CYBERBODIES: SELF AND BODILY

INTERACTIONS ONLINE

By

MARK A. DOUGLASS

Bachelor of Arts

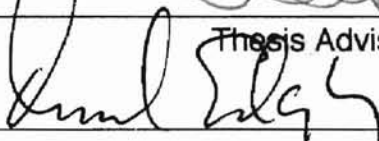University of Minnesota Morris

Morris, Minnesota

1993

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE
July, 1997

CYBERBODIES: SELF AND BODILY

INTERACTIONS ONLINE

Thesis Approved:

_____
Thesis Advisor

_____

_____
Thomas E. Shrwir

_____
Thomas C. Collins
Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project began almost three years ago in the Fall of 1994 as a joint effort between myself and Dr. Dennis Waskul. Our goal was to understand the social nature of computer mediated communication. Specifically we sought to frame the novel and rapidly growing world of online communication within established sociological theories. Since then countless hours have been invested by Dennis, myself, and others in pursuit of that goal. This thesis is an extension of some of the work that we have done.

I wish to extend sincere thanks first of all to my committee. Dr. Robert Lee Maril, my advisor, has helped me to understand the complexities of this thesis. Moreover he has been exceptionally influential in my understanding of what makes good sociology. Dr. Charles Edgley has dramatically shaped my framework of sociology and the world in general. He has taught me so much and I am very grateful for his contribution on this and so many other projects. Dr. Tom Shriver represents an exceptionally objective critic who I have come to respect very highly. He too has given me a great deal of support and encouragement which made this thesis possible. To all three of these great thinkers, I am indebted for their unique contributions to my education.

To Dr. Dennis Waskul, a friend and mentor, I am most thankful. He made graduate school a possibility and has supported my efforts since I met him over eight years ago. Dr. Waskul has shaped my perspectives and provided invaluable encouragement and enlightenment. I could never thank him enough. Our work together has expanded my knowledge and

hopefully contributed to the field of sociology.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Their constant encouragement is greatly appreciated. They have tolerated the difficulties associated with my goals and my aspirations with grace and exceptional patience. In particular I wish to thank my grandfather who has patiently waited for me to finish this thesis. His weekly support did more for me than I think he will ever know.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of sex, one generally thinks of bodies. Sex evokes images of bodies entwined in physical action. Rubbing, manipulating, touching, feeling, smelling, and tasting are part of what makes sex such a body oriented experience. Indeed sex necessitates bodily interaction. The legal definition of sex involves the connection of two bodies in some way or another. Sex and bodies go hand in hand.

While it might be conventional to think of sex as an embodied experience, it seems that a lot of sex is happening in places where bodies just can't go. Phone sex for example is one form of erotic activity where two bodies never touch. Another example is what has come to be called cybersex-- sex on the internet.

There are no bodies on the internet--one cannot touch another body. One may talk about or even describe touching other bodies on the internet, but there is no way to stick appendages from one's body through the screen to have it come out some other screen somewhere else. In this bodiless environment, sex happens without the body. People manage to meet and interact in sexual ways on the internet in the absence of any bodies present. As a bodiless environment, the internet, and cybersex in particular, is an excellent way to explore relationships between bodies, selves, and society.

As a disembodied activity, sex on the internet represents a challenge to traditional ways of thinking about sex and its relationship to the body. Moreover, the combination of sex and a bodiless environment challenges

1

traditional views of the body's relationship to self, and the self relationship with society. This thesis seeks to expand the understanding of these body-self-society relationships through exploration of sexual interactions online.

In order to accomplish this task it is first necessary to elaborate on the medium of computer communications. Second, it is important to provide some context to the act of sex on the net. This includes "where" communication takes place as well as where communication in general happens online. Thus, the following sections seek to clarify these elements before addressing issues of body-self-society relationships.

Genesis of Computer Mediated Communication

The vast network of computers that form the World Wide Web, or information super highway, is a product of attempts by researchers in the late sixties to produce a system of links between computers (Reid, 1994). In these early days of computing, computers were large and cumbersome, sometimes filling rooms. Since computers were exceptionally expensive and relatively scarce, use of computers was often shared by numerous people. Time on computers was precious, and often short. The advent of keyboards and monitors allowed several users to use the same computer at the same time, thus reducing time demands (Reid, 1994). This type of technology led to the development of technology that allowed people to share computer time with multiple locations. Thus an institution without a computer could gain remote access to a university computer. Moreover, by linking computers together, access to computers was shared with even larger groups of people.

Supported by government funding and research, computers across the country began to link together through phone lines, creating a network of

computers. However, not only computer time was shared. Information and files of various types were sent to other computers and users on different parts of the net. Just as it was possible to remotely use computers, it was possible to send information back and forth between computers. Eventually, the ability to send messages back and forth through this network emerged (Reid, 1994).

The development of this message sending capability forms the genesis of computer mediated interaction. It was now possible to communicate with others on the computer net. Soon, interpersonal communication became the majority of traffic on the computer network. In 1988 the first Inter-relay Chat program was developed in Sweden (Reid, 1991). This program allowed users on the computer net the opportunity to send messages. It allowed *real-time* communication to happen. Instead of sending electronic messages and waiting for a reply, this communications program allowed users to communicate directly to one another--the conversation in the form of text on the computer screen. This chat technology is the base of almost all social interaction on the internet and specifically the World Wide Web (WWW or just "web"), and commercial online service providers.

Chat areas in general form a type of electronic lounge where interactions occur and allow one to interact with different people. Conversations may range from the quotidian to esoteric and often includes casual conversation, sharing of religious or philosophical opinions, psychic readings, self-help groups, and occasionally a little sex. The range of the conversational topics and purposes are limited only by the imagination of the users.

In order to assist the user with locating the type of social interaction of interest, chat areas are conveniently divided into hundreds of "rooms." Rooms are areas where several participants gather to engage in some form of

interaction. Each room contains a different topic of conversation and is labeled with a title or short name. The name of the room denotes the general characteristics of the conversation or activities occurring within the room.

Some areas of chat, particularly those associated with online service providers like AOL, Prodigy, or CompuServe, have very straightforward lists of names for the various rooms available. A typical list of room names might include "Christian Chat," "Bikers Room," "NakdBBall," or "Sex4u". As such, one may assume that "Christian Chat" is a group of people discussing Christian issues, or people who identify themselves as Christians talking to each other. The name of the room essentially delineates what happens within the room as well as explains what is *not* in the room. For example, we can be reasonably confident that we will not find financial discussions occurring in a room titled, "KinkyFun." Needless to say, one has access to a variety of interactions, and is assisted in finding desired social interactions by the use of room names.

When one discovers a room with a topic of interest, one may enter the room. On each line of text, the person's screen name is followed by whatever they typed. Here is a fictitious example of what one might find:

    Card Freak: Anyone ever get a royal flush?
    ACES   : I did but it was with stacked deck
    WildOne   : My uncle did once.
    Card Freak: I just got a natural one.
    WildOne. : Wow.
    Aces   : Cool

Many online services allow one to send messages to another person, provided you know their screen name. This message is private, and can be read only by the person it was sent to. Hence, along with the conversation printed on the screen, several side conversations may occur as well. Side conversations appear on the screen in the same format described above. Each

side conversation takes up a small part of the screen, allowing both the side conversation and the main conversation to be displayed simultaneously. As such, one may participate in the main conversation displayed on the screen, as well as engage in one or more side conversations.

Having stated the form of how interaction takes place, it is equally important to discuss the internet in the broad sense of society. Usage of the internet has grown and continues to grow. Many Americans have signed in, logged on, and have begun exploring this new electronic frontier. According to Rose (1995) there are an estimated 60 million users currently logged on the net.

Today, the "net" represents a massive communications network where millions of people and trillions of pieces of information are exchanged through a network of computers. On the web there are many places and spaces where one can find information on virtually every topic--imaginable and unimaginable. One also finds services and products, groups and clubs, magazines and news providers, as well as home pages for many of the companies who sell these products. From advocacy groups to Walt Disney, the net, specifically the web, is a place where information is sifted and exchanged, and products and services are pawned for a credit card number.

Clever marketing and the relatively low costs of usage, surely represent some of the reasons behind the popularity of the net. Yet these are only a part of the allure for so many people. Since the very beginnings of networking computers, people have been content if not excited to just communicate (Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995). There is something appealing, it seems, for people to interact online. It seems that "people are willing to pay money just to connect"(Stone, 1995:96).

While the internet represents a chance for millions of people to

communicate, and a way of transmitting information, it is more than just a neutral delivery system. With this new technology comes new ways of packaging and communicating familiar things. For example, news, stock quotes, and magazines (to name a few) reappear in a novel form online. They no longer appear in the same bland familiar way. Rather they are packaged and converted somehow through the medium. Certainly the stock quotes left Wall Street in the same way they usually do. Yet by the time they get to someone's business or home through the computer, they are entirely different. The numbers are the same, but the way in which they are received and perceived are entirely different. Granted the content of these items remains the same (stock quotes are stock quotes), but the format in which they're presented somehow changes the nature of the experience. The new technology of the computer and the net allows one to experience stock quotes and many other things in a way that was never before possible.

This experiential re-exposure of the same content reverberates throughout the net--perhaps most profoundly in the communications and connectivity. In the same vein, communication with someone through the medium of the computer represents a new and novel way of communicating altogether. It is not just that people are willing to pay money to just connect. If computer mediated communication was so similar to phone communication, one would expect a lot fewer people paying a lot less money to get online. It might be that people are not just paying to chat back and forth, they are paying to experience the same communications pressed through a new medium. As if the technology were a fun house mirror, people line up and see how things 'look' through this new technological environment.

It is not surprising that as people began to experience familiar elements

of life through the novel and new medium of computer mediated communication, that the content of sex should arise. Without question, finding the topic of sex on the net is quite easy. The content of sex on the net is no different than the content of sex in videos, magazines, and other mediums of erotica (Waskul, Edgley, and Douglass, 1997). Erotic images and narratives embracing sexual fantasies are available to all who will consume them. The images of scantily clothed bodies are not so different from those glossy spreads one might find in a sex magazine. Like elsewhere, sex appears on the net with the thrill of the naughty and taboo, exciting and unseen. Yet, something about the technology--the medium in this case--is not just a product of a new technology, not just a new way of experiencing sexual materials, but a new way of interacting all together.

There is nothing new about the prurient relationship between technology and sexual materials. Sex has always been represented by the latest medium for transmission. For example telephones are used for phone sex, VCR's are used to watch pornographic movies, and portable video cameras are more than likely used for sexual intentions. Since technology is morally neutral, every technological innovation presents both deviant and respectable possibilities framed within the particular idiom of that medium (Edgley and Kiser 1979). Sex on the net is made possible by the same technologies that provide business e-mail, educational opportunities for children, and telecommuting--just the same as phone sex is made possible by the same technologies that allow persons to call distant family members on holidays. In all likelihood, the controversy that surrounds the combination of sex and computer-networking technologies is more related to the broadly diffused nature of "the Net," issues of access, and difficulties in restriction, and has little to do with technology or sex itself.

Particularly interesting is the topic of cybersex, which refers to a form of interactive, co-authored text based fantasy. In short, participants log on to computer networks, meet others in electronic space and engage in sexually explicit exchanges with each other. The exchange stimulates the libido and challenges the typist's skill. And while following the norms of corporeal sex (never in public and thus not easy to see), such activities happen throughout the net wherever the opportunity to "connect" exists. Where there are people on the net, there is the possibility for cybersex.

Yet in the bodiless environment of the net, how can cybersex happen? Where do bodies fit in? How does one convey the startling array of sensual stimuli that is associated with sex through a few keystrokes on the keyboard? These are elemental questions to ask, but only the beginning. How does the medium of computer mediated communication alter and transform this experience--not just of sexual activity--but of interaction itself? Marshall McLuhan (1964) once indicated that the same content pressed through a different medium is not the same at all. And as these familiar items are transmitted and transformed through computer technology they become something new altogether.

What are the implications of cybersexual encounters for the participants and for the rest of us? It is a unique situation indeed where we can talk to someone across the world, and never leave our house or office, and where bodies are hidden and de-emphasized functionaries in a sexual encounter. All of these activities represent new ways of using new technology. And how they are used for such activities reflects something about the way in which one perceives the technology.

The thesis seeks to describe and analyze the nature and form of computer mediated interactions in the form of cybersexual encounters. An

attempt is made to show that the form of interaction associated with computer mediated communication challenges the traditionally conceived relationship between bodies and selves. To highlight the changing relationship between bodies and selves it will explore the production and consumption of sexual materials on the internet as it relates to cybersex.

To achieve the goal of understanding the complexities of cybersex and the emergence of selves and bodies online it is necessary to consider the theoretical foundations of these terms and ideas. Using a framework of symbolic interaction and dramaturgy, this thesis seeks an understanding of cybersex. Examining cybersex in the context of these theories, this thesis shall highlight the relationship between bodies, selves, and society. The next chapter addresses these fundamental theoretical dimensions necessary for this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Considerations of the Self

From a common sense perspective the body is a receptacle for the personality. In this sense, the body is a container of sorts in which the self/selves exist. Most people feel that the personality is a core list of characteristics or traits that shape their behavior as they interact with others. Essentially each characteristic is like a lego (those infamous plastic connectable blocks) which can be put together to perform various functions in various situations. Each person can put their lego-like traits together any way they want, but they only have so many legos or character traits to select from. Furthermore, some legos may be used more frequently and more prominently. Personality, from this common sense perspective is essentially the sum total of all the legos. The body in this view serves as the box in which things are put together.

Legos aside, the body has a distinct role in the emergence of a self. Quite simply, if one has a body, one automatically get a self thrown-in as one interacts with others (Stone, 1996). That is to say, for every body there is necessarily a self at any given time. This conception almost seems to stem from the idea of physics. The physics model of matter suggests that different matter may not occupy the same space at the same time. Similarly, only one self may occupy the same body at the same time. While physics has abandoned this model (at certain temperatures and conditions different matter may indeed occupy the same space at the same time), the same is not

true for conceptions of persons.

Sociology, on the other hand, specifically symbolic interactionism, posits the body/self relationship within a different analytical framework of understanding. First, the self represents fluid and emergent system of meaning. The self is that which is an object unto itself (Mead, 1934). It is an object whose meaning is created within a dialogue between itself as subject (e.g. "I am...") and object (e.g. "what happens to me"). More simply stated by William James (1890) and Charles Cooley (1902), the self is validated in any experience which contains the pronouns I, me, or mine in its statement.

As such, the self is a process of interplay between the perception of oneself as subject and object. One may perceive oneself as the subject of action, or as acting upon something. And one may view oneself as acted upon, or the object of action. This cuts to the core of the pragmatists' theories and the heart of symbolic interactionism. Moreover, a dialogue may ensue between these two different conceptions of self: at one juncture one is actor, in another dimension one is acted upon, or the object of those actions. Suffice it to say that one may even act upon oneself. In sum, Blumer (1966:234) expresses:

> "...that a human being is an object to himself, The human being may perceive himself, have conceptions of himself, communicate with himself and act toward himself. As these types of behavior imply, the human being may become the object of his own action."

It is important to note that selves do not exist as solitary, phenomenological elements. On the contrary, the very processes of self are grounded and situated within interaction. The self as subject and the self as object are products of interaction with others. While the established self may engage in a conversation or dialogue between self as object and self as subject, the essence of the self (that is the perceptions of oneself as object or subject) is

11

based in social interaction.

Since perceptions of the self are verified in and through interaction with others, the self is situational. In acting a certain way in a certain situation with a particular other, meaning and interpretation of one's self emerges. The way in which the self is presented becomes highly variable due to the needs of diverse interactions and variability of situational requirements (Stryker, 1985). For example, the self one might present to one's spouse is different in character than the self one presents to one's parents, or coworkers. In each interaction, one presents oneself in a way that is conducive to the purpose of the interaction or situation (Goffman, 1956).

Thus self is a fluid entity of meaning. A self can change or be changed as individuals move 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 role to one person, and something else to another. Any doubt of this is soon shed as one considers the stories one might tell to different people upon a return from a trip to a foreign land. Surely the recounting of the adventures one tells one's friends would be quite different from the ones that are told for one's parents or even one's spouse. To one person you present and maintain a certain image of self that may not agree or may even conflict with another image you present to someone else.

Indeed from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the widely accepted view of self is that which is multiple and situationally fluid. This perception is rooted in the beginnings of social psychology (Stryker, 1985). As Stryker (Stryker, 1985:40) states, persons have as many selves as there are others who respond to them. A novel or at least separately identifiable self is engaged in every situation and interaction. The view of multiple selves emerging situationally is similarly shared by Chad Gordon and Kenneth Gergen (1968),

12

Robert Lifton, (1993) and others (see Stryker, 1985).

The self is the meaning of a human organism. The self is a symbolic referent of an individual human entity. This meaning emerges only through interrelationships with others in the context of particular social situations, roles, and/or encounters. In other words, a self emerges only as a person interacts with others and the meaning(s) of actions are transferred to the person. The body, on the other hand, is not only a system of meaning. The body is an empirically verifiable and objectively real entity. Unlike a self, bodies move from one physical location to another, manifesting themselves in objective and measurable qualities as they function and occupy space.

Theoretical Considerations of the Body

The popular mechanistic view of the body to self relationship is a powerful world view that even lingers to this day (Stone, 1995). In this framework, bodies are perceived as machines whose interrelated parts compose a larger whole. Changes in the body necessarily affect the output of the body. All action is really reaction to some stimulations of the body. All behavior can be traced to some form of change in the machine known as the body.

However, with the development of psychology and a significant paradigm shift, the dynamics of the self / body relationship and the conception thereof became more focused on the idea of the mind. Freud brought into the vocabulary of the person ideas about brains, and specifically minds. The view of action and behavior reversed itself, suggesting that behavior and action originates in the mind. Foucault's work (mentioned earlier) also traces this shift from one of body as source of action to self or

mind as political entity. This view is essentially a reversal of the causal construction of action. In the mechanistic view the body caused the mind to act. In this newer scheme, the mind causes the body to act.

An example of this change in the relationship between mind and body is reflected in Murray Davis' view of masturbation. As Davis (1983:142-3) illustrates, the view of sixteenth century society suggests masturbation as having physical consequences for the body:

> "Masturbation hinders growth...fainting fits and epilepsies, consumption, loss of erection and premature ejaculation, and infertility...Female masturbators suffer from imbecility...hysteric fits, barrenness and [infertility]"

However, with the advent of the enlightenment the emphasis shifts towards perspectives of the mind. The focus becomes the mental consequences of masturbation such as insanity, or other forms of mental illness (Davis, 1983). The body represents the container of the self, as previously stated. More importantly, the body is connected to the self. What may have been viewed as separate status between body and self now comes to be viewed as very much connected.

The body has an important role in experiences of selfhood. It is the physical existence of the body to which we associate (or affix) systems of meaning that collectively comprise the self. Without a body, there is nothing to associate or affix any stable set of meanings that we may refer to as a comprehensible person. Therefore, as traditionally conceived, selves are contained within or affixed to a body. The self, on the other hand, is not a "thing" at all. The self is symbolic referent--a fluid system of meanings that refers to the person.

In spite of the fluidity of selfhood, the fixed and verifiable existence of a physical body has always posed limits on the range of multiple selfhood that

an individual may enact. Although the human body may be decorated, and otherwise altered along a seemingly infinite range--each communicating elements of wide array of self enactments--the physical body remains an important component of the self-social world relationship. We know, for example, that to have a body which is physically male or female will exert a strong influence on the range of potential self-enactments available to the person. Furthermore, regardless of how the body is altered or decorated, these transformations are physical and therefore have a situationally fixed form. For example, to undergo a sex change operation allows the individual to change the fixicity of gender, but only to another fixed form. Even with transvestites, who decorate themselves so the physical body reflects an other-gender self-enactment, these cosmetic alterations are physical in nature and always situationally fixed. The transvestite may only alter the body through application and removal of objectively-real, physical-cosmetic alterations that remain fixed until these alterations are removed. Self enactments may vary greatly, but the physical existence of one's body poses limits and socio-cultural mandates to the range of individual multiple selfhood.

Clearly, a body is *there* as an important and fundamental element of selfhood. The body is instrumental to one's sense of being, who we think we are, and what others attribute to us. As Michael Heim states:

> "Being a *body* constitutes the principal behind our separateness from one another and behind our personal presence. Our bodily existence stands at the forefront of personal identity and individuality (1991:74)."

Like the self, the meaning of the body as an object is socially constructed and negotiated in various situations and interactions. Thus the body represents both an object whose meaning is situationally defined, and a necessary agent to that interaction where such meaning arises. This is not to say that the body makes indications to itself and can perceive itself as object

15

and subject. Rather it is an object towards which the self may make indications. In the process of interaction with the self and others, the meaning of the body is negotiated and emergent. But, because the body is always present in the interaction to some degree or another (even online it performs the removed task of typing, seeing the words on the screen, etc), it's meaning is subject to reinterpretation and renegotiation in every encounter.

While the body is an object, it must be viewed as a very special object with very significant meaning. It's meanings are constantly negotiated in one form or another. As agent to all action, it is subject to redefinition in all situations, though not necessarily. Strauss (1993:120) points out that "since the body as an object is constantly in interplay with the self within action, it follows that body symbolization is literally embedded in every action and interaction." As such a dynamically changing object (in the sense of it's meaning), that must certainly alter the self's interpretations of action and self. That is, if the body's meaning is so truly dynamic, so too then is the self's meaning--not independently, but dialectically through society. In other words body and self couldn't be more connected and inseparable.

The role of the body in the triadic self-body-society (other) process may be acute or benign--though always within this continuum. Awareness of bodily actions or overt control of bodily actions may vary depending on the needs of the situation (Strauss, 1993). Not all situations require immediate self conscious attention to one's body. In fact, for some situations the self may not intentionally or consciously refer to the body at all. The actions or movements of the body may simply slip out of the direct awareness of the self. It is common for persons to become "engrossed" in certain actions (Strauss 1993). In other words, it is common for an action (or series of actions) to be so routine that they do not necessitate the immediate and conscious attention of

the self toward the body. There are numerous body actions that often do not require the attention of the self. For example, brushing teeth and putting on shoes are among the many "inescapably habitual" (Cohen and Taylor 1992) actions that are easily "engrossed," and rarely necessitate the immediate involvement of one's self. "During the skilled automatic action, the body is an unnoted but completely necessary agent. Yet as an object, it it temporarily out of the field of consciousness (Strauss 1993:115)." In these kinds of situations the body may be little more than a remote agent within the processes of action or interaction. In short, the body is always a necessary player in the communication game, but the importance of its role may vary from paramount to virtually absent.

In summary, the body is the grounded referent of selfhood. "'The' body is a necessary condition for all of actions and interaction. 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 (Strauss, 1993:109)." The body is a medium for the self--an object to the self which is acted upon to communicate, and acted on by society. It is necessary to consider the role of society and social construction of meaning of the body as it relates to self and body.

Bodies, Selves, and Society

The body is not only a fundamental element of selfhood, it is also *the* unambiguous core of taken-for-granted conceptions of a comprehensible person and politically recognized citizen (Stone, 1995). Self-to-body relationships are always understood and interpreted within the context of broader body-to-social world relationships. For example, Michel Foucault

(1979) suggests that body-to-self relationships were altered significantly in conjunction with the emergence of capitalism. By using social punishment as the fulcrum of his argument, Foucault notes that before the late nineteenth century punishment took the form of abuse to the body--hanging, burning, decapitating, etc. With capitalism, punitive measures that focus on the mind and experiences of self being emerged. Today a prisoners' body is well taken care of. The goal of incarceration is not to punish the body, but to restrict freedom, liberty, and thus inflict suffering to the self (Shilling,1979). In short, capitalism brought about a new discourse for body-to-social world relationships that induced a change from bodily oriented perceptions (i.e. the body is the whole of the person) to a minded orientation (the mind is the whole of the self).

Foucault's observation suggest that experiences of selfhood are caught in the precarious margins between body-to-social world relationships. That is, selfhood is negotiated according to prevailing interpretive discourses, in the cracks between the relationship of one's body to one's social world. To support of this general orientation, Bryan Turner (1984) suggests that the function of bodies in society is grounded in elements of control. In his theory of "bodily order" Turner contends with the Hobbesian problem of order by positing the body as that which society can exert control. According to Turner, every social system utilizes mechanisms of social control to deal with "the problem of the body." These "problems" include:

1. The reproduction of populations through time.
2. The restraint of desire as an interior body problem.
3. The regulation of populations in space.
4. The representation of bodies in social space as a task facing the surface of 'exterior' of bodies

From Turner's perspective, "problems" such as these are controlled and moderated by society in the form of values, norms, codes, marriage practices,

etc. Thus, Turner (like Foucault) presents the body as an entity that is *acted upon* by societal forces, which shapes and potentially changes the way people use their bodies.

The meaning of the body may be socially constructed, but there is still a mass of tissue and cells that cannot be ignored. As Becker (1973) and Shilling (1993) suggest, physical bodies do age, they become sick, they suffers injuries, they become pregnant, and they die--these kinds of occurrences do have profound impact on human actors. In short, although the experience of selfhood emerges, is negotiated, and validated as one's body enters the scene of interaction in the context of preestablished socio-cultural systems of meanings, this occurs in a *triadic* body-to-self-to-social world relationship. This triadic relationship is most vividly examined in Goffman's (1968) analysis of stigma, in which the body plays a significant role in the negotiation of self in everyday existence, in lieu of socio-cultural systems of ill-meaning.

While it is convenient to think of the body and self as two separate entities or even processes, this is not the type of relationship implied when we speak of the mind and body. The body and mind are not opposites or even binaries for that matter. Rather the distinction is based more on a dialectic relationship. The body and self are necessarily intertwined. The process of self interacts with the body in light of socially constructed meanings of body (Glasner, 1990). In other words, the body is an object whose meaning is socially constructed and necessarily connected symbolically to the self.

Strauss suggests that bodies are necessarily agents of all action and interaction (Strauss, 1993). A self cannot emerge in the absence of the corporeal physical body. This absence does not refer to the physical *presence* of the the body proper. It means that the body is a necessary agent in the creation of self. More simply put, life, or the presence of a living being must

19

exist for a self to emerge (Strauss, 1993). Somewhere in the interaction equation there must always be a physical and tangible body. Note that the importance and prominence of the body in any interaction may very considerably.

Along the same lines, bodies serve as mediums for the communication between selves (Strauss, 1993). A body represents the medium through which all information passes--either incoming or outgoing. That which one sees, smells, tastes, touches, hears--all that which may be empirically sensed, is first sensed by the physiological receptors of the body before it is interpreted and processed through and within the self. All that which the process of the self constructs and communicates must similarly pass through the body in some form or another. Such communication is mediated through speech, touch, or any variety of body originated gestures in a variety of symbolic ways. This is to say, the body works with the self and through the self as a medium through which the self emerges.

More to the point, there are no selves without bodies. In any case, the body serves as a needed component of both the taking in of sensory data and the expression of the self. The role that the body plays in interaction may be more or less in the realm of awareness to the self (Strauss, 1993), and all action requires the body or some part of the body (Strauss, 1993).

Strauss' argument may be slightly overstated in the sense that it implies that physical bodies *must* be present for selves to emerge. Of course this is not true. If such were the case, then how do selves emerge between pen pals whose bodies never achieve presence in the relationship? Perhaps it is best to frame Strauss' perspective in the sense that physical bodies must always have some agent role in the interaction. In other words, the presence of the body is not always necessary, but it always has some function in the relationship

whether that role be prominent as in the case of face to face interaction, or more hidden as in the case of letter writing or online. That is, one cannot develop a self without the body being "along for the ride" in some capacity.

Another view of the body is presented by Stone (1995) who posits the body within the social definition of person, or as an identifiable entity. Selves are situationally grounded, but there is that combination of selves and body that common sense refers to as the person. In this sense, person is that collection of situated selves and the body to which those selves are symbolically associated. But just how does society, legally and pragmatically define a person?

Stone (1995) suggests that a legal person or "fiduciary subject" is composed of collections of physical and discursive elements. On one hand, the very tangible, empirically verifiable, corporeal and physical body. The body can said to possess presence in the sense that it takes up space, and can be measured in a variety of ways. For simplicity's sake, one might say it is able to be located, or is *findable*. In this sense the nature of the political entity lies in its geographical position. One asserts citizenship on the nature of it's location within legally defined parameters of space. Two hundred years ago this may have been well enough sufficient for declaring a person a citizen, so to speak.

But body alone is no longer sufficient for political entity status. Location discourses extend beyond the simple Cartesian geographies. The discursive element "is produced by means of texts, such as legal, medical, and psychological description" (Stone, 1995:41). While the body may be seen, touched, shot, moved, et cetra, the self or that which might be compared to the self is verified in the presence of and produced through the actions of text such as birth certificates, addresses, social security cards and the like. Such identifiers go beyond the mere identification of body to establish a sense of

presence--where a body is. Stone (1995:90) states that such identifiers produce a "biological unit that is not only measurable and quantifiable but also understood in an essential way as being *in place*."

Much of who we are in a sociopolitical sense is the bodies and the discourses associated with those bodies. Acts and actions committed by selves or bodies are necessarily warranted to each other. Self affects body, and body affects self. But it is important to realize that they are mutually dependent in terms of accountability. The obscene phone caller cannot be arrested without his body. The police do not arrest selves, they arrest bodies.

However, in the digital social worlds of online environments there are no corporeal bodies. In spite of millions of participants, and all the smut that supposedly permeates "the Net," there are no physical bodies--only symbolic representations of bodies. In these digital environments bodies are transformed into pure symbol--representations, images, descriptive codes, and words of expectations, appearance, and action. In online communication environments participants are literally disembodied. Although a body is usually necessary in order to access and interact with others online, no physically verifiable or empirically measurable bodies exist *anywhere* in cyberspace.

In these online social worlds, the activities of participants and experiences of self are neither contained nor are they affixed to corporeal bodies. In these environments both bodies and selves exist as socially constructed representations--sets of meanings that emerge in a process of interaction. In lieu of the important role of the body to traditional conceptions of selfhood, the disembodied nature of online environments presents an ideal condition for the examination of body-self-social world relationships.

Because the emergence and development of the self can be historically followed through changes in the means by which it is produced (Stone 1995; Gergen 1991) the transgression of the body, as made manifest by forms of online interaction, is a techno-social development suitable to the examination of contemporary experiences of personhood. Furthermore, because sex is among the most embodied of all imaginable activities--an activity that necessitates an interplay between bodies--it is an excellent form of social discourse of the examination of body-self-social world relationships as made manifest by computer-mediated forms of leisure social interaction.

This study examines the very means by which the experiences of "self" and "body" are produced and operate in online social environments of a sexual nature. In short, this study looks into the context of cybersex, but focuses on the negotiation of self and body construction between individuals. Emergence of selfhood, online leisure situations, others with whom one interacts, and the physical bodies that may or may not be grounded in an emerging matrix of virtual experience, are elements which this study attempts to understand.

Virtual Sex and the Problem of Reality

Numerous scholars have discussed the difficulties in assessing what is "real" with regards to the unique situations posed by electronic media (Chayko 1993; Altheide and Snow 1991; Eco 1986), and scholars of computer-mediated environments have noted how these problems are compounded in online environments (Rheingold 1991; Turkle 1995; Stone 1995; Jones 1995). Although it has become common practice to refer to online environments as "virtual," in spite of heightened public interest and considerable hype,

"virtual reality" is a term lacks clear definition and understanding. Like its cousin term "reality," discussions of "virtual reality" often boarder the narrow margin between confusion and clarity.

Concrete distinctions between "reality" and "virtual reality" are not easily formulated. However, the examination of virtual experience lays at the heart of this study and necessitates some discussion. For the purposes of this thesis, Brenda Laurel (1993) offers a productive stance on the problem of framing virtuality:

> "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 pp. 8).

Like the sociological position on "social reality," Laurel suggests that virtuality is not something "out there." To Laurel, virtual "things" are persuasive representations that allow persons to respond to them as if they were physically real. From this perspective, the reality of virtual "things" is emergent from interactions with the representation, not a quality of the "thing" itself. In short, virtuality has a pragmatic reality that is not unlike social reality.

Like elements of social reality, the "things" of virtual reality may not have an objective or empirical manifestation. Similar to the reality of sociological terms like "society," "norms," and "values," virtual "things" are not necessarily physically real entities that exist "out there," yet they pose a persuasive representation that exerts real influence and allows people to respond to them as if they are real. Like elements of the social world, the things of virtual environments become real in their consequences. By responding to virtual things as if they were real, they assume a pragmatic and experiential reality that transcends the frame of the empirically real.

24

The reality problem posed by online environments is only a problem insofar as we are unable to abandon the traditional frame of the empirically real. In traditional frames of reference, reality is defined by the empirically verifiable. Traditionally speaking, that which is empirically verifiable (or at least subject to measurement) is given the privileged ontological status as "real." Founded on concepts of "objective empiricism," "physical evidence," "proof," and the implicit validity of the scientific method, this approach to reality is deeply rooted in a history that cannot be separated from the emergence of science and the general acceptance of scientific evidence as the ultimate means by which "truth" is accepted or rejected. However, in the context of online social worlds, the only empirical "things" that exist are the wires, chips, and plastic that comprise the technology of the medium--all else exists as symbolic representation.

By likening the reality of online environments to social reality, it may be suggested that the "reality problem" posed by virtual situations is overstated. It would seem that the term "virtual" merely refers to "things," situations, and experiences that have been dislocated from the frame of the empirically real--they do not necessarily draw referent nor are they necessarily committed to that which can be empirically verified. Considering this, an honest assessment would concede that cybersex is no less virtual than phone sex (or masturbation in general). The reality of "virtual communities" is no less empirically real than the constructs of "society" or "culture." The "things" that appear on the Net are no less virtual than the "things" that appear on television, or any other mediated channel of communication. The personae that are portrayed in online chat environments are no less real than the selves that we portray in everyday life. In short, we may borrow from Goffman (1959) and suggest that the reality of online environments is a

product of a scene that comes off, not the cause of it or a quality of the scene itself.

It would seem that the "reality problem" of online environments has in some cases unfortunately diverted attention from other issues. In the context of this study, it is not concerned with whether cybersex is more or less like "real sex." In fact, we would contend that the distinction between cybersex and "real sex" is a false binary distinction with which to begin. Hasn't sex 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 sexual pleasure? What is important to this study is that online environments dislocate the physical body from the context of social interaction and experience. By removing the frame of the empirically real, online environments allow for the enactment of new forms of selfhood, and potentially reveal new relationships between bodies, selves, and social situations. What is the relationship between bodies, selves, and social interaction when the enactment of selfhood is freed from the empirical shell of the body?

In sum, the existence of self is predicated on the relationship between self and the body and self in society. This trialectic relationship of body-self-society is what this thesis will explore through examination and understanding of cybersexual activities. Given this construction of self, this study will look at how relationships between the three elements of body, self, and society are altered and changed because of the disembodied form of online communication.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This research examines the nature of online interaction using cybersexual encounters as a form of discourse to elaborate important relationships between bodies and selves. This research is exploratory. As such, it seeks to analyze a novel setting within an analytical framework missing from much of the current research in the area. The use of the symbolic interactionist perspective, particularly within the frame of dramaturgy is incorporated in order to achieve the exploration of these issues.

The online world differs significantly from the physical or empirical world. Metaphors of physicality litter the online environment. Web, net, cyberspace, rooms, pages, addresses, surfing the web, and sites are just a few common terms which imply tangible physical places. However, it must be understood that such terms serve as metaphors for various activities and interactions that occur in a spaceless context. There is no place one can go to in a physical sense via one's computer.

Given that the entire realm of cyberspace is nothing short of metaphor, such research methods and considerations must recognize this in research design. The same guidelines and expectations of research in physical places does not always neatly make the transformation to metaphor of cyberspace. Some underlying assumptions of research techniques do not apply, or apply only in a loose analogy. One must also carefully reconsider those elements of privacy and the intrusive nature of empirical research within a novel and spaceless environment. This thesis shall consider these concerns within the

methodological framework of naturalistic inquiry.

Naturalistic Inquiry

This study incorporates online interviews as the primary source of data. Interviews were not conducted in the context of cybersexual activities. Nor did such interviews incorporate the observation or participation in cybersexual activities. Cybersex serves as a lens to direct larger considerations of the relationship between selves and bodies. As such, this study develops an understanding of the meaning of such activities from the perspective of participants, not the perspective of the act itself.

Selection of participants represents a challenge in a spaceless environment. There is no real place to "go and find" physical, empirically verifiable people. Moreover, it is difficult to identify groups or communities within the dynamic and border-less frontier of the online world. As such, attempting to represent the population of people online is difficult if not impossible. With this in mind, the attempt to attain a representative picture of cybersex follows from the naturalistic approach or naturalistic interactionism (Denzin, 1989). This methodological paradigm follows seven principles or directives, each of which will be outlined in the context of this study.

The first of these principles embraces the combining of meaning that participants have of acts with the acts themselves (Denzin, 1989). The meaning of cybersex and similar activities arises from the perceptions of the participants. Understanding of the phenomena can only come from understanding how participants create, merge, and interpret various exchanges of the symbols which is then constructed to mean cybersex. This means the research may seek to understand how participants perceive others'

views of their activities, as well as their own perceptions.

Secondly, it is important to adapt the view point of the participant (Denzin, 1989). Cybersex and the nature of the relationship between selves and bodies reflect a sociological viewpoint. This study strives to understand how participants navigate the complexities of interaction when symbolic communication is limited (in bandwidth) and creation of selves are dynamic within the situation. Data reflects how participants perceive the difficulties associated with selves and bodies. Do participants even see this dichotomy? The key in this principle is taking the perspective of the participant as he/or she asks these questions or resolves these issues in their own mind.

Thirdly, these participant based interpretations and meanings must be related to the groups and interactions from which they emerge (Denzin, 1989). Considerations on this dimension include how meanings are negotiated and come to exist. In other words, how do participants come to an understanding of what is going on. How are meanings communicated from person to person over time? This stretches beyond what meanings are constructed about cybersex. It includes the interaction that occurs about and around the concept of cybersex. This is to say, how are these meanings negotiated within groups outside and external to the actual act of cybersex?

A fourth principle involves the recording of the context of interaction (Denzin, 1989). The context and environment of the interaction is paramount in online research. The context is just as negotiated as anything else. Not only is the meaning of acts and events negotiated, so too is the context and environment. The technology remains the same, but the interpretation and social construction of reality surrounding acts online is dynamic and emergent. In this study, particular attention focuses on the relationship of technology as a medium / environment and the meaning provided by

participants to that environment as well as the interactions themselves.

Fifth, methods incorporated should represent potential for change, process, and stability (Denzin, 1989). The interviewing process planned for this study will allow such interpretations of static and dynamic change as reflected in the awareness of such variables by the participants. In the context of this research attention focuses on the changes that participants may progress through as part of the social processes surrounding cybersex. Potential questions focus on how does the neophyte participant--newly exposed to cybersex--develop meanings of acts and how these meanings change over time.

A sixth dimension demands viewing the research act as "an instance of symbolic interaction"(Denzin, 1989). Meaning emerges not just between participants, but between participants and researcher as well. In addition, meaning emerges between researcher and data interpretation as well, so to speak. To guard and protect against poor interpretations of the act of cybersex, open and frequent communication with participants will occur. That is, frequent discussion with the participants will help to ensure that a picture of cybersexual encounters shall emerge that is grounded in the perceptions of the participants. It will not be constructed through armchair theorizing nor shall it appear as a foreign or peculiar representation of the act as seen through the eyes of the respondents. Through negotiation of meanings in frequent encounters with many participants a consistent and reliable definition of the situation from a research perspective may emerge.

And finally, it is important to incorporate the use of sensitizing concepts (Denzin, 1989). As such, no concepts are really defined or operationalized outside of the understanding/meaning that the participants attach to the concept (Denzin, 1989). For example, an operational definition of

what **cybersex** *is* has not yet been provided. Nor will it be provided until an understanding of its parameters is accessed in the field. This is similar to Goffman's term "stigma" which he developed over the course of his research (Denzin, 1989). Allowing concepts to emerge within the research and analysis process allows for a grounded understanding of not just the concepts themselves, but the research questions as well.

Sampling and Selection

Representative sampling online is a difficult if not impossible task in the traditional sense. There are obvious problems with tapping an ever changing population where there is nothing physical to count. Selves are visceral constructions emergent within the situation, and as such impossible to "count." Like popcorn in a popcorn machine, selves emerge only to be removed again. While there always seems to be popcorn in the machine, it's never the same popcorn as before. In a virtual world of electronics there is nothing "real" to hold constant. Furthermore, location discourses such as addresses, phone numbers, and other sorts of identifying elements frequently used in sampling have no counterparts in the online world, or are too difficult to access. Even locations where interactions may take place are fluid and ever changing. Web sites and other areas come and go within months, days, and minutes. For all these reasons, the accurate counting of people online is not possible.

But such considerations serve to further justify the use of techniques in line with the methodological guidelines previously mentioned. This study adapts the sampling design suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba outline four characteristics of research

sampling in line with naturalistic inquiry. These dimensions serve as the basis of the sampling and selection design of this study.

The first of these guidelines rests on the idea that preplanned or "a priori specification" of the sample presumes too much and yields to the bias of generalization sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In traditional sampling techniques, a homogeneous sampling frame is drawn often to fit the needs of the researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that such a process conveniently eliminates confounding or conflicting situational data. As samples are drawn to reflect homogeneity for purposes of better inferences, the contextual elements of the sample grow more similar (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study begins with the assumption that the context of interactions are paramount to understanding cybersex. There is no attempt to pre-characterize the population before research begins. Just the opposite, the goal of naturalistic inquiry is maximum variation--to attain as many diverse elements of the research phenomena for exploration and analysis.

Second, the goal of maximum variation is best met with a selection procedure that allows successive participants to be chosen in order to "test, and fill in information"(Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Each participant serves to fill in gaps in the data, to obtain contrasting information, or to extend data that already exists (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this study participants were selected within the scope of this methodological goal.

Third, as data collection and concurrent analysis ensues, the sampling techniques was continually refocused (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). That is, different respondents with different perspectives were sought out as dictated by the needs of the ongoing research. When working hypothesis emerged, the selection of sample units was refined as necessary to accommodate relevancy. This involved several stages of shifting and changing parameters regarding

32

the selection of participants.

Finally, this research will follow the principle of *selection to the point of redundancy* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Rather than trying to "guess" how many **participants** are necessary to form relevant conclusions, sampling continued until no new information arose from the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). When no new information was derived from the interviewing process, then the data collection phase was complete, and concluding analysis may begin.

Thus naturalistic sampling embraces the idea of informational cues (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). That is, the design and techniques of sampling and selection are guided by what informational needs exist. The goal, as such, is not to produce statistically relevant generalizations, but rather maximize information and thus understanding. As such this method is flexible and dynamic--necessary characteristics for online research.

This still leaves the question of how or where one might begin to find potential participants. Cybersex occurs in diverse online locations. As such, research of cybersex occurred in various areas within the Internet, World Wide Web, and other online service providers. There are areas where people gather for a variety of reasons, one of which is to find a partner (or several) to engage in cybersex. These online areas are analogous to bars or taverns or other similar meeting places. On the world wide web, these chat areas may be associated with a particular service provider as part of the product the service provides. In other services lists of chat areas or rooms are labeled according to their content.

It is within these electronic meeting places that participants are asked if they wish to voluntarily participate in this project by answering a few questions. If they chose to participate, they were given a brief description of

the research, and an opportunity for the potential respondent to ask questions. Each respondent was told that their screen name will not be used, but some of their responses might be used or quoted. Before the questions began, the respondents were asked if they wished to continue and were reminded that they could withdraw at any time.

This technique has been used with success in several previous works (Waskul & Douglass, 1996; Waskul, Edgley, Douglass, 1997). This approach appears less intrusive than randomly selecting people from random locations online. Moreover this technique removes any ambiguity of the researcher's intentions for all those present in a chat area.

The selection of rooms and chat areas was based on the above principles with one exception. Some diversity of potential respondents was attempted through selection of chat areas with various topics. Specifically rooms involving both heterosexual and homosexual, male oriented and female oriented, and various "fetish" type of rooms. For example, rooms involving different types of sexual activities such as bondage, foot fetishes, alternative lifestyles, and other sex oriented rooms were selected with the intent of finding as much possible variation in perspectives. The purpose behind such selections were to help gather a variety of potential participants and avoid exclusion of any category. No claim to random selection is made here, nor are the potential biases of such a procedure ignored.

In this study thirty-seven interviews were conducted over the course of several months. Initially eight interviews were completed and then analyzed for content. In this process, responses to various questions were analyzed. Patterns emerged from the responses and were categorized into groupings of like responses. Once the responses were categorized, the patterns were compared and studied to identify not only existing trends but potential areas

where further questioning was necessary. In cases were questions were yielding poor, or unclear responses, revisions to question asking techniques were made.

A second and more thorough analysis following the same principles was done after approximately eighteen interviews were collected. The process of analysis was similar to the above. In addition, responses and response categories were analyzed for determination of saturation. That is, responses for questions were examined to see which types of questions were yielding new data, and which ones were not. If necessary new categories were developed, and established categories were revised.

The final analysis occurred when over thirty interviews had been collected. At this point a similar analysis was used to establish if any new information or contradictory information had emerged since the last analysis. No new or conflicting data appeared in the last set of interviews and hence it was determined that the principle of selection to the point of redundancy had been achieved.

Interviewing

Following the guidelines for both the overall methodologies, and sampling scheme, the interview process for this study followed naturalistic inquiry as well. The type of interview employed was the unstructured, non-standardized interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1981) or simply non-standardized interview (Denzin, 1989). This interview style incorporates no formal preestablished set of questions or list(s) of mentionable topics. However in the beginnings of research there exist some basic and fundamental questions that form. Such questions refer to what is it (cybersex), how is it done, what

does it mean. et cetra. As analysis begins during the interview process, more questions emerge from the data. Yet there is never the use of question lists, or scripts. At best, the researcher may have some notes regarding topics he/she wishes to ask about should the opportunity arise.

Choosing this method alleviated the problem of preconceiving the phenomena in question by limiting the potential range of topics that may have emerged from the participants. The method utilizes a conversational style which allowed for the discussion of issues regarding cybersex from the participants' perspective. And while the conversation may have been occasionally refocused by the researcher, the direction of the conversation was not restricted. Moreover, it allowed for the flexibility suggested within naturalistic inquiry.

The free-flowing style of this method allowed for an added element of comfort. This subject matter is more sensitive than others, and delicacy, tact, and a relaxed format served to ease the respondents. Moreover, the structure of most online environments is very informal. Such formal structures of design would likely present respondents with a feeling of clinical like atmosphere which may have limited the willingness to expand on ideas (sensing that the researcher seeks brevity) or even willingness to participate.

The nature of the online environment allows for person-to person synchronous communication--essentially a form of live email. This form of communication was used both to initially contact potential participants a well as conduct online interviews. It also allowed participants to provide answers to questions anonymously and confidentially. These messages could have only been read by the the sender or receiver of the message. Hence a secure environment hopefully encouraged honest and more open responses to the interviewer.

Thus the interviews ensued in textual exchange between interviewer and interviewee. The interviews lasted as long as the respondent was willing to continue or until the interviewer decided a satisfactory amount of information had been provided. The emphasis here rested on protection and respect of the interviewee. The course of the interview, while guided by the interviewer as necessary, flowed from the respondent.

Ethical Considerations

There are numerous ethical issues that are addressed in this research. It is important to anticipate and form proactive designs to research so as to best avoid dilemmas and pitfalls before they damage participant, researcher, or others. Ethical considerations will first center on potential damage to the participants, followed by concerns of professionalism.

Potential damage to participants can never be fully measured, and hence should never be underestimated. It is important to assure participants of their confidentiality and anonymity. It is often too tempting to assume that a screen name is nothing more than a meaningless pseudonym for some physical person. But often this is not the case, as these created selves have very strong meaning for the participant, and the integrity of the online persona is often very important to participants. Thus the anonymous function of the screen name cannot be assumed. Thus, all screen names that appear in the dialogue of the interviews were immediately changed at the completion of the interview.

Confidentiality was preserved in a similar manner. Data collected was always used with caution in regards to distinctiveness of the responses. Sometimes the nature of the response from a participant was sufficient

enough to identify the online persona, or the participant behind the persona. Distinctive responses that potentially could be traced to a person were altered to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant. Names and locations were altered to protect identity. Identifiable or characteristic remarks that would lead to possible identification of a person or persons were altered or omitted from the data. Descriptions and observations that would or could have lead to the identification of a specific area online, a specific group or individual, and/ or comments made within the context of a group was not presented as data, or was significantly altered to remove risk to the participant(s). Such revealing data was either altered to retain meaning yet remove distinctiveness, or not used.

As for the issue of informed consent, all participants acknowledged consent voluntarily before the interview began. The interview was completely voluntary. There are millions of people online, all relatively easily accessible. There was no perceived need to pressure any one person into an interview. All interactions with participants were straight forward and clear as to my intentions and goals, as well as the rights of the participants and their voluntary status. Quantity of data collected was secondary to issues of the preservation of the online environment, protection of individuals' rights, and quality of research standards and methodologies.

The topic of cybersex is a provocative one, and brings with it interesting as well as controversial issues. It is important to state that I did not participate nor observe any act of cybersex during the course of this project. The rationale behind not including direct observation of cybersex is based largely on two issues. First, access to such activities is not readily accessible. It would have been exceptionally difficult to watch cybersex as such exchanges often occur in very private online places. Moreover, to observe with the consent of the

participants would surely have altered or affected the act of cybersex. Just as sex in laboratory is surely different from that which occurs in the bedroom at home. The second point is that given the nature and goals of this thesis to expand the understanding of the body-self-society trialectic it was not necessary to observe or participate in cybersex. This research is interested in how and what cybersex appears as and means through the eyes of the participants. The relevant dimensions which shape the act of cybersex is accessed through the participants outside the context of cybersex.

Age of online participants is difficult to assess. Indeed any demographic variable associated with the physical body is difficult to obtain and impossible to verify. All attempts were made to assure that participants were eighteen years or older. This served to protect both the participant and the researcher. If it was suspected that a person was not eighteen or older, no attempt to ask for an interview was made, and any interview in progress was discontinued. Data from such interviews was not used in this research.

Moreover, aside from the straightforward considerations of confidentiality and anonymity lies issues of respect and courtesy. The researcher is an intrusive interruption in the interactions of people online. The researcher is apt to justify his/her presence with claims that his/her research is for the benefit of those studied or even a broader range of people. But while the research goals may seem lofty and worthwhile, these are seldom meaningful to participants. And did not ask them to trust my work's relevancy in advance. Therefore, I felt it was most important to respect the participants and their perceptions. If asked to leave, then, like a good guest, I left. I wished to avoid the role of a guest who has crashed the party of people s/he does not know. It was up to me to act with as much consideration and courtesy as can be afforded.

The presentations of the findings reflects the efforts of these methodologies in pursuit of the research goals. Each of the sections include data from various participants, and various view point held by various participants. As much of the original responses from participants was retained in presentation. However in some cases for purposes of clarity, brevity, and/or protection of the respondent, the responses as presented were altered slightly. Such alterations were minor, grammatical and/or syntactical but did not change the meaning and connotation of the original statements.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The Joy of Cybersex

Cybersex in an interactive dialogue between two people of an erotic nature. Of course cybersex is about sex--the name makes that clear. Cybersex represents an interactive dialogue of an erotic nature. Participants meet with each other in various online environments and exchange erotic messages. These messages include descriptions of sexual activities, as well as dialogue between the participants about what happens and what they would like to have happen.

Much of the appeal of cybersex parallels the appeal of any sexual activity or act with sexual content. As Murray Davis (1983) states: "Those who copulate--and those who merely want to--experience the world in a manner strikingly different from those who go about their ordinary activities in everyday life." Erotic reality encompasses a shift in the way one sees the world. Time, space, social relationship, and physical elements are shifted in their frames and come to take on new meaning (Davis, 1983). The erotic reality shapes the way the world is framed. And in that reshaping of frame, one sees the world in the context of potential or actualization of sexual activities. Engaging in the act of cybersex involves, even necessitates this slip into erotic reality.

For these reasons and others, participants seem to enjoy cybersex, as many respondents indicate:

"I like the spontaneity, it's exciting to some extent."

"The words fire the imagination and while you could do that yourself, it is the thought of someone else enjoying the situation that makes it exciting."

"It's a good fantasy, and your imagination is more powerful than a movie."

"Cybersex is really a way of escaping from reality."

"Good cybersex involves people telling others what they want to hear and you guiding them to that. You need a good knowledge of what men / women like."

Participants enjoy the interactive and dynamic nature of cybersex. Cybersex is not a static form of arousal because the interaction is happening real time. There is neither a set plot nor is there any limits for the direction the encounter might go. In cybersex, your partner is participating in the mutual creation of fantasy, and this element of interaction seems to make cybersex very interesting.

The idea of having a partner in cybersex is part of what makes cybersex so enjoyable. Fantasies unfold as participants share their desires with other people online. One participant may describe what they want to have happen and a good partner will help create that fantasy online. Some participants identify this interactive fantasy role playing as a very important element of cybersexual activity:

"It's mostly done to please others. I say things that others want to hear."

"Knowing that it is pleasing someone else is exciting. It's like a fantasy listening to what you want to hear."

"You have to care about your partner. Imagine what your partner and you would like and take the time to find it."

"People are telling you what you what you want to hear and you can guide them to that."

What makes cybersex arousing in part is the interactive nature of the act. It is expression of desire with a interpretation and reaction to that desire by one's partner. As one performs there is an active and responsive audience which responds to the performance and thus affects the performer. It provides the participant an opportunity to share intimate thoughts with another and experience someone's reactions.

Of course such skillful reduction of a sexual act to typed symbols requires creativity and imagination. Each phrase typed across the screen must not only produce provocative sexual connotations, but must adequately provide context to the situation and describe what is happening. For example, one must describe the body(ies), the scene, who is there, what is happening to the bodies, how is it happening (fast, slow, sensual, rough), and how the actor interprets the scene. Some of these elements are subtle and implied while other elements may be specifically and painstakingly described. All these dramaturgical elements are reduced and manipulated through short typed phrases within the narrow band width of computer mediated communication. Every word and phrase must serve one or more of the elements of script, prop, action, scene, and plot.

Because so much of cybersex involves reducing "reality" to text, good cybersex necessitates quick and skillful writing as some participants state:

"Active imagination and a expansive vocabulary help."

"It's awkward. It takes a pretty vivid imagination."

"If you are the only one typing, it is no good. The best part is connecting with someone. If you are doing all the "work" it's no good."

All the various elements of sex and sexual arousal are channeled through a single and often clumsy medium--text. Everything is

communicated through typed expressions and phrases. Not surprisingly this proves a difficult task.

Sometimes finding someone who effectively communicates sexually arousing scenarios becomes difficult and dull. Many participants quickly grow weary of such a complicated and difficult task despite the arousing and exciting nature of cybersex. The elements of imagination and creativity are indeed very difficult to sustain:

> "It gets very boring. Only so many oohs and mmm hmms you can type."

> "Doesn't really do anything for me. Cybersex is a waste of time and money. Besides, who can type that fast with one hand?"

Cybersex takes effort and thought to be enjoyable. And for some the thrill is fleeting and short-lived. This is not at all surprising given the immense amount of information needing conveyance in order to arrive at sexual arousal. The slip into erotic reality is not always so easy (Davis, 1983), especially when things like grammatical errors, and poor presentations are constantly distracting. Particularly since the verbal direction of sexual acts can greatly diminish the joy of arousal as Paul Ricoeur discusses:

> "Eros...belongs to the pretechnical existence of man...Sexuality remains basically foreign to the 'intention-tool-thing' relationship. It is a surviving example of non instrumental immediacy. The body to body relationship--or better, person to flesh to flesh to person--remains basically nontechnical. As soon as attention is drawn to and settles on the technique of adjustment, or the technique of sterility, the charm is broken" (in Davis, 1983:9).

It is difficult to reduce the act of sex to words and phrases on the screen. As such this may make the activity move to slow for some, leaving large gaps of time where the mind wonders out of erotic reality and back into everyday reality (Davis, 1983). Sitting at the screen waiting for one's partner to respond may cause attention to drift to the pile of bills on the desk, the project that the

44

boss wants done, or other elements of the more mundane.

All in all, cybersex can be described as an engaging interaction of a sexual nature. Participants can thrill to the mutual creation of fantasy as they type away sexual encounters. While challenging, cybersex can be very erotic and enjoyable. Moreover, it is a chance to slide into erotic reality leaving the everyday world behind.

The Online Body

While much interaction and talk of bodies and sex happens with cybersex, there are no physical bodies to manipulate. Interaction online largely occurs through textual exchanges. And even the text is nothing but electrons dancing on a screen. Put simply, there are no bodies online. Online there are no corporeal physical bodies to touch and manipulate. For that matter, even pictures of bodies are rare components of cybersex. The body or bodies involved must be described through text. Some respondents feel that body descriptions are very key to the act of cybersex:

> "it makes for good mental image--body descriptions can tell a lot about people"

> "Just to be able to process the information that is exchanged...I am a very visual person so I need that to stay interested in the conversation."

> "It's nice to be able to *put faces with personalities*. People are playing out a fantasy and the fantasy needs a face and body. Otherwise you might as well fuck Casper" [emphasis added]

Descriptions of bodies and bodily features helps to evoke an image of another. It allows participants to create a consistent and stable image through which sexual act occur. It becomes the image to which the self enacted by the other may be affixed. More importantly, images of bodies can be symbolic of

sex, and as such contribute to the erotic reality.

Particularly in the case of sex, images of bodies help to evoke the senses. As Davis (1983) alludes to, these images help the entrance of the self into erotic reality. This reality separates us from everyday reality in its state of sexual arousal and awareness. In this state of erotic reality dimensions of time, physicality and relationships slip aside, while socially constructed erotic images and symbols become highlighted.

For some, description of certain body parts is important--particularly for the act of cybersex. Those body parts that are described are often those elements of the human body that are symbolically meaningful in terms of sexual context. In particular are those elements which Davis (1983) refers to as generating erotic radiation. Parts of the body have sexual meaning that often aid in sliding from the world of the everyday to the erotic. These include body curves of such things as hips, chest, face, and include dimensions such as voice, smell, texture of skin and even taste of the skin. Any one of these dimensions in cybersex is likely to improve the quality of the act.

For others, description of the sexual organs becomes the focus of body descriptions. For example genital size is important in male descriptions, and breast size is often important for a female description. Perhaps as symbols of sexuality, they cut to the chase of sexual arousal much as harder core pornography skips the context and sticks to the content. That is to say more emphasis is placed on sex than on those elements of interaction that enhance or provide depth to the act.

Construction of body online is not very easy. Most participants are willing to simply describe those characteristics of body that are evident in face to face interaction. These cursory descriptions include eye color, hair color, and weight. For more detail, some will present measurements of waist size,

chest size, and height to add a more complete picture. With these broad categories a person is able to visualize a body, albeit generic.

But indeed what makes the images so erotic is their generic nature. As Murray Davis (1983) points out, sex is remarkable because it largely strips away miscellaneous identities and makes gender and the body the most salient element of the person. In other words, being generic makes sex available to everyone.

While description of gender and body become salient elements of cybersex, these various descriptions of body and body parts do not constitute a body in the sense of a corporeal body. This distinction is largely part of the difference between the physical and empirical nature of the offline body compared to the virtual nature of the online body. The online body does not constrict the behavior of the self, but rather the opposite. The self constricts the behavior of the online body. Whereas in the offline world the body poses real and tangible limits to the enactments the self engages, the online body is a product of the self in interaction with others. Virtual bodies are worn like vestments--appropriately chosen to suit the program. As opposed to having to clothe the body to fit the program, the body itself becomes an alterable and pliable prop.

As such it is not surprising that body descriptions may become problematic online. Reducing the corporeal body down into textual elements is no easy task. The corporeal body has smells, motions, sounds, and appearances that simply do not translate well, or at least do not retain the same resolution when compressed through the medium of text. Communicating these elements via presentations of body is difficult through a text medium.

Another dimension of body description that makes presentation of

body so difficult is knowing how to describe the body. This does not refer to anatomical knowledge of different parts of the body. Society has already provided a wealth of potential synonyms for any and every body part that has established sexual significance. Rather, the problem lies in what about any of these anatomical symbols makes it erotic, and moreover, will represent that eroticism with a particular partner. For it is not the word penis or boob alone that is erotic. While both these words are gilded with eros, they can just as easily have their eros removed. For example, in the phrase "the swab is inserted into the full length of the penis" is hardly erotic (no pun intended). One might suggest that context of the word and situation certainly must contribute to the erotic nature of the act.

Consider just the selection of the appropriate words during cybersex. Murray Davis indicates that "there are no neutral English terms for sexual organs and activities" (1983:xxi). Is "prick" a better choice of describing the male organ than "cock"? Perhaps penis is a better choice, although rather sterile. Indeed Davis (1983) points out the many possible choices of terms one might use. One could choose to use a euphemism for sex, such as "the act," or "the deed". There are also metaphors, vague allusions, vulgar terms, and innuendo. Moreover problems arise if one shifts from one to the other abruptly. For example, "stroke my engorged member while I lick your *cunt*." Added to this are the other meanings attached to sexual words. Females are likely to be taken aback by the use of the word cunt, as it carries with it derogatory meanings as well as sexual meanings.

All these choices of words that are appropriate to the situation and in line with the interaction with the other dramatically shape the course of cybersex. The presentation of body is fraught by issues of socially acceptable and meaningful ways of communicating the body. Without doubt the

48

important role of society in the triadic relationship of body-self-society shapes how the selves emerge and how those selves create, shape, and perceive their construction of the online body.

With all the nuances and subtleties of body construction, and the general familiarity of sexual vocabularies, sex is an excellent and easy way to play with the social construction of a fluid online body. Ideal sexual bodies invoke a vocabulary much more familiar to people. Bodily representations of beauty are a readily accessible system of symbols, and therefore easy to incorporate in neophyte body constructions. What better activity to familiarize oneself with the online social construction of bodies than cybersex? This is not to imply that cybersexual activities occur because people want to experiment with fluid body constructions. Rather the point is that such arenas of activities online have the added advantage of exploring new potential for self creation and presentations.

While few participants would deny the importance of body descriptions online, many recognize that just description of physical body parts is not enough to make for good cybersexual encounters. What becomes important is descriptions of bodies in action. In other words, good description of sexual activities happening to bodies overshadows descriptions of body parts by themselves:

> "I think it is more important when you're describing what you're doing with the body--not just good body descriptions, but more along the line of action descriptions. It's one thing to say I am licking one's breasts. It's another thing to say I am gently running my tongue around your ripe swollen breast."

> "Good cybersex involves good visual descriptions--actions and places."

Obviously in everyday life sexual encounters are not static nor should we expect them so online. Even pictorials in magazines such as *Penthouse* or

Playboy simulate a sense of vector in their presentations. Models in these magazines often appear mostly dressed at first, and with each consecutive picture they appear more undressed (Davis, 1983). The progression of ever increasing levels of arousal adds to the act of cybersex as it does to arousal in general.

As selves emerge in interaction so too do bodily representations. Each situation requires definition and redefinition of the body as it is described. Cybersex participants are well aware of the need and ability to alter bodily descriptions as necessary for the interaction at hand. This ability to alter the body description to fit the situation significantly affects how the participants perceive online activity.

The disembodied context of the medium provides a structure in which participants may 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 commented on fluidity of self enactments in the context of cyberspace (see Turkle 1995; Meyers 1987; Reid 1991; 1994; Stone 1995; Jones 1995), but in many regards this kind of fluidity and multiplicity of self is *not* novel to the online environment. A cyberself, like any self, is situationally defined. That is, persons "have" as many selves as they have meaningful situations to interact within. However, what makes the online environment novel is that the fluidity of self enactments is expanded exponentially by the absence of a physical body.

When online, one is not only free to enact a multiplicity of selves but also able to enact selves that are beyond an individuals' range of possibility due to constraints normally posed by the physical body. As a result, online leisure environments present an opportunity for the hyperfluidity of self

Playboy simulate a sense of vector in their presentations. Models in these magazines often appear mostly dressed at first, and with each consecutive picture they appear more undressed (Davis, 1983). The progression of ever increasing levels of arousal adds to the act of cybersex as it does to arousal in general.

As selves emerge in interaction so too do bodily representations. Each situation requires definition and redefinition of the body as it is described. Cybersex participants are well aware of the need and ability to alter bodily descriptions as necessary for the interaction at hand. This ability to alter the body description to fit the situation significantly affects how the participants perceive online activity.

The disembodied context of the medium provides a structure in which participants may 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 commented on fluidity of self enactments in the context of cyberspace (see Turkle 1995; Meyers 1987; Reid 1991; 1994; Stone 1995; Jones 1995), but in many regards this kind of fluidity and multiplicity of self is *not* novel to the online environment. A cyberself, like any self, is situationally defined. That is, persons "have" as many selves as they have meaningful situations to interact within. However, what makes the online environment novel is that the fluidity of self enactments is expanded exponentially by the absence of a physical body.

When online, one is not only free to enact a multiplicity of selves but also able to enact selves that are beyond an individuals' range of possibility due to constraints normally posed by the physical body. As a result, online leisure environments present an opportunity for the hyperfluidity of self

50

enactments due to the ability to transcend gender, skin pigment, age, weight, and all other socially meaningful characteristics of the physical body. Within this context all "fixed" bodily features become self-selected variables--potential components in a selective enactment of a self--not constants or givens to be taken-for-granted. In this sense, the self online can become hyperfluid.

What contributes to the fluidity and multiplicity of self enactment online is the anonymity. The ability to remain "nameless," allows for a particularly interesting form of interaction. In the following section this thesis will consider some of the implications of the anonymous context of online interaction.

Anonymity and Sexual Experience:

The online environment allows a large degree of anonymity among the users. In order to use any system online, a person must have a screen name or other identifying information. Most service providers online allow users to create their own name. These names generally are created and used like nick names. Some people will develop names that are based in part or whole on their offline names. Others will craft names that reflect their interests whether they be hobbies, accomplishments, desires, or other elements of self they might want to share. In Bechar-Israeli's (1995) research, only 7% used their actual name, whereas 45% used a screen name that "gave off" information about the self.

Names online serve to give selves a fixed point in a spaceless environment. With the absence of bodies there is little else to hold together the interaction. There are no voices, bodies, or even pictures to which one may attach what a person is saying or typing. The name serves to give the enacted self position and dimension in the interaction. It is a discourse of self

51

in that it is a **textual element** of self existence. Whereas in face to face interaction the body serves to allow association of actions to a single person, the online name serves to similarly provide continuity and consistency. As Bechar-Israeli (1995) illustrates, screen names are vital for many users to ensure familiarity among other regular online friends. As such, the screen name has very significant meaning for the participant (Meyers, 1987).

The presence of the screen name is exceptionally dramaturgical. For the actor, it allows the audience to perceive the presentation of self as belonging to one person and not to be confused or mistaken for others' presentations. The name is the assignment of accountability in that all actions emerging from that self are interpreted and responded back to that self. More simply put, there must be distinction between the audience and actor or there cannot be interaction.

However, unlike a verifiable body, the screen name is just as ethereal and non-verifiable as the self. While a textual discourse of self, it has no empirical reality. It can be changed very easily, often within a few short key strokes. Moreover, connection of a screen name to its associated corporeal body offline is (at least for now) a nearly impossible task. In sum, the screen name serves the pragmatic functions necessary for interaction that normally would be taken for granted dimensions of the body.

The screen name itself plays a significant part in the interaction process as well. For it not only serves to identify the actor, but often times assists in the presentation of the self. Much of the information normally accessible in face to face interaction must be condensed into a single line of information often no more than a dozen characters long. And as such, the elements that are important to the user are often presented prominently within the screen name (Bechar-Israeli, 1995). The screen name may clarify that which cannot

be seen, but is relevant to the online performance. That is to say, the online name may serve as a prop to help in the coming off of a self. For example, a screen name like "Buns" in the presence of an area named "Beach Party" evokes images that describe or position the person in the arena of interaction. One might assume that the person has a noteworthy butt. In an area called "Baking Tips," the name evokes a slightly different connotation. More than likely suggesting a type of pastry or specialty of the person.

While many names are just that--names, screen names can and are used to set the tone or even describe the participant. In so doing it presents dimensions of the actor that would not be readily available otherwise. It allows the online actor to present details about oneself as efficiently as possible in the narrow band width of computer mediated communication.

Carefully crafted names do more than simply identify or segregate the emergence and maintenance of self. Rather they evoke and convey images or context of potential or actual situations. The name may present elements of body or physical description--such as a name like "bigboobs." In addition, such a name suggests gender, and also indicates some sexual element. Clearly to wield such a name would indicate that the self associated with this name does not frequent news discussion groups or counseling sessions. For as much as that name's contextual specificity aids in presentation of self in some settings, it limits it in others.

Because screen names are created by the online user, and may usually be changed without much effort, a sense of anonymity pervades the online environment. Without a doubt the screen name can separate the person at the keyboard from the self online. More appropriately, it can be very difficult if not impossible for others to connect the self on the screen with body at the keyboard. Screen names may be changed, altered, and or deleted at any time

on most **online services**—thus making the name as fluid as the self. This produces a **sense of** anonymity that the users make frequent note of:

> "It's **easy** to feel less inhibited online because it's more anonymous. And you can disappear much easier if it doesn't work well."

> "It's just not threatening--the anonymous aspect. I'm a little more forward and less self-conscious due to the security of secrecy."

This fluidity of self allows users to create the name almost as fluidly as the self emerges. At the minimum, the name may be created with particular self or situational interaction in mind. It is much like getting dressed for a party. One picks the adorning name with the context of the situation in mind. As Stone (1981: 149) points out,

> "As the self is dressed, it is simultaneously addressed, for whenever we clothe ourselves, we dress 'toward' or address some audience whose validating responses are essential to the establishment of our self."

In essence, the presence of the screen name equates with appearance on the scene. When a screen name appears, a self is necessarily attached to it. And as an element of appearance, it serves to orient meaningful exchanges of selfhood. In other words, the screen name is an important part of identifying oneself in the online interaction.

Anonymity not only allows users to use their screen names as props in the situated context of online chat, but also changes the dimension of the interactions, particularly the erotic interactions. As numerous respondents indicate, the anonymity of the online context allows for a fluidity of self presentations, and represents a key element to the eroticism of cybersexual encounters:

> "Cybersex allows the freedom of sexual expression. Cybersex allows a person to be who ever 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"

"It gives you a chance to be someone else or meet other people and act in a way that you wouldn't in 'normal' life"

Similar to other forms of role-playing and vicarious experience, the anonymous context of cyberspace allows participants to play at various selves in the drama of a socially constructed virtual situation. In this case, participants can assume a wide variety of roles in the enactment of an interactive sexual drama:

"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."

"Its 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 participants to experiment with sexual adventures. If the experiment is deemed unpleasant, or uncomfortable, then the screen name can be deleted and a new one created, allowing the person to be virtually reborn under another alias, starting completely anew.

The Online Body-Self-Society Trialectic

The reason anonymity allows one to present oneself as anything, anywhere as dictated by the situation has to do with accountability and the status of verifiable personhood online. As previously stated each person may alter descriptions of self as well as screen names with great ease. Anonymity allows for multiple constructions of self and body that go beyond the limits of

physicality. However part of the reason that anonymity represents such a particular allure of the online world relates to accountability.

When no person can easily connect online selves with offline bodies there exists a certain freedom. One is free to interact and present various selves because no one can challenge that behavior as going against "one's nature." While screen names differentiate various selves in the context of the situation, they are less functional in connection of various selves inter-situationally. That is from situation to situation, there is little holding together the performances that originate from the offline body.

However the body symbolizes more than an intimate object with which a particular self is familiar with. The body itself is a symbol or icon of all the selves associated with it. What allows us to recognize our parents, relatives, friends, and other people we know is the assumption that the body is the same. Whether mother is cooking food or chairperson of a large company, she is always mother because it is the same body. One recognizes that there are different selves associated with that body, however one imposes a continuity of those various selves. That continuity is affixed to the relatively stable biological mass known as the body. Even though the body changes regularly in appearance, we symbolize or iconize elements of the body as associated with the various selves enacted. We recognize people not so much by the selves they enact, but the bodies they inhabit.

As a political entity, the body is a key component of what constitutes a verifiable citizen (Stone, 1995). The body and the assignment of discursive elements to the body are based on the empirical verifiability of the corporeal body. This is why the insanity defense--including the multiple personality disorder--are largely ineffective. It does not matter in the sense of political and social order which self one enacts in the commission of a crime. The

body was there. It is hard to handcuff selves and throw them in jail. The same is not true for corporeal bodies. And since selves are associated with a body--then the selves end up in jail too. If one wants to be sure to have black jelly beans, take the whole jar. If one wants to punish the right self, take the whole body.

The recognition of political entity very much plays an integral role in the fabric of society. Without some ability to import continuity to various selves, how does one control deviance? Selves are processes situated in interaction. They are not empirically real. They cannot be detained, separated, removed, or fined in the absence of body. Body and self are inseparable in more ways than one. If not in practice, then certainly by law.

Now if one takes away or splits the self from the corporeal body, a dimension built into cyberspace, problems surface rapidly. This is the problem of accountability as it relates to anonymity. Online, anonymous selves are disembodied. There is no political entity online. The only thing selves are affixed to and associated with is at best screen names. And screen names are hardly the necessary discourse of body to ensure recognizable citizenship. And those online are often aware of this:

"People lie a lot. They are protected by anonymity."

"All you have to worry about here is communication."

There are no consequences to the person who enacts various selves or bodies unless some connection is made with the corporeal body. Otherwise what or whom would be sanctioned? This is not to say that attempts at creating verifiable citizens online has not happened. In IRC (Inter Relay Chat) one can "finger" a screen name to identify the name of the person who holds the account. In this way one can essentially connect selves to discourses of

selves associated with empirical citizen. That is, one can connect the self online to things like drivers' licenses, social security numbers, and legal names. However there are ways to block this function and even change the information available.

Another example is the creation and emergence of virtual ID's. Virtual identification was created to keep minors out of areas where sexually explicit materials or exchanges take place. However the means of acquiring the virtual ID is a credit card number and an online acknowledgement of adult status. Obviously this form of ID is fraught with problems. Even the more extensive virtual identification schemes where actual political entity status is checked offline can backfire as one never knows who is using the ID. The ID is really a discourse of the screen name, not the person at the keyboard. Moreover any virtual id system is likely to encounter stumbling blocks as any information about self is mediated through the computer. That is, one never knows--regardless of how many passwords must be entered to get online--if one is who one says one is.

In summary, it is difficult to identify a political entity online. There is no easy way to associate various enactments of self with other selves. Selves are grounded and emergent in the situation, but have little connection to the corporeal body. The problematic nature of a *free* self challenges traditional thinking about personhood and further illustrates the complexity of online interaction.

Reality and The Presentation of Body Online

A recent MCI television advertisement resounds this powerfully seducing vision: "There is no race. There is no age. There is no gender. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Is this utopia? No, the

Internet." There are also no bodies, not a lot of police, and no easy way to find out who *really* is behind the words appearing on the screen. Participants are well aware that the persons they may interact with may be very different offline. This shapes how people interpret the actions of others. As one respondent points out:

> "You don't know if the person on the other end is for real. How do I know you [the interviewer] are who you say you are for example?"

Respondents feel that one may never know if the other person presents themselves honestly and realistically. That is to say, a person may present or misrepresent themselves in many ways online. Too often it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. And this is part of the paradox of online activity.

The paradox of online interaction, particularly with cybersexual encounters revolves around the lack of verifiable information. On one hand, there is no easy way to substantiate anyone's claim of reality. With anonymity and lack of physical restrictions, persons may present any self--a fact that respondents are acutely aware of:

> "There's no boundaries to what you can be. No hints to tell if someone is telling the truth, no voice to read or body language for that matter. It's easy to forget your conscience when you know for a fact that so and so will never know if you really are who you say you are."

> "Cyber sex is not real so you can do anything and be anything without any consequences."

On the other hand, this same dimension of interaction allows the freedom and anonymity that participants enjoy so much. If one can be anything or anyone online, so too can everyone else. Some respondents accept this fact as part of the online experience and a necessary cost to the freedom that anonymity provides. For example one respondent points out:

> "I accept the words of another on face value and allow my mind to interpret them as the other person intends for them to be taken"

59

"It allows some people to exercise a fantasy that the would never dare in real life."

"The anonymity factor can be intriguing. It gives one the freedom to chose which room to go into, whom to talk to and when, what to say, to lie or be honest while also knowing that every other user has the same freedom."

In this sense it does not matter what is verifiably true or untrue. Words and presentations are accepted for what they are. Other actors are more optimistic about the reality of things online:

"Most of the people I've met online have been exceptionally honest. If you lie it catches up with you."

"You can size someone up within three or four exchanges. I think people want to be honest in case they meet offline."

"Everyone tends to be optimistic--you can easily spot the bullshitters."

For the most part what is real online is that which one accepts or rejected based largely in part on the quality of the performance. In other words, if the actor successfully presents him or herself, that is sufficient for accepting the performance as real. A few respondents remark:

"People want to talk with real people and real situations regardless of what reality is. The perception of honesty is important."

"You can tell a lot by the words if people are being truthful. Women talk different from men. Sit and watch in rooms and you will see others pick them out."

Indeed the first comment expresses the importance of an effective presentation of self. Reality is based on what is convincing. The perception of honesty is really genuineness--that is, a believable enactment of the role. The second comment is not so much about picking out men from women (as the gender of the corporeal body at the keyboard is almost impossible to verify) as it is about identifying faulty role playing. The failure to successfully perform a

role will bring about challenges of **authenticity.**

What makes for the "reality" of online interaction balances on the idea that one accepts the performance until there is reason to challenge the performance. Goffman suggests the useful concept of working consensus. As Goffman (1959, pp.9-10) states,

> "Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored."

People online do not attempt nor can they easily attempt to find "what exists," but rather agree upon which performances are convincing and which claims (performances) will not be honored. Those presentations of self that fail to pass muster will face challenges to authenticity. Reality online is what passes for the moment:

> "If you relate that you are something, and you are convincing, then you are believed to be it."

> "If it sounds to good to be perfect, it probably isn't. I want it to be real."

> "We want to talk with real people and real situations regardless of what reality is."

Reality online is clearly that which comes off as reality. Being believable is more important than what might be the actual case. Take for example issues of gender in cybersex. Most participants view the gender of their online partners as very significant as the following statements indicate:

> "For me real gender is important. I mean I don't know how I would feel if I found out that I was having sex with the wrong gender!"

> "A woman could not describe males sexually because she doesn't know what it feels like and the whole male thing."

> "If I found out someone was male when I thought I had been talking to a female the whole time, I would probably lose all interest in cybersex."

Clearly participants expect that the sex declared is the *real* sex of the body at the keyboard. But since the real sex of the corporeal body at the keyboard is information denied to the online user, how does it matter? According to respondents:

> "If you are led to believe on thing, and then you find out it's different, it could disrupt the fantasy. Of course I may not even know it."

> "It could break the fantasy if they were not what they say they are. It helps in the fantasy world that you are playing in to at least believe that are who they say they are."

What is important, apparently, is not so much the sex of the body at the keyboard, but the effective presentation of a particular gender on the screen. As long as the fantasy remains intact, the real gender of the person online is the gender they are presenting, and the audience is accepting--for the moment. As with all matters the fantasy must be believable. Actual facts, or that which might be real offline are not accessible and thus not important.

And as the participants above note, breaking the fantasy can ruin the entire encounter and potentially sour the desire for future encounters. Any deception revealed or performance failure leads to a certain disconcerting element of interaction. Davis (1983) describes the origin of obscenity and smut. Often that labeled obscene represents challenges to the social construction of one's world view or systems of categorizing the world around oneself. Davis compares this concept to Goffman's (1974) use of the term *negative experience*. A negative experience results when "an ongoing activity or 'frame' is disrupted by the sudden intrusion of logically incongruous elements..." (Davis, 1983:92). As Davis (1983) summarizes, "The experience is negative because it takes its character from what it is not."

Online there is always a great threat for a negative experience to occur in the Goffmanesque sense. Take for example the male who engages in lively

and exciting cybersex with another woman who after the encounter declares that she is really a gay man. One participant clearly voiced this potential scenario:

> "Gender doesn't really matter to me. I just wouldn't want to imagine a man deceiving me to have his homosexual desires fulfilled"

The threat of the negative experience is the idea that an act of hetero-erotic activity could somehow be transformed into homo-erotic activity. What started out as a simple heterosexual act somehow takes its character from what it is not. That is, it is not a homosexual encounter because that is not what it was *framed* to be in the first place!

Within the narrow bandwidth of textual computer mediated communication these difficulties in communication only heighten the potential for negative experiences. Since tokens of eroticism are condensed, there are no simple ways to verify corporeal gender, and all actions are socially produced and interpreted, it is easy to find that meanings thought to have been mutually agreed upon and shared have become anything but that.

The Social Production of the Virtual Body:

> "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 (Heim 1991 pp. 74)."

The hyperfluidity of selfhood, afforded by the absence of a physically verifiable body, does not eliminate the important role of the body in the processes of online leisure interaction. In fact, the situation is quite contrary. By far, the most common occurring phrase in online chat environments is some version of the question "are you a male or female?" The second most common occurring phrase must be one of the following; "what do you look

like?" "how old R U?" "where do you live?" The participants are well familiar with these questions too:

> "It's a paradox. People say that what they like about being online is that people are not judging them by their appearance, but after age and sex are identified, it's the first thing they want to know about."

Ironically, by means of this complex and technologically sophisticated means of communication, people are essentially asking the most fundamental body questions imaginable--questions that through face-to-face interaction and other technologies of communication are largely unnecessary to ask. Indeed, as you read these words online chat environments are bursting with people sending representational bodies back and forth among anonymous others.

How a user "looks" to another online participant is not determined by physical appearance, but entirely dependent on information that participants choose to disclose. Because the body is freed from any necessary or verifiable physical manifestation, it is transformed into complete symbol--a virtual body that emerges and maintains itself apart from the frame of the empirically real. In online leisure interaction, both bodies and selves are systems of meanings emergent in a process of communication, and become associated with whatever performance that participants are currently enacting. The virtual body is a discursive performance, and nothing else. The importance of the corporeal body is left at the keyboard--behind the dramaturgical scene--and engrossed in actions that are only remotely a part of the scene that comes-off (although this probably varies according to an individuals typing skills). When the body disappears behind the dramaturgical scene, it is no longer the agent to which selfhood is contained or affixed. In short, the body is no longer connectable to the enacted self.

These conditions often lead people to believe that they are "more free." That is, once released from the socio-cultural shackles of the physical body, cultural and social meanings associated with bodies somehow magically vanish (i.e. presumptions about gender, race, obesity, ugliness etc.). Or in other words, the basic triadic body-to-self-to-social world relationship, is believed to be reduced to a dyadic body-to-self relationship, with the self in complete control of (and unlimited by) the appearance and actions of the body. If this were the case, than feelings of "greater freedom" are to be expected due to the elimination of the body-to-social world relationship, and the control mechanisms that this relationship seems to imply. The previously mentioned MCI commercial reflects this idea of freedom through the hiding of characteristics of the human body.

This is a happy vision of egalitarianism that probably sells a lot of Internet service. However, this egalitarian vision does not hold empirical muster, nor does it make reasonable sense. Because a person can present any body they choose, they are likely to do so in a manner supportive of the situational self they are currently enacting. These online self-enactments are dramaturgical performances that do not materialize out of thin air. Rather, they occur on a metaphorical stage that contains scripted socio-cultural performances to which participants tend to adhere. Therefore, like any other body-to-self-to social world relationship, we should expect the performance of virtual bodies to emerge in the course of interaction as a part of a participant's presentation of self in highly consistent forms. There is every reason to assume that in online environments because bodies are communicated elements of a self enactment they 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 these regards, bodies are not "more free" in

the disembodied context.

In online environments, selfhood emerges apart from the meanings that the corporeal bodies may have or could have presented. The body is dislocated from the empirical realities of being an integral part of the interaction and the scene that comes-off. For example, in cybersex regardless of how many words are exchanged, no two persons ever so much as touch one another. The self, the body, and the whole scene of interaction amounts to a shared consensual hallucination, substantiated and validated by other disembodied participants. Each participant contributes to the performance of the other within a negotiated agreement of what is desired, expected, and/or required of the situation. Thus, the disembodied context enables participants to side-step cultural specifications of beauty, glamor, 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 persons to redefine themselves in accordance to that myth (Reid 1994):

> "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 prerequisite.....free from the stigma of ugliness not because appearance ceases to matter but because no one need be seen to be ugly (Reid 1994 pp. 64)."

Because participants can present a virtual body that supports a cyberself enactment, and because these enactments are grounded in culturally prescribed standards of beauty, it should not be surprising to observe a sheer 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 online system anonymously report:

66

"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 working' out; I have a 46"chest, 32"waist, and 22" biceps/great ass nice and firm and a thick 9" cock"

The above represent typical descriptions. However, in the context of online leisure environments there is no reason why participants have to claim either actual or typical appearances. Persons can present a virtual body that is strikingly attractive, has outrageous sexual organs, and absolute specialities 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 blue\gray 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, blnde/brn waist length hair, green eyes, 48DD"

Granted, it might be possible to have a 13 inch penis that is 4 inches think. However, such a penis is practically unfathomable. Likewise, it might be possible for a woman to have 48DD breasts--even if they're only 5'2" and weigh a mere 110 pounds. However, the breasts would constitute approximately one-third of the woman's entire body weight. It is more likely that the proportions of these virtual bodies are at least slightly exaggerated, if not altogether fictional--and many online participants are aware of this possibility:

"If they really were 6'2, 185, with 3% body fat, and a 8" unit--would they be online trying to pick up a gorilla like me?"

"I find that a lot of people ask about my image. I usually answer that 'don't you know everyone online is beautiful?'"

"For the most part everyone here has a Greek body. Others are afraid they won't get any if they are honest."

It is likely that some participants (maybe even a majority) embody the sexual performance of a virtual body with exaggerated physical appearances, sexual abilities, and dimensions of sexual organs. Furthermore, it is likely that these exaggerations will adhere to social and cultural standards of beauty and sexiness.

Ironically, many participants claim that they do not distort their presentation of body. Most claim they do not change their online body much from the way their offline body is. At most they will admit to only small or minor modifications:

"No need to lie about how I look. Like Popeye says, I am who I am and that's all that I am."

"I'm the type of person that if you like me, fine, if not that is also fine. I'm not out to impress anyone."

"If I decide to tell someone how I look, I always tell the truth."

"I tell the truth about how I look. I usually leave out the part about being 10-15 pounds overweight from being inside all winter."

Yet while participants seem determined not to deceive people about their appearances, they are very skeptical about other people's honesty about their bodies:

"Most people lie. Most people aren't secure with themselves."

"It's understandable, if you want to make friends online, you don't want to drive them away and 99.9% of them place great emphasis on physical appearance."

Despite that many claim to be honest in their representations of body

online, they feel that most people are not honest. Online participants recognize that it is somewhat of a paradox. Honesty is important, but in many cases--like cybersex--people don't want the truth, they want a good performance--preferably a performance that is authentic.

Instead of subverting the "beauty myth" participants *perform a body* that is most often defined in accordance to it. When the body is transformed into a discursive performance without necessary commitment to the physically real, performances become ideal--a reflection of that which is culturally and socially defined as appropriate and/or desirable. These situations serve to *strengthen* the "beauty myth," bestow it with more legitimacy, and perhaps latently communicate to participants an increased need to make one's physical body adhere to predefined cultural standards of attractiveness. These findings fly in the face of the MCI Internet advertisement and the egalitarian vision of utopian equality. Even when entirely disembodied, self enactments are still subject to the socio-cultural constraints imposed upon bodies. It is worth reminding ourselves that the body is not only an empirical object, it is also a symbolic subject. As a subject, the body is always interpreted according to prevailing systems of socio-cultural meaning.

In summary, sex is an act that requires, or is at least dependent upon 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 upon them, and latently supports cultural and social standards. In text-based online leisure environments bodies are transformed to pure symbol-- representations, descriptive codes, and words that embody expectations,

appearance, and action. This is to say that the body is transformed into a dramaturgical performance. What is being sent back and forth over the wires are not merely words and self enactments, but body performances. Thus, cybersex is based on claims of the flesh in discursive embodiment of socio-cultural meanings that are attached to a performance, and emergent in the interactions between participants. Cybersex exemplifies the experience of "being warranted to, but outside of, a single physical body (Stone 1995 pp. 43)" that typifies the nature of computer-mediated symbolic interaction.

Cybersex involves creative interplay between people for the purposes of sexual arousal. It is a complex act that necessitates performance in light of socio-cultural expectations of what is acceptable and what is not. Whether it be wording, presentation of self, construction of presentation of the online body, or all of these elements, cybersex reflects not freedom, but acknowledgement of socially accepted ways of acting. Within the triadic body-self-society relationship lies the understanding of cybersex, and insight into the body-self-society relationship in general.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Cybersex is about sex, bodies, selves, society and how all these elements relate to each other. Online people clumsily grope with a technology that is very narrow in bandwidth to communicate sexual narratives to each other in an environment which is anonymous and allows for various potential enactments of self and body through dramaturgical constructions.

Cybersex involves communication of various details of sexual acts. Conveying these acts and sexual scenarios in the form of real time interactions leaves the creative with an arousing experience. For some the bandwidth of textual interactions is simply too complex and they abandon cybersexual activities in pursuit of other uses of this new communication technology.

Part of the complexity of cybersex which makes it such a difficult task is the incorporation of bodies into the act. There are no real physical and tangible bodies online, so bodies are created through textual discourses. These creations of body often emphasize the parts of bodies which are sexually meaning laden, such as genitalia. Any description of body may add to the imagery of online sexual discussion.

While body parts are important, most participants must not only describe virtual bodies, but must describe virtual bodily acts. That is the participants must create actions for these various bodies to perform. Moreover, these descriptions may sterilize and stiffen the encounter, taking away the spontaneity of the act and leaving participants spending more time

in the world of anatomy than in the realm of sexuality.

However the disembodied nature of the online environment allows users to create selves without the restrictions that a physical body might impose. There is potential for the emergence and maintenance of multiple selves. This multiplicity of selves frees the user to enjoy and play with self construction.

Along with the disembodied online environment follows a sense of anonymity. Users may create numerous selves without having to reveal any "true" identity. The flexibility of most online systems allow users to change screen names very easily, and consequently change identities with equal ease.

But anonymity brings up issues of accountability. There is no connection between the selves enacted online and the corporeal body which these selves are associated. As such definition of a fiduciary or political entity is very difficult. While screen names serve well to separate selves in the context of a situated interaction, there is no connection between various selves from interaction to interaction if the user changes screen names and hence selves.

Because selves and bodies are so disconnected, some respondents have difficulty believing that others are what they say. The paradox of online communication is that people are free to be whatever they want. But on the other side this means that one may never know how *real* another person is compared to their offline person. As such, online users accept a working consensus approach--believing whatever is presented until reason to believe otherwise. This means reality belongs to the successful performer. If a performance is given well, then that becomes reality in the situated moment.

While such freedom to create any self with any body (so long as the performance is good), would suggest that participants would extend the limits

72

of diversity online. Indeed there is a great diversity online. However most constructions of body follow culturally prescribed definitions of beauty. Participants often attempt to mold construction of online bodies in accordance with what is socially deemed as appropriate and appealing. Sometimes these descriptions of prescriptions go so far as to exaggerate those parts of the body which are symbols for beauty and sexual arousal.

All of these issues of body-self-society within the anonymous, disembodied environment of cybersex have significance not only in their use in understanding the act of cybersex. These issues also highlight the aspects of the triadic relationship that are changing or already have changed in society. As we become more surrounded by transportation and communication technologies, the way we see ourselves and others changes dramatically (Gergen, 1991). We are saturated with selves, and online is just one more potential for selves.

Perhaps the online existence with its anonymity and freedom to engage various selves is about escape from the world of mundane selves. Maybe participants find that slipping into erotic reality that is far removed from the everyday world is a chance to relax and escape. As Cohen and Taylor state:

> "We look elsewhere to cope with routine, boredom, lack of individuality, frustration. We want a genuine escape, a flight to an area in which we can temporarily absent ourselves from paramount reality, find ourselves out of play, and assemble our identity in peace or with new and more powerful symbols." (1992:112)

The online world does provide that escape to an "area" where reality becomes a show, a performance. Moreover the performance of selves in the anonymous context allows freedom to express without fear. It is an opportunity to play. It is a "free area...a place where we can act out our fantasies or where the action doesn't need any extrinsic fantasies to transform it" (Cohen, Taylor, 1992:113).

In consideration of the body and the issues of verifiable persons, there are other problematic dilemmas to address. The issue of identifiable citizens online goes beyond issues of accountability. They cross the very fabric of social control and norms. If various selves are not connected in some way to a constant or consistent element, then numerous potential problems arise. Already issues associated with this dilemma have surfaced numerous times. For example, is it morally wrong for a person of eleven years old to engage in cybersex with an adult? Is it wrong if the adult has no way of verifying the age of his or her sex partner online? What if an adult claims he or she is eleven years old and has cybersex with another adult who really is only twelve? What about two adults pretending to be juveniles? How does one resolve these issues of body and selves in a bodiless environment?

This connection of corporeal body to selves is at the heart of what limits too much diversification of selves. Transvestites may be able to play the body alteration game on Saturday nights, but the bodies are the same, only the selves are different. The political entity or fiduciary subject with it's discourses such as social security numbers, house addresses, driver's license, and birth certificates are much more difficult to alter along with cosmetic variations of the body. One can shape the corporeal body in many ways, but society has very specific location technologies to ensure that however dramatic the changes in self or body, there is still a recognizable citizen.

Take for example a recent "Cathy" cartoon. Cathy attempts to explain to her tax accountant that she wants deductions for some of the various selves she enacts. She points out that she provides food and wardrobe (various means of altering the physical body) for the "executive me," the "athlete me," and other "me's" including different selves which are the product of different body sizes. However her tax consultant wryly points out that the "I-don't-

want-to-go-to-prison-me says 'no'." While Cathy has recognized that she has different selves and to some extent different social bodies--the IRS does not acknowledge this fact. On the contrary, Cathy and all her different selves are still only one recognizable citizen.

While online, these various selves are everything. And what makes them real is the quality of their performance. However their are notable problems when performances flop, or fail. Perhaps the most classic example of this self failure is the famed Sanford Lewin event on the online service CompuServe (Stone, 1995). Apparently Lewin (a psychiatrist) successfully performed the role of a disabled, lonely woman. He was so effective in his presentation that many people online came to view her/him as an important confidant and friend. She/he formed support groups online and developed a well know and respected person online. As time wore on, however, the act became difficult to maintain. More and more the web of deceptions began to collapse.

Unfortunately, the presentation came off so well, that in attempting to end the online self Lewin called "Julie," he discovered that "Julie" had become so important to so many people that he just couldn't end the presentation. And when it was finally revealed that "Julie" was really "John," a lot of people were very disturbed. Not surprisingly it took months for most people to believe that the self called "Julie" was no more (Stone, 1995).

What really brought about the death of the presentation of Julie had little to do with sense of honesty or remorse. It had to do with real, physical, smelly, corporeal bodies. Would Julie's "true" identity have been discovered or revealed if there had not been some threat of actual verification? Lewin's unwillingness to continue the charade was based on the reality of continually trying to create the illusion of Julie in the physical world. In other words, as

online friends pressed more and more to *meet* the body attached to the self called Julie, they found themselves bodiless, so to speak. No one online had ever met the "real" Julie and that created much of the tension in maintaining the Julie identity.

The performance enacted by Lewin was terribly successful and convincing. However, even after developing the confidence of many people online, there was still a search for verification--embodiment beyond the screen. People online are all to aware that all that is on the screen is a presentation, imitation of reality. And while it is possible to interact with that as real and genuine, most are skeptical as to its "true" existence.

In terms of everyday life, does performance come to mean more than reality? This is a difficult question. In the post modern condition, certainly performance plays a very significant role. Consider places and institutions designed solely on the idea of performance without concern about reality. There is Disneyland which embraces the idea of producing a copy for which there is no original (Baudrillard, 1981). Certainly McDonald's is about performance and not about reality. As long as the show comes off, it does not matter what is real and what is not. Everything is relative and has its own position in reality. What counts is how effectively one thing or another jostles for position in the rat race to gain the attention of the individual. It is capitalism exploded onto everything. Marketing and packaging is what is important, not what is inside. One wonders if Rue Paul has become popular because not because she/he is a transvestite, but because she/he is so good at playing the role of a woman.

And this idea of presentation as reality is reflected in the online world. It is not what is at the center of some imaginary core. What is important is completely on the surface. Online all that counts is being believable. It does

not matter if one is man, woman, or "a three legged Lithuanian dwarf" (As one faculty member likes to state). As long as one can present a realistic and believable presentation, than that shall pass for reality.

With presentation as reality, and presentations grounded in socio-cultural expectations of acceptability, then in some ways there is a paradox. On one hand the online world is disembodied. There is potential for multiple and anonymous selfhood and a general absence of accountability. Reality is what is presented. This suggests that online interaction is very disorganized-- on the precipices of chaos where no verifiable bodies exist and the identification of a person is synonymous with each self. On the other hand, the very presentations and bodily representations are completely and utterly grounded in socio-cultural standards of beauty and normality. The idea of presentation as reality reinforces the social construction of reality through replication and iconization of cultural standards of what is good and beautiful versus what is bad and ugly.

In more concrete terms, this paper expands the ideas and relationships of bodies, selves, and societal influences online. In terms of bodies, this paper has developed an understanding of what disembodiment online means for the emergence of selves. Exploration of the narrow bandwidth through which bodies are communicated shapes their presentation and meaning in social interaction. Through the compression of bodies through and into text highlights and exaggerates the important socio-cultural constructions of bodies. What participants chose to describe reflects the imprint that society has left in terms of the construction of meaning for bodies, and sexual acts in general.

Furthermore, the elaboration of disembodiment helps provide an understanding of the freedom of selves emergent in a bodiless environment.

Incorporating Stone's perceptions, the idea of **fiduciary subject or political person** brings to light new issues of online and offline **communication**. Political and common sense definition of persons is exceptionally relevant in the field of social psychology and symbolic interactionism particularly. The views presented by participants about anonymity and freedom provide insight into constructions of body and self offline as well as online.

The dramaturgical dimensions of the construction of reality online shed new insight into the postmodern definition of reality in general. As stated, reality is what passes as real. There is no objective reality, and this research further dispels ideas of such a thing. In addition, the framing of online interactions within the dramaturgical perspective yields yet another way in which to frame and interpret activities online.

In general, throughout the paper the idea of socially constructed expectations, and socio-cultural prescriptions of beauty and authenticity emphasize the nature of self construction online. This paper has shown that the online world, in particular cybersex affords one a picture of society. This picture shows selves at play in the fields of the board--mother board of a computer that is. The way in which selves are constructed and negotiated online provides insight as to how selves are viewed in general. The construction of bodies online highlights this reflection of the the body-self-society relationship at the heart of interaction.

REFERENCES

Altheide, D. and R. Snow. 1991. *Media Worlds in the Postjournalism Era.* Aldine de Gruyter: New York, NY.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1981 [1988]. "Simulacra and Simulation." *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Edited by Mark Poster). University of Chicago Press: Stanford CA.

Becker, E. 1973. *The Denial of Death.* Free Press: New York, NY.

Bechral-Israeli, Haya. 1995. "From <Bonehead> to <cLoNehEAd>: Nicknames, Play, and Identity on Internet Relay Chat."

Blumer, Herbert 1966. "Sociological Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead" *American Journal of Sociology.* March pp. 535-548.

Chayko. M. 1993. "What is Real in the Age of Virtual Reality? 'Reframing' Frame Analysis for a Technological World." *Symbolic Interaction.* 16(2):171-181.

Cohen, S. and L. Taylor. 1992. *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life* (second edition). Routledge: New York, NY.

Cooley, Charles H. 1902. *Human Nature and Social Order.* Scribner's: New York, NY.

Denzin, Norman K. 1989. *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods.* Prentice Hall: NJ.

Eco, U. 1986. *Travels in Hyperreality.* Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: Orlando, FL.

Elmer-Dewitt, P. 1995. "On a Screen Near You: Cyberporn." *Time.* July 3, 146(1).

Edgley, C. and K. Kiser. 1979. "Polaroid Sex: Deviant Possibilities in a Technological Age." *Journal of American Culture.* :59-64.

Foucault, M. 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Penguin: New York, NY.

Frank, A. 1991. "For a Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review." *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (edited by M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, and B. Turner). Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA

Gergen, K. 1991. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life.* Basic Books.

Glaser, Barney G., & Strauss, Anselm L. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory.* Chicago: Aldine.

Glasner, Barry. 1990. "Fit For Postmodern Selfhood." *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies* (Edited by H. Becker and M. McCall) University of Chicago Press: Chicago IL.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Doubleday Anchor: Garden City, NY.
--1968. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.* Penguin: New York, NY.

Gordon, Chad, & Gergen, Kenneth J. 1968. *The Self in Social Interaction.* John Wiley: New York, NY.

Heim, M. 1991. "The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace." *Cyberspace: First Steps* (edited by M. Benedikt). MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

James, William. 1890. *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 2. Holt: New York, NY.

Jones, S. 1995. *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community.* Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Laurel, B. 1993. *Computers as Theater.* Addison-Wesley: Reading, MA.

Lincoln, Yvonna S., & Guba, Egon G. 1985 *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Sage: London.

McLuhan, M. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* McGraw-Hill: New York, NY.

Mead, George. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society.* University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL.

Meyrowitz, J. 1985. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior.* Oxford University Press: New York, NY.

Myers, D. 1987. "'Anonymity is Part of the Magic': Individual Manipulation of Computer-Mediated Communication Contexts." *Qualitative Sociology.* 10 (3): 251-266.

Reid, E. 1994. *Cultural Formations in Text-Based Virtual Realities*. Masters' Thesis. University of Melbourne: Department of English.
—. 1991. "Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat." Honors Thesis. University of Melborne, Australia.

Rheingold, H. 1991. *Virtual Reality*. Touchstone: New York, NY.

Robinson, P. and N. Tamosaitis. 1993. *The Joy of Cybersex: An Underground Guide to Electronic Erotica*. Brady: New York, NY.

Rose, L. 1995. *Netlaw: The Guidebook to the Changing Legal Frontier*. Osborne McGraw-Hill. Berkeley, CA.

Shilling, C 1993. *The Body and Social Theory*. Sage Publications Inc. Thousand Oaks, CA.

Stone, A. 1994. "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: Boundary Stories About Virtual Cultures." *Cyberspace: First Steps* (ed. by M. Benedikt). MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.
---. 1995. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

Strauss, A. 1993. *Continual Permutations of Action*. Aldine De Gruyter: Hawthorne, NY.

Stryker, Sheldon. 1985. "Further Developments in Identity Theory: Singularity Versus Multiplicity of Selves." *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society* (ed.by Anthony Synnott). Routledge: London.

Turkle, S. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Simon and Schuster: New York, NY.

Turner, B. 1984. *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. Basil Blackwell: New York, NY.

Waskul, D. and M. Douglass. 1997. "Cyberself: The Dynamics of Self in Online Chat." *The Information Society: An International Journal*. 13 (forthcoming).

Waskul, Dennis., Edgley, Charles., & Douglass, Mark. 1997 (In Review). "Cybersex: Disembodiment and Sexual Experience." *Sociological Quarterly*.

APPENDIX A

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW

Date: 03-05-97   IRB#: AS-97-045

Proposal Title: CYBERBODIES: SELF AND BODILY INTERACTIONS

Principal Investigator(s): Robert Lee Maril, Mark A. Douglass

Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

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

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

Signature: Date: March 20, 1997

Chair of Institutional Review Board
cc: Mark A. Douglass

VITA

Mark Douglass

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: CYBERBODIES: SELF AND BODILY INTERACTIONS ONLINE

Major Field: Sociology

Biographical:

> Education: Graduated from Academy of the Holy Angels, Richfield, Minnesota in June 1988; received Bachelor of Arts degree in French from University of Minnesota--Morris, Morris, Minnesota in June 1993. Completed the requirements for the Master of Science degree in sociology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 1997.

Experience:

> Research Assistant at Oklahoma State University from 1995-1997; Camp Director for Stearns Webelos Camp, South Haven, Minnesota 1989-1996; Counselor at Welcome Home Independent Living Skills Center, Edina, Minnesota

Professional Memberships:

> Alpha Kappa Delta, sociology honor society; Phi Delta Kappa, French honor society; Southwestern Social Science Association; Mid-South Sociological Association.