

# Cybersex: Outercourse and the Enselfment of the Body

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*The increased popularity of the Internet invites the possibility of repackaging familiar activities in a new medium. Sex is one such activity—an age-old topic with a new cybertwist. The new technologies of computer-mediated communication allow us to examine the nature of human interaction in a uniquely disembodied environment that potentially transforms the nature of self, body, and situation. Sex—fundamentally a bodily activity—provides an ideal situation for examining these kinds of potential transformations. In the disembodied context of on-line interaction both bodies and selves are fluid symbolic constructs emergent in communication and are defined by sociocultural standards. Situations such as these are suggestive of issues related to contemporary transgressions of the empirical shell of the body, potentially reshaping body-to-self-to-social-world relationships.*

For most people most of the time, sexual intercourse represents the ultimate in embodiment—a corporeal experience in which physical bodies interact. The consequences of these corporeal sexual encounters evidence themselves in bodily matters (e.g., sexual intercourse is wet, odoriferous, and teeming with biological organisms). Cybersex, in contrast, is a kind of experience that explicitly contradicts its form.<sup>1</sup> Like traditional print, photo, and video pornography, chat-based cybersex is an experience that simulates tactile sex through a nontactile medium. In chat-based cybersex, semiotic icons emerge in a process of communication and replace all interactions between people.

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Similar to phone sex, chat-based cybersex is purely communicative. There are no copresent bodies, actions, touches, and (unlike phone sex) spoken words or utterances—the whole of the experience emerges in typed words that represent actions, touches, and utterances. For this reason, on-line chat environments represent an ultimate experience of disembodiment (Waskul and Douglass 1997). This is part of the erotic appeal of cybersex: typed words necessarily communicate taken-for-granted actions, movements, romantic settings, and utterances. In cybersex the eroticism of detailed intimate description and communication replaces the physical pleasures of sexual intercourse.

Because cybersex explicitly contradicts its form, part of its erotic appeal emerges from this contradiction. Furthermore, by pressing the corporeal experience of sexual intercourse through the disembodied medium of computer network technologies, a McLuhanesque transformation alters cybersex into something different—an experience that we may call sexual “outercourse.” In sexual outercourse, semiotic icons (in this case typed words, emotions, and utterances) represent and replace corporeal sexual intercourse. Whereas the pleasures of corporeal sexual intercourse are encapsulated in physical contact, the pleasures of cybersex are encapsulated in erotic text communication. This study examines the nature of these cybersexual semiotic icons. And, in the context of on-line communication environments, we raise questions regarding traditionally conceived relationships among bodies, selves, and society.

### SELF, BODY, SOCIETY, SEX, AND THE PROBLEM OF VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE

Most people interpret sexual intercourse as a bodily activity, yet we recognize that the sexual interplay between bodies has neither a fixed nor a necessarily normative state. Sexuality can assume a stunning range of expression between individuals. In fact, sexuality is such a complex and multifaceted dimension of human experience because sexual expression is rooted in the interplay between the selves that we are, selves in relation to our physical bodies, and ourselves situated in a sociocultural context. These three aspects of self together form the core of any sexual encounter and converge to form explicit body-to-self-to-society relationships when considering human sexual activity. Yet each of the components of this body-self-society relationship is fundamentally distinct; we interpret and respond differently to each.

The self is a symbolic referent of a human being—a fluid system of meanings that refers to the person. These meanings emerge only through interrelationships with others in the context of particular social situations, roles, and encounters. In other words, a self emerges only as one interacts with another and transfers the meaning(s) of those actions to this person. Selfhood is multiple and dynamic. A self can change (or be changed) as one moves from situation to situation, role to role, place to place, developmental stage to developmental stage. All persons enact a wide range of selves, as we are one thing to one person and something else to another.

The body, however, is not simply a fluid set of meanings. It is an empirically verifiable and objectively real *thing*. Unlike selfhood, the body manifests itself in objective qualities that occupy space and time. As such, the physically verifiable corporeal body has at least two important functions in traditional conceptions of selfhood. First, because selfhood is multiple, dynamic, and fluid, "the nebulousness of personal identity has caused it to be commonly conceived in concrete form as coextensive with the physical body" (Davis 1983:112). We commonly associate (or affix) systems of meaning to the corporeal body that collectively comprise the self. Or, as Goffman (1959:253) describes, the "body merely provide[s] the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time." According to traditional Western views, a body provides the "peg" on which to associate or affix a stable set of meanings that we comprehend as a person.

Second, the corporeal body, more than the stable "thing" to which we associate fluid systems of meaning that collectively comprise the self, is also commonly conceived as that which *contains* the self. In spite of the fluidity of selfhood, the fixed and veritable existence of a physical body always limits the range of selves that an individual may enact. Although the human body is decorated and otherwise altered along a seemingly infinite range, the body still limits self-to-social-world relationships. We know, for example, that to have a male or female body will exert a strong influence on the range of potential self-enactments available to the person. Although bodies are modified and self-enactments vary greatly, the physical existence of one's body restricts the range of one's selfhood.

The body *exists* as an important and fundamental element of selfhood—instrumental to our sense of being, who we think we are, and what others attribute to us. "Being a *body* constitutes the principle behind our separateness from one another and behind our personal presence. Our bodily existence stands at the forefront of personal identity and individuality" (Heim 1991:74).

While there is a clear relationship between selfhood and one's body, there is also an important relationship between one's body and society. As Stone (1995) suggests, the body is the unambiguous core of taken-for-granted conceptions of a comprehensible person and politically recognized citizen. For this reason, we can best understand and interpret self-to-body relationships in the context of broader body-to-social-world relationships that exert an independent influence. For example, loosely interpreted, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and *History of Sexuality* (1978) indicate that body-to-society relationships are significantly altered in conjunction with the emergence of new interpretive discourses within shifting power relationships in society. *Discipline and Punish* examines a shift in punishments that took the form of abuses to the body (e.g., hanging, decapitation, burning, etc.), to restrictions of freedom and liberty that inflict suffering on the self. The book illustrates the emergence of a new discourse for body-to-society relationships that facilitated a change from bodily oriented perceptions (i.e., the body as the whole of the person) to mindly orientations (i.e., the mind as the whole of the self). Similarly, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* illustrates how the production of an ever greater

quantity of discourse about sex resulted in important shifts in the intersections and influences among self, body, soul, and society.

This perspective suggests that we negotiate selfhood according to prevailing interpretive discourses; it resides in the Goffmanian (1968a) "cracks" between the relationships of one's body to one's social world. Experiences of selfhood emerge, are negotiated, and are then validated as one's body enters the scene of interaction in the context of preestablished sociocultural systems of meaning. This process occurs in the framework of a *triadic* body-to-self-to-society relationship. Selfhood is contained and affixed to the corporeal body, which society acts on, and is interpreted according to prevailing societal discourse. Indeed, bodies represent a fundamental element of personhood, the experience of which is caught in the precarious margins between body-to-social-world relationships. In *Stigma* (1968b), Goffman vividly captures this kind of triadic relationship among self, body, and society, wherein the body plays a significant role in the negotiation of self in everyday life in a sociocultural framework of pejorative meanings.

The body represents the grounded referent of selfhood. The body is a necessary condition for all of action and interaction (Strauss 1993). "It is the medium through which each person takes in and gives out knowledge about the world, object, self, others, and even about his or her own body" (Merleau-Ponty 1962; quoted in Strauss 1993:108-9). The body is a medium for the self—an agent to the self, the object of action, and the fulcrum of societal reaction.<sup>2</sup>

However, in the social worlds of on-line computer-mediated environments, there are no corporeal bodies. There are only symbolic representations of bodies (at best), in spite of millions of Internet participants and widely available pornography. In on-line communication a corporeal body is usually necessary to access and interact with others. However, in this communication the body is left at the keyboard *behind the scene* of the interactions that transpire; participants are literally disembodied. Because no physically verifiable or empirically measurable bodies exist anywhere in cyberspace, actions and interactions are entirely disassociated from the corporeal body. Instead, bodies are transformed into symbol alone—representations, images, descriptive codes, words of expectations, appearance, and action. In these on-line social worlds, traditional assumptions about self and body do not apply: the activities of participants and experiences of self are neither contained by nor affixed to corporeal bodies. In on-line communication environments both bodies and selves exist only as socially constructed representations—sets of meanings that emerge in a process of interaction.

In light of the important role of the body in traditional conceptions of selfhood, the disembodied nature of on-line interaction presents ideal conditions for examination of body-to-self-to-social-world relationships. Furthermore, because sex is among the most embodied of all imaginable activities, an activity that focuses on an interplay between bodies, sex is the peg on which we hang our brief examination of body-to-self-to-social-world relationships revealed in computer-mediated forms of leisure social interaction. This study examines the very means by which experiences of "self" and

"body" are produced and how these constructs function in on-line social environments of a sexual nature. The study is cast in the context of cybersex, focusing on the negotiation of processes among individuals, selfhood, on-line leisure situations, and physical bodies that may or may not be grounded in an emerging matrix of virtual experience.

### A Dramaturgical Approach to the Problem of Virtual Reality

Many scholars have discussed the difficulties of assessing what is "real" with regard to the unique situations posed by electronic media environments (see Altheide and Snow 1991; Chayko 1993; Eco 1986; Zerubavel 1991). Scholars of computer-mediated communication have noted how these problems are most extreme in the environments of on-line social worlds (see Jones 1995; Rheingold 1991; Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). Out of these ontological challenges, the term "virtual reality" has emerged in the lexicon of both popular and academic discourse. Although it has become common practice to refer to all computer-mediated environments as "virtual," this term reflects an oversimplified understanding and overlooks the complex nuances of virtual reality.

Laurel offers an illuminating perspective on virtual experiences:

The adjective *virtual* describes things—worlds, phenomena, etc.—that look and feel like reality but lack the traditional physical substance. A virtual object, for instance, may be one that has no real-world equivalent, but the persuasiveness of its representation allows us to respond to it *as if* it were real. (1993:8)

To Laurel, virtual "things" are persuasive representations that allow persons to respond to them as if they were physically real. "Virtual" merely refers to things, situations, and experiences that are dislocated from the frame of the empirically real; they do not necessarily draw reference from, nor are they necessarily a part of, that which can be empirically verified or that which can be made subject to direct measurement. From this perspective, the reality of virtual things emerges from interactions with the representations, not a quality of the things themselves. This approach to virtuality is quite similar to dramaturgical social reality. In this sense, we may borrow from Goffman (1959) to suggest that the reality of on-line environments is a product of a scene that comes off, not the cause of this reality or a quality of the scene itself. Or, we may borrow from W.I. Thomas (1966) to suggest that the things of virtual environments are persuasive representations that become real in their consequences. Like elements of social reality, the "things" of virtual reality may not have an objective or empirical manifestation, yet as representations they exert real influence that allows people to respond to them as if they were real. By eliciting these responses, virtual "things" assume a pragmatic and experiential reality that transcends the frame of the empirically real. Indeed, whether virtual or otherwise, all realities are far more than a mere collection of things; reality is produced, and it is the process of production that is important.

Approaching cybersex in this framework, this study does not concern itself di-

rectly with the empirically "real" persons or "real" experiences of sexual arousal, or the orgasms behind these virtual sexual trysts.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it seeks to understand how persons create sexual encounters that have the privilege of being responded to "as if they were real" and the forms of body and selfhood that emerge in these circumstances. What is important to this study is that on-line environments dislocate the physical body from the context of social interaction. In this respect, they are "virtual" encounters. By removing the frame of the empirically real, on-line communication environments potentially allow for the enactment of new forms of selfhood and provide insights into new relationships among bodies, selves, and social situations. What is the relationship among bodies, selves, and social interaction when selfhood is situationally freed from the empirical shell of the body?

### RESEARCH METHODS

We used firsthand qualitative methods to conduct this research. Interviews and participant observations were conducted in a wide variety of sexually oriented on-line chat forums on commercial servers, Internet Relay Chat, bulletin board systems, and the World Wide Web. Interviews were the primary source of data collection, and a majority of interviews occurred in the chat forums of a large commercial server. Chat channels (sometimes called "chat rooms") are electronic computer-mediated "spaces" where users create monikers (most often called "screen names" or "nicks") that represent themselves as they type messages to other chat participants in "real-time" (real-time is an admittedly curious term that begs the question of what other time there is. However, it generally refers to immediate and direct interactions, as opposed to the delayed communications that one may experience in e-mail, on a bulletin board, etc.). In chat environments individuals may communicate directly with other participants through private messages or in chat channels where all other participants can read and respond to the ongoing discussion. Chat channels tend to be informal and loosely organized around topics for discussion (for further discussion on the nature of on-line chat, see Waskul and Douglass 1997).

We accessed on-line chat areas explicitly devoted to the experience of cybersex. (All chat channels are given a name that is generally indicative of the topic for discussion or purpose for communication.) At any given time, (but particularly at night), hundreds of channels intended for the purpose of cybersexual encounters can be accessed. These chat channels were easy to identify because they carried such conspicuous titles as "Looking for Cyber," "Hot M in Search of Cyber Fun," and "Sexy DD Blonde for Cyber M." We had no particular criteria for selecting chat channels.

All of these chat areas were "publicly" available to anyone with access to the system. We did not access sexually explicit chat areas where participants intended to carve out "private" electronic spaces (e.g., membership-based on-line sex locations, private chat rooms, or chat channels that require secret passwords). In each of these chat channels participants made no effort to hide the explicit sexual purposes of their communication forums.



### The Interview Process

In each chat channel we briefly stated the research intent, soliciting volunteers via real-time private messages. If the request for interviews was met with hostility from chat participants, we promptly left the chat forum. To avoid harassing participants, only one attempt was made to solicit volunteers. If no participants responded, that chat area was abandoned for another.

Once participants contacted us by private messages, they were debriefed on the nature of the study, guaranteed anonymity (even the actual screen name or nick was deleted from the text of the interview), and given an opportunity to ask questions; a real-time on-line interview would follow. Respondents were told that they could withdraw from the interview at any time.

The unstructured nonstandardized interview strategy was used (Denzin 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985). This interview style does not use preestablished sets of questions or lists of topics. Instead, interview questions emerge from the responses of participants, and there is no set of questions or scripts. The method of nonstandardized interviewing makes use of a conversational style of data collection. This conversational style allowed for the discussion of issues from the participants' perspectives, and although the researcher may have occasionally refocused the conversations, the directions of the conversations were not restricted.

Nonstandardized interviewing allowed for flexibility and a free-flowing format that added elements of comfort and familiarity for the participant. Perhaps most important, nonstandardized interviewing is a method that most directly parallels the informal conversational structure of most on-line chat environments. This methodological approach proved especially useful for contending with sometimes delicate and often controversial issues regarding cybersex. This data collection technique has been used with success in previous works (see Waskul and Douglass 1997).

The interviews focused on what occurs *on-line* regarding cybersex and how participants interpret these events. We did not in any way attempt to gain personal information about the participants themselves. We did not ask their name, gender, age, occupation, or any other typical demographics. We did not attempt to contact participants by phone or request to meet in person. Early in the interview process we quickly discovered that when asked about "actual" personhood, participants were unwilling to give direct answers and would sometimes discontinue the interview (for more information on this problem, see Myers 1987). We decided to discontinue asking participants for such information, primarily because the purposes of this research did not require it. Our research does not directly concern itself with the individuals involved with cybersex. Instead, the focus is on the on-line environment in which individuals create a context for the experience of cybersex. Hence, to contextualize this study one must look to the characteristics of the computer-mediated environment, its uses and purposes for computer-mediated interaction—not the qualities of individual participants.

Furthermore, the body's role in cybersex is behind the scenes of interactions—

something participants seemed to understand. In our interviews participants rarely raised the subject of "real" bodies. It seemed that these participants found it more important to have a scene enacted on screen than to question what was happening backstage. Hence, the participants, like the theoretical underpinnings of this study, were focused on the bodies represented and negotiated through interaction on-line.

Over the course of a total of three months, sixty-two nonstandardized e-interviews were conducted. Initially, we conducted and analyzed thirty-two interviews. Later, we conducted an additional thirty interviews to check the validity and elaborate on ideas that emerged from our analysis.

### Bias and Ethical Issues

In spite of the "public" accessibility of these cybersex forums, participants can (and do) have "private" experiences: in fact, this study focuses on precisely these kinds of experiences. As discussed by King (1996) and Waskul and Douglass (1996), the public accessibility of the medium does not preclude private interactions. Interactions like these pose potential problems and unique ethical responsibilities for the researcher. Obviously, it would be unethical to observe on-line participants engaging in cybersex without their knowledge and permission. We also believe that it is unethical to conduct on-line research in such a way as to overtly and knowingly disrupt the context of one's research. In on-line studies researchers must take care to protect participants' *perceived* privacy, regardless of the "public" nature of the medium. In the comfort of their homes, participants may extend a perceived sense of privacy to interactions that appear in "public" on-line settings. To violate a participant's perceived sense of privacy is to alter and/or destroy the characteristics of the medium that allow cybersex to occur (see King 1996; Waskul and Douglass 1996).

For these reasons, we relied on interview data only from participants who volunteered. We acknowledge that this approach to data collection contains several related sources of bias. First, the data gathered relies only on those who participate voluntarily. Conceivably, those who volunteer might differ from those who do not. This possibility, however, is a necessary bias given the potential for ethical violations, including the possibility of harassing persons who would rather be left alone, and our ethical commitment to the previously mentioned context of data collection. Second, because we made no attempt to gain information about the person behind the anonymity of the medium, we have no way to determine the demographics of our sample and therefore we cannot determine if it is heterogeneous. While anonymity can enable honest disclosure, it can also bring about a new source of bias (e.g., most participants presented themselves within the frame of what we may call the "normative sexual population," heterosexuals primarily interested in various forms of "straight sex"). However, anonymity was important to these participants and respecting that anonymity was fundamental to data collection.

We acknowledge these potential sources of bias and limitations. However, we can justify our method of data collection both ethically and practically. First, our



ethical commitment to preserving the privacy of our participants, rather than merely to adhere to "ideal" methods of data collection, justifies these methods. Second, data collection for this study focuses solely on the negotiation of self and body in the on-line communication environment, rather than on the happenings of "actual" persons behind the anonymity of the medium. We acknowledge that processes of on-line self and body negotiation potentially may differ among various populations (e.g., among women, toward whom society prescribes comparatively strong systems of meaning concerning the appearance of the body). However, the medium does not allow access to the person behind the anonymity of the environment, and attempts to gain that information introduce a new source of bias in favor of persons willing to disclose themselves and sacrifice their anonymity to the researcher. Bias occurs in either approach. Given our ethical responsibility, the importance of anonymity to participants, and the introduction of bias regardless of our methodological approach, we believe that these methods are essential to the aims of our study.

### Translating and Reporting Data from On-line Interviews

On-line interaction is a form of communication that one can accurately describe as written speech—a combination of written and spoken word. Because of this unique quality, three related issues cause data from on-line interactions to be sometimes difficult to use for research findings, and often to require some degree of translation. First, what participants actually type to one another and how these messages appear do not adhere to the grammar and syntax of printed English. In on-line chat grammatical conventions are secondary to the spontaneity of discussion, which can lead to some confusion when reading on-line data in printed text. Furthermore, chat participants use grammatical conventions to convey meaning that is sometimes different from what these conventions mean in printed text form. For example, chat participants often use ellipses to suggest a long pause (e.g., "I'm not sure. . . maybe you are right"). However, to quote this data literally would falsely suggest that the researcher has removed part of what the participant said.

Second, participants in chat environments do not particularly attend to proper spelling. They tolerate misspellings and typos, as well as alterations of grammatical conventions, to sustain an environment of spontaneous discussion. Sometimes these misspellings are intentional phonetic spellings (e.g., "what's up?" is occasionally spelled phonetically: "wazzup?"). In contrast to these stylistic conventions, some misspellings and typos are unintentional and can hinder effective understanding of what the participant is saying when quoted for research purposes.

Third, on-line chat environments almost always entail a multiplicity of simultaneous conversations. When this occurs, the messages that appear on one line of chat communication may or may not be related to what appears in the previous or following lines. As a consequence, it is often necessary to sift through numerous unrelated messages in order to follow any one of many ongoing conversations. Quoting data from these discussions verbatim would inevitably lead to the inclusion of nu-

merous unrelated messages that would certainly be unnecessary and distracting to the reader of this study.

For these reasons, we edited the findings of our studies for research purposes. However, at no time did we alter the meaning. We translated grammar and syntax from the meaning conveyed in a chat environment to make sense in printed text to aid in effectively communicating what the participants were saying (except where they used grammar and syntax stylistically). We replaced punctuation with idiocultural meaning in the on-line context (i.e., ellipses) with the proper punctuation for printed text (commas, periods, dashes, etc.). Like spoken interviews that require the researcher to add punctuation, we must modify on-line text in this way in order to use it effectively as findings in any study. Finally, in cases in which we collected data from situations that involved multiple on-line discussions, we deleted all irrelevant messages from the quoted findings. We do not believe that these modifications falsify or "massage" the data but are necessary for the translation of data into research findings.

### CYBERSEX: THE SIMMELIAN ADVENTURE OF OUTERCOURSE

The first fully functional teledildonic system will be a communication device, not a sex machine. You will probably *not* use erotic telepresence technology in order to have sexual experiences with machines. . . . [P]eople will use them to have sexual experiences with other *people*, at a distance, in combinations and configurations undreamed of by pre-cybernetic voluptuaries. (Rheingold, *Virtual Reality*)

Cybersex is a form of coauthored interactive erotica (Reid 1994). It is a written conversation by which participants transform a computer-mediated communication environment into a personalized interactive arena for sexual experience. In the anonymity of electronic space, individuals engage at least one other participant and type erotic actions, utterances, feelings, and happenings to one another. Like phone sex, cybersex entails a process of provoking, constructing, and playing out sexual encounters through a single interactive mode of communication. In this process participants draw from a vast repertoire of sociocultural symbols to construct a drama that compresses large amounts of information into the very small experiential space of a text medium (Stone 1994). A single channel of dense interactive text compresses and conveys the enormous range of bodily sensations that typically accompany sex (gestures, appearances, expressions, odors, utterances, and physical sensations). Consequently, as many participants indicated, to be "good," cybersex requires a great deal of sexual literacy and communication skills:

An active imagination and expansive vocabulary help. Using predictable expressions is a little ho-hum. Just saying "I want to suck your dick" is unlikely to arouse many people.

There are only so many ooohs and mmm hmms you can type.

Good typing skills and creativity are fundamental for the scene to come off well

in cybersex, which is not surprising considering the challenge of compressing such an intense experience into text.

Cybersex occurs in on-line chat environments that many acknowledged as relatively anonymous forms of interaction (see Jones 1995; Myers 1987; Reid 1991; Turkle 1995; Waskul and Douglass 1997). Participants choose levels of anonymity and exercise selectivity in the personal information that they report to other participants. Emergent from this generally anonymous form of on-line interaction, cybersex participants feel little need to anchor themselves to a physically fixed manifestation of self. Not surprisingly, numerous respondents indicate that the anonymity of the on-line context allows for a fluidity of self-presentations that represent an important element of cybersexual encounters:

Cybersex allows the freedom of sexual expression. Cybersex allows a person to be whoever or whatever they want to be!!

It's erotic, it turns me on—the mystery of it. Not knowing who is really on the other end is really erotic—you can be anything. I may stretch truth, and live out fantasies . . . it allows you to be with who ever you want—no inhibitions!

Similar to other forms of role-playing and vicarious experience, the anonymity of on-line chat allows participants to play various selves in the drama of a socially constructed virtual situation. In this case, participants may assume a wide variety of roles in the enactment of an interactive sexual drama. This range of roles is an important element of the eroticism of cybersex, because it allows participants to playfully toy with alternative vicarious experience:

Sometimes I pretend I'm a woman. I've also invented experiences (like 3 somes). . . . Cybersex enables me to play out fantasies. . . . It allows you to take your dreams one step closer to reality.

You can do anything you want and you can picture anybody you wish.

It's not real. People can take any identity they want, and they do. People lie about who they are to create sexual illusions.

The anonymity of the medium allows the participants to experiment with sexual adventures. As an added bonus, if the adventure is deemed unpleasant or uncomfortable, the participant can delete his or her screen name or nick and create a new one. The capacity to delete one's nick allows participants to choose another virtual identity under another alias, starting completely anew:

I deleted my previous screen name because I tried something that went beyond my normal comfort range.

It's more anonymous. And you can disappear much easier if it doesn't work well.

Anonymity in conjunction with the power to delete and re-create nicks contributes to the emergence of a social environment in which participants feel free to experiment with new social roles and presentations of self. Participants tend to perceive these interactions as a kind of "self-game" (Waskul and Douglass 1997) in

which anonymous leisure interactions become a form of recreation and communication play. By "self-game," we generally refer to forms of amusement, simulation, or recreation that involve the alteration of identity, character, or qualities of the person. As one participant stated, "We enjoy it more than some folks enjoy bridge! So, what's the big deal, it's merely another form of entertainment."

Although these alterations during self-games may be intentional, they need not be. Likewise, although these alterations may be playful, they need not be (for more discussion on the nature of self-games, see Waskul and Douglass 1997:390-91). To an extent, we all engage in self-games any time we knowingly attempt to portray ourselves as this-or-that kind of person (e.g., at a job interview). Sometimes, however, we take this experience to an overtly playful level for the purposes of the sheer amusement or pleasure that these self-alterations can provide (e.g., many on-line cybersex participants).

On-line chat environments allow participants to interact with others from a wide array of socially constructed personae, with no necessary commitment to that which is veritable. This observation, however, is nothing new. Not only have numerous scholars examined the fluidity of selfhood in the context of cyberspace (see Jones 1995; Myers 1987; Reid 1991, 1994; Stone 1995; Turkle 1995; Waskul and Douglass 1997), but in many regards this kind of fluidity and self-multiplicity is *not* unique to the on-line environment. A "cyberself," like any self, is situationally defined. Persons "have" as many selves as they have meaningful situations to interact in. What makes on-line environments unique is how the remoteness of a physical body expands the fluidity of self-enactments.

When on-line one can not only enact a multiplicity of selves but also enact selves beyond an individual's range of possibility due to constraints the physical body normally imposes. As a result, on-line leisure communication environments present an opportunity for a hyperfluidity of self-enactments due to the ability to transcend gender, skin pigment, age, weight, and all other socially meaningful characteristics of the physical body. In this context all fixed bodily features become variables—self-selected interaction utensils in the enactment of a self—not taken-for-granted constants or givens.

To say that cyberself enactments reveal the potential for hyperfluidity does not lessen their experiential importance to participants. A self, by its very nature, is symbolic—a necessarily fluid and situationally defined system of meaning.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, there is no reason to conclude that cyberselfhood is any less meaningful than other forms of self-enactment—perhaps more transitory or more liminal but not necessarily any less meaningful. In fact, through co-authored erotic fantasy with anonymous others, many cybersex participants claim to learn new sexual techniques, discover new sexual turn-ons, and vicariously experience sexual arousal in ways that they would not (or could not) experience in "real" face-to-face sexual encounters. Consequently, the experience is not only meaningful but also sometimes highly valued:

With cybersex I learned about stuff I didn't know, like maybe how to do some things better. Everyone should try it!

Since I've started chatting with people on-line, I've been walking around in this perpetual state of arousal! It's wonderful! I mean, perpetual, never ending, I'm always thinking about sex, coming up with new ideas, listening to other peoples' fantasies and expressions and learning things I never knew existed!

Although some describe cybersex in terms such as "virtual" or "fantasy," and might consider it experientially liminal (i.e., outside the assumed realities of everyday life), participants often insist that the experience is meaningful and highly valued. On the surface this appears paradoxical. However, this apparent inconsistency makes perfect sense when considering the degree to which cybersex represents a Simmelian "adventure," and how both sex and fantasy are important enclaves in which persons create "free areas" for self-expression and identity work.

Simmel (1911) describes "the erotic" as a supreme example of "the adventure" as a form of experience. To Simmel, the adventure is a form of experiencing that involves "dropping out of the continuity of life . . . in contrast to that interlocking of life-links." Although an adventure falls outside the context of life, it remains connected to it. "It is like an island of life which determines its beginning and end according to its own formative powers and not—like the part of a continent—also according to those adjacent territories" (Simmel 1911; quoted in Levine 1971:189). "The adventure" is an experience that occurs outside the context of taken-for-granted everyday life. Yet, by being outside daily conventions, the experience uniquely allows persons to synthesize, comprehend, and provide new meaning to everyday experiences that "the adventure" stands over and against.

Cohen and Taylor (1992) extend Simmel's "adventure" by illustrating the ways that sex and fantasy culminate in "activity enclaves" by which persons cultivate a safe place for identity work apart from routinized realities of everyday life. Both fantasy and sex can be "cultivated as a free area when it is regarded as a portion of life in which we feel ourselves free of the routine nature of the rest of existence[,] . . . regarded as an activity in which we may 'be ourselves' or 'get away from everyday life'" (Cohen and Taylor 1992:125–26). Cybersex certainly constitutes one such "activity enclave." The anonymous nature of on-line leisure interaction, in conjunction with both the fantasy and the sexual dimensions of cybersex encounters, creates situational conditions similar to Simmel's form of adventure and thus potentially creates free spaces for identity work. Although distinct from the structures of everyday life, there is an intimate relationship between those structures and these experiences. Hence, cybersexual experiences may become quite meaningful and highly valued by participants, not in spite of their "virtual" and "fantasy" elements, but *because* of them. One participant states very clearly how cybersex provides an experience of Simmelian adventure—an activity enclave—in which virtual experiences provide a context for renegotiating self:

Whether a guy or a girl sends me a private message and wants to talk, it's usually very exciting. I am 32 years old and think I am only now reaching my sexual prime, and I don't know that I'd have discovered certain things about myself without it. I never thought I could be so free with my emotions and fantasies,

and it's even spilled over into my real life, I mean, now I feel free about talking about my sexuality (bi-sexuality) with other people openly, now that I've discussed it with myself first (which basically is what I'm doing here, talking to a nameless, faceless person, i.e., ME!).

Most often, cybersex resembles a Simmelian "island of experience" that is related to everyday life through participants' appeals to physical bodies—as a novel masturbatory innovation, a way to learn about sexual techniques, a means for examining one's sexuality and the sexuality of others. Cybersex participants commonly interpreted the experience by appealing to the physical body. However, the absence of physical bodies promotes the perception of cybersex as a safe form of communication play—an experience in which the emotional baggage of face-to-face sex does not complicate enjoyment. Therefore, participants perceive cybersex as rich in therapeutic effects. For this reason, participants can easily maintain the distinction between cybersex and "real sex" that underlies the experience of a Simmelian "adventure":

I guess the reason I do [it] is because it is a safe medium by which to explore sexually. To experiment with those aspects of sex that you have not yet explored. To enhance your sex life through the use of new ideas that are learned with a new sexual partner, without risk. It is also a way to be excited sexually without the performance anxiety that is present in face-to-face encounters. It is a way to express yourself sexually in a way you may not feel comfortable doing in a relationship.

For me, cybersex is an opportunity to give someone else stimulation and fulfillment in about the safest way there is right now—no commitments, no diseases, just good clean nasty fun.

Acting out of fantasies can be very healthy and therapeutic.

It can actually help your real sex life. It helps you do things that you might find difficult to do in real sex. Try things out. Actually find out what the opposite sex likes.

The virtual context and hyperfluidity of self-enactments allow users to engage others in a sexual self-game that intentionally relates to the physical body and interprets cues on that pretext (i.e., sexual arousal). Thus, the context of cybersex upholds the basic triadic body-to-self-to-social-world relationship. Despite the lack of physical bodies, cybersex is still a body-game enacted by participants according to prevailing sociocultural interpretive discourses. As one respondent states, "It's a paradox. People say that what they like about [cybersex] is that people are not judging them by their appearance, but after age/sex checks, it is the first thing everyone wants to know."

### Cybersex and the Social Production of the Virtual Body

The hyperfluidity of selfhood, afforded by the absence of a corporeal body, does not eliminate the important role of the body in on-line sexual interaction. In fact,



the role of the body remains quite important—yet its importance is almost entirely symbolic. By far the most common phrase in on-line chat environments is some version of the question Are you a male or female? The second most commonly occurring phrase is usually one of the following: "What do you look like?" "How old R U?" or "Where do you live?" Ironically, by means of this complex and technologically sophisticated network of communication, people ask some of the most fundamental body questions imaginable—questions that are unnecessary or seem inappropriate in face-to-face interaction.

Physical presence does not determine how a person "looks" to another on-line participant. Rather, appearances depend entirely on information participants choose to disclose. Or, as one participant states, "What you read is what you get." Because this convention frees the body from any necessary or verifiable physical manifestation, it is transformed into complete symbol—a "virtual body" made manifest in words that emerges from communication and yet remains detached from the frame of the empirically verifiable. In on-line leisure interaction, both bodies and selves become systems of meaning emergent in a process of communication, and they associate with whatever semiotic performance participants currently enact. The corporeal body remains at the keyboard—behind the dramaturgical curtain—engrossed in actions that are only remotely a part of the scene that comes off. When the corporeal body disappears behind the dramaturgical scene, it no longer contains and holds selfhood. In short, the body is no longer directly connected to the enacted self.

These conditions often lead people to believe that they are "more free." Once released from the sociocultural shackles of the physical body, people often assume that cultural and social meanings associated with bodies somehow magically vanish (i.e., presumptions about gender, race, obesity, ugliness, etc.). Or, in other words, many seem to believe that the basic triadic body-to-self-to-social-world relationship becomes a dyadic body-to-self relationship—with the self in complete control of (and not limited by) the appearance and actions of the body. This kind of "release from the tyranny of selfhood" is a common theme in the rhetoric surrounding the medium. A 1996 MCI television advertisement, entitled "Anthem," promotes this seductive vision: "There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Is this utopia? No, the Internet."

This happy vision of egalitarianism probably sells a lot of Internet service and remains common currency in the rhetorical harangue that often surrounds major technological innovations. "Some people mistake any discussion of the 'breaking down of boundaries among people' for a prophecy of a utopian society of harmony and bliss" (Meyrowitz 1985:317). However, this egalitarian vision does not stand up to empirical muster, nor does it make reasonable sense. It is more reasonable to suggest that because on-line chat participants can present any body they choose, they will be more likely to do so in a manner supportive of the situational self they are currently enacting. These on-line self-enactments are dramaturgical performances that do not materialize out of thin air. Rather, they occur on a metaphorical stage that contains scripted sociocultural performances to which participants tend to adhere.

Therefore, we should expect the performance of virtual bodies to emerge as a part of a participant's presentation of self, and in highly predictable forms. As communicated elements of a self-enactment, bodies are *more* likely to adhere to cultural and social prescriptions appropriate to the situation—not as a variable but as a prerequisite to the situation. In this sense, the disembodied on-line context confines, rather than frees, the body.

In cybersex, as long as relationships remain on-line, participants never so much as see each other, regardless of how many words they exchange.<sup>5</sup> The self, the body, and the whole scene of interaction amount to a shared consensual hallucination (Gibson 1984) substantiated and validated in textual dramaturgies that involve other disembodied participants. Each participant contributes to the performance of the other in a negotiated agreement that determines the desires, expectations, and requirements of the situation. Or, as one respondent succinctly stated, "Looks and communication all tie together." Thus, the disembodied context enables participants to sidestep cultural specifications of beauty, glamour, and sexiness, but it does not subvert these concepts (Reid 1994). The fluidity of both body and self-presentation does not free participants from the shackles of the beauty myth but only allows them to redefine themselves in accordance with that myth.

When everyone can be beautiful, there can be no hierarchy of beauty. This freedom, however, is not necessarily one that undermines the power of such conventions. Indeed, such freedom to be beautiful tends to support these conventions by making beauty not unimportant but a pre-requisite[.]... free from the stigma of ugliness not because appearance ceases to matter but because no one need be seen to be ugly. (Reid 1994:64)

Because participants can present a virtual body that supports a cyberself enactment and because these enactments contain culturally prescribed standards of beauty and sexiness, it should not be surprising to observe a conspicuous absence of fat, ugly persons with pimples, small breasts, or tiny penises. Consider, for example, these typical descriptions of self and body that participants on a commercial on-line system anonymously report:

I have brown hair, blue eyes, average height, average build, bigger-than-average cock!

I'm 22, 6'0" tall, about 176 pounds, long brown hair (mid back)... Good shape, and love to have a good time. I'm not stuck up, but I am very attractive.

My hobbies include workin' out; I have a 46" chest, 32" waist, and 22" biceps/great ass nice and firm and a thick 9" cock.

The above are typical descriptions. However, participants do not have to claim either actual or typical appearances. When on-line, persons can present a virtual body that is strikingly attractive, has hyperbolic sexual organs, and absolute specialties in sexual techniques. Take, for example, the following:

My hobbies include using my 13" LONG 4" THICK [sic] Penis on Women. Selectively meeting attractive Women and sexing them with my 13" penis.

I'm a 21 year old single female 5'7" with bluegray eyes, 124 lbs, 44DD-28-30.

I'm 5'7, Long Black Hair, Brown Eyes, 46DD-30-36, 125 lbs.

I am 5'2, 110, blonde/brn waist length hair, green eyes, 48DD.

Granted, it might be possible, as one of the above participants suggests, to have a 13-inch penis that is 4 inches thick. However, such a penis is improbable. Likewise, it might be possible for a woman to have 48DD breasts—even if she's only 5'2" and weighs a mere 110 pounds. Yet such a woman would have breasts that constitute an improbable amount of her entire body weight. Participants more likely exaggerate the proportions of these virtual bodies in the direction of sociocultural prescriptions for beauty and sexiness. And many on-line participants are acutely aware of this possibility. As one participant stated: "If they really were 6'2, 185, with 3% body fat, and a 8" unit—would they be on-line trying to pick up a gorilla like me?"

Some participants (perhaps a majority) likely embody the sexual performance of a virtual body with exaggerated physical appearances, abilities, and dimensions of sexual organs. Furthermore, these embodiments probably will adhere to (if not extend) social and cultural standards of beauty and sexiness. This is certainly the case when one considers commonly reported breast sizes. One large on-line commercial service allows users to create a "profile"—a brief summary of simple demographic and biographical information. The users of the system create all profiles, and persons can include anything they wish to tell other electronic participants about themselves. Although there is no category for reporting the dimensions of one's virtual body, nonetheless some people do. A keyword search of member profiles revealed that more than 4,250 persons reported a personal bra size. One out of every three persons listing a bra size (32.7%) identified themselves as either D or DD cup.<sup>6</sup> This would indicate that either an inordinate number of large-breasted women spend time on-line or people who claim to be women tend to exaggerate the breast size of their socially constructed virtual body. The latter interpretation seems far more plausible.

Instead of subverting the beauty myth (Wolf 1990), participants *perform a body* that they most often define in accordance with it. When they transform the body into a discursive performance without necessary commitment to the physically real, performances become ideal—a reflection of cultural and social definitions of appropriateness or desirability. These performances of the "virtual body" draw meaning from well-established sociocultural scripts for behavior. Such performances serve to *strengthen* the "beauty myth" and bestow it with more legitimacy. In this respect, the power and freedom to define oneself in accordance with cultural standards of beauty is neither a power nor a freedom; it is what Wolf (1990) calls "the Iron Maiden" of the beauty myth that contains participants within the tight confines of what is culturally acceptable. Indeed, the absence of the corporeal body in cybersex only serves to heighten its symbolic importance. As one respondent explained, "People are playing out a fantasy and the fantasy needs a face and body. Actually, people seem only interested in the body part." More to the point, another respondent simply stated, "Don't you know that everyone on-line is gorgeous?"

These findings blatantly contradict the claim of an on-line egalitarian utopia. While the rhetoric of the medium suggests equality, it only accomplishes this lofty claim by eliminating diversity through the hegemonic power of culture made "high tech." As Nakamura (2000:20) succinctly states, "If technology will indeed make everyone, everything, and every place the same, as 'Anthem' claims in its ambivalent way, then where is there left to go?"

Even when entirely disembodied, self-enactments are still subject to the sociocultural constraints we impose on bodies. As Heim (1991:74) states, "The stand-in self can never fully represent us. The more we mistake the cyberbodies for ourselves, the more the machine twists our selves into the prostheses we are wearing." However, in cybersex, the prostheses that Heim refers to are not technological, they are cultural. The body is not only an empirical object, it is also a symbolic subject that is presented to others and interpreted according to prevailing systems of sociocultural meaning—even when the body is not present in the scene of interaction.

Sex is an act that requires, or is at least dependent on, physical bodies. One's body in relation to the bodies of others forms the essence of a sexual encounter. Yet in cyberspace there can be no body, or fixed physical entity of the person. Nonetheless, cybersex does not escape claims of the flesh. Indeed, it fundamentally depends on them, extends them, and latently supports cultural and social standards for interpreting them. In text-based on-line leisure environments, participants transform their bodies into symbol alone—representations, descriptive codes, and words that embody expectations, appearances, and actions. Thus, they transform their bodies into a dramaturgical performance. What participants send to and from computer terminals are not merely words and self-enactments but body performances. Thus, cybersex is based on claims of the flesh in a discursive embodiment of sociocultural meanings that connect with a performance and emerge from the interactions between participants.

## CONCLUSIONS

Because computer-networking technologies allow persons to dislocate selfhood from the corporeal body, one can transform himself or herself into someone else. This represents a classic case of vicarious experience—involvement in a role without commitment to that role. In a society where people are expected to be what their role implies, computer-networking technologies can have a kind of liberating potential that we can easily see in on-line chat environments. As numerous respondents in this study indicate, one can be who one might like to be, what one might like to experiment with being, or even who one does not think one is. Many examples of screen personae that prove untrue further substantiate this observation. In leisure on-line forums, persons may not even know something as simple as the actual gender of the person with whom they are communicating (see Van Gelder 1985). Indeed, self-games abound in the personae playground of on-line chat environments. However, the findings of this study also conclude with equally important

evidence that contradicts this observation. Cybersex participants clearly confine their body presentations within the narrow margins of prevailing cultural norms of beauty and sexual attractiveness. On-line interaction clearly facilitates *both* a greater degree of fluidity and greater limitations on the presentation of self. That is, participants' experiential sense of fluid, open, discursive horizons of multiple potentials for being exists primarily as a freedom to define themselves in accordance with the prevailing standards of what others expect, desire, or mandate by the situation.

### The Enslavement of the Body

When we tear apart the taken-for-granted seamless surface of reality as exemplified by on-line experiences of virtuality, we find a liminal creature existing within the nuts and bolts of the situation (Stone 1995). In on-line leisure environments, this liminal experience falls within the boundaries of disembodiment and hyperfluidity of selfhood. Although the societal imperative is to have one primary persona, that prescription appears firmly affixed to the physical body. In other words, in spite of widely diverse self-enactments, the self-evident, matter of fact, physical existence of the body can comfortably maintain consistency between selves in everyday life. As long as one's physical body is present, one can always be certain of oneself—no matter what one is doing. The experience of fluid disembodiment, characteristic of leisure on-line chat, does not provide this kind of cognitive consistency. Quite simply, in cyberspace no physical form exists on which to affix or contain a self.

In many ways this situation encourages the creation of forms of selfhood and body presentations that characterize the postmodern condition. "It is pastiche, a borrowing from diverse imagery, styles, and traditions, including both 'high' and 'low,' mundane and special, and past, present and future, wherever these seem usable: a form of contextless quotation" (Glassner 1990:217). Or, as Trachtenberg (1985:7) describes, it becomes "performative rather than revelatory, superficial rather than immanent, aleatory rather than systematic, dispersed rather than focused." Yet the fluid and diverse forms by which participants present, negotiate, and validate self and body in on-line communication environments do not merely reflect or simply illustrate the postmodern condition. Rather, we can see these conditions as *accommodations* to the postmodern condition.

Glassner's (1990) analysis of the contemporary fitness movement as "an attempt to reconstruct the self (and in particular the self-body relationship) in a manner that is more felicitous to life in contemporary American culture" (p. 218) bears an uncanny similarity to the findings of this study. To Glassner, the heart of the contemporary fitness movement is a "salvation of the self" "an intimate and holistic marriage between self and body"—through *being* fit, as a means by which "selves are truly embodied." To Glassner, this accommodation allows participants to reconcile the Cartesian twins and resolve principal dualities (i.e., "male-female," "inside-outside," "mortality-immortality"). We may extend this to suggest that both the "fit body" and the "virtual body" of on-line chat environments may be regarded as "a



postmodern object par excellence, its image perpetually reconstructed of pieces and colorations added on then discarded" (Glassner 1990:228). Whereas Glassner argues that the fit "embody the self," we may similarly argue that on-line chat participants "enself the body." The on-line "virtual body," like the self, becomes an object of pure meaning—a fluid construct that emerges, like the self, as a product of the scene that comes off. Both the "embodiment of the self" and the "enselfment of the body" locate personhood in a safety zone by neutralizing, reducing, or containing meaning. Both accommodations join together the self and the body in a manner that resolves the Cartesian twins and related dualities. Both are totalizing, one in the direction of the corporeal and the other in the direction of the symbolic. Yet in spite of these differences, these two accommodations are remarkably similar because they are both mere images that are more real than the "real" things they reference (see Glassner 1990). The accommodations are opposite; the effects of grounding selfhood are nearly identical.

In cybersex (and other forms of leisure on-line interaction), participants playfully toy with the virtual actualization of multiple potentials of being. In leisure forms of on-line interaction, bodies, selves, and situations become emergent symbolic elements contingent on interaction. Yet when participants interact, meaning simply does not arise out of thin air. We find the answers to questions such as Who am I? What is going on here? How shall I apprehend this other person? in a broader sociocultural context. Although disembodied, participants are not separate from the sociocultural interpretive apparatus that provides meaning to self, body, situation, and other. On-line participants fashion a self and body through the same symbolic stock of images that provide meaning in everyday life. Thus, in the dislocated and disembodied context of on-line interaction the dramaturgies of producing a meaningful self and body assume new salience, yet still remain rooted in the same symbolic milieu, using the same sets of resources as any other self and body performance.

What does this indicate about the contemporary relationship between selves and bodies? First, the issues noted in this article go beyond the confines of certain recreational dimensions of cyberspace. Rather, they reveal (and are extensions of) much broader shifts in sociocultural beliefs, practices, and technologies. "These include repeated transgressions of the traditional concept of the body's physical envelope and the locus of human agency" (Stone 1995:16). Numerous authors have noted the increasingly pervasive experience of multiplicity (see Gergen 1991; Lifton 1993; Stone 1995). In this regard, *disembodiment is the embodiment of the experience of multiplicity*. That is, if multiple potentials of being have proliferated in technologies of communication and if the citizens of contemporary media culture are indoctrinated with a multitude of selves, then disembodiment provides the ultimate experience of multiplicity. Thus, participants can tacitly resolve contradictions between a singular corporeal body and self amid their experiences of self-multiplicity.

Foucault (1978, 1979) suggests that the emergence of new discourses fundamentally alters the very means by which we understand and interpret body-to-self-to-social-world relationships. If true, then what changes might have occurred in con-



junction with the emergence of the information era? What new discourses are operating now, and what is in store for the future? Is there any indication of where this is going? We suggest that contemporary technologies have facilitated the potential for multiple selfhood and opportunities for multiple body manifestations. For example, tailor-made bodies, courtesy of cosmetic surgery, are emerging elements of this phenomenon. The fitness movement, as an attempt to reconcile the self through alterations of the body, is further suggestive of shifts in belief and practice (see Glassner 1990). Like cosmetic and fitness alterations, leisure interactions on the Internet extend and normalize the potential not only for multiple self-enactments but also for the malleability of body presentations in a manner that parallels the fluidity of contemporary selfhood. Although Goffman (1959) claims that the body is little more than the "peg" on which we hang a person's self, only in everyday face-to-face reality is the body so inert (Davis 1983). New communication environments challenge traditional assumptions about the interplay among body, self, and social world. Traditional sociological definitions of self as that which the body contains or holds are increasingly questionable assertions—especially with regard to the experiences of virtuality.

Within these technosocial arenas of experience, the meaning of the body-self relationship manifests itself in a transformed and/or transforming state. What emerges is not merely a body-as-container-of-self, or body-as-dramaturgical-prop relationship. Rather, evident in this study (and suggestive of broader sociocultural changes) is a body-as-performance relationship. The body is more than a prop that is used in a variety of ways to support a multiplicity of self-enactments. Increasingly, the meanings of the actions taken by human agencies define both bodies and selves. As this study suggests, the most stable personal characteristic—our sense of who we are and where we are in space—is now open to redefinition. Given the possibilities of selfhood made manifest in the emerging datasphere as a new arena for human experience, and the relationship of these experiences to the bodies that may or may not be grounded in this matrix of virtual experience, new questions arise about what constitutes a person.

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## NOTES

1. This study examines and uses the term "cybersex" to refer to what is sometimes called "net-sex," "tinysex," and "net.sleaze." For our purposes, cybersex is a chat-based, interactive, coauthored, text fantasy. Cybersex participants log on to computer networks, meet others in electronic space, and type sexually explicit messages to one another. Although many associate cybersex with adult CD-ROM technologies, interactive games, and pornographic images available in computer formats (see Robinson and Tamosaitis 1993), here we use the term

strictly to refer to erotic forms of real-time chat communication predominantly found on Internet Relay Chat, chat areas of commercial on-line services, multiuser games, and bulletin board services.

2. We must acknowledge that we cannot seamlessly resolve the interplay among self, body, and social world. Distinctions between self and body, body and social world, self and social world, are fundamentally wedded to the basic Cartesian mind-body distinction that permeates the social sciences, and relate to the general bifurcation between that which is "objective" and that which is "subjective."
3. In the context of this study, we are not concerned with whether cybersex is more or less like "real sex." In fact, we contend that distinctions between cybersex and "real sex" are far less concrete than are often assumed. To a certain extent, even corporeal sexual intercourse has always entailed elements of virtual experience. What is the point of sexy lingerie, romantic music, scented candles, and soft-spoken words if not to produce a "virtual" environment for the experience of "real" sexual pleasure?
4. The illusion of stability (i.e., "core self," "personality," etc.) is a social-psychological consequence of stable sets of social relations. If the self is an entity of pure meaning, then, like any system of meanings, it cannot possibly have a singular fixed form.
5. Certainly some cybersex relationships progress to off-line meetings. We acknowledge that these kinds of relationships bring about new dynamics as on-line body and self-games confront the corporeal reality of a living person. For this reason, some people may consider our analysis an "artificial" separation of an act (cybersex) from the relationship in which it is embedded (the ongoing progression of a relationship). However, not all on-line cybersex relationships progress to off-line meetings. In fact, we argue that the majority of on-line cybersexual encounters never result in off-line meetings. Yet *all* cybersex encounters occur on-line, and, at least initially, most cybersex encounters exist entirely in response to what occurs on-line. For this reason (in addition to the fact that our analysis seeks to focus on the dynamics of what occurs *on-line*), we do not believe that our overall analysis is in any way "artificial."
6. It should be noted that this keyword search only allowed for a maximum of 250 matching entries. Twelve bra sizes produced more than 250 matching entries. This means that there is no way to determine exactly how many persons actually report a bra size and the exact number of matches for the bra sizes that exceed the maximum 250. However, we feel confident of our interpretation of the data, since nine of the twelve bra sizes that exceeded the limits of 250 maximum matches were large (38-44) C or D cups.

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