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Trading sexpics on IRC: Embodiment and authenticity on the internet

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The body – or its absence – is central to contemporary notions of ‘cyberspace’, ‘the internet’, ‘virtuality’: computer mediated communications (CMCs) are defined around the absence of physical presence, the fact that we can be interactively present to each other as unanchored textual bodies without being proximate or visible as definite physical objects. The revolutionary claims for the kinds of identities available on-line flow from this feature: if identity is performed independently of fixed bodily attributes, then who you are or can be is not limited – or falsifiable – by features of your physical body but turns rather on your resourcefulness in using tools of representation. The body itself is released – through avatars or imagination – from its traditional shapes, colours, genders, boundaries: ‘With no limit to the number of names that can be used, one individual can become a population explosion on the Net: many sexes, many species.’ (Plant 1997: 46)

This focus on the separation of identity from fixed physical embodiment has tended to filter our understanding of CMCs through poststructuralist hopes and concepts: cyberspace has come to be widely understood as a practical deconstruction of essentialism. Out there, bodies and identities alike may lose their connection to terrestrial limits, extending through a new range of possibilities, and in the process may reflect back upon the supposed naturalness, givenness, reification, or territorialisation of real life bodies and identities. In cyberspace, social identity becomes increasingly (revealed as) performative to the extent that ‘real’ bodies are unable to act as anchor, essence, guarantor, container of a ‘true’ or ‘real’ self. To the extent that bodies become virtual, cyberspace constitutes a virtual critique of essentialism and a practical liberation from the shackles of authenticity. (A list of conventional reference points and discussions might include Bassett 1997, Benedikt 1991, Butler 1990, 1993, Dery 1994, Featherstone and Burrows 1995, Haraway 1990, Plant 1995, 1996, 1997, Porter 1997, Shields 1996, Springer 1996, Stone 1996, Turkle 1984, 1995.)

This article is based on a year-long ethnographic engagement with one CMC setting – sexpics trading on Internet Relay Chat (IRC). The aim is to approach the above claims from the perspective of participants’ routine practices rather than from the theoretical concerns and hopes projected onto them: how did participants *in practice* engage with virtual bodies and identities? The aim is not to criticise or refute contemporary critiques of essentialism or authenticity but simply to avoid assuming that participants share them. The strength of ethnographic engagement is a close focus on how participants dealt with, regulated, inhabited, understood a social setting in which the problematised relation between body and identity was the central feature of everyday life; we are not expecting them to react, or want to react, to virtual embodiment as if they were poststructuralists.

More specifically, if this virtual setting constituted a practical critique of essential bodies and identities we would expect – or hope for – at least two central features to emerge: Firstly, we would expect the construction of new kinds of bodies, identities and connections between them, a liberation, an experimentalism or at least a diminished conventionality. Secondly, we would expect that the notion of authenticity – a desire to determine which bodies and identities were *real* or true – would become irrelevant or marginal; that participants would be less concerned to anchor performed identities in an underlying truth or reality.

In fact, the ethnography indicates that the deconstruction of body and identity on-line is experienced by participants as a set of practical and existential *problems* that have to be dealt with and not as a field of deconstructive or utopian possibilities; and that in everyday on-line life considerable energy may be directed into the (admittedly hopeless) project of reconnecting and re-fixing bodies and identities. Firstly, despite inhabiting a space of apparently limitless transgression, participants structured their transgressions in fairly conventional ways (in particular, according to norms of mainstream pornography and male heterosexuality). Secondly, the impossibility of establishing the other's real identity did not make the notion of authenticity redundant. Rather, participants operated within a dialectic of cynicism and belief: they experienced their online world with a mixture of cynical detachment on the one hand (a refusal to believe anything on-line and therefore a refusal to treat events or relationships there as serious), and on the other hand a desire to trust and invest in on-line relationships which depended on pursuing strategies of authentication (and a constant concern about being deceived, ripped off and otherwise hurt by others' inauthenticity). Significantly, these strategies of authentication – necessary in order to trust in a relationship, in order to credit a relationship with any ethical weight – were attempts to fix the other in a body or body-like presence, one which persists over time and is locatable in space.

'Sexpics trading on IRC'

Internet relay chat (IRC) is a medium for 'chatting' in real time to other people who are connected to an IRC network. People first connect to the internet, as they would for email or WWW. Instead of loading an email program or browser, they then connect to an IRC network by loading 'client' software onto their local computers: Figure 1 shows how a participant's computer screen might typically appear. Users may choose amongst an ever-growing number of IRC networks. The network used for this ethnography usually has around 20-30,000 clients simultaneously connected at peak time.

Participants can find and talk to each other in two basic ways. First, they can talk directly and privately with one other person. They make a connection which opens a window on each participant's screen; if one person types a line of text, it will appear on both screens. Conversation takes the form of a flow of text lines. These lines can be of three different sorts which cover the basics of social interaction: simple speech; actions (lines, preceded by asterisks, which describe or performatively carry out an action); and events ('real' actions performed with the basic command set of IRC: bans, invites, entering or leaving channels or networks). Second, these one-to-one chats – the private sphere of IRC – generally cluster around channels, the public spheres in which any number of participants may communicate communally. A channel window will have a section listing the nicks (nicknames) of all participants, a section for the communal chat and a section in which to type in one's own messages. Channels have names and topics which reflect their content. During the period of fieldwork, both the largest channels and the largest number of channels tended to be sex related, though these could be divided into those more oriented to trading sexpics and those more oriented to meeting others for cybersex or flirting or partying. Finally, there is no technical limit to the number of windows – chats and channels – participants can have open at any one time.

If you can transmit lines of text over IRC, you can transmit anything that is digitised, thus any kind of representation: photos, drawings, video clips, sound files, streamed sound or video, software program files. Hence the sexpics trade: 'sexpics' usually refers to any kind of sexually explicit material circulated within this scene. People meet up or advertise their wares in and around designated channels, chatting either publicly in the channel or privately. Alongside the chat, they can send files to each other (technically, this is done by a facility called DCC, direct computer to computer communication). They can also use a facility called 'fserve' (file server): someone offering an fserve allows others (usually by way of 'trigger' word that can be typed in a channel window) to access and peruse directly the hard disk of their local computer, looking through subdirectories and lists of files, and then to select and download the files they want, usually up to a limit (a specified number of kilobytes). As discussed below, people can also set ratios (you can download x bytes for every y bytes you upload): these are like exchange rates or prices.

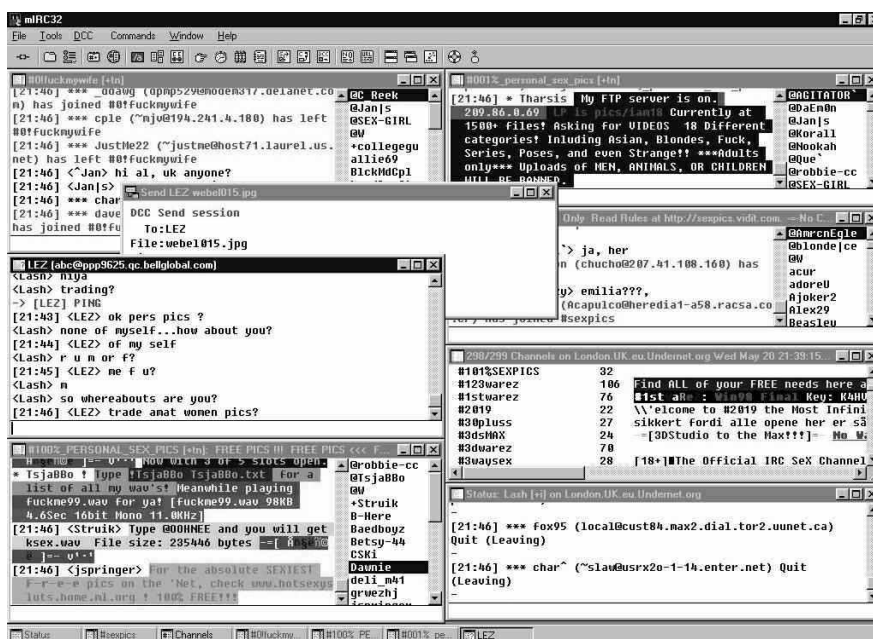


Figure 1: Screen shot of an IRC session.

Fieldwork took the form of a self-consciously conventional ethnography, over approximately eighteen months (July 1996 to December 1997), focused on one IRC network and revolving around a limited number of sex-related channels. The ethnography was also contextualised by following IRC links into neighbouring CMC media such as newsgroups and websites. Engagement with the setting took the form of participant observation in public channels and private conversations, formal and informal interviews with participants (either by way of on-line chat, telephone or email), analysis of logs of conversations sent me by informants, collection and analysis of directory structures and images. Long-term engagement with both the setting and particular informants was crucial to the research.

Disembodiment on IRC

The strength of ethnography – notably lacking from much CMC literature – is an attention to the specificity of settings that allows the researcher to disaggregate global concepts such as – in this study – cyberspace, internet, pornography. We see rather an extraordinarily diverse and fluid world of practices, constituencies, media, technologies which can only be recovered through learning the local culture in detail. Part of understanding the specificity of ‘sexpics trading on IRC’ is to understand what ‘virtuality’ and ‘(dis)embodiment’ mean in this particular context: both are differently constructed and understood on IRC than in other internet settings; we might therefore expect issues of authenticity and identity to work differently here than in even ostensibly similar CMC (or indeed off-line) settings. We can summarise IRC ‘disembodiment’ in terms of three aspects:

Firstly, participants have a purely textual presence for each other. In the main, they exist in and between the typed lines of text, scrolling sequentially down their screens, through which speech, actions and events are accomplished. Bodies and their attributes (gender, ethnicity, age, beauty) are therefore not perceptible, and there is certainly a feeling that one can claim to be whatever one wants and that others’ identity claims are not falsifiable. Participants are almost continuously aware that they are witnessing textual performances and frequently topicalise this feature, while at the same time they can find themselves deeply immersed in those performances. It is like watching realist TV or film: the experience is constituted around different levels of suspension of disbelief. Participants are vividly aware of the complexity and skill involved in textual performances, a feature which sets limits on their disbelief in others’ presences (eg, it is deemed hard to maintain a different gender identity from your own, at least over time).

These issues of textual presence, though partly shared with some other CMC and indeed non-CMC settings, are intensified by specific features of synchronous chat systems like IRC: these are real time, live encounters with other people who must actually *be there now* in order for anything to be happening, yet who are *not here* in the flesh. Ironically, although participants may know nothing or be able to authenticate nothing about the other’s body, the fact that on-line identities on IRC depend *entirely* on physical presence in the present tense means that the presence and reality of the other’s real, off-line body is always in the participant’s mind: are they still there? Will they be there tomorrow? Who was here just now? This is also central to the eroticisation of these relationships: there is a hyper-awareness that nothing could be happening here on-

line unless a real body out there (whoever they 'really' are) was typing these lines to me; there must really be a body out there, but always titillatingly just out of reach.

Secondly, the bodies of IRC participants are not only invisible but untraceable and anonymous: it is almost impossible to track on-line presences to off-line bodies or geographical locations. Not even an email address is available unless offered. The issue is not simply that one cannot find a 'real body' in which to anchor an identity; the issue is also that one cannot hold an identity accountable for its actions because one cannot trace it to a unique and locatable *address*. Who would place trust in a spectre that can evaporate when things get serious? As we shall see, as soon as serious emotional or practical issues arise in an IRC relationship, participants have either to attach the other's identity to a unique body with a spatial address or else (lacking that) to trust in its body-like persistence over time (that the other has proved reliable in being *here* even if we could not locate it out *there* in real life).

The ontological detachment of performed identity from unique and locatable body is compounded by the fact that IRC identities are also not 'owned' by participants. People are identified by their 'nicks' (nicknames) and these can be changed at any moment by a simple command. Moreover, if someone is already on-line with 'my' nick, I simply have to choose a new one. Conversely, if someone presents themselves to me with a familiar nick, it may not be the same person I was talking to last time. Recognising someone as the same as or different over time and tracking down unique others (in order to make them ethically responsible for emotional commitments or trading obligations) is a central practical issue which obsesses participants and centres on the obvious matter of tracing multiple presences to unique identities and bodily locations, a concern which may require considerable technical expertise.

Thirdly, the most unique and extreme aspect of IRC disembodiment is its almost completely 'dynamic' or 'evanescent' character. 'Dynamic' means that nothing exists on IRC independently of someone's presence on-line: for example, I can call a channel into being by simply typing a command: /j #Slater ('join channel Slater'). I am then in #Slater and can invite others into it. However when the last person leaves #Slater that channel vanishes without a trace – it leaves no record, no sign of its existence. There is no way of leaving things behind in it and when I join a channel that has been ongoing before me, I merely see a blank screen: there is no record of the conversation that took place before I entered it. Similarly, my own personal on-line identity depends entirely on my on-line presence: I can leave behind no information about myself, have no ownership over my name ('nick'), and have to reconstitute my self on-line in a permanent present tense.

IRC therefore has no material culture, no objects or structures, which would allow its world and identities to be fleshed out and built up over time, to have a rich past and future. It lacks those processes of objectification through which cultural transmission is accomplished. While this might make for even greater freedom to experiment with identity and to marginalise the notion that any identity could be authentic, it actually militates against projects of either identity or community: much work has to be done to stabilise both identities and settings into ongoing social orders. Indeed some participants do devote considerable labour and expertise to maintaining IRC social structures (on-going trading relationships, channels, leadership structures), battling to solidify their evanescence. On IRC, identity and 'community' are generally pragmatic matters rather than aims for participants; they are *problems* because they are necessary but unavailable, fragile or costly conditions of getting on with the business at hand. The situation is the reverse of Maffesoli's (1996) world in which specific interests are merely the occasion for achieving a generic sense of communality.

We can see some of the importance (and uniqueness) of IRC's lack of material culture, and its own specific brand of disembodiment, by comparing it with ostensibly similar CMC settings. The dynamism of IRC sharply distinguishes it from the CMC settings on which much of the current literature on virtuality and identity is based: MUDs and avatar-based virtual environments. The most grounded and sensitive of this literature (Bassett 1997, Dibbell 1994, Turkle 1995) stresses participants' extraordinary investment and identification with highly developed on-line personae developed over time. These virtual personae are possible on MUDs not only because of the freedom from real world bodies and selves (a feature shared with IRC) but also because MUDs (unlike IRC) allow for the construction and persistence over time of the kind of material culture which sustains identities and identity projects: one can build up descriptions of one's environment and person, and leave them behind. The ability to objectify identity and environment in a persistent material culture on MUDs allows both identification with a developing character but also a distancing: because personae are objectified, the conventionality and performativity of identity can be held up to a reflexive self-consciousness (see especially Bassett 1997). All of this is not to say that individuals do not explore and invest in identities on IRC, but that they surely do so under quite different conditions. Participants may certainly value identities they have developed over time but they are likely to define those identities in terms of friendship and trading networks, social statuses in particular channels (eg, as an op) and 'style'. They are less likely to see their on-line presence as a fictive or objectified character, more likely to talk about their way of being on-line simply as a mode of operating in a particular social space.

The ability to objectify identities and environments is not an independent technological variable; MUD software famously arose out of a fantasy game-playing culture which – on-line or off – involves huge personal investment in avatars and intersubjectively sustained fictional settings. Although the software structures underlying and organising IRC are constantly

being revised and rewritten, they are not being developed in the direction of MUDs. IRC participants presumably have other concerns, aims, styles: IRC participants tend to focus technically on defending (or attacking) stable social structures so that people can get on with business at hand.

The specificity of IRC disembodiment – and its difference from other on-line settings – is important in developing a sound ethnographic sense of the setting. However, the aim in this article is definitely not to present IRC (or ‘the net’, or ‘cybersex’) as new, unique, unprecedented or revolutionary. It is actually crucial to appreciate the ways in which it is similar to, and indeed connected to, other and older experiences of disembodied communications. For example, long term sexpics relationships may be very like correspondence by letter or ‘pen pal’ relationships, in which the presence of the other is constructed out of both their textual performances and the hopes and fantasies projected into the silent spaces between their performances; short-term IRC encounters are very close to telephone chat-lines and phone-sex or citizens’ band radio; possibly the closest to the experiential, sensory quality of IRC is broadcast radio. Indeed, it is no coincidence that all these other media have been associated with sexual commerce and have raised much the same ethical issues, often to the point of moral panic, as do internet sex and pornography. For example, pen pal correspondence or telephone chat lines, like IRC, all allow for relationships and encounters which pleasurably release a complete freedom of fantasy with an interactive other, fantasy pleasures which can be treated as real. However, these engagements are considered to be extremely dangerous when participants believe them to be *really* real, rather than merely pleasurably realistic: because the identities involved are ‘disembodied’ – are not anchored in physically present, spatially locatable and temporally persistent bodies – they are also deemed not to be ethically (or legally) accountable for their actions and therefore as likely as not to be lying and untrustworthy.

Not only does IRC disembodiment and virtuality bear structural similarities to other communications settings, but it also has direct continuities and connections with them. For example, IRC relationships may well develop from on-line chats through letter-like correspondence (email, snail mail or both), phone conversations (either internet or standard phone systems) or paging systems like ICQ, each of which inflects disembodiment somewhat differently. Conversely, participants may move their relationships or activities from IRC to other on-line settings not because these settings share IRC’s virtuality or disembodiment, but exactly the opposite: Usenet newsgroups or web-sites are far more stable and embodied than IRC at least in the sense of providing settings that persist dependably over time and may be more connected to off-line addresses.

Disembodiment and Sexuality

IRC, then, represents an extreme point in disembodiment or virtual embodiment: purely textual, cut off from locatable real-life bodies, and lacking temporally persistent objectifications: any body, any self could be projected at any time. Indeed, the first impression of the IRC sexpics scene is generally of libertarian license: the scene is a place of exuberant transgression in which anything is allowed and every desire that is conceivable is indulged through fantasy, conversation, representation. Above all, any and every transgression can be indulged *with others*, within a sociable and public space. In fact, most informants were clear that one of the great pleasures and attractions of the IRC sexpics scene was not so much the direct indulgence of their own desires as a fascination with the diversity of human sexuality, all of which was there to see on IRC:

<Lash> But seriously. What do you like about trading, collecting pix [...]

<Serrina> well I like to look at them, trading them u get to find out what people prefer sexually, kind of like a sexual education :))

However, despite the excitement of being able to express and share transgressive desires, there is nonetheless a clear structure of desire and transgression, much of which is conventional or hyper-conventional. This is not to dismiss the liberation or simple relief expressed by so many informants who said they felt able on IRC to explore desires or to escape an everyday world they considered boring or restrictive. The point is simply that the scene did not seem to produce new sexual configurations: rather, the IRC sexpics trading scene is strikingly organised and policed according to the conventions of off-line mainstream (heterosexual) pornography. We can sum this up in terms of four main features:

Firstly, the imagery that is circulated on IRC is either scanned in from standard publications or videos, or shot by ‘amateurs’ according to familiar genres and conventions. I have recorded no images circulated on IRC which significantly transgress, let alone explore, those conventions. This is extraordinary given the ease of digital image manipulation which most participants routinely use to change file sizes, colour balances, contrast and so on: I have not seen anyone use these technological skills to modify represented bodies except to montage celebrity faces onto naked bodies or, occasionally, to enlarge breasts or penises. This is also confirmed by analysis of the directory structures of dozens of fserver: the directory and file names give a clear picture of the categorisations that collectors and traders use, of the sexual cosmology of the scene, as it were. These routinely organise body imagery into a conventional repertoire of sex acts (couples in action, group sex, lesbian, oral, cum shots, anal); into conventional body types (blondes, brunettes, redheads); into degrees of ‘hardness’ (celebrities, poses, lingerie, hard, weird, xtreme); into conventional fetishes and kinks (bondage, voyeur/exhibition, mature, latex, etc). That is to

say, the images traded and their categorial organisation is indistinguishable from the organisation of magazines or video titles on the shelves of newsagents or sex-shops.

Secondly, self-representation notoriously runs according to gendered conventions (cf Bassett 1997): IRC appears to be populated with young blonde bombshells and well-hung dudes, both with inexhaustible drives and unfaltering performance; people routinely send others pictures, supposedly of themselves ('personals'), that conform to their ideal self-image (and spend much time wondering whether the picture they just received is 'real' – really a picture of the sender). In fact, this generalisation has to be qualified in terms of participants' aims, kinds of encounter and time-horizon of their relationship: conformity to narrow convention is more likely, and possible, in the context of one-off trading or cybersex than where longer-term and more emotional contact is expected or desired. Nonetheless, it is more or less assumed that even then people are likely to leave out or falsify those bodily features they are most sensitive about in relation to conventions of desirability: age, weight, height, figure, etc. Body representation on IRC is about grounding ideal identities, not about undercutting gender conventions.

Thirdly, although IRC sexpics trading scenes exhibit an extraordinary profusion of represented and virtually enacted sexual desires there are some well-policed deep-structures that contain them and set limits. The most important of these involved norms of heterosexuality. On IRC, the gay male scene is completely separate from the heterosexual, mixed-sex scene. There is prevalent homophobia, sometimes explicit, more often covert but always routinely enforced by the heterosexual men who dominate. There seems to be little if any overlap in membership or activity between channels focused on gay men and those devoted to sexpics, cybersex and female bisexuality (to a lesser extent lesbians), all of which are significantly intertwined. There are frequent explicit declarations (in fservices, channel windows and private trades) that solo pics of men are definitely unwelcome, sometimes followed by public flare-ups when such pics have been received by someone. There are sometimes explicitly homophobic remarks, in public or private. Relationships between (self-declared) men on IRC were either strained or technical: as in most mainstream sexual representation, phalluses must never touch; their relationship must be mediated through the woman (group sex pictures and enacted scenarios were very popular) or else desexualised (channels named after the most recondite sexual practices were often filled with technical computer chat).

On the other hand, women on IRC – both women in the porn images traded and on-line women as virtual presences – are routinely assumed to be, and declare themselves to be, bisexual. This assumed bisexuality cannot be dismissed as simply male wish-fulfilment (or as men masquerading). To argue that this is entirely male-instigated would be to argue both that there are no women in these scenes and that they do not fantasise or enact bisexuality. In fact there is sufficient evidence (both in my ethnography and other research) of women wanting to explore bisexual desires (as well as a vast range of other desires) which they feel they cannot or will not explore IRL ('in real life'). Conversely, however, it is also abundantly clear that both the desires and the ways in which they are expressed, imagined and linked to particular acts and other bodies all closely fit the generic conventions of mainstream and hetero-male-oriented pornography. What is important here is not to try to establish whether particular desires are real or false, but to see that participants can treat them as simultaneously authentic attributes of (real life) people and generic conventions of systems of representation. In fact, the real interest is in how and on what terms people insert themselves or others into conventional systems of representation. What is interesting is the conventionality itself.

Finally, although the sexpics scene appears to embrace transgression, it does so in ways that reinforce rather than deconstruct 'normality'. The dominant IRC view of transgression is libertarian: 'to each their own'. This stance generally means that sexual transgressions are seen in much the same light as consumer choices and tastes, as the expressed preferences of a choosing self. Not only is the notion of self not brought under scrutiny, but most of the preferences are read as the 'real' desires of selves which cannot be expressed off-line: a simple repression model. Obviously, there is a huge difference between seeing oneself as a stable identity making choices – however extreme – and allowing one's identity to be destabilised by extreme experiences. The orientation on IRC is more consumerist than deconstructive. (Rival, Slater and Miller, 1998)

Similarly, although the libertarian ethos is constantly defining and policing pariah sexualities (in addition to male homosexuality), it largely deals with them through exclusion ('do it somewhere else', 'not in my back yard'). The list of pariah sexualities is conventional and indistinguishable from off-line and media agendas (paedophilia, bestiality, violence, coprophilia routinely feature as grounds for banning people from channels). The exclusions are absolute and often ferocious, and repress any sense that 'normal' sexualities and 'normal' transgressions might arise in relation to the exclusions and inclusions that people operate. Again, the ethos of IRC sexpics moves in precisely the opposite direction to deconstruction, asserting a conventional notion of the sexual transgressor as well as of their transgressions.

For example, WhiteGold, a very experienced op on the largest and best regulated sexpics trading channel:

<WhiteGold> That's why I like #Sexpics.. We believe in LEGAL trading of legal pictures.. Actresses or models over 18 only etc etc.. Anything illegal as a norm in the world is illegal in there.

Off-line legality is here explicitly conflated with the broader embrace of conventional normativity. He later identified this normativity as a limit or line drawn in the sand: on one side of the line is absolute libertarian tolerance and on the other side is absolute exclusion (enacted by a consumerist choice to make it 'go away'):

<WhiteGold> Whenever you have a meeting ground of this magnitude, you HAVE to tolerate the idiosyncracies of others or else you're lost already.. Once you get past that it's just a matter of nailing down what YOU think it right and wrong and sticking to it.
<Lash> drawing your own limits
<WhiteGold> The best and only way I let limits hold me ;)
<Lash> and if something is over your limits on IRC you can generally make it go away by clicking the x in the top right corner
<WhiteGold> Yep.. If you don't want to see something, go away ;)

Similarly, Serena contrasts total freedom of exploration with 'ignore lists', a technical means of automatically excluding particular nicks:

<Lash> yes -- but you've said you couldn't be open about porn or being bi in real life till recently?
<Serrina> True! but I'm talking about what i would want from someone in bed, life,. to tell them how i feel
<Lash> Ah, I see.
<Lash> But do you think that in some ways the net is an easier place for women to be sexually free in than real life sometimes is?
<Serrina> easier and safer !!!! [...]
<Serrina> yes i couldn't go into a bar here, and talk about the things i do on here, i would be in so much trouble, like rape, harassment [...]
<Lash> though there are forms of harrassment out here too -- I've watched when [Greta – another female informant] goes on #sex or #cybersex and you can't see the screen for all the /msgs -- hundreds of guys trying to track her down. I find it intimidating!!
<Lash> And they're coming on with some pretty heavy shit!!
<Serrina> It is, that's why they invented ignore lists :)) [...]
<Serrina> i never talk to anyone on here, that the first thing that pops onto the screen is, "wanna fuck " ?

It sometimes seems as important to make a constant *show* of heavy policing – to line up with off-line versions of ethics and identity in the most histrionic ways – as it is for the culture of a channel to be seriously normative in its own right or in its own way. This is clearly the case with the most self-evidently pariah sexuality, paedophilia. The heavy policing in this case concerns both the self-respect of members and of the community, the desire to eradicate any hint of taint or complicity in the eyes of the off-line world, and the practicalities of keeping out 'creeps' and 'assholes'. For example, IceFalcon – a very active female op in several channels, who also runs a web site and a detective operation tracking missing children – ran a very tight ship. Her fserve carried a reasonably heavy version of a standard preamble (**NOTE-I KICK Sharks/Assholes & Incest/Kid/Teen Channelers!) indicating that she would exclude from both fserve and channel not only those trading banned images, but also those whose could be identified as being on another channel with a name that suggested such images. IceFalcon also checked out the wares of any new fservers in her channels, not only for content but also for *filenames* which were as solid grounds for banning as were their visual content:

<IceFalcon> I understand we're more strict... but I have seen some horrid shit and I have a little girl, so I err on the side of protecting children. I also do PI work on the side with missing.kidnapped kids
<IceFalcon> ok I understand about the misty16 [a 'legitimate' picture whose filename could be interpreted as a 'teen pic'], just saying if some sicko saw it he might think it was a 16 yr old

that is to say, the channel must be kept clean not only of actual child pornography or paedophilic traders but of any possibility of a paedophilic thought or the taint of any association with such thoughts. The point here is obviously not to take issue with the ethical-legal line IceFalcon (and most others) have drawn, but rather to examine its absoluteness, conventionality and complete identification with off-line concepts of identity and difference. This especially needs examining since the absolute and public exclusion of 'Incest/Kid/Teen Channelers' and of filenames suggesting models under the age of 18 contrasts with the entirely ambiguous nature of most the images they – including IceFalcon – actually traded: the very vast majority involved representing young women, the age of whose models is obviously impossible to determine. Again, the one absolute and public exclusion contrasts with an entirely libertarian attitude to what remains, to what is not covered by the absolutised identity.

IRC conventionality does not mean that participants are not getting up to anything interesting or 'progressive' or 'liberating' on IRC. There is certainly a robust exploration of fantasies, desires, a use of freedoms to be outrageous, to be another sex and so on. The IRC sexpics scene also places sexual diversity in a generally sociable, friendly and liberally tolerant context which – unlike most of on-line sexuality and sexual representation – is relatively free of commerce and the sex industry. Moreover, participants value and enjoy (as well as worry about and criticise) their activities on-line. The point is that they do so largely on other grounds than might be expected within the current literature on identities.

It could be argued that the conventionality of representation in this ethnography is an artefact of its methodology: had the setting been less conventionally defined (for example, by including the gay scenes) then the range of bodies and identities might have been less conventional. Indeed, I am not denying that elsewhere on the net (in particular media like MUDs or within specific constituencies such as gays or lesbians) body and identity performance might not be more in keeping with poststructuralist expectations. However these exclusions were not an arbitrary methodological decision but a structural and indeed *constitutive* feature of the setting itself: the IRC setting that I researched is organised around exclusions which indicated that there is very little commitment to producing (or even allowing) sexual identities or processes of identification outside the conventionally pornographic ones. Crudely speaking, if virtual disembodiment of the extreme sort characteristic of IRC does not free up identities (or even body representations) in this one setting then we cannot argue that deconstructions of sexuality automatically arise from the virtuality of cyberspace.

Authenticity and Ethics

If the regulation of sexual identity on IRC continues to be conventional, or at least conventionally pornographic, we might ask whether a conventional notion of identity as such persists: do concepts of real bodies and real identities continue to play a part? In fact, the sexpics scene comprises very diverse relationships in which the notion of authenticity involves different meanings, functions, strategies and practices. What I want to suggest is that IRC participants are intensely and incessantly aware of the fact that all on-line identities are textual performances: this is indeed the common sense of on-line life. However, participants only feel there is a 'real relationship' when they believe that the other is authenticated by a body-like presence, when, like a body, the other persists over time (has 'object constancy') and is locatable in space (and can therefore potentially be made ethically accountable for their actions). These conditions are rarely secured on IRC. The result is not that authenticity becomes marginalised or irrelevant but rather that on-line relationships are treated as not real, not serious, just a laugh, a matter for immediate gratification rather than as something consequential for self-identity. The predominant response, the general *modus vivendi*, is frank cynicism: you can't believe *anything* on-line (and are a dupe if you do). Hence, nothing on-line should be taken seriously. And yet, at the same time, IRC relationships, events and experiences can be extremely vivid, intense and wish-fulfilling: there is a powerful desire to believe in their reality. Being drawn by their own desires into mental states that are engrossing yet lacking 'authenticity', participants are forever wavering between a dismissive, cynical stance bolstered by defensive strategies and postures, and a trusting stance bolstered by strategies designed to authenticate the other by giving them an increasingly reliable 'body'. In sum, the problem that is practically posed to IRC participants by the performative nature of on-line identity is simply, how can I trust or believe anyone or anything? How can I accept the other, or be myself accepted, as an ethical subject?

RockDr

I would like to introduce these themes first by way of two contrasting extracts from the ethnography. Firstly, a conversation with RockDr, a reasonably experienced male op on a channel whose members tended to be fairly long-term traders. RockDr is extremely sceptical of any on-line identities, and – talking about basic identity claims about sex and gender – states that only 'about 10 - 20% [at] most of the 'girls' are real' on the sexpics channels, an issue which immediately leads him into questions of deception and authenticity and the perils of credulity, of taking things seriously out there. He recounts a story – one of legion – from his channel in which a lesbian falls in love with a woman on-line, only to discover that the other is really a man. She commits suicide. Aside from the high stakes the story illustrates of treating the realistic performance as if it was really real, there is the problem of the veracity of the story itself. The story, he says, is 'semi-verified':

<RockDr> but I'm not sure about the suicide
 <Lash> I have to ask: how do you know the 'real' girl was a 'real' girl
 <Lash> ?
 <RockDr> the rest is certainly true
 <Lash> leaving asid ethe suicide?
 <RockDr> good question
 <RockDr> I don;'t know anything for sure
 <Lash> no...we never do
 <Lash> does this bother you?
 <RockDr> so I guess I must retract the 'certainly true'
 <RockDr> hmmm

<RockDr> it bothers me that people allow themselves to take irc seriously
 <Lash> yeah, that's interesting...
 <Lash> but they do, don't they?
 <RockDr> and it bothers me that people would allow another to take a fantasy that far
 <RockDr> yes people sure do
 <RockDr> one of my occasional 'crusades' is that none of this is real
 <Lash> yes, but it is also very intense
 <Lash> can feel very real
 <RockDr> it's like when someone complains that the woman who they were having great cyber sex with is a male
 <RockDr> my view is that a fantasy is a fantasy
 <Lash> ...ie doesn't matter who it is with?
 <RockDr> doesn't really matter if the other party is male
 <RockDr> it's all fantasy anyway
 <RockDr> yes exactly
 <Lash> in the normal course of being on-line does it bother you that you can't tell the real girls from the boys?
 <RockDr> in normal course of events, no it doesn't
 <Lash> is that cos you're mainly trading and chatting rather than looking for cyber? [ie cybersex]
 <Lash> actually, let me ask that another way: can you have a long term friendship, relationship with someone on-line without being sure of their gender, age, appearance, etc etc?
 <RockDr> I trade pics regularly with a 'girl' in Sydney ... I'd be surprised if she really is but I couldn't care less
 <RockDr> but if I'm trying to develop a real friendship, then I like to know the truth
 <RockDr> and truth is a very rare commodity in irc
 <RockDr> yes to the first question
 <Lash> and the second?
 <RockDr> as to the second ... I think it would be very difficult to develop a serious relationship w/o some personal knowledge of the person [...]
 <RockDr> and their sex is proly [probably] the least important to me

[...]

<RockDr> question for you ... do you think that you can tell a real female by the way she talks in irc?
 <Lash> I don't think so....
 <RockDr> I find that women think they can always tell
 <RockDr> I don't think so either [...]
 <Lash> do you have any tricks or tips about how to tell?
 <Lash> '<RockDr> I find that women think they can always tell' -- how do you know THEY are women :)
 <RockDr> and I don't think women can either all the time [...]
 <RockDr> the women I referred I know because I've either met them, talked to them on the phone or know someone who has
 <RockDr> unless the 'women' meet those criteria, I assume they are male
 <RockDr> but I rarely care
 <RockDr> I find cyber sex pretty boring so it's not really an issue for me

RockDr – like most people who spend a lot of time on the sexpics trading scene – finds both sexpics and cybersex very boring. He, like many others, consistently claims that both are merely occasions or opportunities for other pleasures of the scene: casual chat, a generally erotic ambience, carrying out channel business, and so on. For these kinds of involvement, most issues of veracity are 'not really an issue'. At the same time, this also implies – as he indicated above – that these involvements themselves are not really much of 'an issue'. In the end it is all a fantasy; to go further – and to warrant the personal danger of going further into any kind of seriousness – would mean going into more embodied encounters ('personal knowledge'). In fact, the most common descriptions of the IRC mode of experiencing relationships approximate best to the idea of 'hanging out': it has the kind of intensity that absorbs one, passes the time but can instantly evaporate, especially when viewed from any external vantage:

<Lash> can I ask: how important to you are your IRC friendships/relationships
 <Lash> ?
 <RockDr> hmmm, hard to say
 <RockDr> when I'm in town and on irc a lot, they are like real friends
 <RockDr> and it's easy to get upset, hurt, etc just like irl [in real life]
 <RockDr> but I notice when I'm away, I don't really think about many of them

WhiteGold – quoted earlier – put it very clearly:

<WhiteGold> I like these people, but they have separate lives as well.. I miss some who've disappeared, and I'd miss some if I disappeared, but when you left school, did you keep in touch with 1% of the people you said you would?
<Lash> though, that 1% were pretty important
<WhiteGold> Sure, but I need face-to-face relationships to allow that %1 to become real enough.. Cyberlife is way different to me.

Crucially, both regard their blasé attitude as pre-eminently *healthy*, or at least see the alternative as dangerous and silly: only the gullible believe or get involved.

LoverGirl

At the far side of the blasé attitude is an apparently contrary but in fact complementary orientation. LoverGirl thoroughly enjoyed the casual banter of IRC, and was certainly the most virtuoso, flirtatious and charismatic on-line presence I have ever encountered. Yet she took the crossing of certain lines as boundaries into more serious relationships: as each was crossed, trust in the reality of the relationship rose and the stakes of finding that trust abused became considerable. These lines included such things as trading real names, email and postal addresses, phone numbers; the amount of time spent (both time shared in the present and the length of time the relationship persisted); acknowledgement and honouring of obligations (does the other come when needed, when promised, at the cost of off-line inconvenience to off-line relationships). After meeting through on-line chat, LoverGirl had been communicating with a couple, Stu and Lisa, and their friend Alli for eighteen months, across several different media, when Alli confessed to her on-line that none of their names were real, that they lived in different countries than originally claimed, that Stu and Lisa had married and had a child without telling LoverGirl, that some crucial features of their lives (especially occupations) had been falsified:

Is it silly that I'm sitting here in tears??? I feel so incredibly betrayed. I have known these people for a year and a half now.... I thought some sort of trust would have been built by this point. Stu and I were sort of involved, before Lisa came along (Jesus these aren't even their names!!) we've shared a lot... and I KNOW it's just a name.

But what an adjustment to have to make after calling them that for YEARS...it took me a while to adjust to "Jane" and I'd only known her as Greta for a month!

I don't know why I feel so betrayed, but I do. It's like... I couldn't be trusted with the truth. That hurts so much, hon!! :((((

I know people lie on here... people do it all the time, for all sorts of reasons... but to continue a lie like that... for so long.....

I'm just really hurt.

After all this time, LoverGirl has not been entrusted with their names, which would allow her to locate them, which gives them an address and a unique, fixed and dependable identity. Part of the problem is that it is through such tokens of trust that LoverGirl is able to internalise the relationships and live them as real, which in this case she did very intensely. LoverGirl contrasts her reaction with the RockDr-like stance of her friend Amelia who said:

"well forget em then, who needs em..." which is typical Amelia. If AOL [America On-Line: some of the events shifted out of IRC to other chat spaces] people don't make themselves Real fairly quickly they seem to cease to exist for her. Maybe it's because I live so much of my life in my head that these people seem so real (been trying to rationalize this ache I have inside and it isn't working so well...) I'm still pretty unstable, burst into tears at no prompting...

Also crucial to the real intensity of the hurt is the fact that Stu and Lisa vanished into cyberspace, disappeared in their puff of lies despite LoverGirl's attempts to contact them. The final abuse of trust was their refusal of the moral commitment to confront the issues and injured party they left behind, while LoverGirl – having lost their locatable, addressed bodies (real, unique names) could not call them to account. From bodies to nobodies. Indeed, LoverGirl measures the strength of the lost relationship precisely by the extent to which they had been physically there for each other: while LoverGirl was separated from her husband, Stu and she

talked on the phone for hours and hours and hours.... he helped me a LOT through the break-up [...], the affair...and I helped him get his life back together after Victoria [...] and I was there for him when he "met" Lisa... now I wonder if it was ALL a sham. Did he already KNOW her... were they already married?? God I don't even know... I don't know what to believe anymore!!

LoverGirl went on, in a series of emails and conversations with me and others – and eventually in a very long on-line conversation with Lisa, who had finally responded – to piece apart their 18-month performance: this meant first recasting the

whole affair as a charade, examining every significant aspect of the relationship from the standpoint of incredulity and injury. In the end, Lisa and LoverGirl recast their past as one in which the web of 'lies' was explained as the result of Lisa, Stu and Alli being captured by a performance from which they could not escape:

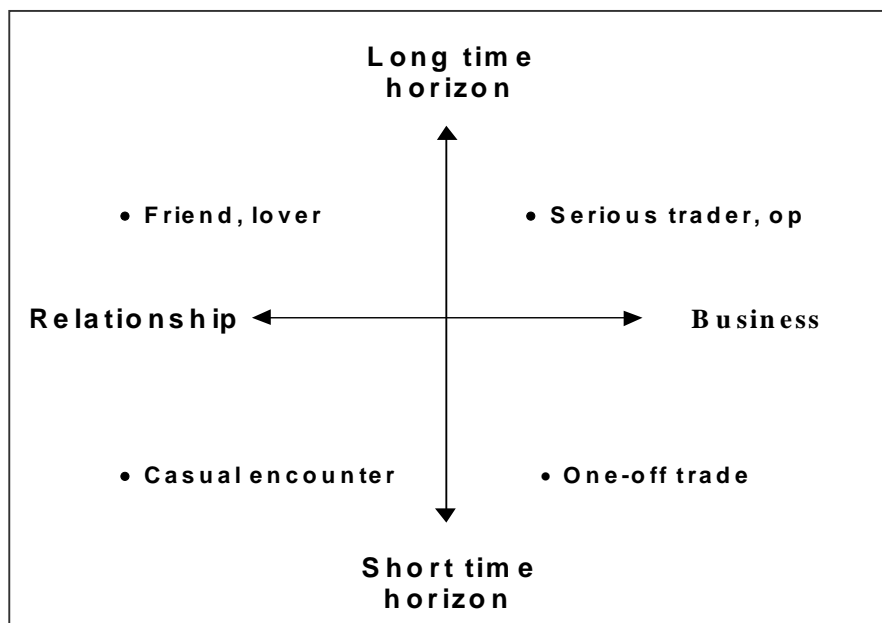
SO many lies..... and once they got in too deep they couldn't stop and tell me. So ... basically all was forgiven and we spent hours talking, me finding what was true and what wasn't... it was amazing. But I DID know, them in spite of all the lies, the people they really are... I knew them. Still do. I would like to think that, no matter what happens here in cyberland, whatever little lies we put up to shield ourselves from... whatever... the REAL person does shine through. And eventually, given enough time, we care, we love... it really happens. It transcends the physical. The superficial. [...]

and I learn, once again, in spite of all the pain, it really IS worth it. And it reaffirms my belief that people can be, and mostly are, basically good in the long run.

LoverGirl – herself a tremendous performer – fundamentally treats performances as lies when in the context of an ostensibly 'meaningful' relationship. She swore after this and various other similar disillusionments that she – like RockDr – would never believe anything anyone ever said on IRC again. Her entire on-line life sometimes seemed a battering by the twin gales of cynicism and credulity, in which a desire to commit and to believe were inseparably connected to each other and constantly winning out over a safer, lighter orientation. She kept putting her head generously on the block because the lesson of her pain was not the deconstruction of authenticity but rather a desire to track that authenticity to the ever deeper recesses of the soul where it hid: once she had calmed down and had received an apology and reaffirmed commitment from Lisa, LoverGirl asserted that 'I DID know, them in spite of all the lies', that there is a deeper authenticity and goodness, a definition of the other's truth that places it beyond superficial facts about them, a truth that is accessible because the real person shines through and because LoverGirl can sense their real selves (there is constant reference on-line to intuition and 'having good antennae' (Serrina)). It is in terms of that deeper authenticity – purchased at the cost of pain and risk – that it is all worth it.

Businesses and Pleasures

We can make some sense of the contrasts and deeper complementarities between RockDr and LoverGirl by relating their stances to the business at hand, to the things they are trying to do, the stakes, dangers and investments that are involved (or that they are willing to allow), and the kinds of relationships they feel themselves to be involved in in particular social and temporal contexts. Levels of belief and trust in others need to be related to specific relationships, aims and activities. Figure 2 presents a typology of the kinds of relationships formed in the IRC sexpics scene. The horizontal axis registers the fact that people may be more oriented to 'business' (trading and collecting, maintaining and policing channels, solving technical problems) or more focused on 'relationships' (hanging out, chatting or chatting up, friendship and support, flirting, cybersex, romance). The vertical axis indicates that different temporalities – longer or shorter acquaintance, intense or intermittent encounter, different temporal horizons – define different kinds of social relationship and social action on-line. Different concerns about authenticity and different strategies for authenticating the other arise depending on the interest in the relationship and on its temporality.



Business

The lower right-hand quadrant of Figure 2 is typified by one-off trading between two strangers. A basic trade takes the form of a private chat involving some minimal discussion of what the two parties have and want, some agreement about what would make a fair exchange and then a flurry of file transfers with perhaps some commentary on the quality of the pics or a request for more (or less) of something. This obviously can develop into more sociable chat, cybersex or a continuing relationship. Participants themselves may find it hard to say whether they are more interested in chatting or trading. However, for as long as the encounter is treated as a trading encounter with a short time horizon it is not regarded as much of a relationship: participants might know little about each other (not even age, sex, location), but they do not *need* to know anything. They are also unlikely to believe or rely upon anything others say about themselves: there is no context or reason to trust an entirely fugitive textual presence. However, this relationship, in which concern for the other's authenticity is most minimal, is also one which participants do not regard as a significant or meaningful relationship. It is therefore not surprising that participants have produced a range of software add-ons that render this kind of trading almost completely automated and depersonalised: the software manages all aspects of fserve to the extent that the trader need not even be present. There is much unhappiness amongst IRC old-timers who feel that this migration to automation is killing off the sociability of their scene. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that automation suffices unto the business at hand.

And yet underlying even the minimal sociality of one-off trading lies a normative concern that decisively requires authenticating an ethical other by locating it in a real body. This concern is with *reciprocity* in exchange: will the other return a good measure of pics (in both quantity and quality)? The expectation of reciprocity depends on some certainty that one is dealing with one other person who will persist long enough to complete the exchange. In fact, even that basic condition of embodied dependability is generally absent or unreliable. Presences will take pics and then vanish without reciprocating, will send 'any old rubbish', will use multiple nicks to 'leech' more pictures than a single contractual partner is entitled to. Despite the fact that the supply of sexually explicit pictures on IRC is entirely free and apparently inexhaustible – beyond either scarcity or value – being ripped off or 'leech' is a matter of constant, obsessive anger and regulation. The issue is evidently ethical rather than economic (there is no scarcity): the other should be a unique ethical subject located in a unique and accountable body. Hence it is again unsurprising that automated fserve programs (for example 'Hawkee's leech proof fserve', the most popular) regulate the normative issue of reciprocity by building in exchange ratios as well as devices for detecting if several nicks share a single local host address (and therefore by sharing a single location can be presumed to be one body). That is to say, at the level of a one-off trading encounter IRC participants are concerned to define and identify something close to a legal subject, a unique and accountable person in a locatable body. It is fundamental to ethical exchange that a just measure is legitimately due to real and unique bodies, not to multiple performed identities.

Although one-off trading encounters probably account for most of the sexpics scene, in the course of 'doing business' over time identities can develop that are treated as persistent and anchored, as having a constancy that is close to having a body. This most typically takes the form of being a big, regular trader with a constant on-line presence and a reputation and standing, or of becoming a 'channel op', one responsible for managing and policing a channel. The latter assumes a considerable stake in the persistence not only of particular relationships but of the 'society', the channel as a collectivity

independent of the presence of particular members: enforcing and adjudicating rules, socialising new participants into a transmittable culture, maintaining ancillary media such as web sites, protecting the channel against take-overs and flooding, sustaining endless ban and kick wars against pariah figures and miscreants. Insofar as the business dimension of sexpics trade relationships is meant to represent what participants recognise as 'real relationships' (as opposed to automated or automatable operations), the temporal consistency, reliability and presence of the other becomes extremely important. One is really talking about familiar 'real life' qualities: a good op should be consistent and reliable in his or her judgements, application of rules, technical expertise and so on. The role of the op is to extend normativity over time: in a sense, to embody a normative order as well as simply to enunciate or enforce it. Good ops are credited with this ability on the basis of both personal qualities (someone is considered friendly, sensible, knowledgeable, a leader) and 'experience' (ops are seen as veterans who know the ropes, really know the scene from the inside out, socially and technically). BaseHit's account of his recent rise to op status foregrounds all-round dependability, condensed into 'a good reputation'; he has been

<BaseHit> on the channel as an active trader and "helper" for months, and I have a good reputation here [...]
<BaseHit> quality pictures, fair trades. and help the channel ops when they need anything. like help with scripts, sometimes I will be a guinea pig for them.

In other words, good ops are talked about as somehow 'the real thing'. By contrast, people who want to play at being an op or who have not demonstrated their leadership qualities over time, people not authenticated on the basis of qualities and experience, are seen as unreliable, dangerous or irritating. RockDr contrasts ethical stability with pure self-interest:

<RockDr> basically a new op has to be a regular here
<RockDr> not an asshole
<RockDr> know a bit about irc
<RockDr> and usually run an fserve
<RockDr> a good op is patient
<RockDr> helpful to newbies
<RockDr> encourages fun in channel
<RockDr> and enforces rules strictly
<Lash> that sounds very clear...
<Lash> now that raises a question I've wanted to ask: how do you define an 'asshole' on IRC?
<RockDr> an asshole is someone who is only here to satisfy his/her ego at the expense of others

Relationships

The lower left-hand quadrant of Figure 2 includes sociable chatting, of which there is plenty in IRC sexpics scenes, but also 'chatting up' and eroticising on-line relationships. Cybersex is one possible outcome, and certainly the place is permeated with marauding male presences hoping for a convincing female presence to get off with. Explicit cybersex aside, what is most striking about the scene is that chats and trades can be eroticised at any moment; eroticism is incipient in every encounter.

However, whether the chat is loosely erotic, an explicit virtual sex act or a sociable encounter, participants are intensely aware that they are dealing with textual performances which can be gratifying or wish-fulfilling and may be highly skilled (much of the pleasure is in the performance or in watching a good performance). Moreover, IRC encounters are 'interactive': they are texts that are built up in the moment by two or more people responding to each others' performances. This is the level of virtuality: can you conjure up an event within representation that can be imaginatively experienced as real. This is where people routinely describe cybersex as like being inside an interactively written pornographic novel. The issue in such interactive performances is, as we have already noted, much the same as in 'realism' in film or television: the ability to sustain a fictive world which is internally coherent and consistent and which therefore allows a willing suspension of disbelief which is quite compatible with both engrossed attention and an unfailing knowledge that what is going on is a performance, not a reality.

In essence, the other person and the interaction are assessed in terms of 'realism' (a way in which we evaluate representations) rather than in terms of 'authenticity' (a way in which we trust other people). As the case of LoverGirl clearly shows, people on-line are very aware – quite painfully aware – of the difference between realism and authenticity. They speak about the difference in terms of disappointments, deceptions, being let down or conned by others who seemed very real at the time. Or simply in terms of the unaccountable disappearance of the other. They are drawn into the realism because they have a huge desire for various kinds of emotional engagements, including a desire for the erotic, and for the erotic to be transferred from the pornographic images they trade to the pornography they can construct interactively with each other. But they do not *trust* that realism: they know it to be a fiction in the very process of making it ever more real. This awareness may take the form of a disbelief in anything said on IRC; or a belief that everything said on IRC is positively a lie (a male

informant claimed in one sentence to have had cybersex hundreds of times and that there are absolutely *no* women at all on IRC); or a strategy – like RockDr’s – of treating everything as if they were lies.

The most vivid and painful examples of the pragmatically necessary distinction between realism and authenticity involved relationships that had developed, like LoverGirl’s, over time (the upper left-hand quadrant). Her story also illustrates what might be termed the dialectic of realism and authenticity, that dialectic of disillusionment in which participants might retire into a complete cynicism, a total disbelief in the authenticity of any identity claims, only to be gradually drawn into the pleasures of a new relationship with engrossing involvements that they again slowly came to treat as true or authentic, rather than simply pleasurable, performances. The virtual keeps slipping into the authentic. Although participants will often claim that ‘you are what you type’, or you can be whatever you want to be on-line, nonetheless the issue that preoccupies them is how to tell the difference between the real and the realistic, the authentic and the performed, a difference which they never question in principle and understand to be highly consequential in practice. Indeed, there is a somehow masochistic pleasure in unmasking performances that rivals the pleasures of enjoying performances; yet the latter pleasure involves suspending precisely those claims to authenticity which the former pleasure both assumes and perversely enjoys debunking.

In the quadrant of casual encounters, as with one-off trading, it is felt to be impossible to establish any real credibility, but it is also not particularly necessary: at stake is either a vivid experience or a pleasant chat, neither with any serious consequences. Realistic performance is sufficient to the business at hand. As relationships develop over time however these issues of authenticity become both more pressing and more capable of being dealt with in complex ways. Participants’ growing sense of having a relationship – and the experiential grounds upon which participants are prepared to claim that a ‘real’ relationship does exist – is bound up with two strategies for authenticating the other:

The first is a strategy of ‘progressive embodiment’: to see the other’s picture, hear their voice, get their address or phone number, exchange letters, see them on quickcam or talk on iphone, or to meet in real life. To put flesh on the texts. Embodiment actually does two things: it gives the other a fixed point or origin in space (an address) from which their actions can be mapped to which responsibility for those actions can be traced; and it provides the kind of sensual delineation of the other and their presence that people have come to treat as incontestable in everyday life. Hence, developing an IRC relationship often means moving off IRC. However, one of the ironies of these relationships, and of this strategy, is that although moving to more embodied encounters may begin to transform realism into authenticity (I can *really* believe in a relationship with someone whose body I can both locate and see), the very opposite may be happening: that one is simply drawing the actual body of the other into an ever more realistic performance which still has no authenticity (I can use the real body of the other to make the fantasy even more realistic, credible, exciting).

Secondly there is a strategy of ‘object constancy’: to establish the consistency of the other’s presence and performance over time. This strategy involves a constant testing and probing of the narrative realism of the other, a kind of falsificationist epistemology in which truth claims are always provisional and are vigorously challenged. Indeed it is something like pushing the realism of the other’s representation of themselves to various breakpoints: if it passes the test, realism can be treated as authenticity, performance as real presence. At a basic level, this can simply be a matter of ‘are you still there for me?’ or ‘where were you last night?’ If you blew off a real life encounter to be with me on-line, this must be for real. At another level, this strategy takes the form of vigilance over time, of watching for inconsistencies, lapses, ruptures in the unfolding narrative of the other, something which counts as a lie or a cheat and therefore a revelation of the true falsehood of the representation. Time becomes the dimension of exposure, unmasking, nakedness. At the same time, object constancy involves assimilating an ever more complex, variegated, contradictory experience of the other to a sense of them as somehow innerly consistent and recognisably the same, if only at some deeper level than the performative. In this sense, the constancy of the other is my construction, and the most credible construction may testify to *my* performative skills and my desire to believe rather than to the other’s authenticity.

In the end, of course, participants acknowledge that there is no guaranteed authentication on IRC, as anywhere else: people simultaneously trust the other while always reserving judgement, feeling niggling doubts, testing and scrutinising – all in proportion to the degree of investment and potential hurt involved if they prove false. This dominant mode of participation – simultaneously accepting the realism and doubting the authenticity – is largely defensive rather than deconstructive. That is to say, it is about protecting a self which is seen to be coherent and absolute but potentially vulnerable to all manner of hurt, embarrassment, deception, danger. It is precisely the opposite of a critique of that self. To the contrary, the idea is to defend the solidity of this self either by establishing beyond all (situationally available and appropriate) doubt the solidity of the other, or by preventing any emotional engagement that might make one more vulnerable, to distance oneself from any sense of the relationship as significant.

Conclusion

There is obviously a connection between the conventionality of on-line sexuality and the persistent role of authenticity in structuring on-line experience: while the disembodied character of IRC – its textuality, anonymity and dynamic, present-tense character – are essential ingredients if people are to feel safe enough to transgress and explore identity, they also preclude that persistence of the other in time and that locatability of the other in space which allow commitment, trust, ethical responsibility. That is to say, the necessary conditions for treating the whole experience seriously are constantly in doubt. It could be that participants are simply retrograde in importing into IRC an older relational apparatus; in fact, their world sometimes looks post-war rather than posthuman, with constant talk of fidelity and cheating, true love, an American high school romance language of dating and going steady. But this in itself is significant: it is clear that participants see transgression without ethical commitment as a recipe for something scary and dangerous. There is much talk about the crazies one has encountered, the horrible pics people have sent, the horrible fantasies thrust upon one, the harassment. One suspects that the IRC sexpics scene is a strange halfway house, a place where anything is possible but little is realised because although the malleability of the body allows any identity to be performed no identity can be taken seriously, trusted or even properly inhabited without the ethical weight – persistence over time and location in space – that dependable bodies are believed to provide.

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