REALITY HACKERS: SELFHOOD, ONLINE CHAT, AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

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NEAR-Y HACKBERG, BEDROCK, CHALICE CHAT,
AND CRYPTOCRYSTALLINE-SEDIMENTED PYROCLASTIC
INTERFACTION

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PREFACE

> "We stumble toward a new technological era made possible by the emerging technologies of computer, video, telephone, and high-quality sound. Alas, the stumbling is not guided by any understanding of the nature of interaction. Instead, it is more like the tale describing the groping of those legendary blind men touching an elephant. ...the technologies are provided by the technologists. It is, therefore, no wonder, that most new devises, including computers and their software applications emphasize technology over all else. ...We need to view each of our activities in a larger framework (Norman 1993 xii-xiv)."

The vast computer network of computer networks, described most generally as "the Net," has been growing at an unprecedented rate of fifteen to twenty percent a month, and institutions are strained to keep up with the demand (Chapman 1995). As millions of users connect into vast networks of computer systems daily, the Net expands like a transglobal parasite--colonizing the very frontier it creates in host institutional environments. The amazing growth of the Net has left individuals, institutions, and governments in a dilemma in terms of how to conceive and apprehend this growing techno-social phenomena.

Although novel in many regards, the Net is not an isolated occurrence. Rather, it is a *social* phenomena--one element in a broader social milieu. As a social phenomena the Net can only be understood *sui generis*. That is, on one hand the Net is nothing more than a series of interconnected wires, electronics, and computer technologies. On the other hand, these technologies constitute a vast medium and environment for human communication. The Net is more than the sum of its technological parts, it is a *social environment* where people meet

others, socialize, play, do business, shop, and publish creative works. The social environment of the Net cannot be explained or reduced in terms of the technological components that comprise the medium alone. As individuals interact on, in, and through computer networks, a socially constructed environment emerges that is greater than the wires, telephone lines, and computers that comprise it. In short, what emerges is inherently social, and circumstantially technological--not vice-versa.

Furthermore, the seemingly novel development, diffusion, and growth of the Net cannot be divorced from its situatedness in a general history of societal change. The Net emerges in a historical period of change that is most generally described as the movement from industrial to post-industrial eras. The post-industrial age, often dubbed "the information age," represents a condition in which knowledge and the control of information is more central than the production of material goods (Bell 1976). The history of societal change accompanying the socio-cultural movement from industrial to post-industrial eras, is marked by numerous changes including the infiltration of high technologies of transportation, mass media, and communication into the reality of everyday social life (Schement and Lievrouw 1987). Like the major eras that preceded it, the dawn of the information age has been (and will continue to) alter the nature of institutional arrangements in complex social processes that accompany the diffusion of these information technologies.

Elementary sociological precepts repeatedly suggest that changes in societal, institutional, and interpersonal arrangements impact experiences of everyday life. Although various theoretical traditions account for this relationship in widely diverse and often conflicting ways, it may be assuredly stated that the shift from industrial to an information era will fundamentally alter experiences of social reality in everyday life. These changes will not only alter

the physical and social reality of institutional environments but transform experiences of personhood by altering the dynamic ongoing processes by which individuals produce and subjectively experience self.

Computer networking represents one contemporary technology capable of illuminating these processes of socio-cultural change. Contemporary computer technologies offer opportunities for new interactive experiences and new forms of interaction (Norman 1993). Nicholas Negroponte (1995) argues that these forms of techno-social activity are increasingly resulting in experiences of a "digital state." In short, contemporary life is increasingly sustained by a sea of technological innovations by which persons listen to digital music, view the world through digital medias, socialize in digital neighborhoods, play in digital parks, travel digital paths to reach digital destinations, and meet digital others. In short, people are *becoming* digital. Contemporary life increasingly entails not only the digitization of entertainment, institutions, and industry, but also is a matter of *being digital* (Negroponte 1995).

This study builds on the concept of being digital. Emergent from a broader socio-cultural context, the computer-mediated environment of the Net represents a technologically sustained and socially constructed digital social world. This study aims to explore, explain, and propose understandings of the online world as a social phenomena, rooted in a distinct form of techno-human interaction whose reality is emergent in the interrelations between participants. In short, this study is about the nature of virtual techno-social worlds that have a special illuminating relationship to an emergent information reality.

Organization

This dissertation will be organized into five chapters, each with it's own intended aims. Chapter one, the "Literature Review," will provide the reader with a brief and general background on the research context. The primary task of the "Literature Review" is to familiarize the reader with the nature of the online environment, and identify generally acknowledged characteristics of social interaction in online computer-mediated contexts. The second chapter, "Conceptual Framework" summarizes and seeks to re-formulate interactionist and dramaturgical theoretical positions in terms applicable to computer-mediated social worlds. In this chapter, all conceptual cards are laid on the table. Of central importance is identifying the relevance of interactionist and dramaturgical theoretical perspectives to the online world, modifying, and proposing new interpretative approaches for understanding online phenomena. The third chapter will detail the methods used for data collection. In the fourth chapter, findings will be presented in conjunction with what is traditionally called "discussion." Due to the complexity of the phenomena "findings" will not be arbitrarily divorced from "discussion." Finally, in the fifth chapter research findings will be summarized and conclusions will be made. The conclusions will seek to specify theoretical implications of this research, and to expand understandings of contemporary forms of human selfhood in lieu of the findings of this study.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Computers have revolutionized the way we organize and operate within and through important sectors of life in society. The "computer revolution" has transformed industry, government, education, and countless other institutional environments. However, in spite of the growing importance of computer technologies in contemporary society, "understanding computers is about as easy as understanding a bank statement (Negroponte 1995 pp. 89)." Computers and computer networking technologies are surrounded by techno-jargon and procedures that read like a VCR owners manual--both of which hinder effective learning and meaningful understanding. Although this study will seek to avoid computer techno-jargon as much as possible, this brief introduction will attempt to demystify pertinent elements of the computer-mediated environment, provide the reader with a general background on computer-networking technologies, and identify major elements of recreational computer-mediated communication central to this study.

The Net

In recent years, computers have been electronically linked together (networked) resulting in shared access of databases, information services, and a host of computer resources. These "networks" of computers can themselves be linked together, creating networks of networks. The result is a massive and

almost incomprehensible web of interconnected computers, information, and electronic technologies that is most generally referred to as "the Net." It is "a network of innumerable computer networks representing thousands of hot, buzzing machines (Patton 1994 pp. 134)." Within this "network of networks" an impressive array of information from around the world can be accessed electronically by anyone with a modem, computer, and online access.

"The Net" is a loose term that actually refers to thousands of separate, yet interconnected services that have been electronically linked together through phone lines and fiber-optic cable. Metaphorically, the Net is like an electronic river. The Net, like a river, has many branches and tributaries that may be loosely referred to as one on the grounds that they are connected. These branches and tributaries are like online services--they draw from a wide array of populations, geographic locales, and vary in size from a few to a few million. Like a river, each of these services are electronically connected and may be loosely referred to as one "Net." Some of the main components of the Net include:

The World Wide Web: The World Wide Web is a global "hypertext system." Hypertext simply means that persons can jump from one document to another by clicking components contained within documents that are electronically linked together. The World Wide Web is graphically oriented, user-friendly, colorful, and flashy. Through pointing and clicking portions of a "web page" one accesses computers from around the world, each containing information that ranges from pornographic pictures to the most recent cancer treatments. The user friendliness of the World Wide Web has excellerated its growth at an incalculable rate.

Usenet: Usenet is a system of electronic messages that participants can read and/or respond to. All messages and replies are "posted" and available

for all to view. For all practical purposes, usenet is a big electronic bulletin board divided by more than ten thousand topics of interest (Moore 1995).

Commercial Servers: Commercial servers are the shopping malls of the Net (Patton 1994). A commercial server is usually a nation-wide, for-profit, pay-by-the-hour industry that provides user-friendly access to their services and often limited dimensions the broader online world (i.e. limited access to the World Wide Web, Usenet, and so on). Commercial servers are companies with big computers that are willing (for a fee) to connect persons to a broader network (Moore 1994). Currently, the major commercial servers include America Online, CompuServe, Prodigy, Delphi, and E-World--many of which boasts membership rates in the millions. In short, commercial servers "are doing for the Net what McDonald's did for the cheeseburger (Moore 1994 pp. 4)"--they popularize, commercialize, and diffuse it.

Bulletin Board Systems (BBS): Bulletin boards are the crudest unit of the Net (Patton 1994). A bulletin board system is little more than a computer with a phone line linked to it. Using a modem, persons access the "host computer" which contains anything from catalogs of library information to interactive games. A bulletin board system may be set-up by almost anyone, and requires little more than a shoestring budget to maintain. Most bulletin board systems offer online games, chat areas, e-mail, free software, technical advice, and so on. Almost anything that can be computerized is probably available on a bulletin board system somewhere. Furthermore, some bulletin board systems have formed coalitions and guilds. For example, "KinkNet," which is a number of leading BBSs with prurient themes--"a kind of agricultural co-op that is to porn what Ore-Ida is to potatoes (Patton 1994 pp. 135)."

As for numbers of persons "logged on," conservative estimates place the number of privately operated bulletin board systems at around sixty thousand

and rising, each averaging at least two dozen participants a day. Add to that roughly four to five million people currently believed to be using commercial online services and an estimated ten to twenty-five million persons who have direct access to the World Wide Web and Usenet, and the estimates of the number of persons thought to be be colonizing the online world ranges from thirty to fifty million and growing (Rose 1995). However, it is not possible to count exact numbers of persons online, and therefore an honest assessment can only conclude that their are a lot of people on the Net and tomorrow there will be a lot more. There is no agreement on the estimated number of users on the Net, nor is there an accurate means to count them. However, it is generally agreed that the number of users is rocketing skyward (Moore 1994) at a rate of fifteen to twenty percent growth per month (Chapman 1995).

Interaction on the Net: Online Chat

Some of the biggest successes in online services are "chat areas" where persons interact with groups of other participants, engaging in live text based discussions (Rose 1995). In 1995 Prodigy (which is not the largest commercial online service) reported that its subscribers spend 1.2 million hours a month "chatting" with other users (Steinberg 1996). These popular chat services comprise a unique medium for computer-mediated communication that alters the scope, range, and nature of electronic media, creating new social environments, allowing participants to interact with new collectivities, groups, and individuals (Jones 1995).

In these popular chat services, it is apparent that the Net is more than an electronic means for accessing information--it is an environment and a medium for social interaction. Social dimensions of the Net are evident in the briefest visit. Widespread opportunities for chat-related social interaction exist along

with information services. Commercial services such as America Online, CompuServe, and Prodigy have emerged as popular avenues to not only find information (as the phrase information superhighway suggests) but to meet others for games, conversation, and romance (Resnick 1992; Spear 1991; Gunn 1994).

David Meyers (1987), in an early experimental study of a New Orleans bulletin board system, notes that users of the service establish an online screen name, and online identities that they wish to retain. Myers notes that anonymity plays an important role in online social interaction. Online users tend to protect demographic and other forms of personal information. To the extent that anonymity is maintained, anyone can be anything in cyberspace. Furthermore, Meyers notes that in cyberspace identities are changed as easily as hats. Thus anonymity--the power to create these identities--becomes highly valued and well guarded.

More recently, Sherry Turkle (1995) has written extensively on social dimensions of the Net. Turkle notes the extreme fluidity of self that is exhibited in these techno-social environments, as persons enact, and cycle through multiple anonymous identities. "Role-playing" writes Turkle, "sounds as if we're putting on, playing at. I'm saying these are all bona fide aspects of our self (1996 pp. 164)." Throughout her analysis, Turkle emphasizes how computer-mediated forms of social interaction encourage people to play with a multiplicity of selfhood in a threshold between what is real and what is virtual:

> "'This is more real than my real life,' says a character who turns out to be a man playing a women who is pretending to be a man. In this game the self is constructed and the rules of social interaction are built, not received. (Turkle 1995 pp. 10)."

The numerous opportunities for online communication encourage people to create personally meaningful identities through interaction with others (Turkle

1995; Myers 1987; Stone 1995; Baym 1995; MacKinnon 1995). The fact that participants identify or present themselves in the online contexts suggests two conditions. First, the fact that participants present meaningful identities in the online context confirms the environment as inherently social. That is, participants interpret action as perceived by others. In short, in order to have an identity bestowed onto oneself, it is necessary to be in a context where one can identify with others. Secondly, such a situation highlights how cyberspace involves users in a virtual reality that blurs the distinction between the physical, social, and computer environments (Shapiro and McDonald 1992). Cyberspace is "real" in the sense of wires, chips, and thousands of hot buzzing machines, but is perceived by users not merely as a series of interconnected computers, but as a tangible *place*--a medium and environment that cannot be explained or reduced into its technological components alone.

Both these conditions illustrate the socially constructed nature of online environments. Cyberspace is a socially constructed reality that exists within computer networks and supporting technologies. Like other constructed realities, cyberspace isn't so much a physical thing as it is a concept that contains shared understandings and information (Shapiro and McDonald 1992). Yet, because of it's computer-mediated and virtual nature, popular literature often ascribes a lesser reality-status to online environments, subsequent forms of social interaction and experiences of self (see Turkle 1995). Although questions of "reality" are rapidly becoming a slippery slope of political interests (consider, for example, the struggle of many Native American Tribes to be considered "authentically real"), at this point it may be prudent to suggest that questions pertaining to the "reality" of online social worlds and/or online selves are closely related (if not identical) to the fundamentally unanswerable question of whether any self or community is genuine, veritable,

true, or authentic. The difficulties in conclusively establishing the reality of online selves and online communities simply mirror, and highlight the same ontological dilemma of *any* self and *any* community. Therefore, whether or not an online self can exist is less important than the fact that people claim to have attained it. Likewise, whether or not an online community truly exists is less important than the wide spread belief among users that it does. That is, when we perceive things as real we achieve something that is not only epistemological or ontological, but experiential as well (Aycock and Buchignani 1995). For these reasons, the experiential dimension of online interaction suggests that participants' claims to online selves and online communities should be perceived as existing through the same processes of interaction by which any self and community emerges, is maintained, and transformed in everyday life.

Statement of Intent

Until recently, empirical research on computer mediated communication has been conducted almost exclusively by scholars in the field of communications. Predominately armed with experimental designs, most studies have sought to document the effects of computer technologies in institutional and professional environments and on task-related activities. These studies are abundant and often aim to identify the computer as the primary cause for certain transformations of interpersonal behavior, as well as changes in institutional and professional contexts (see Walther and Burgoon 1992; Walther 1992; Sproull and Kiesler 1991; Baron 1984). Much of the literature on computer mediated communication emphasize the effects of interaction in the absence of spoken words, non-verbal, and contextual cues. This research frequently assumes either a single set of characteristics or a

causal relationship between the unique characteristics of computer mediated communication and its users. Contemporary scholars have noted the lack of research emphasizing computer mediated communication as an expressive form of leisure and communication play (Danet 1995; Meyers 1987). Missing is a conceptualization of computer mediated communication as an emergent phenomena (Baym 1995), where meanings are negotiated in the processes of social interaction. In sociological terms, absent from the literature is an understanding of *computer mediated symbolic interaction*.

This study will draw from interactionist and dramaturgical theoretical orientations in an attempt to provide a foundation for filling the observed gap in the literature. This study will explicitly apply interactionist and dramaturgical concepts to shed critical-analytical light on the complexities of computer-mediated symbolic interaction. Additionally, this study also seeks to establish computer-mediated communication as a uniquely adept area for interactionist analysis, modifying existing interactionist and dramaturgical perspectives, and suggesting new ideas to heighten its applicability to this emerging context for sociological activity.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Parallel Worlds and Multiple Selves

"Self" and "social world" are central concepts to the analysis of online social environments. In this study, the term "social worlds" will be used as a construct to imply that "reality" is socially constructed and sustained within dynamic and ongoing patterns of social interaction[1]. A social world refers to both the reality of human situatedness in time and space, and the interaction between persons which construct, sustain, and transform such realities.

A social world may be as broad as an entire nation-culture, or as micro as an individual's home. Social worlds may include the activities of millions of people, or as few as two (or at least the perception of another presence). A social world may persist for centuries, or emerge and dissipate in one casual encounter. Social worlds are frequently associated with a wide array of qualities (mystical, secular, playful, solemn, erotic, etc.), and may be formal or impromptu in nature. Social worlds may exert considerable objective force on the individual, or may exist so subtly as to not warrant notice. Indeed, all "demographics" of social worlds are possibilities that merely exist as a function of what social world one is examining, when, with whom, and at what level of analysis.

In spite of its fluidity, social worlds have at least two constant qualities. First, they cannot exist apart from human interaction. Secondly, they are

pluralistic (existing in multiples and parallels[2]). For example, the bureaucratic social world of one's academic environment is separate and distinct from the social world of one's home, church, peers, and so on. Traditionally, each social world emerges from interactions that are segregated (at least cognitively) to those situations. Thus, social worlds often consist of unique, unrelated, and sometimes conflicting patterns of interrelationships, expectations, and world views that sediment into distinct socially sustained realities.

As participants interact with others in a meaningful context (a social world) selves emerges. A self is that which is an object unto itself (Mead 1934). Or more simply, the self is the meaning of the human organism. The human organism assigns meaning to itself only through interaction with others in the context of particular social situations, roles, and/or encounters that collectively constitute the foundation of social worlds. In short, through social interaction participants construct social worlds as they (in conjunction with others) simultaneously construct themselves within them. Through interaction with others a context attains meaning and a social world emerges at the same moment that meaning is assigned to the individual (Mead 1934). In these regards, both selves and social worlds emerge, persist, and transform through the same "moments" of production in on-going patterns of social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Self and society are two sides of the same coin (Mead 1934), as each is dependent on the processes of the other. As stated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966):

> "It goes without saying, then, that the organism and, even more, the self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they were shaped. ...the statement that man produces himself in no way implies some sort of Promethean vision of the solitary individual. Man's self-production is always, and of necessity, a social enterprise. Men *together* produce a human environment (pp. 50-51)."

It is essential to note (as alluded to by Berger and Luckmann) that the duel nature of self and social world is *not* a Cartesian mind-body distinction. Rather, the duel nature of self and social world is a statement of the *relationship* between individuals and interrelations with others in a meaningful social context. It is a means of conceptualizing the nature of social interaction in a context that both includes the individual, others to whom the individual interacts, and a social reality that is greater than the sum of its individual participants. In short, it is a conceptual tool for understanding the dynamic relationship between individuals, relations that culminate into socially constructed realities, and social worlds that act-back exerting influence on its human creators.

Like any other relationship, the self-social world relationship is subject to change. As will be illustrated in the following sections, self-social world relationships exist in a fluid interplay between individuals, social situations, and the means by which persons interact within situations. A central theme to this study is that selves and social worlds emerge within constant processes predicated on interaction, however alterations in the *means* by which persons interact will subtly alter the boundaries and nature of selfhood, social worlds, and the transform self-social world relationship itself.

Face-to-Face Interaction: Multiple Selves and Parallel Social Worlds

> "Inevitably we construct ourselves. Let me explain. I enter this house and immediately I become what I have to become, what I can become: I construct myself. That is, I present myself to you in a form suitable to the relationship I wish to achieve with you. And, of course you do the same with me (Pirandello 1962 pp. 157-158)."

Social life is a shifting sea of situations, roles, and encounters that individuals navigate in, around, and through. In the process, persons routinely

shift from one social world to another, and social relations become dynamic, displaying remarkable degrees of fluidity. For example, the professor who leaves a committee meeting and returns home to eat lunch with his/her spouse will experience a shift between an "academic social world" and a "home social world." This shift is accompanied and sustained by alterations in social relationships, self presentations, and subjective experiences as the individual moves from a set of self-academic to self-spouse relations. Shifts like these are an expression of the dynamic nature of social interaction in complex societies where it is necessary to maintain multiple and parallel social worlds[3].

From its earliest conception, symbolic interactionists have examined the interplay between multiple social worlds and the emergence of self. In the foundational work of George Herbert Mead (1934), a form of situationalism that emphasizes the emergence of self in social worlds is clearly stated. In Mead's work, a self emerges as the meanings associated with actions in an given social context are bestowed unto the person. From Mead's perspective, human behavior is fully situational, as people become the persons of the situations they find themselves in. From this perspective, a self simply cannot "be" anything apart from interaction (Brissett and Edgley 1990). As Mead (1934) states:

> "The self is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience. ...it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience (pp. 140)."

Since selves are rooted in the interactions that comprise social worlds, as persons interact with numerous others, in a variety of social settings, a multiplicity of selves emerge. Symbolic interactionists have long noted that a multiplicity of selves is a normative reflection of the degree to which individuals occupy multiple social worlds:

> "We carry on a whole series of different relationships to different people. We are one thing to one man and another thing to another. ...We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances. We discuss politics with one and religion with another. There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions. It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not there as a self apart from this type of experience. A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal (Mead 1934 pp. 142)."

To Mead, "the unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole (Mead 1934 pp. 144)." Therefore, when individuals interact with others in a multiplicity of social worlds, multiple selves emerge. As Mead (1934) summarizes:

> "What we have here is a situation in which there can be different selves, and it is dependent upon the set of social reactions that is involved as to which self we are going to be (pp. 143)."

To Mead individuals construct a self through interaction with others in a social context. Only through interaction is meaning bestowed unto the things people do, and consequently only though interaction in a social context can a self emerge. Human activities collectively comprise social worlds as they simultaneously provide the meaning *to* the individual *of* the individual. Furthermore, within each social world individuals enact differing sets of behaviors, and as a consequence different selves emerges. Thus, an individual has as many selves as s/he acts within unique situations.

As people enact multiple selves in a variety of social worlds, a metaphorical drama occurs. In other words, as people move about the drama of life they enact a wide range of ongoing performances through presenting and negotiating a multiplicity of selves. In these regards, Erving Goffman and the dramaturgical tradition extend the situationalism of George Herbert Mead by emphasizing the means by which individuals enact and maintain performances on the various stages of multiple social worlds:

> "A person's self (in the singular) is not carried from situation to situation. Rather, individuality is fashioned in terms of the resources and audiences available in the immediate situation in which the individual is acting (Brisset and Edgley 1990 pp. 114)."

While a self is imputed to an individual, and inextricably concerns the individual, the self does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of human interaction (Goffman 1959). That is, the imputation of self to a person "is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it (Goffman 1959 pp. 252)." Consequently, "without a presentation of self, a self is not possible (Krielkamp 1976 pp. 137)."

Selves are meanings that are staged, not "things" (Becker 1962). Selves are *communicated*, in the broadest sense of the word. Persons communicate a self through a variety of means including speech and language, conduct, appearance, gestures--any object or action capable of conveying meaning. It is in this broad sense of both discursive and nondiscursive communication that dramaturgy is interested (Brisset and Edgley 1990). From a dramaturgical perspective, a self is basically a symbolic system--a linguistic device. A self is a system of discursive and non-discursive language in a constant process of modification as persons interact with others (Becker 1962).

In spite of its constant state of flux, a modicum of socially constructed continuity exists between the various selves that one enacts. This continuity is sustained by socially accepted role repertoires (we accept the roles of police officer, Boy Scout Leader, husband, and father as complimentary. This would not be the case if the roles were police officer, Catholic Priest, transvestite, and father). More commonly, are socially accepted means for segregating various self enactments (consider, for example, common phrases such as "leave your work at the office," "leave the locker-room talk with your bar buddies," etc.). Most importantly, modern western societies promote an ideological system of

beliefs that prescribe a faith in the unity of self, and thus color interpretations of individual activities and the activities of others. In short, people see themselves as unified because of socio-cultural prescriptions that tell them so.

Because of widespread socially accepted role repertoires and ideological means of viewing selves as unitary, only when an activity is interrupted does one become conscious of one's selfhood and it's multiplicity. As such, dramaturgical analysis is fundamentally interested in situations where interactions have gone awry--hence, the preoccupation with such issues as embarrassment, faux-pas, apologies, accounts, and the like (Brisset and Edgley 1990). In these situations we not only become conscious of our self enactments (Brisset and Edgley 1990), but also confront the multiplicity of our self-social world relationships.

In summary, the self--as a dramatic linguistic devise--exists in a state of plurality, a condition best illustrated in situations where the self breaks down under the weight of it's own multiplicity. In these conditions, individuals not only become aware of the multiple selves they enact, but also aware of the various (and sometimes conflicting) social worlds they inhabit. These occurrences frequently entail "dramaturgical awareness" (Brisset and Edgley 1990) and the possibility for personal and social transformation, as they threaten the taken-for-grantedness of social interaction and its constituent reality. As stated by Berger and Luckmann (1966):

> "Most conversation does not in so many words define the nature of the world. Rather, it takes place against the background of a world that is silently taken for granted. ....conversation can *afford to be casual* precisely because it refers to the routines of a taken for granted world. The loss of casualness signals a break in the routines and, at least potentially, a threat to the taken for granted reality (pp. 152-153)."

Generally speaking, traditional interactionists and dramaturgical analysts have been preoccupied with "face-to-face" interaction. This preoccupation is

sometimes legitimized by the general view that "real" flesh-and-blood interactions in the "here and now of the present" represent the prototype for all forms of human sociality (see Berger and Luckmann 1966). This preoccupation conveniently implies that multiple selves are enacted as the physical body moves from one social world to another. Furthermore, this preoccupation often explicitly views the collision and/or juxtaposition of social worlds as deeply problematic (embodied by such widely used terms as "role-conflict"). It is often implied (if not overtly stated) that social worlds are functionally segregated, and in the rare case where multiple social worlds and role performances collide, the individual will experience a personal state of crises--a problematic situation to be avoided and/or overcome.

This preoccupation with "face-to-face" social worlds, and the negative bias toward overlapping social worlds, may have had some legitimacy, when technologies of transportation and communication were nonexistent or insufficiently diffused. In conditions where persons are born and raised, living and dying the span of their life in the same enduring communities, they will become personally known within a stable social world. These conditions are conducive to the emergence of a stable set of selves, and facilitates the illusion of personality and/or a core self--a self that is, for all practical purposes, only influenced by cultural prescriptions associated with human developmental processes (i.e. childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age). Furthermore, within these conditions the enactment of multiple selves can only be accomplished through the movement of ones physical body from one social world to another. However, if such a world once existed, then without a doubt that era is long past.

The contemporary world is marked by widely diffused technologies of transportation and communication that infiltrate and colonize the reality of

everyday life. Through these technologies (especially communication technologies including the mass media), persons are exposed to a broad array of diverse social worlds that are constantly in a state of overlap, collision, and juxtaposition. To the extent that a self is primarily a dramatic linguistic devise (a process of communication) then these technologies will exert an impact on experiences of selfhood. That is, by altering the means, availability, and range of communication and transportation technologies, alterations can be expected in the self-social world relationship. Such a situation is widely observed in contemporary society, and will be articulated in terms of "electronic social worlds."

Electronic Communication: Fragmented Selves and Hypercontextual Social Worlds

> "Until recently, place-bound , face-to-face interaction was the only means of gaining 'direct' access to the sights and sounds of each other's behaviors. The physical barriers and boundaries marked by walls and fences as well as the passageways provided by doors and corridors directed the flow of people and determined, to a large degree, the number, type, and size of face-to-face interactions. ...electronic media override the boundaries and definitions of situation supported by physical setting (Meyrowitz 1985 pp. 35 and 38)."

In *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) notes how electronic media represent a unique form of interaction that dislocates the traditional relationship between physical setting and social situation, rearranging social forums so that individuals find themselves in contact with new persons in new ways. Electronic media override the boundaries and situational definitions that emerge in the physical settings of distinct social worlds. While watching television, or communicating via telephone, the situation we are "in" is only marginally related to physical location (Meyrowitz 1985). For example,

electronic forms of communication allow a person to drive an automobile while conversing with a phone sex operator on a cellular phone--the physical context of the automobile has little or nothing to do with the social context of the erotic conversation.

As electronic media transgress the traditional relationship between social situations and physical setting, it rearranges social forums, blurring social spheres that were once distinct. For example, driving an automobile while conversing with a phone sex operator is a novel social situation achieved only by the physical dislocation and symbolic convergence of two separate social worlds--the physical and social world of an automobile, and the physical and social world of sexuality. These kinds of situations can only be accomplished through mediated forms of interaction.

By repeated transgressions of social situations and physical settings through electronically mediated forms of communication (telephone, television, radio, etc), people find themselves in increasing contact with others in new ways, as electronic medias alter the significance of space, time, and physical barriers to human interaction (Meyrowitz 1985):

> "By changing the boundaries of social situations, electronic media do not simply give us quicker or more thorough access to events and behaviors. They give us, instead, new events, behaviors [and social situations] (Meyrowitz pp. 43)."

Electronically mediated forms of human interaction represent far more than simply a neutral delivery system for communication, and more than merely a channel for conveying information from one location to another (Meyrowitz 1985). By rearranging the significance of time, space, and physical barriers to human interaction, electronic communication transforms social worlds into altogether new social situations. Emergent from these conditions is a unique form of social interaction that transcends the traditional relationship between

physical place and social situation. Consequently, distinct social spheres are transformed into new environments with new patterns of action, feeling, and belief (Meyrowitz 1985).

According to Kenneth Gergen (1991), these techno-social transformations of situations are anything but benign. Technological advancements of the past century have resulted in radical shifts in exposure and relationships between people. Advancements in transportation, communications, computers, and electronic media have significantly altered everyday experiences of social reality and selfhood. These technologies result in frequent encounters with an ever increasing variety of people from widespread differing social worlds, encompassing a boggling array of divergent viewpoints. As electronic medias infiltrate and colonize everyday experiences of human social life, social worlds are increasingly desegregated, as they constantly overlap, collide, and juxtapose themselves within other social worlds. The result is a state of "social saturation (Gergen 1991)."

Increasing degrees of social saturation reduce the possibility of living within a limited cast of significant others in small and enduring communities. As technologies of social saturation infiltrate the reality of everyday life, human experiences occur relative to an enormous ever-expanding range of other people, special interests, forms of relationships, unique circumstances, and opportunities. Consequently, "with social saturation each of us comes to harbor a vast population of hidden potentials (Gergen 1991 pp. 71)." In a condition of social saturation there is no individual essence to which one remains true or committed. Each "hidden potential" represents a possible self that under the right conditions may spring to life. Selves are continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through a technologically sustained sea of ever-changing relationships. Through electronic media one's self is exposed

to a broad array of "we's" and "them's," each potentially and simultaneously representing what we were, are, and can be (Gubrium and Holstein 1994). In sum, technologies of social saturation become an additional means for social interaction that entail an ever-increasing possibility for the development of a "populated self," or the acquisition of *simultaneously* multiple potentials for being (Gergen 1991).

Electronic communication technologies subtly transform experiences of self and social world in ways that are not possible in face-to-face interaction. Electronic communication technologies highlight a condition where selves become experientially fragmented, and social worlds manifest themselves hypercontextually. That is, electronic technologies of communication desegregate social worlds, and as one interacts through a plethora of electronic technologies that have colonized the reality of everyday life fragmented selves and hypercontextual social worlds characterize any given situation. In short, electronic forms of communication allow for a simultaneous multiplicity of social worlds to manifest themselves in a single given social situation, and by enacting selves appropriate to each, selfhood becomes experientially fragmented. Thus, the essential difference between electronic forms of social interaction and face-to-face forms of social interaction is *not* the existence of multiple selves and parallel social worlds, but the fact that electronic technologies of communication serve to desegregate social worlds and experiences of self that were previously confined to those situations.

It is essential to note, however, that fragmented selves and hypercontextual social worlds are *not* caused by new forms of electronic communication. Rather, the influences of electronic technologies of communication on the self-social world relationship (as presented here) merely highlights broader socio-cultural conditions in which selves and social worlds

are rooted in contemporary consumer-media culture of western societies. Experiential dimensions of "electronic social worlds" and its influences on the emergence of self are not limited to social situations involving telephones, televisions, or any other communication technology or media. Rather, the fragmentation of self and hypercontextualism of social worlds that is endemic to electronic forms of communication and interrelationships is more broadly reflective of socio-cultural conditions of an imploding capitalist system (see Schwalbe 1993). For example, in complex mass society bureaucratic social arrangements "McDonaldize" (Ritzer 1993) most public relationships. Aside from what we can create in the small spaces of our private lives, we lack personally meaningful communities in which to anchor, cultivate, and crystallize our selves (Schwalbe 1993). Because we are more mobile than ever before, we tend to fail in developing identities that are meaningfully associated with places (Schwalbe 1993). Because we are bombarded with a broad array of different view points from an overwhelming diversity of people, situations, and events--all of which confidently assert themselves as "correct"--we lose faith in the possibility for "truth," or any other "essence" of (or to) anything. The culture industry has commodified and sold to the public the images we use to fashion a sense of self (Schwalbe 1993), and the prerogatives of our public personae combined with the degradation of "ultimate truths" compel us to use these "image commodities" for lack of anything else to affix a self to. Indeed, electronic medias simply provide a grounded metaphor in which we may illustrate an increasing experiential state of *general* dislocation and fragmentation of the self-social world relationship.

To summarize, the self-social world relationship of face-to-face interactions is multiple and parallel. As persons move from one unique situation to another, differing selves emerge out of differing sets of expectations

and meaning associated with the context of interaction. However, in a socio-cultural context that includes the widespread diffusion of electronic communication technologies, the self-social world relationship acquires an additional characteristic of simultaneousness. Here, social worlds simultaneously impose themselves upon one another, persons acquire populated selves, and the self-social world relationship implodes into an experiential state of fragmentation and hypercontextualism.

Scholarship examining the impact of electronic forms of communication on the enactment of selves and the emergence of social worlds offers provocative insights on changes within the self-social world relationship. However, this analysis remains fundamentally wed to traditional assumptions of physical space. That is, this scholarship emphasizes how electronic forms of communication highlight the juxtaposition of social worlds within specific physical places, the consequence of which is the emergence of self enactments that are fragmentedly multiple. What scholars have not considered is the emergence of self and social world *within the technology of communication itself.* That is, in spite of considerable investigation on the impact of electronic forms of communication, these investigations have been preoccupied with how such forms of communication have highlighted certain transformations in physically situated self-social world relationships. The possibility of selves and social worlds emerging and existing within technologies of communication--not merely because, or as a result of them--has not been considered. Computer-mediated forms of social interaction exemplify the emergence of self and social world inside the technology itself and expose new techno-social dimensions to the self-social world relationship

Digital Interaction: Disembodied Selves and Dislocated Social Worlds

> "The cyber perspective, as we have seen, seeks from the new communication technologies access to new forms of sociality, freed from the body yet still sensorily vivid. It also seeks different ways of presenting identity and developing relationships, ways which combine efficient simulation of the presence of other people with deliberate uncertainty concerning the real identities of interlocutors. ...What is the social and cultural context in which we are developing electronic communications environments, which fire our imaginations but about which we really know too little? Only now are we beginning to ask ourselves the right kinds of questions (Mantovani 1996 pp. 130-131)."

To say that digital social worlds exist within technologies of computer-mediated communication is to say that both self and social worlds emerge, are maintained, and transformed in a process of communication situated inside the technology itself. When interacting online, the computer is a communication medium and a social environment, where selves and social worlds emerge through the processes of computer-mediated communication. When online, the self-social world relationship is translated to a process of communication where personhood and social situations are emergent within digital-symbolic representations. Since no physical objects exist in digital environments, all that remains are the living socially constructed artifacts of selves, social worlds, and communications. These characteristics, unique to computer network environments, transform the self-social world relationship by presenting new social situations, new forms of interaction, and new social contexts that are not possible in either face-to-face or electronic forms of interaction alone.

Computer-mediated communications stem from previous electronic technologies of communication (most notably the telephone), and therefore contain both similar characteristics of it's electronic predecessor technologies, and characteristics that differ in important ways. Thus, it must be emphasized that characteristics of online social worlds are not completely different from

other forms of social interaction. Like in face-to-face interactions, selves and social worlds emerge only as persons interact with others and meaning is associated to the person and the context of interaction. Like electronic forms of interaction, online environments juxtapose social contexts, creating hypercontextual situations (multiply and simultaneously) where persons enact fragmented self performances. The key difference, however, is that when selves and social worlds emerge within technologies of computer-mediated communication, the self-social world relationship is not only multiple and parallel (as in face to face environments), not only fragmented and hypercontextual (as in electronic social worlds), but also *dislocated and disembodied.*

Computer-mediated communication occurs in *dislocated* social environments. That is, interaction is neither defined nor confined by the geographic locale of participants. Similar to electronic communication, yet in a more pronounced form, computer-mediated communication dislocates social worlds from the constraints of physical space. So pronounced is dislocation of physical contexts in online social worlds that alternative terms have emerged to describe the "space" of online interaction.

Commonly, the term "cyberspace" is used to describe the "place" where online interactions occur. However, cyberspace is a fictional term coined by novelist William Gibson (1984), and intended to describe a virtual reality where people log their minds into computer technologies capable of entering, perceiving, and exploring the data matrix. In the non-fictional world, cyberspace is an intuitive concept--a *metaphor.* "Cyberspace" is a consensual hallucination that refers to a virtually uncomprehensible and seemingly endless array of computer mediated electronic communications and supporting technologies. Because the term lacks clear and concise definition it is understood

metaphorically. Furthermore, these metaphors are indicative of its socially constructed nature.

In common use cyberspace implies a "place" where both real-time and delayed interaction occur between people via computers, on telephone lines, in e-mail, on bulletin boards, and in online chat areas (Tribe 1991). The labeling of certain dimensions of cyberspace as "rooms," or "lobbies," even services such as "E-World," and the term "information superhighway" illustrate the way cyberspace is perceived--a real "place" to which people may *go*. However, contrary to the common metaphor, people neither travel, nor do they "surf" anywhere along an "information superhighway." When online, "People do not 'navigate to' information; rather information comes to them from a variety of sources (Laurel 1993 pp. 182)." Thus, the use of these metaphors suggest that dimensions of cyberspace are socially constructed realities, that have certain perceived qualities, that are not to be taken literally.

The common metaphors for online environments (information superhighway, bulletin boards, rooms, lobbies, etc) illustrate how the dislocation of the online context serves to blur common sense distinctions between physical and computer environments (Turkle 1995; Stone 1995; Shapiro and McDonald 1992). It is true that cyberspace is comprised of and dependent upon physically real technologies that occupy a definitive space in a specific locales. Nonetheless, it is also true that cyberspace is perceived by users as a tangible *place*--an environment that cannot be explained by, or reduced to, the geographic locale of its technological components. Consequently, if we are to consider the experiential dimension of online environments, we must view these "places" as existing in-and-between a vast array of geographic locales and physical spaces. Persons manipulate a computer that exists in a specific geographic locale and network other

computers in other geographic locales, yet what emerges exists in-and-inbetween such locations in an interactive processes between the various (and often uncomprehendable) sets of connections that link them together.

For these reasons, cyberspace is often labeled "spaceless." Although the meaning of the term "spaceless" is generally understood, it is more accurate to conceive of cyberspace as dislocated. Quite simply, computer network technologies *are* physically real, they *do* occupy space, and the existence of these technologies *is* a prerequisite to online interaction. Cyberspace is not purely imaginative, but is contained within concrete physical technologies that exist *somewhere*. What occurs online is not necessarily "spaceless," rather space has little bearing on what transpires. Like other constructed realities, cyberspace isn't so much a set of geographic spaces as it is a concept that contains shared understandings and information (Shapiro and McDonald 1992). Online realities are constructed and sustained with information alone (Benedikt 1991) in an ongoing process of communication, entirely dislocated from physical locale. Distant and divergent social worlds are immediately available in the same medium of communication in the here-and-now of the interacting present.

In summary, the social worlds of online environments exist in a "space" where geographic locale and spatial distance are insignificant factors. Interaction in this context is dislocated from the geographic locale of the computer networking technologies. Instead of being "spaceless," online interaction exists in an experiential "place" that is in-and-inbetween geographic locales. Consequently, similar to many electronic forms of communication, online environments allow participants access to social worlds that are entirely removed from any form of physical space (as traditionally conceived).

The social world of computer mediated communication is not only

dislocated, but a *disembodied* form of interaction. That is, online interaction is "faceless" and "voiceless" in the literal sense of the words. Although an estimated thirty to fifty million users are currently logged onto the Net (Rose 1995), nowhere will one find a physical body. Online interaction proceeds through communication alone, and the existence of a physical body has little (if any) bearing on what transpires between people in the course of interaction. When online, one is completely removed from face-to-face forms of interaction that dominate symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical theoretical orientations. All that remains are the computer-mediated communication dramas by which selves are enacted and social worlds constructed.

The absence of physical bodies in the context of cyberspace poses a serious challenge to interactionist and dramaturgical theoretical orientations. From traditional interactionist and dramaturgical theoretical orientations, a physical body is a prerequisite to a self. Although interactionist and dramaturgical theoretical orientations emphasize that the human body may be decorated, and otherwise altered along a seemingly infinite range to communicate a wide array of self enactments, the physical body remains a powerful element in the self-social world relationship. In face-to-face interaction, and to a lesser degree in electronic forms of social interaction, self enactments will vary greatly, but *the physical existence of ones body always presents limits and mandates to the range of multiple selfhood*: For example, in relation to issues of identity Peter Berger (1963) states:

> "It is not difficult to change from garbage collector to night watchman. It is considerably more difficult to change from clergyman to officer. It is very, very difficult to change from Negro to white. And it is almost impossible to change from man to woman (pp. 98)."

The thrust of Berger's argument rests on the real limitations posed by the empirically verifiable physical body on the range of the multiple selves that an

individual can enact. In both face-to-face and electronic forms of interaction, the body this always *there*--outside of the realm of meaning alone. Regardless of how the body is altered or transformed, it always exists as a physical *thing*:

> "In everyday life, our efforts at self-presentation usually assume that we cannot change the basics of our appearance. Physical characteristics, although open to cosmetic or fashionable manipulation, are basically unalterable. What we look like, we have to live with, and this fixity underpins our social institutions. ...Male, female, black, young, old, poor and affluent are all terms that resonate through our culture, and each depends in part on the fixity of physical form, and our ability to affix meaning to that form (Reid 1994 pp. 61)."

In digital social worlds, these bodily constraints do not exist. Only in a digital social world is the body transformed into pure symbol in the processes of social interaction[4]. Only in a digital social world can we state without hesitation or quotation marks that bodies and selves exist as pure socially constructed meanings that emerge in the process of communication. Only in a digital world do both bodies and selves emerge in the process of interaction as fluid entities to think with, and interact through--not within. Only in digital social worlds can we speak without hesitation or qualification about the experience of disembodiment.

In a digital context, selves and social worlds emerge entirely in a process of dislocated and disembodied communication. Online interaction proceeds in a "place" without "space," in a geographic location without physical presence. These conditions represent an extension of electronic forms of interaction and allows for unprecedented degrees of multiplicity. Whereas electronic forms of communication allow for the emergence of fragmented selves in hypercontextual situations, limits on the degree of multiple selves and social worlds are posed due to the physical presence of the body in geographic space. When online, however, self-social world relationships emerge and

maintain themselves apart from physical bodies, and geographic locales. When apart from the constraints of the physical body, and apart from the constraints of geographic space, *online interaction represents the ultimate context of multiplicity.*

The digital nature of online interaction, which most directly expresses itself in a disembodied and dislocated form, poses unique social situations that highlight changes in the self-social world relationship. Consider, for example the following situation:

> Wife Accused of Cybersex Cheating
>
> "Sommerville, NJ --A man filing for divorce accused his wife of carrying on a 'virtual' affair via computer with a cybersex partner who called himself 'the Weasel."
>
> Diane Goydan's relationship with the man apparently never was consummated, but her husband, John Goydan of Bridgewater, claimed the pair had planned a real tryst this weekend at a New Hampshire bed and breakfast.
>
> Goydan filed divorce papers Jan 23 that included dozens of e-mail exchanges between his wife and a married man she met on America Online. The man, whose on-line name was 'The Weasel,' was identified in court papers only as Ray from North Carolina (Associated Press, Feb. 2 1996)."

This unprecedented case of "virtual infidelity" highlights the conditions of disembodied interaction in dislocated social contexts. According to traditional definitions, the political and legal status of "married" is, and always has been, firmly affixed to the physical body. That is, regardless of the range of self-enactments that one engages within multiple and parallel social worlds, the political and legal status of "married" is firmly affixed to the physical body (as iconized by physical symbols affixed to the body, namely a wedding ring on a specific finger). In traditional terms, it is the body that has the ontologically privileged status as "real." The body is the necessary element to which a person is acknowledged as a "citizen," and thus affixed the rights, duties, and responsibilities of any given political-legal status (see Stone 1995). No matter

where that body shall go or what the person does, the status of "married" legally and politically applies to the body. However, once in a disembodied and dislocated context, participants enact performances that are freed from these constraints. Situations such as these raise new questions and problems made possible by the dislocation of space and disembodiment of self enactments.

Cases like these emphasize how disembodied and dislocated interaction depart from other forms of interaction, resulting in situations that are problematic to traditional understandings of selves and social worlds. By posing a new range of possibilities that depart from traditionally conceived understandings of self and social world new questions and problems arise. For example, how do national and state laws apply to the activities of persons who interact with others through computers located in different legal jurisdictions? Is it the location of the physical body that determines which laws apply, or is it the location of the activity in question? What can be said about gender, when a male psychologist can convincingly maintain himself as a handicapped female over the course of several years (see Van Gelder 1985)? What is the role of age in defining a person when anyone can present themselves as being any age in an online context? What does it mean when a virtual persona has a better sex life than we do? Is an adult guilty of statutory rape if he/she has virtual sex with a minor who claims to be an adult online? Is an adult guilty of statutory rape if he/she has virtual sex with an adult that claims to be a minor online? What does it mean when a persons virtual persona makes better friends online than as a real embodied person? What does it say about contemporary experiences of personhood when an individual claims to feel more "them self" online?

Clearly, widely publicized cases, like "virtual adultery," the "virtual cross dressing psychiatrist (Van Gelder 1985)," and numerous other problematic scenarios raise serious questions about the nature of self and social world in

online environments. These problems and situations are representative of the shifting boundaries of the self-social world relationship made manifest by the dislocation of social worlds and disembodiment of self, and serve to mark changes in the self-social world relationship.

The Bit, Self, and Digital Social Worlds

What is a self when disembodied and emergent in a computer-mediated dislocated context? The disembodied nature of online self enactments challenges traditional conceptions of selfhood as a unified entity affixed to or contained by the body. The dislocated nature of the self-social world relationship challenges traditional conceptions of the self as situated in time and space. How then are we to conceive of the digital self-social world relationship? Clearly, the disembodied and dislocated nature of the self-social world relationship, as made manifest in online contexts, begs for an adequate interpretive apparatus.

The online self-social world relationship manifests itself in markedly different form than in either electronic or face-to-face situations. These differences are best understood by re-formulating traditional conceptions to include two key elements that cannot be dismissed when considering online social interaction. First, online selves emerge in a process of social interaction (like any other self). The self is inherently a system of meaning emergent within a process of communication--not *an* entity, or *a* quality of the person that is affixed or contained within the mind or the body. Secondly, the nature of self-social world relationships is necessarily transformed by alterations in the means by which selves are enacted and social worlds are produced (as preceding sections have sought to emphasize). That is, by altering the means by which persons interact with others, transformations in the nature and scope of human activity accompany the emergence of a new range of potential interactions.

These changes allow for the emergence of new forms of interaction, new expressions of selfhood, and the construction of unique social environments that do not necessarily adhere to preconceived understandings of self or social world. In short, in order to adequately interpret experiences of online interaction, re-formulations of a *dynamic* self-social world relationship must be devised, articulating the *process* by which selves and social worlds manifest themselves within the *means* of computer-mediated communication. Such an articulation can be informed by examining fundamental differences between online digital environments and the environments of the physical world.

According to Nicholas Negroponte (1995) differences between physical and digital worlds are highlighted in the fundamental difference between bits and atoms. The physical world of matter is composed of atoms, while digital worlds of online environments are composed of bits. An atom is an independent, objective, physical entity that occupies space in linear time. An atom may be pushed, pulled, and otherwise moved and/or contained. In short, an atom is a "thing." A bit, on the other hand, has no fixed physical form, no weight, and does not occupy space. In short, a bit is not a "thing" at all, it is a *state* that can only be described as either "on" or "off" (or "+" and "-"[5]).

Worlds composed of atoms are worlds of "things" that have a relatively stable, fixed form, which occupy physical space, and are time dependent (i.e. atomic things of matter have a knowable history and a future). Online digital worlds, composed of bits, are worlds composed of states that have a non-fixated form, do not occupy physical space, and are conceivably infinite. The world of atoms is a world composed of "things," while the world of bits is a world composed of *states of being*. Atoms occupy geographic space and thus, in the physical world of atoms "things" have *a* place. Bits, on the other hand, do not occupy physical places and are not constrained by geography, thus digital

worlds emerge as *places within things* (namely computer technologies). Furthermore, in the physical world of atoms, persons move from place-to-place. However, in the digital world of bits, "place" itself may be transmitted from one location to another (Negroponte 1995).

Things composed of atoms are things that have inherent and relatively stable "properties." Therefore, atomic things have an *empirical reality* that can be observed and formulated into principals and/or "laws." Things composed of bits are not necessarily anything but malleable states of being that may be re-formulated or otherwise altered without necessary referent to what is empirically real. Things composed of bits do not have a fixed form and may be manipulated, transformed, and re-formulated infinitely (conceivably) without the constraints imposed by physical matter. As such, digital worlds consist of malleable "things" that have *pragmatic reality*. Or in other words, digital "things" are representational states oriented toward action and thought--not reflections of what is necessarily empirically veritable.

To interact with others in the online context it is necessary to translate ones actions into the conventions of the medium. Or in other words, to interact with others in the online context, it is necessary to "be digital." "Being digital" is to compose ones self enactment and social worlds of bits--fluid, discursive, non-physical states of being. Thus, "being digital is the option to be independent of confining standards," including the "spatial and experiential sense of place (Negroponte 1995 pp. 44 and 66)." A digital self-social world relationship is one that builds from interactions in a disembodied and dislocated form that is neither confined nor defined by elements of the physical world, nor is there necessary commitment or referent to the "physically real." Rather, the digital self-social world relationship is a fluid and discursive horizon of multiple possibilities for being.

The Problem of Reality

> "Few of us think about 'reality' much... It is, perhaps, the conceptual equivalent of unconscious motor functions such as breathing. It is vital to life--without it, we would be unable to distinguish the real from the imaginary, the true from the false, the natural from the artificial. But we do not have to think about it to use it--indeed, as soon as we do start thinking about it, it becomes extremely difficult to continue using it (Woolley 1993 pp. 2-3)."

Without referent or necessary commitment to the "physically real," the social production of online environments allows individuals to construct new places (Meyrowitz 1985), new roles (Spear 1991), and personally meaningful personae (Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). With a click of an icon participants interact with diverse others, in a multiplicity of techno-socially produced places, allowing for the emergence of disembodied selves situated in dislocated social worlds, where commitments to any given self are as easily dispensed with as they are accessed--a mere click of an icon.

These conditions of extreme potential fluidity presents problems of how to frame reality. As reflected by numerous contemporary controversies concerning online activities, defining what is "real" in an online context is particularly problematic (i.e. is "virtual infidelity" really adultery? Is "virtual sex" subject to the same legal prescriptions that apply to physical sex? Is digital pornography subject to the same laws as other forms of pornography?). Numerous scholars have noted the difficulties in assessing what is "real" in relation to the unique situations posed by electronic medias (see Chayko 1993; Altheide and Snow 1991; Zerubavel 1991; Eco 1986), and current researchers of computer-mediated environments have noted how these problems are compounded in online environments (see Rheingold 1991; Turkle 1995; Stone 1995; Jones 1995).

In traditional frames of reference, reality is defined by the empirically

verifiable. Traditionally speaking, that which is empirically verifiable (or at least subject to measurement) is given the privileged ontological status as "real." Founded on concepts of "objective empiricism," "physical evidence," "proof," and the implicit validity of the scientific method, this "seeing is believing" Perry Mason approach to reality is deeply rooted in a history that cannot be separated from the emergence of science and the general acceptance of scientific evidence as the ultimate means by which "truth" is accepted or rejected. However, in the context of online social worlds the only empirical "things" that exist are the wires, chips, and plastic that comprise the technology of the medium--all else exists as symbolic representation. As previously stated, online environments emerge inside computer networking technologies, however the selves and social worlds that emerge within these environments are neither defined by or a function of the empirically verifiable technologies themselves. What is the status of "reality" when one interacts in a disembodied and dislocated social world, where all "things" present themselves as fundamentally non-empirical symbolic-representations?

"Grounding" Hyperreality

Several authors have given serious attention to the problem of defining online realities, and many find solace in the postmodern articulation of "hyperreality." Jean Baudrillard (1981) describes "hyperreality" as a simulation that is no longer of territory, referential being, or substance. The hyperreal is generated through an infinite Xerox of models from a real, that is no longer of known origin or verifiable reality. It is a condition of pure simulation that threatens the difference between "true" and "false," "real" and "imaginary" (Baudrillard 1981). As Baudrillard (1981) states:

> "....it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: Not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. ...it *plays at being* an appearance. ...it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation (pp. 11-12)."

To Baudrillard, Disneyland illustrates the nature of hyperreality. The elements that comprise the "things" of Disneyland have no real reference or situated boundaries of existence. Walt Disney constructs images, that in Disneyland are simulated to assume a reality for which their is no referent. Once we experience the never-never world of Disneyland, Los Angeles appears strikingly real. As Turkle (1995) illustrates:

> "Los Angeles's shopping malls seem authentic, even though they, too, are recreations. The shopping malls enclose another dream: a golden age that never was of idyllic small-town life. What we have are dreams within dreams (pp. 234)."

In a similar fashion, computer environments display a dimension that some scholars call "hyperreal:"

> "The objects on the screen have no simple physical referent. In this sense, life on the screen is without origins and foundation. It is a place where signs for reality may substitute for the real. Its aesthetic has to do with manipulation and recombination. ...files and documents on my computer screen function as copies of objects of which they are the first examples. I become accustomed to seeing the copies as the reality. The documents that scroll before my eyes as I compose this book on a computer screen function as real enough. They are my access to the thing itself, but there is no other thing itself (Turkle 1995 pp. 47)."

The computer is fundamentally a "tool"[6] of representation and surface images. All things represented on a computer have an underlying reality that has no meaning or necessary referent to the representations produced. For example, the programing language of any computer software is unknown and meaningless (to most people) in reference to the representation produced on the computer monitor and/or printer. As this dissertation is being created on a

computer, a complex underlying electromechanical process is occurring inside the computer that has no referent to the meaning of what is written, these processes necessarily relevant to the interpretation and understanding of these words, and they are not evident anywhere on the page that you are reading. The underlying reality of the electromechanical processes of the computer are extraneous to the meaning of what is created[7]. Furthermore, although I know how to operate my computer and manipulate its software, that knowledge merely refers to the ability to operate the surfaces of the computer-program. When I save this dissertation to disk, I simply manipulate the surface representation of an underlying electromechanical reality that is meaningless, beyond my comprehension, and whose specific processes are not a necessary referent to understanding the consequences of the "save command." In short, the contemporary user-friendly personal computer is a medium and environment of surfaces, where surface representations *are* the "things" we manipulate, and who's underlying electromechanical processes are meaningless in reference to the "things" produced. Consequently, the computer is often cited as the icon of the postmodern world.

In his 1984 article, Fredric Jameson noted that unlike the mechanical machines of the modernist era, the postmodern era lacked objects that could represent it. A decade later, scholars claim that the computer has emerged as an object to represent the postmodern era (see Turkle 1995, chapter one: "A Tale of Two Aesthetics" pp. 29-49). As Turkle states; "Computers embody postmodern theory and bring it down to earth (1995 pp. 18)." Or in other words, the computer is an object that "fulfills the postmodern aesthetic (Lenham 1993 pp. 51)." Although the the point is well taken--computers do provide helpful illustrations of some postmodern ideas, caution must be taken with this *metaphor.*

It is fundamentally perilous to suggest the computer as a metaphor for a set of ideas that has systematically examined the erosion and decay of all metaphors and similar grand narratives (see Lyotard 1993). Since it's earliest articulations, postmodern theory has emphasized the processes by which all metaphors have collapsed, exposing a perfumed vail of vested ideologies that these narratives latently serve to mask. In short, it is unwise to suggest a metaphor for a set of ideas that has rejected the validity of all metaphors. It is equally perilous to suggest that computers "ground" postmodern concepts of the hyperreal. This implies that postmodern ideas can be somehow empirically verified in computer environments. Quite simply, to declare the computer as a means of "grounding" postmodern theory, is to convolute postmodern conceptions into terms amendable to modernist ideologies. To be blunt, one simply cannot have their postmodern cake, and eat it too. Furthermore, one cannot eliminate the postmodern critique through strategies of intellectual imperialism--that is, by simply transforming postmodern ideas into modernist language and ideology. The postmodern condition is neither contained within, nor is it a result of the computer.

Clearly, the problem of reality, as posed by computers and computer networks, is precariously perched in the problematic margins of two competing aesthetics. It is situated in an environment that is dependent on the electromechanical processes of the computer, yet what emerges is not necessarily related to these processes. That which emerges is clearly contained within technologies that empirically exist, yet digital reality is completely comprised of and sustained by non-empirical symbolic representations alone. "Things" are created, yet nothing empirically exists. The "Perry Mason" approach to reality yields us little more than understandings of a complex electromechanical process that are meaningless and unrelated in

reference to the socially constructed reality that emerges. Equally, a purely symbolic "hyperreal" approach not only ignores the existence of concrete and empirically real technologies, but also tends to falsely reify the computer as an embodiment of hyperreal. Neither approach is entirely adequate. Thus, we arrive at the same question this section began with: what, then, is the status of "reality" when one interacts in a disembodied and dislocated social world, where all "things" present themselves as fundamentally non-empirical symbolic-representations?

Virtuality

To overcome the "problem of reality" within computer-mediated contexts (and perhaps to even more broadly articulated problems of reality) it is necessary to reframe the "reality problem" altogether. It is increasingly necessary to acknowledge that "reality" is not a phenomena of nature, and does not "exist" as an objective empirical entity. This is not to deny the epistemologically privileged status of "reality," nor does this suggest some Promethean vision of humankind (recall earlier discussions of the production of social worlds). Rather, this highlights the fact that human beings do not, and cannot, experience "reality" directly. The very fact that humans are capable of questioning that which is defined as "real," highlights the nature of the problem. In short, we must acknowledge that "reality" is *always mediated*, and can only manifest itself in the experiences of persons. That is, reality is always (1) *interpreted* according to prevailing definitions and understandings of the world, and (2) manifests itself in *experiential* conditions that are only marginally related to predefined empirical, epistemological, and ontologicial understandings. Increasingly, empirical research and theoretical orientations, must recognize that any attempt to ground "reality" into objective and empirically verifiable terms apart from the interpretative and experiential processes by which reality is

produced (and vice-vera) will always fail. From this perspective, reality is a fluid definition of a situation, and like all definitions it's meaning is always subject to change[8]. Reality is not an either-or-distinction between that which is "empirically verifiable" and that which is "symbolic." Rather "reality" is an interpretive apparatus that serves to define states of human experience.

From this perspective the reality posed by electronic and computer mediated environments is best conceived by use of the term "virtual." A situation may be called "virtual" when it is not entirely real in terms that are directly translatable to the empirical boundaries of the traditional "real" frame, yet the *experience* is not devoid of reality[9] (Chayko 1993). Online interaction exemplifies a condition of virtuality. Online interaction is "real" in so far as people are really communicating. However, online interaction, and indeed all of cyberspace, is only a metaphor for the computer-mediated social production of space, place, self, and other. Where socially produced locations, situations, and identities are malleably created and negotiated in a process of interaction between people (Meyers 1987; Turkle 1995; Stone 1995; Jones 1995). It is a collective dramaturgy on an empty social stage (Baudrillard 1981), where social productions are not dependent nor contingent on what is physically real or veritable. In the context of online interaction participants construct meaningful personal and social experiences (Turkle 1995; Meyers 1987; Reid 1994, 1991; Jones 1995). Hence, online interaction assumes a virtual quality--it cannot be framed as empirically verifiable, yet is defined as experientially real (and meaningful) by participants.

Virtuality is an experience (Rheingold 1991), and like any experience, cannot be explained or reduced to empirical qualities alone:

> "The adjective *virtual* describes things--worlds, phenomena, etc--that look and feel like reality but lack the traditional physical substance. A virtual object, for instance, may be one that has no real-world equivalent,

but the persuasiveness of its representation allows us to respond as *if it* were real (Laurel 1993 pp. 8)."

The precarious endeavor to ground virtual experiences in empirically verifiable terms is a futile task. Now, that is not to say that people don't try (i.e. the experience of sexual arousal--an inherently virtual experience--is often grounded in physically verifiable terms, such as the existence of an erection), however most people implicitly understand that these indicators of experience are merely one small part of the phenomena (i.e. being sexually aroused is more than just erections, it also entails a wide array of cognition, and emotion that are as important, if not more so, than the physically verifiable conditions of being sexually aroused). In virtual experiences, socially constructed selves and situations attain a meaning in a given place and time (like any other self or situation). Yet, unlike other situations, virtual experiences do not have inherent meaning grounded in specific socio-culturally prescribed places, nor are they necessarily wed to anything that is a part of the physically verifiable world. In short, virtuality is a socially constructed situation that is experientially real, yet lacks the qualities of physicality.

Thus, the "problem of reality" as posed by virtual situations is not a question of how to apprehend virtual social worlds within the taken-for-granted bifurcation between that which is empirically real -vs- that which is symbolic (see Chayko 1993). We cannot phrase "problems of reality" in this manner, for it takes for granted the process of reality production--the very thing we are attempting to understand. Thus, the problem must be re-phrased to examine how such realities produced, not the status of such realities. In these regards, like all other realities, virtual online environments are not *either* empirical *or* symbolic, but emergent between interacting persons within the processes by which it is mediated.

The Social Production of Virtual Realities

> "'Virtual' was and remains a much grander word, scandalously underused, a huge vessel of semantic vacuity waiting to have meaning poured into it (Woolley 1993 pp. 58)."

By design, the computer is a simulating electromechanical machine. That is, computer technologies are designed to represent things that you can see, control, and play with (Laurel 1993). The "things" that present themselves in computer environments are not "things" at all. Rather, they are representations that can be manipulated[10]. For these reasons, the computer's "interesting potential lay not in its ability to perform calculations but in its capacity to *represent action in which humans could participate* (Laurel 1993 pp. 1)."

Because of its unique simulating capabilities, considerable attention has been dedicated to the role of *the computer* in the production of virtual environments (see Rheingold 1991). Even when examining social-psychological dimensions of virtuality, technology remains the focus of attention. For example, the popular work of Sherry Turkle (1984; 1995) directly addresses social-psychological issues of virtuality, building from the view that "as people come to a greater acceptance of a kinship between computers and human minds, they have also begun to pursue a new set of boundary questions about things and people (1995 pp. 24)." As such, Turkle's analysis centers on issues of virtuality and the social-psychological consequences of a contemporary condition in which "we have become accustomed to opaque technology," and "we have learned to take things at interface value (1995 pp. 23)." However, on both grounds Turkle's popular analysis of computer-mediated virtual realities not only over-emphasizes the role of technology, but is fundamentally flawed from the start.

First, there is no reason to assume that technology is any more "opaque" in the emergent computer-mediated information age of "virtual reality" than any other preceding era. Anthropologists have long informed us that human societies have always exhibited a tool-making quality, and have always integrated technological innovations into the taken-for-granted everyday lives of its citizens. Thus, humans have always lived in a technologically "opaque" world. On what grounds can we reasonably conclude that technology in computer-mediated virtual environments is "more opaque" than any other social environment (historical or contemporary, virtual or non-virtual)? Computer technologies within virtual environments are "opaque," however the same may be said about *any* technological innovation within any given social situation (including non-material innovations, such as new theoretical paradigms), and therefore is *not* unique to computer technologies, or computer-mediated virtual realities.

The transformative potential of any given technology is precisely a function of its fundamentally "opaque" nature. Technological innovations exert impact on human societies, not because people understand how they work, but because they work (or at least are perceived to be working). People implement technological innovations for specific purposes, and to the extent that those technologies are successful, they alter the nature, range, and scope of human activity. It is the opaqueness of technology that allows persons to implement it for their purposes, and to the extent that such technologies "work" they serve to transform physical and social environments[11]. Thus, the unique quality of computer-mediated virtual environments is not that the technology is opaque--all technologies are opaque--rather, it's transformative potential rests in how it uniquely alters, or at least makes manifest previously existing alterations in the nature, range, and scope of human activity.

Secondly, Turkle (1995) argues that "we have learned to take things at interface value." Yet, here again, human beings have *always* took things at interface value:

> "Every tool has a human interface: doorknobs are the human interface to a door; steering wheels and speedometers are the human interface to an automobile. An effective interface was the hand-shaped grip on a stone axe (Rheingold 1991 pp. 70)."

For any technology to be usable, it must have a human interface. Once familiar enough to proficiently utilize the technology, the interface is necessarily taken for granted in lieu of the purpose of using the technology in the first place. We take for granted doorknobs, steering wheels, tool handles, power buttons, volume knobs, and channel selectors because they are simply a means to an technologically enabled end (opening the door, transportation, lawn care, adjusting volume, selecting a channel). Only when the interface fails to produce a desired result do we pay attention to that which we previously took for granted (i.e. a channel selector or volume knob that works unpredictably). Once again, the unique characteristic of computer-mediated virtual realities is not that the interface is taken for granted--all technologies have a taken for granted human interface--rather, its uniquely transformative potential rests in how persons construct and participate in computer-mediated environments that have the precarious privilege of being taken for granted.

As the preceding critique highlights, in spite of considerable hype surrounding "virtual reality," attention has focused on technology. More specifically, considerations of "virtual reality" unduly focus on the technologies capable of creating visual illusions (see Rheingold's 1991 best seller *Virtual Reality*, which should probably at least contain the subtitle *Technologies of Visual Illusion)*. As a result we have been blinded by the hype that emphasizes technologies that create visual illusions of reality, while ignoring other forms of

virtuality (this includes other computer-mediated forms like text-based virtual environments[12]). Furthermore, the preponderance of literature and popular accounts of "virtual reality" have emphasized the role of technology to such a degree that it would seem persons simply have no participatory role in the production of a virtual environment. Where in all this technology are human participants, and do they play a role in the production of virtual environments?

There can be no doubt that the computer-mediated virtual environments are dependent on computer technologies, and that these technological innovations bestow these environments with special characteristics. However, there is no reason why attention should be narrowly focused on merely; the technology, graphically based forms of virtuality, or even computer-mediated forms of virtuality alone. To the extent that virtuality is an *experience* (Rheingold 1991), understandings might best proceed through examination of similar experiences of virtuality in relation to computer-mediated virtual environments. Or in other words, to advance understandings of virtuality we must also consider how these realities are produced as an emergent experience situated in an ongoing process of human interaction--not merely the function of operating computer systems.

Brenda Laurel's (1993) influential book *Computers as Theater* is an important contribution toward highlighting processes in which computer-mediated forms of virtuality emerge within the interaction between persons and technology. Although Laurel's intended readership is a specific audience of computer programmers, her work is directly relevant to the social production of virtuality, and her dramaturgical model bears uncanny sociological familiarity. To Laurel (1993), the computer is merely the representer of a virtual world. Persons, in the process of interaction with one another and computer technologies, create the virtual worlds that computers *merely represent*. The

computer is simply the medium through which representational and virtual social worlds may be experienced (Laurel 1993), it is not that which alone creates such social worlds. The technologies of the computer are simply one small element of the virtual realities that emerge in computer mediated contexts:

> "Interface is more than screen deep. The interface becomes the arena for the performance of some tasks in which both human and computer have a role. What is represented in the interface is not only the task's environment and tools but also the process of interaction--the contributions made by both parties (Laurel 1993 pp. 7)."

Laurel encourages readers to look beyond the computer environment to obtain a more systemic understanding of how virtual situations are created, sustained, and experienced. Indeed, once divorced from the technological gee-wizery of the interface by which computer-mediated virtual experiences are produced, virtuality assumes a surprisingly familiar experiential quality. As Laurel (1993) notes:

> "Virtual reality is a continuum that is older even than science fiction. Enactments around prehistoric campfires, Greek theater, and performance rituals of aboriginal people the world over are all aimed at the same goal: Heightened experience through multisensory representation (Laurel 1993 pp. 187)."

The magnificent cathedrals, stately government buildings, the noble architecture of educational institutions, and even pristine sites of nature have an analogous virtual component. For example, as a Catholic priest stands before his congregation--within a magnificent cathedral, adorned with magnificent apparel, elevated on a stage that is only belittled by the sight of an enormous crucifix, enshrouded in an aura produced by the dim light of stain glass windows, candles, incense, and organ music--a virtual environment is produced where the meaning of the ordinary is transformed. Computer-mediated virtual environments, although contained within computer technologies, are produced

and experienced in a similar manner--they emerge dramaturgically. From this perspective, the reality of computer-mediated situations "lies not in the machinery itself, but in the users willingness to treat the manifestations of their meanings as if they were real (Reid 1994 pp. 4)."

"Human-computer activities are dramatic in nature (Laurel 1993 pp. 105)." Like any other dramatic activity, *action* is the primary component of human-computer activity--not characters, environments, interfaces, or objects[13] (Laurel 1993). If virtual situations are produced dramaturgically, and if dramaturgical enactments are sustained by action, then neither the technology nor the individual alone can represent that which allows for the production of virtual realities. That is, if virtual situations are dramaturgical enactments, then like any other drama they cannot be adequately understood by virtue of the stage or character alone--the action of the drama must be the focus of analytical attention:

> "It's not just that the technical underpinnings of theatrical performance are unimportant to audience members; when a play is 'working,' audience members are simply not aware of the technical aspects at all ...the action on the stage is *all there is* ...For actor and audience alike the ultimate 'reality' is what is happening in the imaginary world on the stage--the representation...The technical magic [of computer environments] that supports the representation, as in the theater, is behind the scenes. Whether the magic is hardware, software, or wetware is of no consequence; it's only value is what it produces on the 'stage.' In other words, *the representation is all there is* (Laurel 1993 pp. 15-17)."

Although many computer-mediated virtual environments are text-based (composed of words), neither human-computer activity nor online interaction is merely text--it is more than simply narrative. Unlike mere text or narrative, human-computer activity implicitly incorporates performance (Laurel 1993). To highlight, there are at least two grounds on which human-computer activities dramaturgically diverge from narrative alone; human-computer activities entail

"enactment," and "intensification."

Both drama and human-computer virtual activity involves *enactment*. In other words, what occurs in these environments is acted-out rather than simply read (Laurel 1993). Enacted representations involve users in a direct sensing and cognition *in* the environment as a *participant*. Where as narrative entails fundamental barriers in the participants role within the plot of the story, dramaturgical enactments necessitate human involvement. Furthermore, both drama and human-computer virtual activity is *intensifying*. That is, elements of situations are selected, arranged, and represented, so as to intensify the performance and condense time (Laurel 1993). Narratives generally employ the reverse process, extensification, where a narrative account may continue at great length and detail of a minute event (Laurel 1993). These differences between drama and narrative highlight the central role of action and drama to the emergence of computer-mediated virtual environments. All human-computer activities entail a degree of enactment and intensification which are embodiment of action and drama, and the means by which computer-mediated virtual situations are produced.

Summary

In the end, we arrive on the same conceptual grounds that this chapter began with: Computer-mediated virtual realities are emergent within the actions of participants situated in technologically enabled environments. Which is tantamount to saying: The "reality" of a social world is produced and sustained within ongoing dynamic patterns of social interaction. The virtual realities of computer-mediated environments are produced and sustained through the same processes of interaction that "non-virtual" realities of physical environments are produced and sustained. What is different about these two

forms of "reality" are not the processes by which they are produced, but the means of their production.

As highlighted in the previous subsections on face-to-face, electronic, and digital social environments, alterations in the means by which selves and social worlds are produced bestow unique qualities to the processes of interaction that serve to make manifest transformations in the nature, range, and scope of human activity. Because digital social worlds emerge and sustain themselves within the technologies of computer-mediated communication, the production of digital social worlds assumes qualities that serve to distinguish it from other social worlds. Selves and social worlds that emerge in these environments will display fundamental differences simply due to alterations in the means by which they are produced. As such, experiences of virtuality made manifest by online interaction and the emergence of self and social world within technologies of computer networking, become an "antienvironment" (McLuhan and Parker 1968) where ordinary occurrences are experientially transformed. The antienvironment of digital social worlds is a virtual context where simple occurrences assume new meaning, where previously unconsidered questions and issues become the source of great controversy.

The "things" that emerge within digital social worlds, how participants apprehend experiences of these virtual environments, and the questions and problems that these conditions present, display an awesome contemporary struggle over meaning. Participants in digital social worlds represent "reality hackers" (Stone 1995)--a population caught in the precarious margins of two eras: The implosion of the mechanical age, and the dawn of an information age (see Stone 1995). Caught between two eras, these "reality hackers" are people struggling to do what they have always done: To understand themselves and their world using whatever materials they have at hand (Turkle 1995).

Given these considerations the virtual self-social world relationship produced in online environments are technologically sustained "antienvironments" that open the door of perception to people otherwise numbed in a non-perceivable situation (McLuhan and Parker 1968). Examination of this condition is precisely the aim of this study. This study is not about a fad, nor is it merely about social games people play with computers. This study is about a temporary and isolated glimpse at the shifting boundaries of self and social world made manifest by computer networking technologies at the dawn of the information age. This study is about relationships between people, selves, bodies, social worlds, and the negotiated realities of personhood in a contemporary techno-social era.

> "Just as textual technologies--cheap paper, the typewriter, printing--accompanied new discourse networks and social formations, so electronic communication technologies--radio, television, computer networks--accompany the discourse networks and social formations now coming into being (Stone 1995 pp. 20)."

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study is guided by three general questions: (1) How do selves emerge in the online context of chat environments? (2) What are the unique qualities of these social constructions? (3) What do these findings imply about off-line self-social world relationships in everyday life? These research questions stem from the theoretical framework detailed in chapter two, and are researched using ethnographic-naturalistic methods.

Ethnographic-Naturalistic Methods

This study utilizes methods of ethnographic-naturalistic inquiry. Consequently, no pretense of replicability is implied or intended. Descriptive and illustrative data is used, and these findings can only be judged by the degree to which analysis yields understanding. Generally speaking, this research is an enthnography that follows from the methodological approach of naturalistic interactionism (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Denzin 1989). Like an ethnography this study relies on skills of observation and interviews. Like an ethnography, this research seeks to examine structures of meaning and meaning production. Like an ethnography, this research entailed a substantial commitment by the researcher to spend numerous hours amongst participants of the selected community under study. This naturalistic-ethnographical methodological position adheres to several principals that fundamentally

differentiate naturalistic methods from other forms of data collection.

First, naturalistic-ethnographic methods closely examine the meaning that participants associate to their activities in conjunction with the activities themselves (Denzin 1989). That is, from a naturalistic methodological approach, how persons interpret their activities and the activities of others must be examined in relation to the actual doings of people. This means research must seek to understand how participants perceive others, their activities, and themselves in a process of action, in the context of interaction--not as separate, but as *related* happenings.

Secondly, naturalistic methods seek to accommodate the perspective of the participant (Denzin 1989). Although this study is intended to be sociologically significant, it seeks to do so by utilizing sociological theories, concepts, and world views in conjunction with perspectives supplied by participants. In short, sociology must be emergent from the perspectives and activities of participants--not vice-versa. Obviously, this is idealistic. Any act of seeing will be structured by the theories that guide observation. Not unlike the ideals of objective empiricism, this "subjective grounding" is an ideal, yet probably remains only attainable in degrees.

Third, participant interpretations must be related to the groups from which they emerge (Denzin 1989). In these regards, interactionism is combined with naturalistic methods to produce what is sometimes called "naturalistic interactionism" (see Denzin 1989). From an interactionist perspective structures of meaning are inherently problematic. Meaning is negotiated between participants as they come to understand what is going on. These meanings, although often taken-for-granted by participants, are volatile constructions and temporary accommodations. Yet, ultimately these systems of meaning represent the foundation for interaction, and the means by which groups

emerge. Hence, analysis must examine participant interpretations in relationship to these larger group processes.

A fourth principal, which is exceedingly important to this research, involves the recording of the context of interaction as part-and-parcel to the phenomena one studies (Denzin 1989). The context (or environment of interaction) is paramount in any form of online research. In the computer-mediated context, it is clear that not only the meaning of persons activities is negotiated, but so too is the context and environment. This is not unlike any other social context for human interaction, however the computer-mediated environment bestows new salience to this important element. In this case, analysis must consider the online medium as an instrumental, not merely coincidental, element to the processes of social interaction

Fifth, methods and analysis should include mechanisms that allow for considerations of change, process, and stability (Denzin 1989). The process of data collection must be more than one momentary slice of time. Analysis must consider mechanisms of process--that is, how phenomena not only emerge, but evolve, transform, and change. Furthermore, no matter how fluid and indeterminate human activity may become, there is always some degree of stability (or perceived stability). In the online context, analysis must examine where and how stable aspects of social interaction emerge and are maintained to produce an environment for human activity.

Finally, it is important to incorporate the use of sensitizing concepts (Denzin 1989). Sensitizing concepts are critical to any form of ethnographic-naturalistic methodology. Where applicable, preexisting and well established concepts will be used to convey meaning to the reader. Elsewhere it may be necessary to suggest new concepts to convey something entirely new. However, in either case meaning is defined in relation to the understandings

that participants attribute to the phenomena. This is equivalent to saying that concepts and understandings are grounded in the activities and interpretations of participants themselves, and should sensitize the reader to what is examined.

Limitations of Naturalistic Methods in the Online Context

As with any enthnographic-naturalistic method, observation and interviewing techniques are the primary skills and tools implemented. However, due to the unique context of data collection fundamental methodological similarities and differences between the online context and other more traditional contexts of data collection must be noted. Like any other method of data collection, this study contains special problems, some of which are related to the ethnographic-naturalistic methods employed, while others are related to the unique qualities of the online world itself. The two most serious problems posed by ethnographic-naturalistic methods in the context of online chat is the problem of third-order interpretations and the problem of direct observation.

This study is not particularly interested in "things" or behaviors themselves. Rather, "things" and behaviors become relevant to analysis as they are grasped and shaped through the meaning-conferring response of participants (Emerson 1988). In short, this study is a description of meanings as made manifest in the activities of people. To the extent that all ethnographies seek to provide "thick descriptions" of meaning, all ethnographies struggle with the problems of second-order interpretations--interpretations of participants interpretations; or in Geertz's (1988) terms, "our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to (1988 pp. 42)." For this reason, ethnographies are often criticized as "second-order" interpretations--that is, the researchers theoretically guided interpretation of a participants interpretation of what is going on.

The problem of second-order interpretation is further compounded in online environment. Because ethnographic-naturalistic studies of online environments are necessarily computer-mediated, it is at best a third-order interpretation. For example, although observation and interviewing are primary methods of data collection, simple questions as to what is being observed and who is being interviewed are fundamentally unclear in the context of online social worlds. In spite of all the words and textual representations of action, such presentations are *not* simply narrative, and yet like narrative they are devoid of all that can be heard or seen. The "data" of an electronic ethnography is *exactly* what transpires (i.e. to save the text of an online interaction or an online interview is to capture everything that was communicated), yet such texts are *not* the embodiment of online interaction--they are merely the third-order remains of it. This seemingly contradictory statement is best illustrated by Reid (1994):

> "It is not a text, but a context. Virtual Interaction loses emotional and social meaning when transposed to a computer file and re-read. Pauses, breaks, disjunctions, speed and timing of virtual conversations are lost in such transposition, and such factors are a crucial signifier of meaning and context (pp. 26)."

Conveying these important expressions of meaning conferring behavior (an explicit goal of any ethnography) is greatly compounded within the online context due to; (1) the narrow band-width of information transmission (the vast entourage of verbal and non-verbal face-to-face and contextual information that is usually critical to the production of a superior ethnography, is simply not available), and (2) the computer-mediated nature of the context. Both of these conditions serve to further remove the ethnographer from the context of what is being studied, a situation non-conducive to producing quality ethnographic works. The online environment is fundamentally a computer-mediated narrow

band-width of interaction, and all that can be captured for the purposes of analysis are the remains of interactions that once transpired.

In an effort to partially overcome this problem, this research proceeds in a "empirically theoretical" manner. That is, the intent of this study is *not* to provide a "thick description" (Geertz 1988) of the online environment, but to advance understandings (which are by nature conceptual and/or theoretical), and to do so in an empirically grounded fashion. Ideas are the focus of this research, yet ideas presented will not simply be measured against reason, but supported with empirical illustration. Hence, no arbitrary distinction is made between what is traditionally called "data" and "discussion," and no effort is made to "capture a slice" of the online ethnographic world. Rather, data and discussion are presented as inseparable elements of what this research represents--an "empirically theoretical" interpretation of the online context.

A second and related problem posed by the use of ethnographic-naturalistic methods in the online context is the unavailability of direct observation. Persons in the online context are not immediately accessible, and cannot be directly observed. Whatever "data" that can be gathered about persons and their interactions is necessarily computer-mediated. Because the context is computer-mediated, data collection often assumes qualities similar to other mediated forms of data collection (most notably, survey methods). Without direct access to the person, one simply cannot be assured that information provided or observed is accurate[14]. Like mail surveys, persons can choose to respond to a researchers questions, or ignore the survey altogether. Like phone surveys, persons can choose to respond to a researchers questions, or simply "hang-up." Worse yet, like all survey methods persons can answer questions honestly, or dishonestly, and there is no direct observation to verify the validity of responses.

To overcome this problem, an ethnomethodological interpretative approach is employed. This research makes no attempt to devise a "measure" of validity, nor does this research merely take participants reports as "fact" (as "real" events that stand outside of the phenomena being described). Rather, participants reports and observations of their doings are conceptually apprehended as inevitably embedded in, and a part of, the phenomena under study (Emerson 1988). That is, the reports of participants and observations of their doings in the online context are apprehended as "accounts"--not merely descriptions.

In summary, the methods of this study primarily rely on observational skills and interviewing techniques that are like an ethnography, yet does not proceed with the same explicit goals of traditional ethnographic work. The focus of this study is to suggest a conceptual approach toward interpreting online interaction, identifying characteristics of selves and social worlds that emerge in the online context, and suggest implications that these findings have for off-line self-social world relationships of contemporary everyday life. Hence, the focus of this study is theoretical-conceptual, yet these ideas are sustained with empirical observations and interview data.

Research Context

Data was collected in multiple online contexts including the World Wide Web, Inter-Relay Chat, small bulletin board systems, and commercial online servers. The immense diversity of these elements of the Net poses practical limitations. For this reason, this research focuses on online contexts where persons communicate with others in "real-time" (when persons communicate in the immediate present, rather than in "delayed-time," which would include such things as e-mail or usenet). A focus on "real-time" communication environments

is not only practical, but theoretically sustained. That is, in theoretical terms the most explicit context in which the emergence of selves and social worlds may be observed are those situations where persons are interacting with others in an ongoing process of interactive communication. Only "real-time" online communications readily meets this condition.

However, "real-time" computer-mediated communications also display remarkable diversity. We can generally distinguish between "game-oriented" and "chat-oriented" real-time communications. Game-oriented real-time communications are interactions between persons that emerge in the process of "playing" online games that are loosely referred to as MUD's and MOO's[15]. These real-time game-oriented social activities have been the focus of the majority of the sparse literature in the area of recreational online interaction. However, game-oriented real-time communications are at least influenced, if not structured by the explicit and implicit rules of the game. They are by nature fantasy role-playing activities, and "being in character" is part of the game. Furthermore, the social worlds that emerge in these contexts are at least partially determined by the context of the game itself. Although participants in these games can construct their own contexts for play, for all practical purposes the social world is predefined--it is a prepared context in which persons can role-play for the sake of the game. For these reasons, game-oriented real-time communications are of less interest than the unstructured chat-oriented forms of real-time communication.

Chat-oriented real-time communications is the focus of this research. In real-time chat people interact with one another for the sake of interacting alone, sometimes for related ulterior purposes (i.e. to obtain specific information, to achieve sexual arousal, etc). However, with the exception of limitations posed by the medium, nothing in a chat environment is "given." Persons can, for all

practical purposes, say anything and in the process construct any kind of self or social world imaginable. Chat systems represent a no-holds-barred orgy of directionless communication, and therefore represent an ideal environment to examine the emergence of self and social worlds in the context of computer-mediated interaction.

Although data were gathered from numerous online chat environments, one large Nation-wide commercial online service was chosen as the primary context for research, all other sources of information were used to supplement and extend upon data collected from this one source[16]. The selected commercial online service is available to customers for a monthly fee, and an additional hourly fee. This service was chosen because it is one of the largest of many "charter busses" on the information super-highway, providing access to a variety of information and services, and is immensely popular as a particularly user-friendly means of interacting with others in the sometimes daunting computer-mediated world of cyberspace.

Additionally, Inter-Relay Chat, bulletin board services from around the world, dimensions of the World Wide Web, and several other chat-environments are considered and used to expand findings beyond the context of this one chosen commercial server. Data from these sources supplement findings in ways that are not necessarily included within the chosen commercial server, or best illustrate ideas in ways not covered in the selected commercial server.

Methods

Four methods of data collection were used. First, a rough form of content analysis was used to analyze information provided by chat participants. Some chat environments allow a participant to report information about themselves to be freely accessed by others. These "profiles" are a summary of basic

demographic and personal information that are available to anyone within the system. A sample of one hundred chat participants was obtained and content analysis was used as an analytical tool for describing the information provided.

Second, a survey was distributed to online chat participants. A convenient sample of volunteers was given an electronic survey sent to their e-mail address. Fifty-eight surveys were collected. The primary intent of the e-mail survey was to obtain personal information on the meaning and uses of chat environments and the sense of self that emerges through online interaction. Because some online participants have ulterior reasons for interacting online (which does not include answering researchers questions), and some participants pay by the hour for the time they spend in these environments, the e-mail survey is more a matter of convenience for the participant than of methodological importance. In short, the e-survey allowed participants to answer questions at their leisure while off-line, and hence not paying for that time. The questions asked in the e-survey are contained in Appendix B.

The third methodology is participant observation. The author created screen names (and where applicable, an accurate "profile" reflective of research intent) and entered chat areas, observing what transpires and learning as much as possible about how users communicate within such environments. Participant observation was central to this study, and lasted over three years. Sometimes participant observation was explicitly intended for research purposes. At those times the research intent was clearly stated, and consent of participants to record and collect data was obtained. At other times, the researcher simply participated--chatting with others with no ulterior research motive. During these times no data were collected, however insights and understandings were gained and proved invaluable to the analysis of online chat. In the end, what emerged methodologically were sets of observations and

interview questions that were informed from insights gained from being a participant in these chat environments.

Often participant observation became a time consuming task of learning the rules of conduct, and how to manipulate the user interface and software necessary to effectively communicate in various online chat environments. Once proficient with these mechanical processes, considerable time was devoted to the context. In all cases, the author became an accepted member of the online chat environment--often known and recognized by the "regulars." Through carefully maintained rapport and trust, which was often completely informed by my insider status, data collection would sometimes begin. In some cases, however, data collection was deemed inappropriate and discontinued[17].

The fourth methodology is open-ended interviews. Throughout the project a convenient sample of key informants was obtained for open-ended online interviews concerning both the context of online chat and the emergence of self. This proved to be the most important method of data collection, as most of the data presented in this study came from these interviews. A total of forty-two interviews were conducted. Although all interviews were open-ended, several questions were used to warm-up the participant, and create a set of responses for the development of more probing questions (see Appendix B). Throughout the interview process, participant selection and interviewing techniques utilized the methods of naturalistic inquiry. As detailed in the following sections.

Selection of Participants

This study does not seek a "representative sample" from a broader "population" of well defined "subjects." Frankly, such aims would be difficult (probably impossible) to achieve given the current nature of online

environments (i.e. there isn't even a reasonable way of assessing how many persons are online, let alone how many of them frequent chat environments, or what characteristics define that particular population. Therefore, no sampling frame can be obtained and therefore this is no means of devising or assessing a "representative" sample.). For these reasons, traditional methods of sampling for interview participants were abandoned. Alternatively, this study adopts the sampling suggestions outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four guidelines to research sampling that stem from the methods of naturalistic inquiry. These guidelines serve as the basis of the sampling design of this study. First, according to Lincoln and Guba preplanned or "a priori specification" of the sample presumes too much and yields to the bias of generalization sampling. In traditional sampling techniques, a homogeneous sampling frame is drawn often to fit the needs of the researcher. Lincoln and Guba argue that this process conveniently eliminates confounding or conflicting situational data. As samples are drawn to reflect homogeneity for purposes of better inferences, the contextual elements of the sample grow more similar. In opposition, the goal of naturalistic inquiry is maximum variation--to attain as many diverse elements of the research phenomena for exploration and analysis.

Second, the goal of maximum variation is best met with a selection procedure that allows successive participants to be chosen in order to gather data and fill missing information. Each participant was selected to fill in gaps in the data. Special attention was given to contrasting information, or data that extends information previously provided. In this study participants were selected within the scope of this methodological goal.

Third, in the process of data collection and analysis the sampling

techniques become successively honed and refocused. That is, different respondents with different perspectives were sought as dictated by the needs of the ongoing research. To do this, analysis and data collection occurred concurrently. The selection of participants was refined as was necessary to accommodate the needs of emergent analysis. This involved several stages of data collection and analysis, a refocusing of interview aims and persons selected.

Lastly, this research followed the principle of selection to the point of redundancy. By far, this principal proved to be the most useful concept of naturalistic inquiry. Data collection continued to the point of saturation, where participants provided no new information. In each area of analysis, interviews and other forms of data collection continued until there was complete saturation of information and the researcher could not derive any more useful information from participants.

These guidelines, however, do not specify how one should find potential participants. What Lincoln and Guba (1985) do suggest is to be fluid and open to multiple possibilities--to go where the action is, so to speak. Consequently, this research involved numerous chat areas of the Net including; the World Wide Web, national online servers, local bulletin board services, and any other online "place" where people meet to "chat." Once a location was determined, participants were asked if they would voluntarily participate in this project by answering a few questions. If they choose to participate, they were given a description of the research, guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity (see Appendix A), and once they provided consent an open ended interview followed.

Interviewing

The study utilized the unstructured and non-standardized interview processes described by Lincoln & Guba (1981) and Denzin (1989). This interview technique does not entail the use of preestablished set of questions, and maximizes the flexibility suggested by the method of naturalistic inquiry. Interviews began with a few simple questions (i.e. "how often do you chat?"), and moved to more reflective questions (i.e. "to what extent do you think people modify who they are when chatting with others online?"), but ultimately interviews followed an emergent structure based on probing questions from the participants previous responses (i.e. "do *you* ever change your presentation of self while chatting?" "why?" etc.). Instead of a set agenda of questions, this research sought to find topics that each respondent was particularly willing and able to discuss, and maximized the collection of that information.

All interviews were conducted in private by the author. No other participants were able to see or record data provided in interviews. Immediately following each interview, the text was recorded and the screen name of the respondent was replaced with a pseudo-name. No record of screen names or pseudo-names was kept. For all practical purposes, after the pseudo-name was assigned even the researcher could no longer identify participants from the recorded interviews.

Actual Data and Research Findings

Online interaction involves a form of communication that is a combination of written and spoken word (as will be discussed in the next chapter). Because of this unique quality, there are three related issues that make "actual data" from online interactions difficult to use for research findings, often requiring some modification. First, what participants actually type to one another, and how

these messages appear do not adhere to syntax of printed English. In online chat, grammatical conventions are secondary to the spontaneity of discussion. This can lead to some confusion when reading online data in printed text. Further compounding matters, chat participants utilize syntax to convey meaning that is sometimes different than what these conventions mean in printed text form. For example, ellipses are used by chat participants to suggest long pauses (i.e. "I'm not sure...maybe you are right"). However to literally quote this "actual data" exactly as it appears would mislead the reader by suggesting that the researcher has cut out part of what the participant said (which is not the case).

Secondly, participants in chat environments are not particularly attentive to proper spelling. Like syntax, misspellings and typos are usually tolerated in order to sustain an environment of spontaneous discussion. Sometimes these misspellings are intentional phonetic spellings (for example "what's up" is sometimes phonetically spelled "wazzup?"). As opposed to these stylistic conventions, some misspellings and typos are unintentional and can hinder effective understanding of what the participant is saying.

Finally, online chat environments almost always entail a multiplicity of simultaneous conversations. When there is a multiplicity of simultaneous discussions, the messages that appear on one line of chat communication may or may not be related to what appears in the previous or following lines. As a consequence, one often must sift through numerous unrelated messages in order to follow any one of many ongoing conversations. Literally quoting data from these discussions would inevitably lead to the inclusion of numerous unrelated messages. Following these literal quotes would certainly be distractive to the reader. More importantly, these "other messages" are not likely to have any bearing on the point that is being made.

For these reasons, the findings in this study were modified for research purposes. However, at no time was the wording or meaning altered in any way. Grammar and syntax were translated from the meaning conveyed in a chat environment to the same meaning in printed text (except where grammar and syntax were used stylistically) to aid in effective communication of what the participant was saying. Syntax with specific meaning in the online context (i.e. ellipses) were replaced with the proper syntax for printed text (commas, periods, dashes, etc.). Like spoken interviews that require that the researcher add punctuation, online text must be modified in this way in order to be effectively used as findings in any study. Finally, in cases where data were collected from situations that involved multiple online discussions, all irrelevant messages were deleted from the quoted findings. The researcher does not believe that any of these modifications are in any way a form of "massaging" the data. These modifications are merely deemed necessary to the translation of actual data into research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of this study are organized into four parts. Admittedly, dividing the findings of this study into "parts" is an arbitrary imposition of order--it is not, however, with out reason. This study aims to be empirically theoretical, which is to say that the primary objective is conceptual--introducing a set of understandings to account computer-mediated symbolic interaction in the context of online chat. Empirical observations are simply the grounded means by which theoretical arguments, suggested terms, and constructs will be sustained. Findings will be divided into four parts, each stem from the theoretical framework discussed in chapter two.

Part one, entitled "The Medium is the Message," builds from the assertion that forms of selfhood, and experiences of ones social world are influenced by the means in which they are produced. All self and social world experiences are mediated; online environments just happen to be computer-mediated. Consequently, this part seeks to briefly describe the processes of online chat, and highlight important dimensions of the computer medium as they translate into elements of emergent forms of online selfhood.

Part two, "Constraints and Creativity," is intended to be the antithesis of a body of literature in computer-mediated communication often referred to as "cues-filtered out." The "cues filtered out" perspective argues that computer-mediated environments deny contextual, interpersonal, and emotional cues,

and therefore hinder meaningful social interaction. "Cues filtered out" is a form of computer determinism that assumes the computer itself posits the causal link between limitations of the computer-mediated environment and a host of social communicative outcomes. This part explicitly illustrates the opposite in chat environments. It is argued that limitations of the medium represent a structure by which chat participants focus creative communication efforts. By creating imaginative means for overcoming the limitations of the medium, participants latently establish an ideoculture that serves to identify members of the online "electropolis" (Reid 1991), and distinguishes chat participants as a unique group.

Part three, "Translating Self to the Conventions of the Medium" begins with a theoretical distinction. Selfhood entails two separate processes: the designation of an agent; and the endowment of agency. To have a self (in any context), one must have a designated agent--a recognizable form of personhood. To this agent, agency is attributed. That is, meanings are bestowed to the agent in a process of human interaction. Given this framework, this part seeks to explore how agency is bestowed to the online agent. The form and major characteristics of online interaction (from which agency is bestowed) is used to describe the nature of "cyberselfhood."

Part four, entitled "Negotiations of Reality," is perhaps the most important component to this study. With considerable time devoted to the examination of the online chat environments and computer-mediated forms of selfhood, it is necessary to broaden findings to include analysis of off-line self-social world relationships. In this part, findings and analysis will refocuses on the generalized nature of self-social world relationships in lieu of participant experiences of online chat environments. Because chat participants frequently find themselves unexpectedly amidst a culturally based ideological conflict of

competing self interpretations, how participants negotiate this conflict, and thus define the reality of selfhood is key to our understanding of online chat environments and how these experiences inform the contemporary experiences of self and social world.

PART ONE

The Medium is the Message: The Mechanics of Chat and the Designation of Online Agents

> "...the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium ...result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology (McLuhan 1964 pp. 7)."

Online "chat" is a relatively simple process of communication. Participants access a chat system, select a chat channel, and proceed to type messages to one another. Gaining access to a chat system is a matter of deciding what online service(s) one is going to subscribe to. A direct Internet connection provides users access to InterRelayChat (IRC), while online commercial servers (such as America Online, Compuserve, E-World, etc) contain similar self-contained services that are often called "chat rooms." Although each chat system contains different user interfaces, they all function about the same. The differences between the various services is usually just a matter of size, number of other chat participants, and user friendliness of the interface.

Once access is obtained, participants then select a chat channel to participate. To aid participants in this selection, each chat channel is identified by a name that functions to define the context of communication and is therefore indicative of the content of the conversations. For example, to go to a chat channel entitled "Christian Fellowship" is to know the context and general

content of communication. Participants of the system create chat channels with a simple procedure that involves little more than designating a label to a particular chat environment. The name of each channel is listed for all members within the system, and one may view this listing at any time. The number of available channels can range from dozens to thousands depending on the system (i.e. a local bulletin board service may contain five to ten chat areas, America Online may contain up to a thousand chat rooms, and IRC may contain more than five thousand chat channels). Consequently, the user-selected descriptive label applied to the channel is an important outward cue to what people are chatting about and provides an important basis for choosing which channel to participate in.

Once one or more channels are chosen, participants may interact with one or all members within the selected chat environment(s). Each person on the system is identified by a self-selected screen name (in some systems these names are called "nicks," which is short for "nickname"), and each channel contains a listing of all screen names within the chat room. Hence, participants always know who (as identified by screen name) they are communicating with in the channel.

Communication within chat channels is syncronistic. All persons can immediately and simultaneously contribute to online conversation(s) by typing messages and clicking icons. Within seconds the message and the screen name of the sender will appear on the computer monitor of all other persons in the channel. Additionally, private channels of communication are also available. These private channels allow participants to send messages directly to other participants without persons in the channel "over hearing" (this is analogous to whispering in a persons ear while at a party, except in chat environments one may "whisper in the ears" of many persons at the same time).

Participants in the channel can simply watch the conversation(s) scroll up the computer screen, joining when (and if) they choose. By these means people carry on lively discussions on almost any imaginable topic.

Synchronisity: A Structure for Multiplicity

To say that online chat is synchronistic is to say that all persons communicate simultaneously, and may do so through several different means (in the channel, in multiple channels, through private messages, etc.). Imagine a text recording of a lively party where various statements are printed in text form in the order by which they are received to the recorder. The resulting text would be a disjointed set of messages--each individual message may or may not be related to the previous or the following. Although there may be a known order to the messages among various participants, the convolution of conversations creates a condition where, when read literally from top to bottom, the transcript would not necessarily make reasonable sense. Online chat environments frequently resemble this hypothetical situation. Syncronisity compromises the linearity of communication due to the potential for numerous conversations through a single mode of communication, and the absence of taken-for-granted ethnomethological means for sustaining a communication order (eye gestures, vocal cues, gestures, etc.).

In the sycronistic chat environment conversations easily become disjointed and quickly dropped, perhaps to be continued later, or to be forgotten altogether. Furthermore, within the syncronistic chat environment it is not unusual for multiple conversations to occur simultaneously. To illustrate, consider the following conversation from a chat channel entitled "tarot" (the left hand column identifies the screen name, the message follows the colons):

Trudygal : what goes on in here I am a virgin to all of this
ASK4U : you got cards savannah?
OSusanna : I don't have to be a psychic to accurately tell fortunes, no one does
Washcycle : that's what they all say Trudy
OSusanna : It's just a matter of a good guess
DogsAime : Is anyone available to do a reading??
Trudygal : no really I am
SKYHOOK : Oh Trudy, never tell that to anyone in here!
Washcycle : There are official readings 9-12pm ET
Trudygal : why??
Washcycle : and just chat rest of time
Amulet : hey trudy once you get the bill you wont be a virgin anymore!!!!
SKYHOOK : I hear SysSage is reading, DogsAime
PVCDC : who does the readings?
Trudygal : I am already fearing that

Multiple conversations frequently occur simultaneously and breakdown the taken-for-granted linearity of normative communication. In the above illustration, "Trudygal" makes a statement that three lines later "Washcycle" responds to. On the seventh line "Trudygal" responds to "Washcycle's" comment, at which point "SKYHOOK" responds to "Trudygal" on the eighth line. All the while, "OSusanna" carries on discussions between various other participants in a conversation of a different nature. This kind of syncronistic communication is typical and continues on-and-on with each successive statement eliciting responses from any one or more persons within the channel at any given time.

"Private messaging" further contributes to the sychronistic experience of online chat. While much of the communication within chat channels is available for all to view and participate, there are other channels of communication which allow privacy. Private messages are communications sent from one user to another but do not appear in the "public" text of the channel. Private messages can be sent and/or received by anyone in the chat system regardless of what channel(s) they are participating in. Since there is no limit to the number of

private messages that one may send or receive, private messages allow for tremendous flexibility in online chat communication. Users can simultaneously communicate with others who are not in the same channel, they may have numerous private message conversations occurring at the same time, and may participate in the conversation that is occurring within the room as well.

Private messages are widely utilized, and in conjunction with the "public" communication in the chat channel creates a party-like atmosphere. As stated by one participant, "I feel like I'm talking to the whole world. It's like I'm invited to a party all over the country." In more ways than one, online chat becomes an orgy of communication.

The multiple-syncronistic nature of online chat is an important element of the chat environment. The syncronisity of online chat communication encourages and sustains a multiplicity of simultaneous conversations. Furthermore, by use of private messages persons can participate in a chat environment, while also communicating with numerous others in any number of other on-going conversations at the same time. Therefore, not only is the chat itself syncronistic, but individual participants can converse syncronistically with a variety of others through multiple means. In short, the very structure of the online chat environment is multiply-syncronistic.

The Designation of Self in Online Chat: Creating Online Agents

In the online chat environment, participants utilize numerous mechanisms for creating and presenting online self-agents. One important initial element in the creation of online agents is the designation of a screen name. Self-selected screen names are initially influential in determining the nature of interaction (Bechar-Israeli 1995; Meyers 1987). When communicating in a chat environment, all participants know which other screen names are in

the channel and all communication is associated with the screen name of the message sender.

Although persons can designate any screen name they choose, there are a few technical limitations. First, a screen name is usually limited to nine characters or less (some chat systems allow for spaces in the screen name, while others do not). Secondly, not all characters on the keyboard can be used in the designation of a screen name. Usually screen names are limited to the upper and lower case letters of the Roman alphabet, the numbers 0 through 9, hyphens, lines, the symbol ^, and brackets (however, this also varies according to the chat system, as many only allow letters and numbers). Finally, no two persons can have the same screen name at the same time on the same system. Within these limitations, the range of screen names is enormous.

Since a person's online existence and identity must be condensed into a single word or phrase, participants will often attempt to make these representational elements as prominent as possible (Bechar-Israeli 1995). Therefore, screen names are a critical element in participants presentation of an online self agent. In fact, they are the only initial means by which participants can say who or what they are in literally one word or phrase (Bechar-Israeli 1995).

Names in general are under examined as important elements in the projection of meaning. Yet, understanding elements of the construction of online agents necessitates an understanding of the importance of names. Although a screen name may consist of a mere word or phrase, as Haya Bechar-Israeli (1995) illustrates, names can evoke complex meanings and images. For example, we often choose names to neutralize frightening or unfamiliar objects and occurrences to minimize negative connotations (i.e. calling the Lock Ness monster "Nessy," as if it were a cute little kitty. Or, the

practice of calling hurricanes by human names). A name may be used to glorify (i.e. to call a ship the "Queen Elizabeth"). Some names can carry such strong connotations that they become concepts in their own right (i.e. McCarthyism). In short, names are an important part of an individuals sense of self and how they are perceived by others (Bechar-Israeli 1995; Strauss 1969), and participants in chat systems are acutely aware and manipulate the meanings that can be conveyed by the designation of a screen name.

As chat participants designate, change, and play with screen names they engage in the initial elements of an identity game. That is, by designating a screen name, participants associate themselves with a *label*. Many screen names are neutral labels, but others serve as important indicators of interests and motives for interaction. As indicated by content analysis of member profiles, in many cases screen names are simple derivatives of the persons supposed real name. For example a screen name such as "M1che1e" is presumably based upon the users real first name "Michelle." Likewise, many screen names indicate location. For example, "MrMaine" communicates the geographic location of the person. Similarly, screen names may also be based on the person's hobbies and interests. For example "GuitarPickn" indicates the persons interests in guitars and guitar playing. Other screen names are based on the person's occupation. For example "TeachMan" is suggestive of a male teacher. As can be expected, some screen names are based on life styles. For example "VegDiet" is an indication of a vegetarian. Not surprisingly there are a number of screen names that are based on an individual's motives for online interaction. For example a screen name such as "PhoneFun4u" is indicative of the users interests in obtaining potential contacts for phone sex. Likewise, a screen name such as "DarkElf" is suggestive of participants online gaming motives.

Regardless of its foundation, to designate a screen name is to associate oneself with a label. Because users have the power to create their own screen names, these labels become important self-selected components in the presentation of an online self. Furthermore, because of the absence of a physical body, screen names are "transformed into trademarks, distinctive individual smells by which their users are recognized (Meyers 1987 pp. 240)." Without physical presence, screen names are important means by which persons communicate qualities of selfhood that are normally observed (i.e. gender, age, geographic location, etc.), or otherwise discerned by interactive cues (i.e. hobbies, occupations, status, etc).

The inaccessibility of information about others in the online context that would normally be observed in face-to-face interaction may be contrasted to the kind of interactions that became central to the work of Erving Goffman. Goffman (1959) emphasized that in the course of interaction persons convey two sets of impressions; impressions "given" and impressions "given-off." That is, persons intentionally give information to others about themselves, and unintentionally give-off other information. Usually, expressions given-off support the impressions persons give. However, when they do not a person's presentation of self may be jeopardized. Thus, expressions given-off often operate as a control mechanisms over the impressions given. However, when interacting with others in the online context only one type of information is initially provided--information that a person wishes to "give"--whether fictional or fantasy (Bechar-Israeli 1995), and other participants do not have access to anything else (at least initially). Consequently, screen names become one initial and important element of a participants selected presentation of self.

However, designating a screen name is simply one facet of the presentation of an online self. Presentation of an online self occurs in a manner

similar to face-to-face interaction. A self must be presented, negotiated, and validated in an ongoing process of interaction. Consider the following:

RedWines : Let's have an age/sex check
LeFetes : 24/F
EdsFerret : <-------26 F
RedWines : 20/f
DocNut : 27/m
RedWines : How about a state check?
RedWines : MD
EdsFerret : OH
DocNut : MI
LeFetes : FL
EdsFerret : What is your occupation Doctor???
DocNut : psychologist....YIKES!!!
EdsFerret : Oh, no I already feel like I'm being analyzed
DocNut : where ya from EdsFerret??
EdsFerret : Toledo, Ohio
LeFetes : Hey RedWines, what do you do?
RedWines : I work with retarded adults
RedWines : and what do you do?
LeFetes : I'm a secretary?
LeFetes : ...and I play the guitar
EdsFerret : Hello, LeFetes. is that a French name?
LeFetes : Actually I'm Italian
LeFetes : ...But my moms French
Ball 0 : Hi everyone!
EdsFerret : That's neat, do you know French?
LeFetes : me oui moin ami
LeFetes : yes
EdsFerret : moi aussi aujourd hui.
Ball 0 : Any college students here?
AndyCapps : Yes, Miami Univ. in OH
EdsFerret : The University of Toledo
Ball 0 : Univ. CA, San Diego
Ball 0 : What are you studying, Andy?
AndyCapps : Accounting. and you?
Ball 0 : Psych
Ball 0 : I'm learning to mess with people's minds.

Conversations typically begin, and continue as illustrated above. Because chat environments are disembodied, simple elements of selfhood that are normally observed in face-to-face interaction--elements embedded in ones

physical being (i.e. gender)--must be presented and validated to others. Once participants have stated an age, gender and perhaps a few other demographic variables, conversations are quickly formulated (as illustrated above). If participants want more information on any given person, or if they doubt the statements that someone is making, then a participants profiles can be obtained (this is possible only in some chat systems--not all chat environments allow for "profiles"). Therefore, "user profiles" provide another potential means by which participants present a selected self. Take for example the following profile of one of the participants in the above conversation:

Screen Name: Ball 0
Member Name: Sabrina
Location: Santa , CA
Birthdate: 1-28-76
Sex: Female
Marital Status: Single
Computers: PC 486DX33
Hobbies: Music, pool
Occupation: UCSD student
Quote: "Jesus is coming....look busy!"

With information provided to others while interacting in chat channels, supplemented with cues potentially derived from a participants' screen name and "profile," an online performance attains meaning. In other words, a "cyberself" agent is designated.

In short, a self is a performance that includes a set of situational meanings that are derived from any meaning conferring action. In the absence of face-to-face indicators, participants designate and present a self agent by use of (1) screen names that are often descriptive self-selected labels, (2) through information provided in "profiles," but ultimately the online self agent emerges through (3) interaction with others (the processes of which will be detailed in part three). That is, screen names and profiles may be elements of online self

expression, but ultimately selfhood emerges through a process of communication in the chat environment. Thus, on one hand, the emergence of self in the online context is nothing new--it is a form of selfhood that emerges the same as any other form of self. Yet, on the other hand, "the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964 pp. 7)." Networks--or systems of carrying information--are not transparent (Woolley 1993). Online chat environments, like television, are not windows to another world--they do not simply show its audience pictures of events that happen to be taking place somewhere else. Rather, like television, the online chat environment itself has a role in determining what people see and how they interpret it. Elements of the online chat environment (the medium of communication) fundamentally alter the nature of human interaction, presenting a new range and scope of human interaction. Although an online self-agent is designated like any other form of self, the medium by which this form of selfhood is enacted (the online context) allows users a new range of agency that can be attributed to this unique self-agent (as will be discussed in the next sections).

PART TWO

Constraints and Creativity: Emoticons and Idioculture

Online chat is text based, and therefore contains no communicative cues of physical presence. There is no eye contact, voice tones, physical gestures, or any other traditional enthnomethodological means for maintaining a taken for granted communication order. Consequently, non-linear multiply-sycronistic communications, combined with the absence of communication cues of physical presence, presents constraints and limitations to the process of communication. These conditions pose certain difficulties to chat participants:

"Conversations can easily become disjointed. It's often difficult to keep up with what's going on."

"I dislike the fact that you can't communicate emotion in text. This often leads to problems with members reading something into the text that isn't there."

Problems like these are endemic to the multiply-syncronistic and disembodied online chat environment. These and other limitations have been identified by some scholars of computer-mediated communication who argue that the constraints of the medium hinder communication (see Walther and Burgoon 1992; Baron 1984; Cheseboro and Bonsall 1989; Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984; Rice 1989; 1984). Because computer-mediated communication environments deny physical presence and related social cues, this approach is sometimes called "cues filtered-out." From this perspective, the lack of contextual, interpersonal, and social cues produce numerous interrelated outcomes that exert causal influence on communicative outcomes.

Overwhelmingly, scholars of the "cues filtered out" perspective derive evidence from experimental research on task-oriented activities in organizational and occupational contexts. These were among the first researchers intrigued by computer-mediated communication, and they have focused on applications in organizational contexts where computer-mediated communication was first introduced (see Walther and Burgoon 1992; Baron 1984; Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984; Rice 1989; 1984). This kind of task-oriented experimental research in organizational environments remains the focus of most computer-mediated communication research, which seek to reveal factors that exert causal influence on communication patterns and social organization (Baymn 1995).

Scholars from the "cues filtered out" perspective generally seek to answer the question: how do computer-mediated communication technologies

influence people, groups, and organizations. Through examination of task-groups in organizational contexts, these scholars identify elements of computer-mediated communication, and causally link them to communicative outcomes. For example, participants in computer-mediated communication environments gain greater anonymity because elements of their public identity (gender, race, age, status, etc.) are not immediately available. As a consequence, scholars from the "cues filtered out" perspective have argued that the nullification of differentiating personal qualities allows participation in task-groups to be more evenly balanced and egalitarian (Walther 1992), making it more difficult for persons to dominate or impose their views on others (Baron 1984). However, when everyone is allowed to express their views, it often takes longer to reach a decision or complete a task (Sproull and Kiesler 1991). Thus, computer-mediated communication heightens participation, but impedes resolution of tasks.

Although the "cues filtered out" perspective may be a useful approach to understanding work and task-related computer-mediated environments, it does not provide an adequate model for interpreting online chat environments, and some scholars argue that the model is over-simplified even for use in organizational contexts (see Baym 1995; Contractor and Seibold 1993; Steinfeld 1986). The "cues filtered out" perspective has been seriously criticized for assuming too much of a causal role to the computer itself. While there is no doubt that computer-mediated communication environments deny much of the physical and socio-emotional cues of face-to-face interaction, these conditions alone do not provide necessary and sufficient grounds for the assumption of computer determinism. It is necessary to take into consideration numerous other factors. Perhaps the most important factor over-looked are the purposes for which participants use computer-mediated communication

technologies. Task-oriented activities in work-related contexts represent only one set of purposes for computer-mediated communication. Recreational purposes, like those found in chat environments, represent an entirely different set of conditions in which task-completion may have little bearing.

It can be argued that the "task at hand" influences the extent to which individuals are involved in what they say in computer-mediated contexts, what they do, what topics are raised (Baym 1995). Furthermore, to the extent that participants have prior relations (occupational for example) the very structure of the computer-mediated task-group may be influenced by pre-existing relationships. In chat environments, on the other hand, the only "task" is to communicate, and generally there are no pre-existing relationships save those which emerge in these contexts. For these reasons it may be suggested that the conditions of "cues filtered out" may exert a substantially different impact on chat participants than on those who are studied within the occupational task-groups contained within traditional computer-mediated communication studies.

In online chat environments, understanding of the role of "cues filtered out" to the emergence of particular forms of online social arrangements might best proceed by perceiving the constraints imposed by the medium not simply as a hindering force to the completion of tasks, but as a structure in which participants focus creative and imaginative communication efforts. As suggested by Brenda Laurel (1993), it is possible that constraints, or limitations of the medium can serve to focus creative efforts, and paradoxically increase imaginative powers by reducing the number of possibilities open to participants. That is, heightened creativity may arise out of the tension between spontaneity (the desire to communicate) and constraints (being confined to a text medium), forcing the spontaneity into various forms.

Emoticons and Idioculture

"Emoticons" represent one of the best illustrations of heightened creativity in lieu of the constraints and limitations of online chat environments. Quite simply, the faceless and non-oral nature of online communication does not preclude the existence of emotional content in communication (as suggested by the "cues filtered out" approach). Rather, in the faceless and non-oral online environment participants employ (and continue to invent) a lively system of typed symbols as a short hand for expressing emotion and action that cannot be captured in the text medium of online chat interaction. That is, participants creatively construct and employ text icons that symbolize socio-emotional, contextual, and interpersonal communication cues. These "emoticons"--symbols for smiles, frowns, laughing, yelling, pointing as well as numerous other non-verbal forms of communication are constructed out of dashes and punctuation marks. Like Chinese calligraphy, these emoticons seek to be literal representations of the ideas they seek to convey (Marx 1994):

:)	=	Amusement (notice the symbol is a sideways smiling face).
: (	=	Disappointment, sadness (frowning).
;)	=	devilishness, playfulness, flirtation (winking).
{ }	=	Hug (place a screen name between the brackets to indicate hugging that person).
<--------	=	Pointing at one's self.

In addition to emoticons, online chat participants create and employ a wide range of acronyms, as a shorthand for frequently used statements. Some of the more common acronyms used include:

LOL	=	"Laughing Out Loud."
ROTFL	=	"Rolling On The Floor Laughing"
BRB	=	"Be Right Back"
BBL	=	"Be Back Later"
WB	=	"Welcome Back"

These symbols, in addition to hundreds of others (see Sanderson 1992) are used to indicate that a statement is intended to be humorous, sarcastic, in good spirits, in disappointment, surprise, and a wide range of other emotions. Participants freely use these symbols to communicate that which is not conveyed in words alone. Obviously, it is possible to write emotions and even intonations with words which indicate that one is "just kidding" or being sarcastic, but doing so is not only time consuming, but seems to undercut the directness and spontaneity of what is expressed (Marx 1994). Thus, emoticons are usually intertwined with text communication as a kind of gestural and emotional punctuation mark, as illustrated in the following dialog:

SimpleGirl : Good morning!!!
Shane : hi SimpleGirl :)
Dan : {{{{{SimpleGirl}}}}}
CmLaInT : good morning Simple!
Brian : uggh..vodka..no more drinky drinky for me the next uhmm...12..naah....13 hours :)
Ranger : LOL brian!
Terry : bye y'all, see you later :)
Dan : bye terri ;)

Sometimes emoticons are extensively used to produce what would appear to outsiders as a discombobbled set of nonsense communications. New online participants can often be found inquiring as to the meaning of these symbols, and when used extensively become a form of slang that marks insider status. When used extensively, online dialogs become a form of communication that makes little more than hieroglyphic sense to those who are unfamiliar with the meaning of the symbols, as illustrated by the following:

Lucky : Dabble !!
Dabble : {{{{{{{{{Lucky}}}}}}}}}
Dabble : <-----Jon, fixing Dabbles pc
Lucky : LOL
Lucky : =: O
EndoEarth : I'm back!!

EndoEarth : <~~got booted
Lucky : wb
EndoEarth : thanks*******
Dabble : <~~brb, downloading...
KityKat : Well all, it's been fun, but gotta do the work thing.....Have a good one
KityKat : TTFN

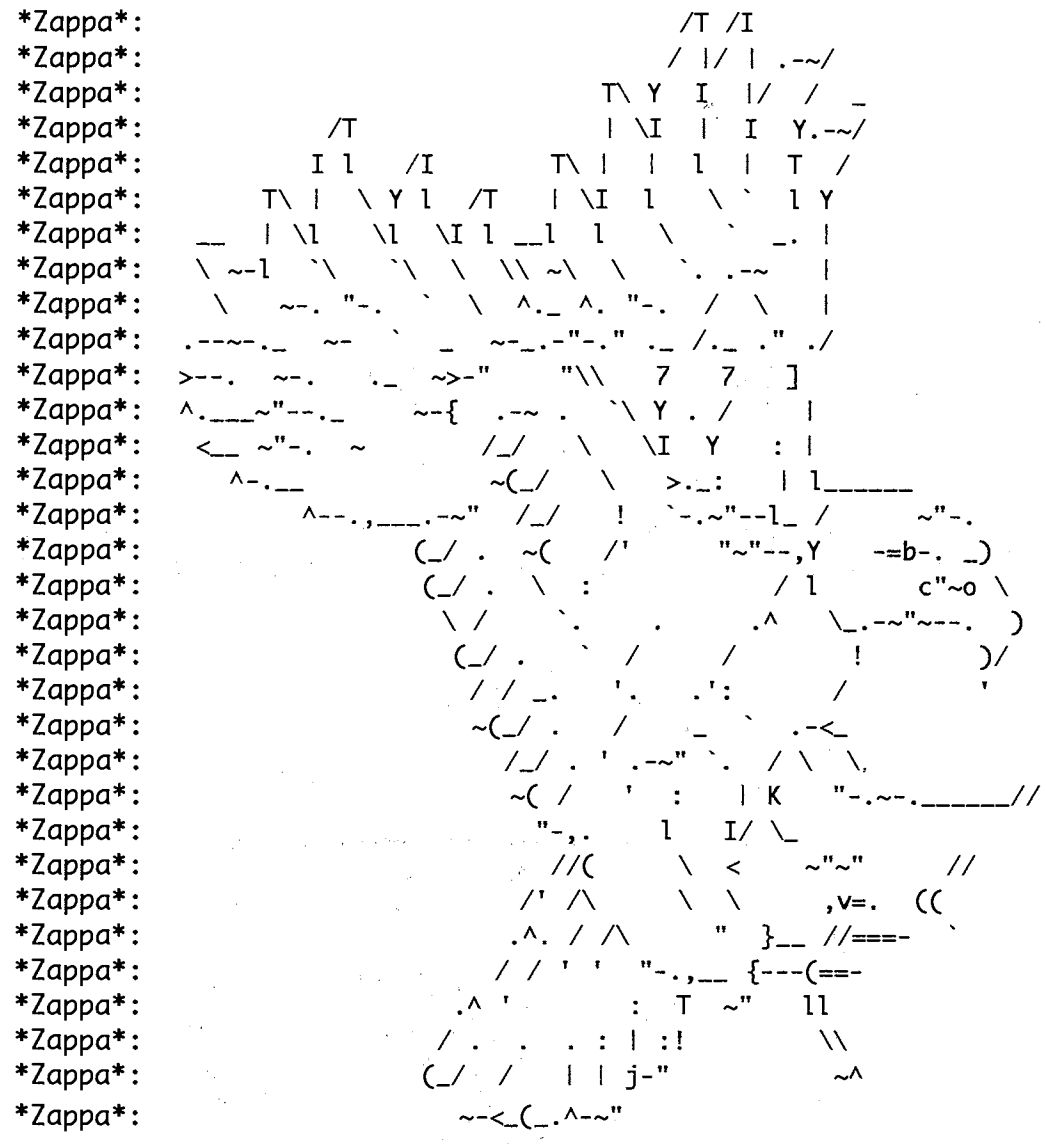
Beyond emoticons and acronyms, some highly creative chat participants have discovered ways to create pictorial displays out of letters, numbers, and punctuation marks that are sent in a particular order at a rapid pace. These pictorial designs are frequently used to announce a participants arrival or departure (and, of course, sometimes these images are displayed for the mere fun of it). As can be seen, many of these images are quite elaborate, artistically impressive, and can be used as distinctive individual trademarks:

```
Kitty:            |\\_,-~/
Kitty:            / _  _ |    ,--.
Kitty:           ( @  @ )   / ,-'
Kitty:            \  _T_/-._( (
Kitty:            /         `. \
Kitty:           |         _   \ |
Kitty:            \ \ ,  /      |
Kitty:             || |-_\__   /
Kitty:            ((_/`(____,-'
Kitty: meow!

Tiger:         ("`-''-/").___..--''"`-._
Tiger:         `6_ 6  )   `-.  (     ).`-.__.`)
Tiger:         (_Y_.)'  ._   )  `._ `.  ``-..-'
Tiger:       _..`--'_..-_/  /--'_.' ,'
Tiger:      (il), ''  (li),'  ((!.-'

Yang:      * ---------------------- _-^-_ ---------------------- *
Yang:                               / o )=\
Yang:                              {   /===}
Yang:                               \ (=o=/
Yang:      * ---------------------- ^-_=^ ---------------------- *

shasta:                 (~._.~)
shasta:                   (Y)
shasta:                --()-,-()--<@
shasta:                   (_)-(_)
```



Since words and keyboard characters are all that are available, then participants creatively compress the richness of meaning into symbols that aid in the construction of a context for words into words themselves (Reid 1994). In short, emoticons, acronyms, and pictorial displays are innovative forms of expression that vividly illustrate creative, spontaneous, and rich interpersonal communication in the disembodied "faceless" socially constructed online environment.

Emoticons, acronyms, and pictorial displays are important elements for creating a context of online chat communication. However, these are not the

only mechanisms by which socio-emotional and interpersonal cues are communicated. The speed of a participants response, pauses, and other elements of socio-emotional meaning are equally important, and cannot be recaptured in text alone. These elements of online communication are purely contextual, indicating that online interactions are not to be read as an artifact, but to be subjectively experienced. As stated by Elizabeth Reid (1994):

> "It is not a text, but a context. Virtual Interaction loses emotional and social meaning when transposed to a computer file and re-read. Pauses, breaks, disjunctions, speed and timing of virtual conversations are lost in such transposition, and such factors are a crucial signifier of meaning and context... (pp. 26)."

Finally, unconventional spellings, and means for placing emphasis upon particular words become another mechanism by which participants create a context for words unto words themselves. In chat environments sentences are often ended without periods, commas are positioned to indicate pauses rather than clauses, and ellipses are used to indicate long often thoughtful pauses (Marvin 1995). Utterances like "uh-huh," "yee-haw," "yippie," "hummm," "ooops," and "yeeeoooch" are frequently used. Upper case letters are often used to indicate shouting (i.e. "will somebody PLEASE answer me?"). Similarly, astricks are frequently used to place emphasis on particular words (i.e. "*don't* tell me what to do!"). This agreed upon use of unconventional English[18], sprinkled with emoticons and acronyms, functions to heighten a sense of spoken conversation (Marvin 1995).

Although the richness of face-to-face interaction, and even electronic forms of interaction (i.e. telephone conversations) cannot be entirely recaptured in the text medium of chat environments, they are not entirely eliminated either. It is clear that in chat environments contextual, interpersonal, and emotional cues are creatively communicated and thus cannot preclude meaningful social

interaction (as is sometimes suggested in "cues filtered out" perspectives). Indeed, the opposite could be true. As suggested by Rollo May (1975), constraints--or limitations posed to participants--represent a structure that channels creative energies, allowing persons to manipulate available materials to construct innovative forms of expression. In online chat environments the text that can be communicated is limited to the characters of a typical keyboard. Yet, emergent from these constraints are the creative forms of interpersonal communication described most accurately as "written speech" (Elmer-Dewitt 1994)--a set of expressive resources for communication (Marvin 1995).

Although the specific mechanisms by which participants creatively overcome limitations of the computer-mediated environment represent interesting dimensions of online chat, in final analysis the importance of emoticons and other contextual and interpersonal cues is not that participants "feel" emotions, or "sense" a context. Rather, two more important issues arise when considering the role of emoticons to online chat communication. First, emoticons, acronyms, and other online cues allow participants a mechanism to communicate socio-emotional and contextual indicators to others, and hence validate them in a social context. As others see and respond to these symbols they become meaningful and experientially real.

Secondly, emoticons, acronyms, and pictorial displays can be seen as important elements of an online "idioculture" (Fine 1987; Fine 1979). "An idioculture consists of particular examples of behavior or communication that have symbolic meaning and significance for members of a group (Fine 1987 pp. 126)." If culture is "a set of expressive and interpretive resources (Marvin 1995 pp. 1)," then these online para-linguisic constructs become a cultural lexicon that identifies members of a distinct idiocultural group. Like occupational groups (McCarl 1986) and close-knit families (Zeitlin et. al. 1986), online chat

participants have a specialized vocabulary based within their unique environment (Marvin 1995).

Generally speaking, idioculture may include a wide range of things such as slang, clothing styles, jokes, nicknames, rules of conduct, music, and so on. In any group culture some elements of idioculture will have more significance than others. Therefore, important items are those that are repeated on many occasions (Fine 1987). Emoticons and online acronyms represents one such repetitive and thus salient element of online idioculture. Because "knowledge and acceptance of a group's idioculture is a necessary and sufficient condition for distinguishing members of a group from nonmembers (Fine 1987 pp. 128)," by use of emoticons and other online communicative cues, participants display a cultural mastery and thus validate themselves as members of a larger "electropolis" (Reid 1991) of chat participants:

> "Ironically, the use of these specialized symbols disrupts the illusion of virtual speech created by conventionalized misspellings and paralinqual smileys. They are the marks of 'inside status' because they demonstrate knowledge and skill which are the requirements of belonging for a group with no kinship, geography or occupational ties (Marvin 1995 pp. 4)."

The blanket assumption that constraints imposed by the computer-mediated environment hinder meaningful social interaction and deterministically cause particular forms of social organization, as often articulated by scholars of the "cues filtered out" perspective, is unfounded in online chat environments. Rather, in chat environments the constraints of the medium represents a structure that channels creative communication energies to overcome the limitations of the online environment. Emoticons and acronym cues represent the most salient of these creative measures. Additionally, these creative means become defining elements of the online environment in a cultural sense. As chat participants create and disseminate such things as

emoticons and acronyms as creative solutions to the limitations of the computer-mediated environment, they become important elements of an emergent and evolving online idioculture. Knowing and using these idiocultural constructs define and identify members of the group, and serve to distinguish them as unique from others.

There is no doubt that "cues filtered out" poses constraints on communication, however previous research on task-related activities in organizational contexts proves an inadequate model for interpreting the activities of chat participants. The findings presented here suggest that, at the very least, task-related activities in organizational contexts involve a fundamentally different set of purposes by which participants use the technologies computer-mediated communication, and that these group purposes exert an influence on what ultimately emerges from their interactions. When considering online chat, similar to the findings reported by Meyers (1987), Reid (1991), and Baym (1995), rather than being constrained by the medium, participants creatively exploit features of the online environment, develop new forms of communication, and new ideocultural constructs that are not a derivative of the comptuer-medium alone, but emergent from the interactions between persons in response to the constraints imposed by the medium. Clearly, one must consider the human participants and their purposes for interaction as having a role in the kinds of communicative outcomes that emerge in computer-mediated contexts. To simply ask "how does the technology effects people," is to ignore the question "how do people manipulate technology for their purposes?" Or, as stated by Giuseppe Mantovani (1996)

> "The question: how do new technologies change people, groups and organizations? only deals with half of the problem. It should be completed with the second half: how do people, groups and organizations modify and adapt new technologies to suit them? (pp. 93)"

PART THREE

Translating Self to the Conventions of the Medium: Bestowing Online Self-Agents With Agency

Through interaction with others, the computer-mediated environment becomes a socially produced place. The chat channel is a situation to define and interact within; room names are self-selected labels that provide important definitions of the situation and indicate a context for interaction. In the absence of ethnomethodological cues of face to face interaction, participants employ a wide range of emoticons that serve to make contextual and emotional indicators communicable and thus validate these as features of communication. Also, emoticons become a form of slang that identifies members of the online group as participants of a distinct idioculture. Furthermore, the structure of communication is organized in a manner that promotes a non-linear multiplicity of communication. As illustrated in part one, the structure of the system is organized to be conducive to multiple-simultaneous interactions. The potential to engage in a multiplicity of simultaneous conversations, is a characteristic unique to cyberspace, and is central to the emergence of "cyberselves" as a uniquely situated experience of personhood.

Up till this point, this study has merely examined how participants interact in the online environment, overcome the limitations of the medium, and in the process designate a self-agent that is associated with a larger group of online participants. It is now necessary to examine how participants bestow agency to the designated self agent and therefore construct a "cyberself." To do this participants must translate interaction to the text medium of the online environment. To translate interaction to a computer environment, one must transform human traits, or even endow a self-agent with new traits in order to

enhance abilities to act in the mimic world of online chat (Laurel 1993). To accomplish this it is necessary "to make self out of *any* collection of attributes that we think we can recognize as possessing agency...that is, that resembles or *acts like* our definitions of a 'person' (Stone 1995 pp. 83)."

The Concept of Cyberselfhood:

In the case of online chat, a cyberself is an emergent set of situated meanings, dependent on processes of interaction and temporarily associated with a screen name. More generally, *a cyberself is the meaning of personhood (or experience of personal identity) emergent within dislocated and disembodied forms of electronic and computer mediated interaction between persons and/or communication technologies.* Like any other self, a cyberself is presented and negotiated in an ongoing process of communication. Unlike other forms of self, cyberselves emerge in electronic and/or computer-mediated communication environments that involve qualities that challenge traditional conceptualizations of selfhood (as detailed in Chapter Two).

Several scholars have noted that selfhood manifests itself in qualitatively different forms in the online context (see Jones 1995; Turkle 1995; Meyers 1987; Stone 1995). To emphasize the differences between online forms of selfhood and more traditional manifestations of self some scholars have suggested the term "cyborg self." In this study, however, the term "cyberself" is used as an alternative to "cyborg self," which is seen as inadequate on at least two grounds. First, "cyborg self" is often articulated as a solopistic form of selfhood. According to Elizabeth Reid (1994), "cyborg selves" are an emergent process of character development that is "at all times in the hands, or imaginations, of the player (pp. 61)." To the extent that selfhood emerges in the online context, and this form of selfhood shares characteristics that are similar to

other forms of self, this solopistic conceptualization will not suffice. A self, regardless of its context, exists *between* individuals, ever emergent in an on-going process of social interaction. A self is never simply the product of ones solipsistic imagination. To merely view cyberselfhood as a solopistic creation of virtual personas is to ignore the important processes of interaction with others, the context, and the means of interaction by which selfhood is situated.

Secondly, the term "cyborg" refers to an entity that is half human and half machine. As stated by Sherry Turkle (1995), this suggests that "distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex," and that "the traditional distance between people and machines has become harder to maintain (pp. 21)." Although the computer-mediated context in which cyberselfhood emerges contains unique technological qualities that alter the nature, range, and scope of human interaction, the suggestion that selfhood in the online context is therefore "half technological and half human" seems grossly overstated. Furthermore, this technological -vs- human distinction poses a false binary distinction that impedes understanding. Selfhood, regardless of its context, is a symbolic process of meaning conferring activity, and always emergent between persons in processes of interaction. Although emergent in computer-mediated contexts, at this point there is no reason to conclude that online selves have anything to do with machines.

By use of the term "cyberself" it is suggested that online forms of selfhood are like other forms of self--they emerge and maintain themselves in ongoing processes of interaction between persons. Like any other self, online selves must be presented, negotiated, and validated in a process of interaction. Or in other words, through interaction with others cyberselves--online self agents (a means of personhood)--are endowed with agency (any collection of meanings and attributes that resembles our definition of a person).

Selfhood in the online context is not automatic, but only occurs when an online self-agent--a means by which persons may be recognized and therefore interact with others--attains agency in a process of interaction. Through interaction with others any and all self-agents are endowed with agency--collections of meanings and attributes that resemble personhood and are associated with the agent. This process, when it occurs online, is not unlike any other means of acquiring a self in a given situation. Face to face and electronic forms of interaction contain the same basic elements. What is suggested here is that *all* forms of acquiring selfhood entail a process by which an agent is designated, and agency is bestowed. These are two separate processes that may be configured differently to create different experiences of selfhood. For example, in face to face interaction the self agent is always the human body, which becomes a translucent means of personhood around which agency is attributed. Likewise, in telephone communications, the voice is the agent, around which agency is attributed. Thus, what distinguishes cyberselves from other forms of self-agents and experiences of agency is the computer-mediated means by which it is produced and maintained.

Cyberself Consistency and Fluidity:

Like any other self, as one interacts with others in the online chat environment a cyberself is momentarily validated. Yet, unlike other selves, cyberselves emerge in the disembodied and dislocated context of cyberspace and thus selfhood cannot be affixed to a body, place, or any other fixed physical thing. Furthermore, cyberselves are not necessarily affixed to a screen name either. In spite of the potential consistency of ones screen name, when new people enter the chat-channel, when one switches to a different channel, or when one carries on private message conversations with others it is still

necessary to present and negotiate all elements of one's cyberself all over again. Hence, cyberselves are always situated performances that exist at the surface of a communicated knife-edge present. In short, a cyberself is always whatever is passing for a self at a given moment in an electronic or computer-mediated context.

In spite of the potential for self fluidity, frequent visitors to the same chat channels, who communicate with the same people over an extended period of time, achieve a degree of cyberself consistency. That is, a cyberself can be validated through time in a group to which the cyberself has a history and becomes personally known. This is vividly illustrated by revisiting the important role of screen names. Although participants in chat systems may change their screen name at any time, and often use more than one screen name, recent studies have shown that most participants retain one screen name amidst all the others as representative of themselves (see Bechar-Israeli 1995). Participants in this study convey the same finding:

> "I use this screen name because people know me by it."
>
> "I prefer to go to the chat channels where people know my screen name."
>
> "I use one name most of the time and it has the most recognition as 'me.'"
>
> "I use this screen name because it's well known by the people I chat with."

This suggests that participants in chat environments retain at least one online self-agent around which they anchor some degree of stable cyberselfhood. However, this potential for online self consistency does not negate the transitory nature of cyberself enactments. Rather, this highlights the same processes by which *any* meaningful relationship and/or self performance emerges and extends beyond the surface level of a communicated present,

regardless of its context. Additionally, this highlights the processes by which meaningful personal relationships can (and do) emerge in the online context (in spite of the fact that contemporary research seems inclined to ignore the existence of intimate and deeply personal online relationships). Quite simply, all cyberselves are situated surface performances in a computer-mediated context, yet when persons consistently interact with a relatively stable group of other online participants, through time a non-temporal role sediments. The meaning of these roles draw from both the history of an individuals computer-mediated interactions with stable sets of other online participants, and broader socio-cultural structures of self-symbolism (i.e. a person formulates conceptions of what "kind" of person they are on the basis of information provided).

In sum, the creation of an online self is not merely the designation of a screen name, but an *emergent* process that forms out of, and is based within ongoing computer-mediated communications with others. To access a chat system and create a screen name provides the individual a self-agent, and through processes of interaction agency is associated with that self-agent. When online, as in everyday life, self-agency is continually presented, negotiated, and validated through interaction with others. As stated by one participant:

> "I didn't think through the creation of identity, it just evolved. I just make it up as I go along, as I talk to people... I don't change online, I just evolve."

Anonymity, Engagement, and the Fluidity of Cyberselves

Numerous participants identified the anonymity of the context as an important element of online chat interaction. As stated by some participants:

> "I like the fact that in chat channels people are not blinded by age, sex, nationality, race etc. Since everyone is anonymous there are no barriers to communication."

"Anonymity. This is what makes it all worth while. The ability to meet people without seeing a face."

Anonymity is widely sited as an important element of online chat and widely implemented by participants. The prevalence of anonymity is illustrated as one examines the content of participant profiles. Of 100 randomly selected screen names sampled from chat areas, twenty-two percent did not have a profile whatsoever and therefore exist *only* as a screen name. Of all the information that can be provided in member profiles (name, gender, marital status, birthday, etc.), only fifty percent of the information was actually reported (Consider, for example, something as simple as gender: Ten percent of the sampled member profiles refused to report whether they are a male or a female).

In the anonymous context of online chat presentation of self is everything. To compromise one's anonymity is to compromise the power to construct any sense of self that one desires (Baym 1995; Meyers 1987). Thus, anonymity is the essential means by which dynamic cyberselves are constructed. Through anonymity participants can present any self they choose at any given moment:

"Online can be fantasy--You can be anyone you want to be."

"... To be free from our own personalities for a little while. To be free from inquisitive minds we may know."

"Many people lie about what they look like, age and so on and I guess its a fantasy thing because if you want to be pretty you can be pretty on here because no one knows the truth, but no one is going to come out and say they are fat and ugly."

"Online allows much more freedom -it's anonymous- whatever mood you're in you act upon. We all project an image with others - and are pretty consistent in person -- online it doesn't have to be consistent." "It also allows some to exercise a fantasy existence that they would never dare in real life."

As the above statements illustrate, the anonymity of online interaction allows participants the option of being "something different." In online chat environments any potential self is possible, and anyone can present themselves as being anything. Categories of personhood--race, gender, socio-economic status, age, physical appearances--all become pure labels, self-symbols that participants use to think and interact with, not to be contained within.

When online one does not occupy a fixed physical form. That is, in cyberspace there is no such thing as a body, at least not in the sense that we inhabit a body (Penny 1994). All that "exists" are fleeting electronic presentations of self that are loosely associated with a self-selected screen name (another fleeting electronic image). In this sense, cyberselves are literally "disembodied." The self is freed from any physical form, and thus challenges the traditionally perceived relationship between body and self (see Chapter Two). This fact alone would suggest that cyberselves are always divergent from selves that emerge in a participant's everyday life, regardless of the intentions of individual participants. That is, some cyberselves are intended to be different from selves that define participants in everyday life, other cyberselves are intended to be attempts at a "true reflection" of "who the person is." Regardless, a self is not a fixed entity that one carries around like an appendice of the body. Rather, it is a continuous product of a meaning-conferring process of communication. Because the online chat environment does not include a veritable, fixed, physical entity that represents the person (a body), no single set of culturally grounded meanings can be attached to the person. Therefore, situational elements of communication are particularly central to the emergence, maintenance, and transformation of the cyberself. Cyberselves are always situated, disembodied performances. To this end, cyberselves will

always represent some degree of departure from the selves that participants present in everyday life.

In chat environments, one's gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, occupation, interests, and all other elements of selfhood exist as possibilities that can be instantly realized or altered simply through one's online presentation of self. All "properties" of the self become selected, variable, and dynamic tools of interaction. Many respondents report this to be a liberating experience of free self expression:

> "...the anonymity factor can be intriguing, it gives one the freedom to chose which room to go into, whom to talk to and when, what to say, to lie or be honest while also knowing that every other user has the same freedom."
>
> "The anonymity allows me to be myself, allowing a certain freedom of expression in which I rarely indulge in person."
>
> "It gives me the opportunity to express myself with no one to stare or wonder and not worry about where I was or with what company I was keeping."
>
> "Sometimes I pretend I'm a woman. I've also invented experiences. It enables me to play out fantasies. It allows me to take dreams one step closer to reality."
>
> "You can be anything. I may stretch truth, and be with who ever I want - no inhibitions."
>
> "I'm constantly changing my alter-egos and identities on this silly system. You think I could get a life or somethin'."

Although many participants value the freedom of self exploration afforded by the anonymous chat environment, these conditions pose problems of legitimacy. The ability to "be anything" implies that all online presentations of self exist only as possible truths, and all claims of selfhood are potentially suspect. Indeed, the "freedom to be anything" is contradicted by constraints imposed by the fact that everyone knows that all others are "free to be anything,"

and persons cannot be anything short of what is passing for a self at the moment. Therefore, the "freedom to be anything" can also represent a source of frustration and concern. To illustrate, consider the Net folkstory of "Douglas Adams." According to Net folklore Douglas Adams, having assumed celebrity status among some Net participants for his *Hitchhiker Guide to the Galaxy*, paid a visit to his own online fan club. However, upon arrival he was ruthlessly accused of being an impostor, and no amount of biographical trivia or argumentation could sway the consensus that he was a fraud. As a consequence, Adams was not allowed to participate in his own electronic collectivity of enthusiasts (Hertz 1995). This Net folk story conveys the way in which the "freedom to be anything" can become a source of frustration and concern. Consider the following responses to the question: "What, if anything do you dislike about online chat"?

> "I don't know if people are as they claim to be. Many people are not what they claim to be. Men posing as women, etc!"
>
> "I enjoy the opportunity to meet people anonymously, but people often misrepresent themselves and turn out to be vastly different than their profile and behavior online would indicate."
>
> "Because people can take any identity they want, they do. People who are 50 tell you they are 25, Males tell you they're females, etc. People lie about who they are."
>
> "There are alot of very very horny guys out there, and so much so that they sometimes pretend they are women to get the bi or lesbian girls to talk to them. I don't know if that's a sexual game they play for their own fantasies, or if they're just lying assholes."

Although there is no reasonable way to validate the Douglas Adams Net folk story, the tale is plausible and highlights some of the problems posed by anonymity in everyday online situations. In chat environments, it is not unusual for persons to present themselves as being what they are not; for men to

present themselves as women, for women to present themselves as men, for children to present themselves as adults, for people to claim expertise in areas they are unqualified to give advice, and so on. Each presents potential problems endemic to the situation, making anonymity both a value and a source of frustration. However, in spite of this problem interaction persists (and even thrives) through what Erving Goffman (1959) calls a "working consensus." That is, "together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored (Goffman 1959, p. 9-10)." Similar to what Goffman indicates, MacKinnon (1995) notes that because users are denied direct knowledge of other participants, they must suspend or "forget" about the person behind the persona and rely on the individual's word as an accurate representation of self. Thus, in order for interaction to proceed it is necessary for participants to formulate a "working consensus" and suspend disbelief. This process is noted by several participants:

Question : "If you don't actually meet the person, how do you know if they are what they claim to be?"
Response : "You don't! That's part of the appeal! Some u meet some u don't but u get right to the heart of an issue without getting caught up. If u don't meet what difference does it make? As long as you have a good time, who cares!"

Question : ""How can you tell if the people you meet are "genuine" or "fake?"
Response : "I have yet to be disappointed. I just go on instincts, trust, and faith. Mostly I go on how they treat me and what I pick up along the way."

Others are less aware of the somewhat arbitrary construction of a working consensus and suspension of disbelief. Most often these persons claim to "be themselves" online. Yet, their presentations of self are equally

suspect by other participants because everyone knows that anyone can claim to be anything, and there is no feasible way of discerning the "real" from the "fake" (unless participants meet "off-line"). Participants who claim to "be themselves" online are frequently aware of this problem:

> "I am honest about who I am online. But there's no way to tell between people who are honest and people who lie, so I'm often accused of lying when I'm not."
>
> "I'm real. Are you?"
>
> "I guess I try to be honest about myself. Why lie when you know everything may be false? I have both, thank you."
>
> "I'm sure people are skeptical about who I say I am. I'm skeptical too."

By agreeing on a working consensus (regardless of whether individuals are aware of this agreement or not) participants initiate a form of engagement--a willing suspension of disbelief (Laurel 1993). Participants generally understand that cyberselves are dramatic enactments. Or in other words, persons enact a self performance and they know that others do not have access to the information necessary to confirm the validity of this performance. Hence, like any dramatic performance participants generally recognize that the enactment is not necessarily real. However, to enjoy the drama (the chat) one must at least temporarily suspend knowledge that it's all "pretend." This suspension of disbelief, affords users a certain privilege of engagement: "*Pretending that the action is real* affords us the thrill or fear, *knowing the action is pretend* saves us from the pain of fear (Laurel 1993 pp. 113):

> "Engagement is what happens when we are able to give ourselves over to a representational action, comfortably and unambiguously. It involves a kind of complicity. We agree to think and feel in terms of both the content and conventions of a mimetic context. In return, we gain a plethora of new possibilities for action and a kind of emotional guarantee. One reason why people are amenable to constraints is the desire to gain these benefits (Laurel 1993 pp. 115)."

By engagement participants can experience the representational and dramatic world of online chat directly without mediation or distraction. This necessitates that participants proceed with interaction under the assumption that what you see is what you get, and the representation is all there is. Thus, agency is bestowed unto online self agents in a process that involves a willing suspension of disbelief and engagement in the drama of self production.

Communication Play and the Multiplicity of Cyberselves

> "A surprisingly popular thing to do online is pretend you're someone else. Why not? It's not like anyone can really see you or anything. With online chat, you can pretend to be someone or something else, change your personality, or take on another gender (Kinkoph 1995 pp. 134)."

In addition to the opportunity to present an alternative image of ones self, participants can have a multiplicity of screen names, each independent of the others. Many participants consider this to be an important and valued aspect of online interaction, providing the opportunity to construct multiple anonymous cyberselves:

> "I actively use four of my five screen names. Each screen name represents a different persona."
>
> Question : "How many screen names do you have?"
> Response : "3"
> Question : "Why you use more than one screen name?"
> Response : "I am curious to see other people's different reactions to various 'personalities'."
>
> " One name is known only to my closest on-line friends. I use that name when I don't want to be bothered by strangers. The other names are used when I go in to chat rooms or private rooms where I wouldn't normally want my friends to find me."

The multiplicity of simultaneous and anonymous self-enactments that are frequently realized in online chat environments often results in communications

that may be metaphorically called an ongoing "self-game." After all, online chat interaction is a past-time that participants purchase--usually for leisure and enjoyment. Not surprisingly, online chat interaction and cyberself enactments often become a literal form of communication play:

> "Some people take this as a total game--I call it Nintendo for adults!!"
>
> "I'm sure people modify who they are online, it's part of the game I guess, the mystery and fun of discovery."
>
> "I enjoy talking to people and having fun without being tied to 'who we are'."
>
> "It's quite fun to create a completely new identity. I have three others!"
>
> "Like anything else, online is a game. Isn't everything a game? Only here, I play with who I am."
>
> "I have a different persona for each moniker. One is very sexy, but I have one who is grouchy and a real bitch. Another sarcastic, and another is very sweet. I know it sounds very schizophrenic, but actually, it is a lot of fun."
>
> "The lifestyle is 'who cares?' It's all a persona, it's all an act."

In the process of enacting a self-game there is little commitment to any given self[19]. In online chat environments one's self can be a fluid, discursive horizon of possibilities. In online chat environments each user has the power to create any sense of self, through interaction with others in a given situation as illustrated in the following:

> "It's kinda like split personalities. Shows that someone is only who they want to be when it's most comfortable."
>
> "I use different screen names to fit the environment of the chat channel."
>
> "Online allows much more freedom. Whatever mood you're in you act upon."
>
> "I think if a person has a good imagination the skys the limit--You can become anything you want!"

"It's a way for people to be who they what to be, haven't you ever tried to be something your not?"

As indicated above, participants themselves frequently use a game-metaphor to describe online chat. This metaphor can be useful for conceptualizing online chat interaction. However, it is important to note two observations in relation to the self-game metaphor. First, "play" and "game" are used as *metaphors* to highlight qualities that online participants often attribute to interactions and presentations of self. To take this metaphor one step further, interacting with others in online chat environments necessitates that one translate oneself into the conventions of the medium. These conventions are *like* rules to a game, and participants often "play" with them. However, this playfulness does not imply that all is merely "fun and games." Persons can (and do) form deeply meaningful interpersonal relationships in the course of playful encounters. Playfulness does not eliminate capacities for such things as commitment and trust, but merely makes such qualities playable, like any other quality of human interaction (Kristeva 1987). The "play" -vs- "serious" dichotomy that pervades the literature in online interaction is a false (and binary) distinction that does not hold empirical muster. "Serious play" is not only possible, but a prevailing standard for gaming activity (i.e. people often take "seriously" the things that occupy their "play"). Online self-games, although playful, are "serious play" and we belittle them at our risk.

Secondly, if we adopt a game metaphor for interpreting online leisure-social activities, it is important to acknowledge the distinctions between "finite" and "infinite" games (see Carse 1986). A finite game is played for the purpose of winning. In contrast, an infinite game is for the purpose of continual play. Finite games have distinct rules that all players must know. However, with infinite games the "rules" change during the course of play. Players of finite games play within boundaries, while the players of infinite games play with

boundaries. Clearly, if a game metaphor is to be adopted, the "game" is infinite.

Ultimately, it makes no difference whether a person intends to be genuine or non-genuine, playful or serious in an online self-enactment. In final analysis, the meaning of the activity is established in the expressive-impressive dimension of communication (Brisset and Edgley 1990). Therefore, instead of embarking on attempts to impose a binary play -vs- serious, genuine -vs- non-genuine distinction on the processes of online interaction, analytical attention should focus on the production of meaning--a process that remains consistent across perceived categories of "play" and "seriousness," "genuine" and "non-genuine." A game metaphor may be more-or-less helpful in conceptualizing this process, however explicit focus should be on the processes by which meaning is produced in online environment irregardless of participants intent.

In summary, when online, just as in face-to-face situations, a sense of self emerges through interaction with others. The structure of online chat communication is multiple-simultaneous, and not surprisingly so too are cyberselves. Within the multiple-simultaneous medium of online communication emerges a multiplicity of potential cyberselves. Each cyberself represents an anonymous set of meanings associated with any given screen name of one's choosing--all of which may be dramaturgically presented as virtually anything. These interactions become a form of dramatic communication play--a hyperreal saturation of communication and a simulacra of the self--all reflective of symbolic interaction situated within a technology of social saturation.

PART FOUR

Negotiations of Reality: Experiences of Multiplicity, and the Ideology of a Unitary Self

> "...*true self*. No other concept so dominates the literature of despair and pessimism in our society; no other prize is so frequently promised in the guides and handbooks to alternative reality. The link between this goal and the pluralization of our life worlds is evident. We see our existence as made up of different life-worlds, various phenomenal universes within which we display desperate modes of consciousness. Our very lack of full commitment to any or all of these worlds produces within us the sense of some entity which stands back from reality, an entity which is presented within all of them but which is fully realized in none. ...Our new search for a real self may have done little more than add another self conception to the stock derived from our supposedly 'unreal' involvement in work, marriage, bureaucracy, leisure (Cohen and Taylor 1992 pp. 218-219)."

In online chat environments participants enact self performances in a dislocated and disembodied context that allows the freedom to "be" without "being." The online chat environment in-and-of-itself is a multiple-simultaneous and sychronistic mode of communication (see part one). Coinciding with this multiple-simultaneous and syncronistic communication environment, participants enact selves that are equally multiple-simultaneous and fluid (see part three). In short, online chat environments provide a structure for multiplicity and dramatic self fluidity that is frequently realized as some participants play with who they claim to be, and all participants know they may do the same.

These elements of online chat conflict with deep seated cultural prerogatives. Specifically, these elements of self multiplicity and self fluidity conflict with the cultural prerogatives of a unitary self. In the highly individualized cultures of western society persons are socialized to have *a* unitary self. That is, persons in contemporary western society continue to be socialized to have *a* personality,*a* relatively stable set of personal characteristics that are carried with them from place to place, situation to

situation. The multiple-fluid online chat environment challenges this cultural ideology and subsequent experiences of self and social reality. Therefore, *how* participants negotiate this apparent conflict is important to understanding the relationship between online chat environments and off-line experiences of self and social world.

Several contemporary scholars have noted that the emerging post-industrial/post-modern society has been progressively marked by increasing social-psychological conditions of multiplicity and self fluidity (see Gergen 1991; Stone 1995; Turkle 1995; Meyrowitz 1987; Schwalbe 1993). Yet, older social orders and cultural ideologies do not rapidly dissolve (Bell 1976). Older visions of social order hold-on, even when experiential conditions no longer sustain them. Thus, experiential conditions of multiplicity and self fluidity may become increasingly common, yet cultural prerogatives may nonetheless continue to provide lip service to unitary self interpretations. This is one condition characterizing persons caught in the margins of two currently competing asethetics. How individuals negotiate these competing world views will comprise a defining element of their self-social world relationship. Online chat environments exemplify this struggle over meaning, as participants confront and respond to this ideological challenge.

Illustrative of this ideological conflict is the amazing controversy that sometimes arises when these issues are raised in groups of persons interacting online. When these issues are raised, persons quickly take sides, discussion becomes lively, and sometimes angry. Consider the following:

Question	: Can you tell the difference between online fakes and those that are "genuine"?
Mary	: Yes I can, but it took over 7 years of being online
Ellen	: You are kidding yourself, Mary
Hank	: <--- Genuine fake
Bruno	: Sometimes I can spot the liars
Ellen	: How could you tell if I was lying? I mean, REALLY!

Siz : The tone of your typing, Ellen. LOL!
Mary : It's not hard to do I was a liar for years now I only tell the truth
Ellen : Online is fantasy, if you want to know the truth, you have to meet someone. See their body language, look in their eyes.
Siz : Right, online everyone is well endowed and good looking! LOL!
Mary : Not to me. If people need to lie and only hurt themselves it's ok
Bruno : See that's the problem. People making this a fantasy world
Bruno : I don't have the need to lie online It's classic projection--people project what they want onto a person, and disappointment awaits!
Siz : I think alot of people use this as an outlet, saying or doing things they won't let themselves do in reality.
Ellen : Yes, I think so too, and the behaviors become surprisingly extreme! I mean, every woman online says she loves oral sex. THAT has to be a lie!
Siz : You are ALWAYS who you are, but some circumstances will censor or govern your behaviour differently.
Question : Some people claim that when online the lack of inhibitions reveals their true self. do you think that's true?
Bruno : kinda like being drunk then?

As the above illustrates, participants in online chat environments often indicate strong sentiments with regards to selfhood and multiplicity, and these discussions expose widely dichotomized viewpoints. The dichotomy that is revealed in these controversial discussions highlight the two primary interpretive means by which participants negotiate between cultural prerogatives of a unitary self -vs- experiences of multiple-fluid self enactments in online chat environments. It is important to note that both of these interpretive approaches recognize multiplicity and fluidity of self, yet each accommodates for multiplicity in different ways resulting in differing sets of experience and understanding.

First, there are persons who wholeheartedly accept and embrace self-multiplicity and self-fluidity, altogether rejecting the ideology of a unitary self. These persons play with multiple potentials for being, and see little difference

between online and off-line social worlds:

> Question : "Do you think most people are who they claim to be when online?"
> Response : "I think that they are showing one of their true selves. I think people have many selves. I don't necessarily think the people one meets in person are being any more genuine than those one meets online."

> "Each of my screen names is a different representation of my multi-faceted personality. ...I consider myself witty, intelligent, and sophisticated. And I have a sparkling personality! Each screen name is just a representation of different parts of my personality. One screen name is the eternal child within me--she has the 64 pack of Crayola Crayons, you know, the one with the sharpener and stuff. Another screen name represents the lady I am--she has read Emily Post's Book of Etiquette, 15th edition. And a third screen name dreams of waltzing to Strauss on a moonlit eve in Vienna. *But I don't act any differently offline*" [italics added]."

> "Didn't you ever sit in the bar and try to pick up some girls, or tell old war stories with the barkeep? It's a bunch of 'old Irish Billy Liars." It's a fantasy world my man! My truthfulness borderlines naiveness. I'm just playin' around and telling you my truths."

For these persons the self-evident multiplicity of online chat environments presents no conflict with regards to cultural ideologies of selfhood. These persons embrace a postmodern aesthetic, and embody what Lifton (1993) calls the "Protean self," but Gergen (1991) more accurately refers to as a "relational self." Robert Jay Lifton argues that due to contemporary socio-cultural conditions and historical forces persons have evolved a shape-shifting mode of selfhood that he refers to as the "Protean self" (after Proteus, the Greek sea god of many forms). However, Lifton views the Protean self as largely a tactical move that enables persons to engage in continuous exploration and personal experimentation. This is not what these chat participants indicate.

These chat participants exemplify more than merely a "pastiche

personality." Instead, these chat participants exemplify a fully "relational self" (Gergen 1991). These participants embrace multiplicity, yet acknowledge that individual autonomy is a state of "immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self (Gergen 1991 pp. 147)." These participants are quite comfortable--not with an orgy of selfhood (as suggested by Protean self, and pastiche personality)--but with abandoning the view of self-constructions as objects (i.e. a true self), and viewing these self-constructions as a means of getting on in the social world. As aptly stated by one participant:

> Question : "How do you know if the people you meet online are genuine or fake?"
> Response : "Do we ever really know people, though we may meet them in person? Everyone is genuine in the moment. The moment is a spark. The person is genuine in many styles. He has many faces. Like a masquerade."

In contrast to these participants, others take a slightly different approach with vastly different experiential consequences. Whereas the first group of persons presented a self-social world interpretation that poses no embedded conflict, this second group embodies a world view that vividly captures the struggle for meaning that participants in chat environments may latently encounter. This second approach consists of persons that accept the fact that people can be self multiple-fluid, but deny that they in fact are:

> "I see nothing special in your survey. ...I am me, and am what I am. If people don't like me for what I am, then it's their right. I don't put on a show for anyone. I am proud of who I am ...Chatrooms are a place to go to make jokes--nothing more."

These participants make sharp distinctions between online and off-line social worlds. These participants often perceive online activities as an escape from the realities of everyday life. That is, persons who accept the possibility of multiplicity and fluidity of self, yet deny that they are multiple-fluid, tend to view

the online social world as an illusionary never-never land of make-believe. To these participants the attraction of online chat environments stems precisely from its unreality. To these participants online chat environments represent a place to take a socio-emotional time-out from the burdens of everyday life:

> "This is all make believe...a world of phony smoke screens, lights, and mirrors. But illusion is always prettier than reality."
>
> Response : "Online is an escape from loneliness."
> Question : "Why online, and not in person?"
> Response : "Real life is too scary in the real world. Too much commitment, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. ...We are all trying to escape from reality for a little while and this fantasy is a great way to do it."
> Question : "Is that what it all amounts to--a fantasy?"
> Response : "It is an ESCAPE not fantasy."
> Question : "Escape from what?"
> Response : "Work, bills, life."

As the above quotes indicate, these participants sometimes apprehend the world as overwhelming, restrictive, and inhibiting. Often these participants view everyday life as a burdensome chore to be endured. Even the task of face-to-face interaction can require too much of ones' self:

> "I find at times that it's just hard to listen, to have patience to discover someone, or get to know someone. I think it's cuz living just requires so much of you, that often you're just too tired to try."
>
> "I get bored and I like to talk to people without anyone really knowing me. ...It is nice to be able to have a conversation with a friend when you don't feel like physically talking. It's easier sometimes. It's like, you can talk to a lot of people at once, and say the same stuff you can on the phone."

However, in a paradoxical twist of logic these persons tend to view their online cyberselves as *more* reflective of their "true self" than off-line self presentations. That is, in spite of drawing sharp distinctions between online and off-line social worlds, and denying that they are multiple-fluid, these persons arrive at the interesting and conflicting conclusion that their online

cyberselves as more reflective of who they "really" are than their off-line selves:

> "Actually, in most chatrooms, if anyone is talking long enough their real personality comes out. ...Once you get people talking they become more real than face to face--no masks. You can always change your name if things get ugly. You can't change your face, so you are always watching out."
>
> "I feel more like my true self online. Is that weird? My whole life should be conducted online. I'm more confident. I'll say anything! You can say what you want without looking someone in the face. Sometimes it's easier to say what you think on here. Well - as my shrink confirmed - it's safe! You can open up to people."
>
> "Have you ever thought that people are more open here, and can be with no inhibitions, and can actually get closer to knowing someone? I feel people can open up easier here. People are more open when they are not face to face"

It is amazing that these participants can sustain such vividly conflicting sets of beliefs. On one hand, they claim that they "are who they are--and no one can change that." When online, they are the same person as when they are off-line. On the other hand, they claim to be "more real" online than in face-to-face interaction[20]. Most surprisingly, *none* of these participants saw these two statements as conflicting. Why?

The extraordinarily contradicting sets of beliefs that these chat participants articulate only makes sense, when we consider processes of self formulation in the context of the perceived "rat cage" of real "off-line" life, and the perceived "fantasy" or "unreality" of online activities. It is not difficult to empathetically understand the perceived monotonous "rat cage" that these chat participants sometimes attribute to the "real world." As articulated by Stanley Cohen (1992):

> "The regularized nature of our life begins to loom within consciousness as a cause for dissatisfaction ...Our house appears much like one of the little boxes in the song, our relationship with our spouse and children indistinguishable from those paraded in the soap operas or radio and

> television. Our job comes straight out of the textbook discussions about alienation at work. We appear to live by order, moving from network to cable television, from vinyl records to compact discs, from natural gas to microwave, along the market tramlines of consumer society. How may we declare ourselves still free and indeterminate, individual and unique, when uniformity asserts itself so massively within our daily life? ...At such times words like 'freedom', 'spontaneity' and 'indeterminacy' seem empty slogans. The only freedom lies in doing nothing, in standing still. The habitual stretches out like a contagion into every region of life; it feels inescapable. This is the world despaired of by the existentialists, the empty hollow nothingness of a Beckett play, in which no one moves, nothing changes, and no one comes (pp 48, 49, and 51)."

Under these perceived conditions, which are similar to those conveyed by these chat participants, Cohen makes clear how selfhood is stifled. Ones very sense of self, and the materials by which persons construct a unique sense of personal identity can be perceived as systematically eliminated by one's sense of imprisonment within the monotony of everyday life:

> "...each day's journey marked by feelings of boredom, habit, routine. We feel dissatisfied with our marriage, our job and our children. The route we take to work, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, are visible reminders of an awful sense of monotony. For some people such feelings may be so intense that they are led to search for alternative realities; they set out to change their whole world. But for most of us, the periodic sense of dissatisfaction is related not to marriage, work, children as such; we do not wish to rid ourselves of these involvements altogether. What we object to is the sense that we are sinking into a patterned way of existence in all these areas; that they no longer appear to us as fresh and novel. They are becoming routinized. They no longer help us to constitute our identity (Cohen 1992 pp. 46-47)."

When one's world appears as such, it is not unusual for people to take measures in which to gain a sense of individuality and selfhood. Through momentary "role distancing" (Goffman 1974) or all-out "escape attempts" (Cohen 1992) persons create experiential spaces in which the routines and roles of patterned life may be temporarily abandoned--a means of detaching from ones' oppressive sense of reality. Thus, for these participants, online chat represents an "activity enclave" (Cohen 1992) in which they may carve out

space for the expression and experience of meaningful personal selfhood.

For these participants, online chat is an "activity enclave"--like hobbies, games, gambling, and sex (Cohen 1992)--online chat is an experiential space where participants dig out a safe place for meaningful personal activity and individualized selfhood. It is a momentary slip through the fabric of what is perceived as an oppressive and monotonous social reality. As an activity enclave, it is easy to see how some chat participants can perceive their online sense of selfhood as more reflective of "who they are" than off-line self experiences. If one perceives the "real world" as a rat-cage of stifling, monotonous, and determined patterns of existences, then the "fantasy" world of online environment becomes "unreal" precisely because it lacks these qualities. In lieu of this perceived freedom, participants can enact a form of selfhood that may appear more personally meaningful than that which is either provided by the monotonous routines of everyday life, or that which one may purchase in the form of image commodities from contemporary consumer-media culture. Thus, these participants may not act any differently online than off-line. Rather, they perceive the online world as merely allowing for self enactments that are not (or cannot be) realized in everyday life.

The resilience of human selfhood is truly remarkable. There is little doubt that the emerging post-industrial/post-modern world is marked by increasing experiences of multiplicity (as suggested by numerous scholars including Gergen 1991; Stone 1995; Turkle 1995; Meyrowitz 1987; Schwalbe 1993). Yet, these conditions do not mark the demise of either selfhood or the cultural ideology of a unitary self. What emerges is a conflicting set of conditions--a cultural prerogative of a unitary self amidst experiences of multiplicity and fragmentation. Not surprisingly, negotiations of reality in lieu of this conflict either reject the cultural ideology of a unitary self, often fully embracing a

"relational self" interpretation. Or, retain faith in the ideology of a unitary self by viewing ones participation in the world as incondusive and stifling to the cultivation of a "true self." Both approaches are reasonable adaptations to the experiential conditions of selfhood for persons caught in the margins of an eroding mechanical era, and an emergent yet not culturally formulated information era--and both may be vividly seen in the everyday occurrences of chat environments.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions will be organized into three parts. The first will seek to generalize elements of cyberselfhood as they relate to broader issues of contemporary experiences of self and social world. By generalizing elements of online selfhood discussion will seek to briefly identify descriptive pegs on which future analysis and investigation can proceed, and yield helpful understandings that pertain to more than just computer-mediated contexts. In the second part, the problem of presence will be addressed as it applies to theoretical understandings of human interaction. In part three, by addressing the "so what" question, discussion will generally comment on the findings of this study and what these findings imply.

Descriptive Elements of Online Selfhood

Online chat communication is a unique form of interaction situated in an electronic-computer medium that challenges the significance of time, space, and physical location as interaction variables. As suggested in this study that it is the *form* of interaction that transforms social spheres into new online environments, with new patterns of social interaction and amidst new situations. Furthermore, as suggested in this study, it is the *form* of online chat interaction that allows for a fluid multiplicity of cyberselves that may be realized or deleted at any moment. What are the descriptive elements of this form?

On the basis of this study, the following elements of the form of online interaction may be identified, and utilized as grounded analytical pegs by which interpretation and implications may be derived. As discussed in Chapter Two, online chat interaction displays two constant qualities; online chat is *dislocated* and *disembodied*. Because technologies of computer-mediated communication transgress the boundaries of social situations traditionally considered distinct, taken-for-granted conceptions of "space" breakdown. Yet, what occurs in online environments is not purely imaginative. Computer network technologies *are* physically real, they *do* occupy space, and the existence of these technologies *is* a prerequisite to online interaction. Online forms of interaction are contained within concrete physical technologies that exist somewhere. Thus, what occurs online is not necessarily "spaceless," but rather space has little bearing on what transpires. Online interaction is situated in "virtual space"--a socially constructed context that cannot be explained or reduced to its technological components alone, nor can it be readily described using the same terms of physicality widely implemented in the world of matter.

Two key issues of the dislocated form of online chat interaction must be considered. First, as technologies of communication colonize the reality of everyday life, it becomes increasingly difficult to define situations utilizing traditional space-segregating labels. For example, distinctions between "public" and "private" domains of experience are routinely transgressed by technologies of communication (see King 1996; Waskul and Douglass 1996). While physically within the "privacy" of their home, participants interact with others in the "public" environment of cyberspace. In cyberspace, where social worlds emerge within the technology of communication itself, distinctions between such things as "private" and "public" are exceedingly difficult to maintain, especially when considering forms of online chat interaction.

Second, the dislocated nature of virtual space breaks down not only the traditional segregation of space, but also the traditional segregation of social situations that are routinely bestowed unto physical places. The relationship seems so natural, that we have yet to realize the implications of dislocating social situations from physical places. For example, words like "school" and "home" refer to both physical places and social situations (Meyrowitz 1985). Within electronic and computer-mediated forms of interaction, these kinds of space-place associations with social situations are no longer necessarily determined by physical location. As a result, previously distinct social worlds can easily overlap in the online context, especially within leisurely and recreational forums. Children have access to online information and situations that were previously segregated to adults in adult places, men have access to situations previously segregated to females, females have access to situations previously segregated to males, and so on. As dislocated electronic medias provide universal access to information and situations once available only when participants moved from one place to another, then electronic medias begin to reshape the meaning of social situations altogether, eroding segregations that once maintained places as distinctly adult, youth, male, female, work, school, etc. Therefore, not only is it increasingly difficult to use space-segregating labels to describe online interactions, but also it is increasingly difficult to use situation-segregating labels to define experiences in an online context.

Online chat interaction not only illustrates a condition of dislocated space and social situations, but also illustrates the dislocation of the physical body from the context of interaction. That is, online chat interaction is a uniquely *disembodied* experience. Traditional conceptions of selfhood as that which is contained or affixed to physical body are deeply problematic, and will not hold

empirical muster in the online context. Important questions need to be raised with regards to what it means to be disembodied, and to closely examine the relationship between bodies and selves in the disembodied online context, and how these relationships relate to off-line body-self relationships.

Disembodied and dislocated forms of interaction depart from other forms of interaction, resulting in controversial situations problematic to traditional understandings of selves and social worlds. By posing a new range of possibilities that depart from traditionally conceived understandings of self and social world, new questions and problems arise (i.e. cybersex infidelity, determining who's laws shall prevail where for what online activities, etc.). These problems and situations are representative of the shifting boundaries of the self-social world relationship made manifest by the dislocation of social worlds and disembodiment of self, and serve to mark changes that have occurred in self-social world relationship.

Dislocation and disembodiment are constant features of online chat interaction. Additionally, these two constant qualities allow for the emergence of several variable elements. First, because the form of online chat interaction is dislocated, constraints posed by geographic space, social place, and the physical body are lifted, exposing the potential for hyperfluidity of self enactment. Indeed, fluidity of self is often hard-wired within the very form of multiple-simultaneous online chat communication. As widely observed, online social environments are a literal smorgasbord of potential interaction. Participants belly-up to the buffet of a vast and widely diverse selection of forums and potential others to engage in interaction. Like a communication orgy, the technologies of online chat interaction allows users the potential to simultaneously converse with numerous others through a multiplicity of channels. As such, online chat interaction takes a potentially *multiple and*

simultaneous form.

The multiple and simultaneous form of interaction is reflected in the fluidity of online chat associations. Like a finicky eater at the social buffet, many participants come and go with more or less consistency as they wander from one location to the next. Meanwhile, other participants display some degree of commitment to a given online location and/or forum for interaction. As such, online chat associations, groups, and "virtual communities" are loosely and informally organized at best (in fact, anything more represents a serious organizational challenge). As the metaphors indicate, the multiple and simultaneous revolving doors of access invite participants to "browse" a variety of locations as they "surf" from one location to the next.

Secondly, *online chat interaction is a potentially anonymous form of interaction.* Participants can choose their level of anonymity, allowing for degrees of selectivity in the personal information they report. Participants in chat environments can (and do) situationally modify presentations of self to meet the demands of the situation. These choices are shaped by the context of the online situation (i.e. in some contexts anonymity is more-or-less practiced and valued than in others). However, the range of possible selves one might present are as limitless as the possible situations in which one presents a self. Participants in chat environments may present themselves under a variety of identities, sometimes simultaneously, to a variety of other participants, where presentation of self is equally as metamorphic, fluid, and ambiguous (Jones 1994). The anonymity of interaction allows users the option of presenting a self that is virtually unlimited in form and content. It is the variable anonymity of the context that allows participants the option of negotiating "actual social identities" in the non-verifiable presentation of an online "virtual social identity."

A third variable element that is made possible by the dislocated and

disembodied form of online chat interaction is a condition of complete *dramaturgical awareness*. That is, cyberselves emerge as the person is acutely aware of the personal fronts, facades, and veneers that are adapted and maintained in the process of interaction. In fact, online chat interaction cannot proceed without dramaturgical awareness--an awareness of the necessity to present and maintain all elements of selfhood. When online, we create representations of ourselves in the mimetic universe of computer environments (Laurel 1993), and having literally written a self into existence participants are therefore implicitly "dramaturgically aware." Furthermore, while interacting in chat environments, one's dramaturgical awareness in conjunction with an understanding of the dramaturgical awareness of others (a mutual dramaturgical awareness) is extended to the point of an ongoing self game, where it is not uncommon for participants to dramaturgically enact a wide variety of divergent selves. When chatting online, participants are performers performing to an audience of performers--all aware that everyone is performing. To be sure, self games (online interaction, role playing games, phone sex, etc.) can *only* be played in a state of mutual dramaturgical awareness, as the entirety of one's cyberself exists on the surface of a communicated present.

Finally, the dislocated, disembodied, anonymous, multiple-simultaneous nature of online chat interaction invites variable forms of a *distantly intimate* interaction. Cyberselves emerge as personalized-anonymous presentations within an orgy of dislocated multiple-simultaneous interactions. As such, online chat interaction presents a condition where the experience of participants is strikingly similar to Simmel's (1908) description of the "stranger." As Simmel notes:

> "If wandering, considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, then the sociological form of the stranger presents the synthesis, as it were, of

> both these properties...He is fixed within a certain spatial circle--or within a group whose boundaries are *analogous* to special boundaries--but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities to it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it (Simmel in Lemert 1993 [1908] pp. 200)."

Cyberselves are strangers, in the sense that Simmel describes above. That is, the cyberselves observed in leisure chat environments emerge in a process of social interaction situated in cyber*space*, where attachment to a given *place* is difficult to achieve. As a result these cyberselves are fixated in social circles to which participants do not belong in any necessary physical or social sense of membership. Hence, the cyberself citizenry of chat environments represent an infinite series of personalized strangers--reflections of persons caught in the margins of an eroding industrial-mechanical society and an emerging information-digital society, experientially made manifest by computer-networking technologies. In these regards, the Simmelian strangers of online-chat environments are not necessarily strangers to other people. Rather, they are strangers to an imploding and/or changing social world. Indeed, chat participants represent "reality hackers" (Stone 1995)--people struggling to do what they have always done--to understand themselves and their world using whatever materials they have at hand (Turkle 1995).

The Problem of Presence

Communication and language theorists make sharp distinctions between the spoken and written word. "That distinction is based on the perception of temporal and spatial proximity in the case of spoken communication, and distance in the case of written communication (Reid 1991 pp. 3)." Furthermore, "most analyses of linguistic interaction are based on the paradigm of two people speaking face-to-face (Baron 1984 pp. 120)." Within these distinctions, it is often assumed that alternative methods of communication (i.e. telephones,

letters, computer-mediated communication, etc.) are simply supplements to traditional face-to-face interaction (Baron 1984). In short, "the underlying assumption that physical contact is necessarily a part of human communication pervades social theory (Reid 1991 pp. 3)." Online forms of interaction, such as those described in this study, seriously challenge these assumptions of presence and proximity.

Computer-mediated communication, and other contemporary communication technologies, extend an individuals physical presence. Whereas Marshall McLuhan (1964) argues that media represents extensions of the human body, the growing datasphere of interlinked communication networks does more than simply extend the bodies ability to see and speak over great distance. The current and expanding datasphere made possible by cable, fiber-optics, telephone lines, computer networks, micro-wave transmission, and satellite relay, extend one's very sense of presence. Furthermore, online chat interaction entails a form of "written speech" that erodes theoretical distinctions between the spoken and written word. Finally, the sycronistic chat environment implodes linear models of human communication and interaction. Each of these conditions suggest that telepresence is more than simply a "supplement" to face-to-face interaction, and requires newly invigorated and creative investigation.

According to Steuer (1992) telepresence is "the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium (pp. 75)." Given this definition, telepresence is possible in online environments, as well as numerous other communication medias--not the least of which is television. As these communication technologies continue to colonize the reality of everyday life, telepresence poses an increasing range of potential experience that remains difficult to incorporate into existing models of human communication

and interaction. For example, consider the infamous O.J. Simpson and his epic Bronco chase. As Los Angeles residents were watching the live slow motion chase on television, many realized that O.J. Simpson was going to pass by their homes and they ran out to cheer him on. In the process, observers became subjects at the same time, as they jumped onto their own television screens. Action and reaction occurred at the same moment, as the media audience became a participant in the events that transpired. The impact of the original image was intensified by a non-passive telepresent audience participation, which drew more television viewers, and more camera crews:

> "It was as if the theories of quantum physics were demonstrating themselves on CNN, with the viewing audience playing the scientists who find themselves under their own looking glass. Subsequently, the O.J. coverage that followed had more to do with the audience than the subjects. Audience polls, "Talk Back America," Geraldo Rivera, and Court TV spent as much time chronicling our reactions to evidence as the jury's (Rushkoff 1996 pp. xiii)

This is one of many cases illustrating the nature of telepresense in everyday life, and how these situations erode distinctions contained within traditional theories of human communication and interaction. Cases like these should serve to illustrate that telepresence is not merely a "supplement" to face-to-face interaction, it is an entirely new situation, communication environment, and context for human interaction. These new telepresent situations for human interaction, which mostly explicitly manifest themselves in "reality television" and computer-mediated Internet environments, are exposing new dynamics and theoretical anomalies that beg for direct and serious examination.

Although this study was not intended, nor does it necessarily shed light on the problem of telepresence, this study does suggest that there is more to telepresence than first meets the eye--especially with regards to issues of theoretical import. As discussed in Chapter Two, symbolic interactionist and

dramaturgical perspectives have traditionally been preoccupied with face-to-face forms of interaction. However, neither symbolic interactionism or dramaturgy have ignored the situations posed by electronic forms of interaction. Although willing to include electronic (and presumably digital) forms of interaction within the scope of symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical theory, neither perspective has yet to acknowledge the challenge posed by telepresent forms of interaction made possible by communication technologies. Within these telepresent environments the very concept of "presence" is being re-shaped. Within these environments distinctions between "audience" and "subject" is eroding. Within these environments the dramaturgies of performance take on new salience. What do these situations have to offer with regards to the advancement of theoretical understandings? Indeed, there is much work to be done.

So What?

> "The agent of change will be the Internet, both literally and as a model or metaphor...The information superhighway is more than a short cut to every book in the Library of Congress. It is a totally new, global social fabric (Negroponte 1995 pp. 181 and 183)."
>
> * * *
>
> "John Perry Barlow, a songwriter...described bullshit as 'the grease for the skids upon which we ride into the future.' ...To most outside the industry, the personal computer is a white-collar toy, an accessory for those already plugged into the power circuits. It is easy to forget that bullshit like 'the fastest route from imagination to reality' is not really for greasing the skids upon which we ride into the future, it is for greasing up to potential customers (Woolley 1993 pp. 12 and 35)."

The computer revolution and the rise of the Internet has been excellerated and hindered by both utopian and distopian hopes and fears. Utopian dreams of a new world order, greater democracy, greater equality, greater freedom, higher standards of education, greater quality of information, and equal access are the words by which corporate CEO's become rich,

politicians become elected, and magazines are sold. However, these utopian images are not unlike that which is often ascribed at the advent of other technological innovations. In fact, they reveal an interesting contemporary condition where the hopes and dreams to which we seem to have become apathetic and have abandoned as attainable goals to strive for in everyday life have been transferred unto our technologies. This "better living through science" attitudinal framework reveals the hope for Star Trek solutions to contemporary problems (in which Dr. Spok always knows the answer, Scottie can always find a way to generate more power, and Bones can always find a medical cure). These were *human* goals of a previously more hopeful and less cynical generation (as evidenced by such grand ambitions as the preponderance of utopian movements at the turn of the century, the "war on poverty," the civil rights movement, etc.). What can be said about a society that seems to have lost hope in human potential, yet bestows these grand ambitions and dreams to the perceived potential of technology?

Distopian visions offer no better interpretations. Distopian images of the computer revolution and the rise of the Internet allege that computers represent a new form of technocratic exploitation. Persons are expected to know and produce more, technology replaces human labor, and the computer revolution becomes a new form of power for those already in the ranks of the "haves." Enhanced and excellerated alienation and isolation mark the rise and diffusion of computer networking technologies. These are often the views of fundamentalists who long for an unrealized and idealized past. Distopian images are plagued with romanticized views and yearn for a reversal of terminal occurrences and events. There is no "going back." In fact, there may not have ever been a "back" that these distopian images seek to re-establish.

Clearly, both the utopian and distopian views represent little more than

ideological fortune telling. Both tell us more about our own hopes and fears than about what is going on or what has occurred. However, these views do illustrate a generally recognized period of great social change. The sheer volume of literature surrounding these hopes and fears suggests that something is going on, that there is a growing recognition of socio-cultural change, and a increasing awareness of an uncertain future.

In this study it is suggested that computers are not only tools, but arenas for social experience. Within these uniquely disembodied and dislocated social arenas we gain a vivid, yet momentary glimpse of processes occurring in society as a whole. When persons interact with others in the online context, they must translate themselves into the conventions of the medium. Likewise, if we are to consider the situation to be social, persons must also translate their social worlds and situations for interaction into the conventions of the medium. How participants make this translation and the unique qualities of these constructions tell us much about the nature of self-social world relationships in our technologically enabled contemporary era.

When considering computers as arenas for social experience one arrives at two potential answers about what is new in these experiences:

> 1. "Nothing: The tools of computer networking technologies are essentially the same as they have been since the telephone (Stone 1995 pp. 15)."
>
> 2. "Everything: Computers are arenas for social experience and dramatic interaction, a type of media more like public theater and their output is used for qualitative interaction, dialogue, and conversation. Inside the little box are other people (Stone 1995 pp. 16)."

Both answers are correct, and both answers are incorrect. In the context of online chat, selfhood arises like any other form of self--it is presented, negotiated, and validated in a process of social interaction. Thus, the

emergence of self in online chat does not, in and of itself, reveal anything sociologically new. On the other hand, cyberselfhood displays unique characteristics that depart from traditional forms by which self is made manifest. As illustrated throughout this study, the *means* by which persons interact with others subtly, yet powerfully, alter the boundaries of self and social world. What do these alterations tell us about contemporary forms of selfhood?

When we tear apart the taken-for-granted seamless surface of reality, as is exemplified by the online experiences of virtuality, we find a liminal creature existing within the nuts and bolts of the situation (Stone 1995). This liminal creature is situated in the boundaries of the experiences of disembodiment and hyperfluidity of self. Although the societal imperative is to have one primary persona, these prescriptions appear to be firmly affixed to the physical body. In other words, in spite of widely diverse self enactments, consistency between selves in everyday life can be comfortably maintained by the self-evident, matter or fact, physical just-thereness of the body. As long as my physical body is present, I can always be certain it's me--no matter what I'm doing. The experience of hyperfluid disembodiment, characteristic of online chat environments, does not provide such cognitive consistencies. In cyberspace, there is no physical form on which to affix a self, and participants are exposed to "the wonder and terror of the masquerade (Stone 1995 pp. 180)."

Leisure forms of online interaction can become a masquerade--a rejoicing of unconfined self enactments. Some participants playfully toy with the virtual actualization of multiple potentials of being. Yet, this wonderment also entails the terror of realization: If all people are "free" to be anything, then everything we "are" amounts to little more than fleeting disembodied electronic images on a computer screen. Both the body and the self implode in these virtual spaces. While at the masquerade we discover that beneath the mask of

one persona is another mask, and another mask, and another mask... Yet, at the masquerade everyone appears to be wearing remarkably similar masks.

When participants communicate (no matter what the context), meaning simply does arise out of thin air. Answers to questions such as "who am I?" "what is going on here?" "how shall I apprehend this other person?" are grounded in a broader socio-cultural context. Although disembodied and dislocated, participants in chat environments are not apart from the socio-cultural interpretive apparatus that provides meaning to self, situation, and others. Thus, in the dislocated and disembodied context of online chat interaction the social production of a meaningful self manifestation assumes new salience.

What does this indicate about the contemporary relationship between selves and social worlds? First and foremost, the changes noted in this study are not isolated nor limited to certain recreational dimensions of cyberspace. Rather, they are embedded within (and extensions of) much broader shifts in socio-cultural beliefs, practices, and technologies. "These include repeated transgressions of the traditional concept of the body's physical envelope and the local of human agency (Stone 1995 pp. 16)." There is reason to suggest that similar to technologies have (and continue to) facilitate the potential for multiple selfhood and opportunities for multiple body manifestations. For example, tailor made bodies courtesy of cosmetic surgery, are initial elements of this over-all phenomena. Like virtual cosmetic alterations, social activity on the Net extends upon, and normalizes the potential for multiple-fluid self manifestations. What it means to be warranted to a body has clearly been altered, and perhaps it will become necessary to reconceptualize what it means to be "embodied." The traditional assumption of self as that which is contained or affixed to the body, is increasingly a questionable assertion--especially with

regards to the experiences of virtual reality.

Unfortunately, discussions of virtual reality have unduly focused on technologies capable of creating sensory illusions. As a result, we have been blinded to virtual experiences that have embedded itself in everyday technologies of communication and subtly colonized the reality of everyday life. Consider such situations as; online interaction, reality television, Nintendo, cosmetic surgery, re-mastered digital photos, and audio disks. Virtual reality has slipped into our vocabulary (we can consider the entire entourage of "politically correct words" as an awesome power struggle over the means by which virtual images may be controlled in actual settings). Virtualness has been adopted and marketed by commercial slogans such as "reach out an touch someone," "is it real or is it Memorex?" and the endless barrage of commercials that suggest that by using their product you will be this-or-that kind of person. Virtual reality is an *experience* (Rheingold 1991) that is everywhere, evidenced by the fact that "it is becoming increasingly difficult to say with certainty that something has happened (Chayko 1993 pp. 180)."

Within this techno-social system of change, the meaning of selfhood is manifesting itself in a transformed and transforming state. What is emerging is not a "self as affixed to body" relationship, nor is it a "self as confined to geographic space" relationship. Rather, what is evident in this study and suggestive of broader socio-cultural changes is a self, body, and social world-as-*performance* relationship. Increasingly, the meanings of the actions taken by human agencies define self, body, and social world within a translucent horizon of dramatic possibilities. As this research suggests, the most stable personal characteristic--our sense of where we are in space--is now open to redefinition. Within these translucent horizons of symbolic meaning systems, one can only wonder where this might lead. What is a virtual person?

NOTES

1. Although "reality" is becoming an increasingly slippery and divisive term, here the word is used to refer to the meaning of the context of human interaction. All human interaction is situated in a context, and the web of meanings associated with each context of interaction comprises the reality of the particular situation. Like all other structures of meaning, the meaning of the context emerges in processes of interaction with others.

2. The word "parallel" is not meant to imply that social worlds are complementary, or in any necessary state of equilibrium. Parallel is used to convey the characteristic of simultaneousness. In other words, not only are social worlds multiple, they are also simultaneous. In this state of social reality (multiple and parallel) a social world *can* be complimentary--but it may also conflict with other social worlds, or simply remain compartmentalized exerting little or no consequence on other social worlds.

3. Imagine the academian that acts the same in a committee meeting as he/she does at home. Such a person would either be a poor academian, a poor spouse, or both. It is doubtful that such a situation will be tolerated over time, and thus reveals the essential dynamic nature of the self-social world relationship as individuals inhabit a multiplicity of parallel social worlds.

4. Certain electronic forms of communication display this characteristic as well. Phone sex is an excellent illustration. However, even here it would be exceedingly difficult for a male to enact a female presentation of self (or vice-versa), or for a child to enact an adult self presentation (or vice-versa). Thus, even in the context of a telephone situation, the body poses constraints by the necessity of voice communications. One's voice conveys distinct bodily impressions of gender and age. Such limitations are not posed within the disembodied context of online interaction.

5. "On" or "off' ("+" or "-") refer to either the existence or non-existence of electrical current, which is the essential binary building block of all computer programs. Whether "on" or "off" a bit is a *state*, simply because an "off" bit is as instrumental to the computer program as on "on" bit. Whether a bit exists is less important than it's state in conjunction with other bits.

6. Most studies have focused on conceptions of computer technologies as a tool, rather than a constructed environment (Lawley 1995). Nonetheless, the "computer as tool" metaphor is rapidly eroding, if not dead already. The

computer is a "metatool" (the prefix "meta" is used to convey a "beyond" quality). As Brenda Laurel (1993) makes poignantly clear, the "tool" metaphor is inextricably connected with modernist assumptions and grand narratives. There is nothing inherently "toolish" about the computer. It is a complex electromechanical machine that *can* function as many "tools," but also provides a medium and environment for human interaction in and of itself. Furthermore, the "multimedia" revolution is, by nature, imploding the boundaries of these various computer qualities (tool and non-tool alike). Multimedia transgress the boundaries of computer-as-tool, computer-as-medium, computer-as-environment--that is, after all, what multimedia is all about.

7. As will be emphasized, this same observation can be made of any technology of communication; typewriter, pencils, pens, telephones, etc. The mechanics of the technology are secondary to the meaning of what is produced. However, as will also be emphasized, various technologies allow for the production of different kinds of meanings, and environments for human interaction. But this is not to be regarded as a function, or necessary derivative of the technology alone.

8. It is important to note that the fluidity of contemporary experiences of reality is *not* a product of the postmodern condition--such a cause and effect assertion is another convolution of the postmodern critique. Rather, the conditions of the postmodern era have merely excentuated and problemized the processes by which reality has *always* been produced. The processes by which reality is produced have not necessarily changed, they've merely become increasingly manifest.

9. Although discussion will focus on the nature of virtual experiences in the online context, the reader is encouraged to consider the extent to which "virtuality" has come increasingly to characterize experiences of contemporary social life in general. The reader is encouraged to consider the extent to which virtuality has embedded itself in our everyday technologies of communication, and subtly--yet powerfully--colonized the reality of everyday life.

10. This observation (as well as this entire subsection) is applicable to all user interfaces, however discussion will often center on WIMP interfaces. WIMP user interfaces refer to graphically based *W*indows, *I*cons, *M*enus, and *P*ointing devices, the development of which served a critical role in the explosive expansion of the personal computer industry by making making computers more intuitive, consistent, predictable, and forgiving (Beekman 1994). With early computers it was necessary to conserve limited capabilities that a graphical WIMP interface would unnecessarily use. Hence, arcane hieroglyphic command languages became the rule. With the development of powerful personal computers it has become not only possible, but standard, to replace arcane command languages with intuitive WIMP interfaces. Both forms of user interface have the same simulating quality, however WIMP interfaces greatly excentuate the simulating nature of computer environments by creating

virtual environments (i.e. a "desktop,"), and by allowing the user to operate the system with little prerequisite specialized knowledge (i.e. computer languages, and system operations). As such, WIMP interfaces have been critical to the emergence of computer-mediated virtual environments, not simply because they excentuate the simulation, but also because they have made these simulated environments widely available to non-specialized populations.

Although many sections of this dissertation presume a WIMP user interface, the reader should acknowledge that these observations are also applicable to early hieroglyphic computer environments, and are equally applicable to newly developing user interfaces. The reader is encouraged to consider how recent historical developments in user interfaces have served to transform the cryptic computer environment into a diffuse arena for virtual action, and what this implies for future transformations that may accompany new user interface technologies.

11. This may appear tautological: People use technologies for purposes, the purpose of which defines the transformative role of technology. That is not what is implied. The relationship between technology and human social and physical environments is not this linear. In a fundamental McLuhnesque sense, technology has both manifest and latent transformative potential. This kind of analysis will be highlighted through this dissertation, however for now it is sufficient to say that it is often difficult to see what technologies do to us, for part of what they do is structure the act of seeing itself (Stone 1995).

12. For an empirical analysis of a text-based virtual reality see Reid 1994.

13. It should be noted that this is not only the brilliance of Laurel (1995), but also the brilliance of both Aristotle and Erving Goffman. Dramaturgical enactments, whether in theater-proper or as metaphorical elements of human social life, center on action--not persons, places, or things. Action is the primary component of *any* drama, "and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates personal agents (Aristotle 1450 pp.1)." Indeed, Aristotle goes so far as to acknowledge that drama is possible in absence of characters, but without action no drama can exist (see Aristotle 1450; Laurel 1995). Goffman's work exemplifies the same level of analysis as the entirety of his work emphasis an analysis of "Where the Action Is (1967):"

> "Plainly, it is during moments of action that the individual has the risk and opportunity of displaying himself and sometimes to others his style of conduct when the chips are down (pp. 237). ...And now we see character for what it is...it refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed during fateful moments (pp. 238)....there at the end is action and character (pp. 270)."

14. It should be noted that this is hardly a problem of validity, at least not to any greater degree than that which poses itself in traditional survey methods. One cannot be any more "sure" of the validity of responses in an online context than

by use of traditional survey methods. Responses are given, and we must proceed with that information at face-value lest we achieve anything from our efforts. Although techniques for "assessing validity" are available for survey methods, I make no assertion that such techniques are necessary or valid in the context of this study.

15. MUD's stand for "Multi-User Dimensions" and "MOO's" stand for "Multi-Oriented Objects." Although the distinction between them is anything but clear, both are "game" oriented in that both are intentionally fantasy role-playing games. Like the popular dice-game "Dungeons and Dragons" these games involve participants as characters that are created within the confines of "gaming-rules" for the purposes of the role-play game.

16. For ethical reasons, the source will not be identified.

17. Not all "real-time" chat environments were deemed appropriate for study. For example, initially this study intended to include CU-Seeme chat environments. In CU-Seeme chat, participants interact with one another while sending and receiving live televideo images (by use of inexpensive digital cameras). However, upon entry into these video-chat environments it was clear that participants in these online group organize themselves around sensitive issues (often sexual in nature) that are exceptionally susceptible to damage from research and potential exposure. As such, all initial data from these groups were destroyed, and no attempt was made to further include these persons in this study.

18. On this note, as Marvin (1995) accurately observed, grossly poor spelling and syntax are not tolerated without some teasing, or at least self-critical remarks from the participant (usually some form of an apology, or self-correction). Participants are not particularly concerned with spelling and syntax. However, typos and occasional misspellings clearly occupy a different status than "ignorant" spelling and syntax. This makes sense considering the importance of words in an environment that is intended to be spontaneous, yet is dependent on the written word.

19. This is true of online chat environments, and all other forms of self-game play. Phone sex represents an excellent example of another self-game with equivalent results.

20. It should be noted that not all participants who claim to be "themselves" online, also claim that online is "more real." As with any generalization--there are exceptions. However, the tendency is quite strong, as hopefully the reader can see by the data provided.

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APPENDIXES

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW

Date: 08-15-96 **IRB#: AS-96-071**

Proposal Title: REALITY HACKERS: SELF, SOCIAL WORLD AND ONLINE INTERACTION

Principal Investigator(s): Dennis Waskul, Charles Edgley

Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

ALL APPROVALS MAY BE SUBJECT TO REVIEW BY FULL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AT NEXT MEETING, AS WELL AS ARE SUBJECT TO MONITORING AT ANY TIME DURING THE APPROVAL PERIOD.
APPROVAL STATUS PERIOD VALID FOR ONE CALENDAR YEAR AFTER WHICH A CONTINUATION OR RENEWAL REQUEST IS REQUIRED TO BE SUBMITTED FOR BOARD APPROVAL.
ANY MODIFICATIONS TO APPROVED PROJECT MUST ALSO BE SUBMITTED FOR APPROVAL.

Comments, Modifications/Conditions for-Approval or Reasons for Deferral or Disapproval are as follows:

Provisions received and approved.

Signature: _____ Date: September 10, 1996
Chair of Institutional Review Board

cc: Dennis Waskul

APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

All interviews in this study were open-ended and no set agenda of questions were used (see Chapter Three). However, some questions turned out to more frequently arise in order to warm-up the participant, and create a set of responses from which additional probing questions could be derived. The following list of questions are among the most commonly used:

1. How often do you communicate with others in online chat? Why?

2. What, to you, are the personal benefits of online chat communication?

3. What, to you, are the shortcomings of online chat communication?

4. To what extent do you think persons modify who they are when communicating with others in online chat? Explain.

5. Do you ever change your presentation of self in the online context? Explain why.
    A. What about the online context allows you to make these changes?

6. When online do you think most people are who they say they are? Explain why or why not.
    A. How do you convince others that you are who you claim to be?

7. Can you tell the difference between online "fakes" and those that are genuine? Explain.
    A. If you can't tell the difference, then does the difference matter? Explain.

8. How many screen names do you have? Why more than one?

VITA

Dennis Waskul

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Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: REALITY HACKERS: SELFHOOD, ONLINE CHAT, AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Major Field: Sociology

Biographical:

Education: Graduated from Willmar Senior High School, Willmar, Minnesota in June 1987; received Associate of Arts degree from Willmar Community College, Willmar, Minnesota in May 1988; received Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from University of Minnesota--Morris, Morris, Minnesota in June 1990; received Master of Arts degree in sociology from Mankato State University in July 1992. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in sociology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 1997.

Experience: Employed as a part-time instructor at Willmar Community College from 1992-1993; Human Service Technician for Willmar Regional Treatment Center from 1992-1993; Teaching Assistant at Mankato State University and Oklahoma State University from 1990-1997; Camp Director for Stearns Webelos Camp, South Haven, Minnesota 1988-1996.

Professional Memberships: Alpha Kappa Delta, sociology honor society; American Sociological Association; Midwest Sociological Society; Southwestern Social Science Association; Popular Culture Association.