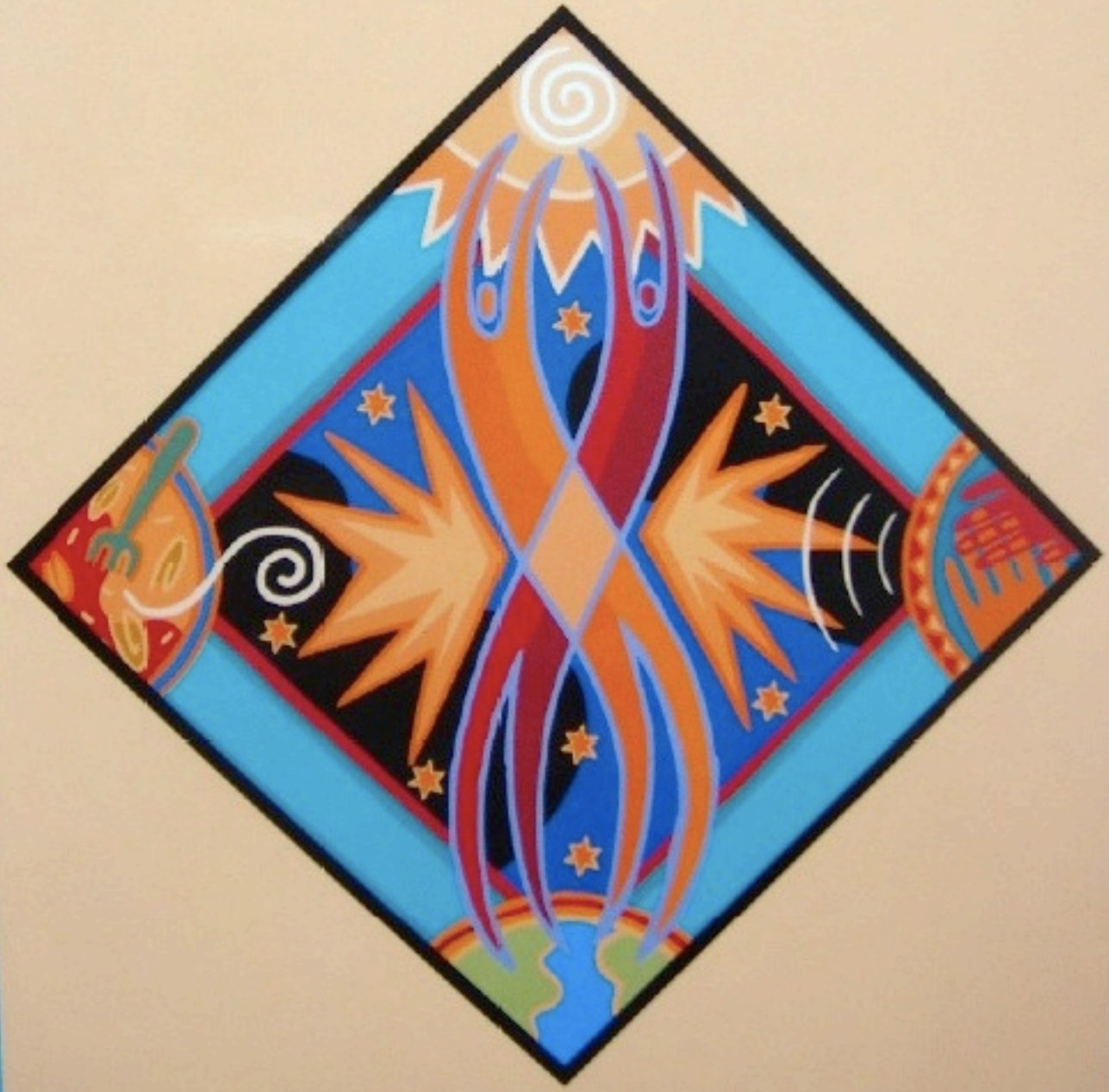
Constructing Sexualities

Readings in Sexuality, Gender, and Culture



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.../Cybersex/no_gender/no_sexuality/no_body.html

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<i want to close my eyes>
<i think of kissing you and I> <want to close my eyes>
<...yes>
<I was thinking it... you were writing it>
<i want to close my eyes and see you>
<...no words are enough>
<i want to open them and see you> <i hate words> <I am condemned to depend on them> <i would like you to know it all without me saying it> <but feel it as strongly as if you were reading it> <i'd like you to be able to read it on me straight away>
<i want you> <right now>
<i want to become the screen, the paper>
<i hate interfaces> <i want you too>
<you can be my lap top. my hands are there>
<now. the butterflies are getting aggressive too> <i want to be your laptop. where am i?>
<hold me closer> <hold me closer.> <let me feel you>
<my hands will not leave you, ever>
<touch me> <more>
<you are there. it is close>
<i am so alone here>
<i am close>
<where are you?>
<I want you beneath me> <you are> <i am above you,> <you can feel my breath>
<I feel it>
<it is ... too much>
<on my neck> <on my breasts>
<i want to kiss your lips, so much, all over,>
<you say forever>
<forever>
<your lips are still saying it>
<and where are you> <do your lips move with mine>
<where are you letting me to be> <my lips are inside yours>
<I am persuading you>
<now is my turn to have you inside me>
<i am breathing too much. it is...> <i am <i am>
<it is never enough> <i am too> <these hands .... til when are they going to keep writing?>
<how far> <how far are we going to get?>
<i cannot stop> <how far. it is not possible to see an end> <gosh, you have to go soon. i don't want out of this>
<i could be here all night> <but yes i have to go soon>

Source: .../Cybersex/no_gender/no_sexuality/no_body.html, original article written for this publication.

<stay> <stay> <with me> <tonight> <i need more nights with you> <always with u>
<i am trembling> <i will get out of her shaking all over>
<i want to touch your hand> <i want to feel it around me>
<i want to embrace you> <touch your hair> <kiss your eyes>
<around my waist, my back>
<hear your heart>
<oh my god..this is so incredible>
<i know, it is> <i am getting lost into this>
<you make me incredibly hot> <i have never felt so strongly whilst with a machine>
<i am breathing deeply> <those machines ... they are not machines any more>
<are you really there... I want you to use your hands.> <I want to touch you where I cannot>
<how can they be??>
<I want to feel you. feel your softness.> <feel that you are ready for me>
<how can they still be machines after all what they are experiencing through us?> <i am so ready for you, my love> <i am ready. i want you> i really want you> <i will be unable to sleep wanting you> <i must leave>
<i want to touch you. you know where.>
<how am i going to??>
<No, do not go>

(25 October, 2000)

Cybersex and cyberdating bring into focus what constitutes human relationships and how one should conduct interactions when online. It forces a question about what is important in human relationships. In so doing, cybersex presents a form of engagement that challenges conventional understandings of sex as a fundamentally bodily engagement with others. The text-based interaction above took place between real people and, if one is to accept that it was sincere, real emotions were behind the words. The lack of physical closeness does not lessen the importance of what has been felt in this conversation. If another person is being felt, or simply perceived, then it cannot help but be real. What matters is the sincerity of the gesture, which is not dependent upon actual physical contact. Perhaps the best approximation is to consider that cybersexual encounters combine more traditional examples such as telephone sex or letter writing, neither of which would be claimed as lacking meaning and realness.[1]

Although there is no clear consensus, it is sufficient to describe cyberspace as the context for information communication that exists as an electronic, virtual entity within computers. Within academic discourses, inquiries about cyberspace have focused on how it impacts upon social barriers and ways of constructing identity (Cairncross, 1997; Castells, 1997; Jones, 1997; Turkle, 1995). However, curiosity about virtual relationships seemed to reach a mainstream audience through the cinematic production *You've Got Mail* (1999). At a similar time, countless television-based documentaries were telling the story of couples who fell in love on the cyber-highway and had even arranged marriages before meeting each other in person. Amidst these cultural products have emerged contested views about whether relationships based upon virtual correspondences can be fulfilling and whether they alter the way in which people relate to each other.

The ideas presented here give reason for considering the efficacy of what takes place within cyberspatial environments. Cyberspace is suggested as being a unique location for personal expression and freedom that *does* impact upon human experiences. Specifically, cybersex is argued as sufficiently 'real' and meaningful, and virtual *only* in the sense that it is mediated by technology. Even the physical aspects of sex are becoming increasingly sophisticated with the development of teledildonic technology, which allows the users to strap-on appropriate electronic equipment and feel physical stimuli being directed from somebody at a remote location. As the name suggests, teledildonics combines the use of sex toys, such as vibrators, with telecommunications. Thus, two people wearing such equipment control the amount and location of stimulation felt by the other person through computer software.

Currently, it is unclear what can be said about online relationships, though examples of cybersex bring into question whether physical

proximity is important at all. To understand this context and the challenges it raises for understanding sexuality, this paper is structured to reveal aspects of cybersexual relationships that problematise the construction and understanding of gender, sexuality, and the body.

WHEREFORE ART THOU ROMEO?

Cybersex can take place in a number of contexts that blur the boundaries of pornography, voyeurism, and romance. The futuristic and immersing experiences described in the cinematic production, *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), are becoming more aligned with current technology. In the movie, the two central characters don their virtual reality suits and enter into a cyberworld where they experience a feeling of their bodies as being fluid, weightless, and entangled in physical embrace. For the viewer, its visual representation is described by two human-like forms in a brightly coloured fantasy world that resonates beauty and affection. Yet, the most accessible opportunities to experience cybersex are through conventional computer interfaces that utilise computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems. These are best known and most widely used through such protocols as the World Wide Web, which is host to (and overwhelmed by) a wide range of sexual environments.

Not surprisingly, the web offers many opportunities to engage with sex through electronic pornography (e.porn). One of the more interesting possibilities offered by real-time e.porn is the use of camera technology to allow a viewer to enter into the day-to-day life of somebody. In this case, the website host lures the voyeuristic browser into a situation where they would be willing to pay money to peek into the lives of others; a kind of pornographic *Truman Show* (1998). Yet, the objects of our "affection" are very aware of their being observed and, often, the emphasis is not on sex. With continually up-dated cameras (web-cams) placed all around the host's house, the user is able to observe a person washing-up, sleeping, watching television, bathing and having sex.

Beyond pornography, the opportunity to form romantic or sexual relationships can be found in many locations on the web. Most commonly, this entails the use of text-based interactions in chat-rooms or messenger service software. Chat-rooms are, literally, virtual places where individuals at different places in the world can meet through computers in a social environment comparable to a night club or restaurant. It is a place where multiple interactions are possible, with discussions taking place in text format between two or more people. In such locations it is also possible to have private or public conversations by moving around the virtual environment into private rooms and so on. Whilst an understanding of these environments is developing, there are some central characteristics of these contexts that are worth noting.[2]

A chat-room or personal interaction online can be a fictional or an honest experience in the sense of revealing sincere aspects of one's personality. Particularly in virtual spaces where fictional games are being played by its users, the presentation and naming of oneself tends to be fictional, where a name is ascribed to one's own character. A similar claim can be made about virtual social environments where one might go to meet people or make new friends. It is not uncommon for users to adopt a different name or fictional characteristics of their identity in regard to such things as personal appearance or personal beliefs. However, there also exist chat-rooms where members are required to be truthful about identity and where membership is not granted until checks are conducted to confirm identity. In some contexts adopting a fictional identity does not take place, particularly where the meeting is between a well-established group of friends. An example of a conversation between two people, whose names are not given for reasons of privacy, proceeded as follows.

<so are we gonna have cybersex or what??>
<yes, let's go for cybersex> <it will be good. Especially with everybody around>
<well. ok. you start!. ("let's go for cybersex" - i am laughing). don't forget protection> <activate your virus software>
<indeed> <fine so...<what are you wearing?>
<....and I want quick cybersex!!!>
(December 15, 2000)[3]

Developing relationships in chat-rooms can have an appeal of anonymity, where one can discard any inhibitions related to physical appearance, gender, sexuality, race, disability, or age. Indeed, Markham (1998: 35) describes how using a pseudonym can provide a "sense of freedom in a dislocated place where one can be anyone or anything simply by describing oneself through words and names." Thus, cyberspace can offer the opportunity to mix fantasy with reality and to reject whichever is less pleasing. As Tamblyn (1997: 42) claims,

> . . . the Internet traffics in the encouragement of its users' utopian fantasies about accessing the power to spin out proliferating identities. Multiple personas of whatever gender, sexual preference, age, race, and ethnicity seek virtual relationships with other designer identities.
>
> Chat-rooms allow for the free construction of identities and offer an eject button if ever things get a little unpleasant. It allows individuals who would not usually tolerate one another to interact and converse without having any basis to assert any social prejudice that they might normally hold, whether in relation to, for examples, sexuality, gender, class, or ethnicity. It offers a limitless opportunity for engaging with marginal fetish tastes that can accommodate all sexualities.

However, it is in such descriptions that one also realises the contradiction of this utopian technology that promotes difference in some contexts and flattens it in others. Cybersex can provide a context for liberating individuals from the burden of prejudice, though can also reduce people to fictional personae, where difference is dealt with by its removal. Cybersex can challenge sexualised stereotypes, though at times, amplify and reinforce them through simply replicating social norms. The negative aspect of this double-edge is reinforced by recent research that suggests cyberspace offers nothing revolutionary as a means for challenging stereotypes. Such research claims that the utopian aspirations of cyberspace, where individuals are liberated from social conventions and norms, are not reflective of what is actually taking place in cyberspace (Terry and Calvert, 1997). As Morse (1997) argues, "virtual worlds do not necessarily or even commonly reveal interactions that transcend gender or cross culture" (p. 27).

Indeed, the artificiality of chat-room environments is reinforced by Wakeford (1997: 53), claiming that "electronic networks are constructed and experienced as male territory, and not a place within which anyone would voluntarily wish to display/reveal female identity." Thus, the very claims that were given earlier about how name changing can be emancipatory, would also seem to reflect an imperative derived from sexual difference. Consequently, early cyberspace discourse that sought to reveal the web as a utopian social location seems no longer persuasive, even if cyberspace could have been a medium for the transgressing of norms (Wakeford, 1999). In its most extreme interpretation, Strehovec (1997: paragraph 2) claims that

> . . . cyberspace is less and less a portent of messianic escape; it has become a colonised and 'McDonald's-ised' field for enforcing the technototalitarianism, web fascism, machismo, and tribalism of new, distinctively yuppified elites.

In turn, this realisation has rendered a refocusing of attention in cyberspatial theorising onto the experiential effects of engaging with others through a computer. If it cannot be claimed that social stereotypes collapse in cyberspace, then, at least, they can adopt new ways of being for those engaged with it.

SEXUAL DISRUPTION: .../no_gender/no_sexuality

These examples of cybersex and cyberspatial relationships provoke mixed reactions. From one perspective, e.porn is difficult to locate because it crosses the boundaries of other kinds of sexual engagement, such as personal relationships and prostitution. For example, in many cases of e.porn, the user often engages with the person that is producing the website, even building some degree of personal relationship.[4] Thus, the person by whom

the user is being aroused is often also the person that owns the site and with whom they would communicate to arrange subscriptions and so on. Thus, the interaction with the subject of the pornography is also the person that the user engages with on levels other than simply the physical titillation.[5] However, e.porn that really does challenge conventional boundaries is also part of a larger network of pornographic websites where many others do very little that is different from more familiar examples of pornography.

This ambiguity renders it unclear whether pornography can be interpreted using the conventional moral discourse surrounding it (Kizza, 1996). Claims about pornography because it is exploitative are less persuasive for e.porn. Increasingly, e.porn involves individuals who are not working for a living, not being exploited and who have arranged the website portal independent of any coercive production process. Thus the context does not generate the same kinds of moral dilemma for the customer in terms of taking advantage of another human being (although, such cases can also be found online).

At most, one can object to e.porn on the basic premise that any kind of objectification is unacceptable. However, this would underestimate the level of interaction that can take place within e.porn. Indeed, the example of web-cam sites illustrates that the medium is not necessarily valued for it being specifically or exclusively about physical gratification. Rather, the concept of companionship more accurately describes the attraction, as the browser is afforded a continuity with the life of the person or persons being viewed. Moreover, the reduction of glossy covers to amateur, real-life images of people who have not augmented their bodies to fit a sexual stereotype allows a sense of e.porn as being much more real. One is left feeling more sympathy than contempt for the e.porn consumer.

E.porn does not necessarily provoke any clear sense of objectification premised upon stereotypical gender distinctions. The web is saturated with pornography to such an extent that it makes nonsense out of previous target audience markets. Inevitably and, perhaps, unfortunately, the phrase *if you can think of it, it's probably online* is quite appropriate in describing what can be found on the web. Thus, such a phrase as *sexual preference* has less utility in cyberspace, since the multiplication of preferences renders the business of categorisation somewhat redundant. The relatively static terms of homosexuality, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual are impoverished in comparison to such terms as fetish, bondage, cartoons, group, stories, latinas, or upskirts. Although there are gateways to e.porn websites distinguished by conventional terms denoting sexual preference, increasingly, this method of demarcating interests is less relevant and portals offer access to all tastes to ensure utility. Sexual preference is thus, one category of many other kinds of taste. In itself, this is interesting for it reflects a shift away from sexualities to taste cultures.[6]

(RE)CONSTRUCTING SEXUALITY: no_body

The possibilities for different interactions problematises whether one can treat cyberspatial relationships in the same way as their non-cyberspatial counterparts. Indeed, this question is part of a broader discourse about how events within cyberspace relate to life outside of it (Parks and Floyd, 1996; Mnookin, 1996). In this sense, the importance of cybersexual interactions is also reflected in the way that it challenges the importance of *being there*. The significance of this is recognised by Rheingold (1991: 351) where he states that,

> The secondary social effects of technosex are potentially revolutionary. If technology enables you to experience erotic frissons or deep physical, social, emotional communion with another person with no possibility of pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, what then of conventional morality, and what of the social rituals and cultural codes that exist solely to enforce that morality? Is disembodiment the ultimate sexual revolution and/or the first step toward abandoning our body?

The consequences of interactions in cyberspace are illustrated by the disturbing case of virtual rape, which took place in a Multi-user

Object-Oriented (MOO) community in 1993. This context is comparable to that which has been previously described, where the environment is created by text-based descriptions and formed by the members of the community that are online. In this particular location, LambdaMOO, the incident was widely publicised and has been argued as being the event that turned a "database into a society" (Dibbell, title of paper, 1993 cited in MacKinnon, 1997).

The violation entailed one member of the community (the violator) taking control of another person's persona and violating the character sexually, in this case, in the presence of all other users. It would be easy to trivialise the act and argue that it is just a group of people having fun playing a game and that what happens to the character is not really what happens to the person. However, this kind of environment blurs fantasy and reality, people are there with different motivations, some playing out fantasies, others meeting with friends and having "real" conversations. As MacKinnon (1988: paragraph 51) describes,

> Many of the personae inhabiting LambdaMOO are permanent or semi-permanent members of its virtual community. They have established for themselves relationships and reputation. Their existence matters to their respective users, and accordingly, they abide by the existing collection of norms, mores, and guidelines known as netiquette.

To argue that cyberspace is a created, artificial, and unreal environment, begs the question as to whether anything at all that takes place in cyberspace is real. It is argued by MacKinnon (1998) that, whilst it can be questioned whether the LambdaMOO incident did constitute rape, there is no doubt that "the current iteration of rape as constructed in LambdaMOO poses serious, real consequences for users of virtual reality." Moreover, the physical component itself cannot be taken as a necessary condition of identifying something as rape. Indeed, the emphasis that is placed upon violations of a physical nature, can be critiqued as underestimating the significant psychological impact of rape (Turkle, 1995).

This lack of importance attributed to the body leads to a more persuasive case for arguing cybersex as problematising its associated meanings. As previously identified, it is doubtful that social stereotypes about gender and sexuality are being replaced. At most, it would seem that they are challenged and altered in some contexts of cyberspace. In contrast, the disappearance of the body in cyberspace (Hayles, 1999) provokes a blurring of the virtual and non-virtual that creates conflicts of understanding. It is not clear how one reconciles this blurring with traditional concepts related to romantic relationships, for example, fidelity. Would it constitute adultery or simply titillation if one were to engage in an affair with a real person in cyberspace?

Imagine a person in any chat-room, chatting (by writing) with strangers about something and nothing. The person is drawn to one individual in particular (or more if it helps) and finds themselves talking about loves and life, embarrassing moments, and other inconsequential matters. After some casual flirting, the discussion evolves when the other person asks 'what are you wearing?' or something equally leading or suggestive. Very soon, they are explaining how arousing the conversation is being. To clarify the circumstances, nearly nothing is known about the identity of the other person or, indeed, whether they are making a joke out of the situation. The person might be quite different in age, perhaps even a minor. Consequently, if one engages with this individual in a sexual manner, then one may be acting contrary to one's perceived sexuality and social values.

Returning to the immediate problem of whether the affair would be adulterous, it must be asked what are the salient characteristics that make adultery morally problematic? Whilst it might be a cliché to say that it is the physical act of sex (or a more diluted form of it) that is problematic, it is suggested here that the act itself is less of a problem than the mental state of intimacy that is achieved between two (or more) people. Upon such a premise, sex with a prostitute, for example, would be less problematic than the meeting of minds that can take place in cyberspace. It is the intimacy experienced

between the people involved that is important, indeed, perhaps whether they are in love.

The example serves to reinforce the need to approach relationships differently when they are cyberspatial. If being faithful is a matter of physical acts, then cybersex offers little threat and what threat it does pose may be construed as simply a sophisticated form of pornography. However, if being faithful is about ensuring one's romantic interactions are with one person and one person only, then cybersex can pose a threat to remaining faithful to one's partner. Either way, there does seem a need to draw boundaries within this categorisation that derives from the possibility of cybersex. As Kanitscheider (1999) argues "we need a redefinition of jealousy, or rather a bifurcation of the semantics of the concept, one concerning natural and one concerning virtual persons."

Although this analysis is not exhaustive of these issues, cybersex and cyberdating offer an environment that allows one to form different attitudes towards morality in the context of sexual and romantic relationships; where prostitution meets pornography and where fidelity meets fantasy. Moreover, though Kitchin (1998) considers that cyberspace entails a reconfiguration of the body, the stronger case is suggested here that cybersex marginalises the body's role.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the impact of cybersex on the construction of gender, sexuality, and the body must be directed at the experiential quality of liberation that can be felt by CMC users. Such feelings can, at least, reconstruct notions of sexuality, though the aspirations for transcending them are less clear. The kinds of sexual experiences that are found through CMCs permit a unique approach to understanding lifestyle and identity that cannot be treated in a familiar manner. Within cyberspace, not only are the spatial and temporal barriers distorted; so too are interpersonal ones. At the same time, new social barriers and challenges emerge in relation to how one gains access to, interacts, and understands other people in these new environments.

It may be argued that I have avoided any discussion about *real* cybersex. I have made passing reference to the technology of teledildonics and based most of my claims upon a text-based interpretation of cybersex. Hopefully, the reasons for this will be self evident. The title of the paper endeavours to show how cybersex can render some central concepts relating to sex vacuous, in particular gender, sexuality, and the body. It has been claimed that cybersex can distort these concepts, liberate them from their normative understandings, and inevitably make them nonsensical. The importance of the body is reconfigured and that cybersex reaffirms the importance of the mind in sexual interactions.

The example of text-based cybersex might seem a relatively tame basis upon which to claim that there is anything particularly revolutionary about sex through a computer. However, the importance of this example is far greater than any form of cybersex mediated through teledildonics, since it implies a sharper separation of the experience from the body. This dislocation is reinforced by the real effects of acts like virtual rape. This is not to say that people are entirely without their own bodies when engaging with cybersex. Indeed, it is not uncommon for people to masturbate whilst engaged in an online chat. Yet, it is in this sense that the implied meaning of my title "*no body*" is clear.

Cybersex, with or without teledildonics, can be an isolating activity and can become a product for consumption simply because there is no one else in the same room. Thus, cybersex presents the user with a contradiction: the provision of exciting and new experiences without the need for a physical other, at the same time as being rendered spatially isolated from any other person. As Lamborn Wilson (1996: 224) so comedically writes in his analogising of cybersex with phonesex, it is but "a poor parodic rendering of the phone company's slogan, 'Reach out and touch someone,' which is so sadly, so finally, what we *cannot* do in cyberspace."

NOTES

1. It is difficult to gauge the temporal relationships of the words; textual, real-time interactions also introduce a further difference in conversing with somebody. Due to the entire conversation being recorded while the participants type, there is no possibility for mis-hearing or forgetting something. It is possible to get backwards in a conversation whilst it is still taking place, since the entire communication is recorded on the screen as it is written. As such, text-based relationships introduce a dimension that is not feasible to achieve in other contexts.

2. This dialogue and subsequent ones took place between the same two people through an electronic messenger service. For reasons of privacy, the names of the participants are not given. Pseudonyms are also omitted to avoid any unnecessary contextualising of the participants' identities.

3. It is important to recognise that an understanding of these contexts is evolving still within an academic discourse that is only very recently beginning to take seriously the concept of virtual communities and the value of ethnographic research into such sub-cultures (Markham, 1998; Ward, 1999).

4. The term "consumer" does not seem particularly accurate here though neither does "user" as it could be seen to imply the unwarranted connotation as objectifying the other person. However, it is used here in a similar way to its use in general in computer speak, where user simply means the person on the end of the computer.

5. Support for this idea is found in Kibby and Costello (2001) who claim that the presentation and re-presentation of sex entertainment is blurring the respective roles of the spectacle and the spectator.

6. Although it might be argued possible to ascribe specific kinds of taste to any particular sexual preference, the absence of any clear link serves to provide a way of accessing pornography without such associations being made.

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