Cyber-flirting

Playing at Love on the Internet

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ABSTRACT. While there exists some research on offline flirting, there is currently little in the way of conceptual theory or empirical research on flirting in cyberspace. This paper attempts to help redress this balance. The paper initially presents a summary of the behaviour of offline flirting and particularly identifies what constitutes offline flirting signals. Given this background context, suggestions are made as to how we might better conceptualize online flirting. The prevailing wisdom has been that we should focus on the absence of the body in cyberspace. This view is challenged here. Instead, it is argued that researchers should re-orient their focus to how the body is reconstructed online. Winnicott's notions of *'potential space'* and *'transitional objects'* are drawn upon in this paper to advance an argument that online flirting should be considered as a form of play. In making this argument, it is contended that online flirting has unique aspects in comparison to offline flirting. In particular, while realistic elements are present in online flirting, there is a blurring between what is reality and fantasy when one engages in flirtatious behaviour on the Internet.

KEY WORDS: cyberspace, flirting, Internet, online relationships, play, psychoanalytic, Winnicott

> *Case was twenty-four. At twenty-two, he'd been a cowboy, a rustler, one of the best in the sprawl. . . . He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness in the consensual hallucination that was the matrix.* (Gibson, 1986, pp. 11–12)

For Gibson, who invented the term, 'cyberspace' offers an ultimately liberating experience. In his book *Neuromancer* (1986), the main character, Case, becomes addicted to cyberspace. Virtual reality is a space where one's dreams can be satisfied. In this space, one can excogitate new identities. The fictional characters of *Neuromancer* experience cyberspace as a place of rapture and erotic intensity. Within Gibson's matrix, entities attain a 'hyper-reality'. In comparison, ordinary experience appears dull and mundane.

Gibson (1986) also highlights the erotic appeal of cyberspace:

> Now she straddled him again, took his hand, and closed it over her, his thumb along the cleft of her buttocks, his fingers spread across the labia. As she began to lower herself, the images came pulsing back, the faces, fragments of neon arriving and receding. She slid down around him and his back arched convulsively. (p. 45)

When Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* he had little knowledge of computers or how interactions might actually occur in cyberspace. Nevertheless, his fictional writing has had some influence on our non-fictional perceptions about interactions over the Internet. Gibson's fictional world of cyberspace is a place to play. This paper, in turn, puts forth the argument that the Internet affords the possibility for another type of play: flirting, or, to phrase this another way, playing at love.

Aims of this Paper

There is a paucity of research and theorizing on the topic of online flirting. This paper explores how we might better conceptualize flirting in cyberspace and how this is different to offline flirting. First, a definition of flirting is offered, together with an adumbration of the history of flirting and the courting process. Following this discussion, the meagre amount of research on offline flirting signals is outlined. The paper then turns to consider how flirting in cyberspace might be better understood. Although past theorists have typically focused on the absence of the body on the Internet, it is argued here that it is more productive for researchers to shift their focus to the reconstruction of the body online. In considering this, a new way of thinking about flirting online is outlined. For instance, the body can be reconstituted through the text; in turn, this can provide a space where flirtation is easier and more playful than offline flirting. Winnicott's conceptions of play and '*potential space*' are utilized here to develop the notion that the Internet provides a space for online flirting as a *unique form of play*. In addition, the term '*magic realism*' is drawn upon to aid us in understanding how, when we are online, there is a blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality. It is contended that the 'fuzziness' between what is real and what is fantasy affords the cyber participant the opportunity to play with love online.

What Does It Mean to Flirt?

Theorists have offered various definitions of flirting. For example, Downey and Vitulli (1987) have argued that flirtation can be defined in two ways:

> One implies an existing casual relationship where one or both persons are engaged in maintaining some suggestion or expectation of intimacy with-

> out intentions of increasing its level or allowing some type of 'consumma-tion' . . . but another common meaning seems to refer simply to the initial actions one takes to convey a message of interest or attraction. (p. 899)

In contrast to this definition, Feinberg (1996) contends that flirting involves teasing and communication. She proposes that flirting is a short cut to intimacy. She argues that: 'Flirting transmits a hidden message the same as other types of teasing. The underlying communication is to find out how intimate a person wants to become or if she wants to become intimate at all' (p. 40).

Although evolutionary psychologists purport that flirting is a universal basic instinct necessary for the procreation of the species, there appear to be other motivations for flirting. The aim of flirting for some might be purely to indicate sexual attraction to another, but this has been found not to be the sole purpose of flirtation. Rather, there are three main reasons for why people flirt: to signal sexual interest, to test the ground to see if others still find them attractive, or simply to pass the time of day (Feinberg, 1996).

Offline Flirting: A Short History

Before moving on to compare and contrast online flirting with offline flirting, it is instructive to consider the history of the courting process. It has been noticed that courtship rituals have changed over time (Mongeau, Hale, Johnson, & Hillis, 1993; Rice, 1996). Prior to the 20th century, in Western cultures, courtship involved the man calling upon the woman. This would generally be at her invitation. Koller (1951) has explained that the man visited his potential beloved at her home, so that the women could display her domestic talents under the watchful eye of her parents. Since this time, the rules of the courting ritual have changed from remaining in the home, to going on dates outside the home. Mongeau et al. (1993) believe that this transition alters who makes the first move. They contend that, from around the turn of the 20th century, men began to initiate the courtship, generally because they had to pay for the date and arrange transportation. Although Mongeau and his colleagues are not wrong in stating that at this time men started to do the asking out, I would suggest that they have missed an important stage in the courting ritual: that of flirtation. If we pay close attention to the non-verbal signals displayed before the male actually asks the woman out, then it would seem more plausible to argue that it is the woman who controls the interaction in the early phases of courtship.

Givens' (1978) five-stage model on courting explains how it is that women make the first move. According to Givens, the first stage is the attention phase, where women typically use primping, object caressing (see below) and using quick glances at and then away from the male. In the second phase, the recognition phase, flirting behaviour consists of head

cocking, pouting, primping, eyebrow flashes (see also below) and smiling. Givens suggests that interaction does not occur until the third stage, where conversation is initiated. During this stage, participants appear highly animated, displaying laughing or giggling. Interestingly, Givens notes that men are generally hesitant to approach women without some initial indication of interest from the woman.

Givens' work not only demonstrates that women make the first move, but also highlights the importance of non-verbal cues in the signalling of sexual attraction. These signals are crucial in the game of flirting.

Offline Signals: The Crucial Place of Non-verbal Cues

As highlighted in Givens' work, flirting behaviour consists mainly of non-verbal signals. Researchers such as, Feinberg, (1996), Koeppel, Montagne-Miller, O'Hair, and Cody (1993) and Moore (1985) have identified a repertoire of facial expressions and gestures. The importance of the body in flirting is not so surprising given that conveying feelings verbally about sexual interest involves a high risk of embarrassment or possible rejection. Unlike the spoken word, body language can signal attraction without being too obvious. This ambiguity protects people from humiliation if the person they are signalling attraction to does share these sentiments.

Some basic codes that are important to consider in flirting include kinetics, oculesics, physical appearance, olfactics, vocalics, proxemics and haptics. Much of the research (see, e.g., Moore, 1985) reveals that flirting usually consists of a combination of these basic codes. It is instructive to consider these codes a little further.

The basic code of kinetic gestures would include, in particular among women, phenomena such as tossing one's hair so that one's face is tilted upwards and one's neck is exposed. Women also often lick their lips, or pout to indicate attraction. To mirror another's body movements is often a sign of attraction. Smiling, laughing and giggling can also signal attraction.

Oculesics, or eye movements, can reveal a great deal about a person's feelings. A person's pupils will dilate if they are attracted to another. Flirtatious behaviour often consists of demure glances downward, a short darting glance (glancing at a person one is attracted to for a few seconds, glancing away, then looking back again), and eyebrow flashes (the raising of both eyebrows for a couple of seconds, usually accompanied by a smile and eye contact).

Given that researchers have mostly agreed that first impressions leave a lasting impression (e.g., Asch, 1946; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), it is no surprise that people take more care of their physical appearance when they hope to attract another. In Dion et al.'s (1972) classic study it was revealed that participants given photographs of more attractive people were

more likely to think they would be happier people, make happier mates, and have higher status occupations than less attractive people. Research has also found that men more than women rated physical attractiveness to be an important quality in a partner (e.g. Travris, 1977). Hence, we would expect that women more than men would take care to look attractive.

In addition to looking good, individuals make attempts to smell good. However, store-bought perfume is more a decoration than a love potion. Despite what the perfume and deodorant companies would have us believe, men prefer women with a light amount of perfume. Interestingly, women are attracted to men whose MHC (major histocompatibility complex—a segment of the DNA that we can smell, which determines what diseases we are inherently resistant to) is more varied to their own (Wedekind, Seebeck, Bettens, & Paepke, 1995).

The use of voice is a most telling indicator of the type of interaction that is taking place. Flirtatious speech is more animated, with moderate amounts of laughter, decreased silences and pauses, and increased warmth and interest.

Proxemics is the amount of personal distance kept between individuals. Individuals who lean toward one another and who are at the same body angle are perceived as being more seductive than those individuals who lean away from each other. Flirtatious behaviour is further characterized by crossing legs toward one another and more face-to-face interaction.

Haptics, or the use of touch, is a common form of communication, particularly in flirtatious behaviour. Another sign of seductive behaviour is unnecessary clothing adjustment, for example playing with buttons, jewellery, a tie, or smoothing out one's skirt or trousers. Yet another indicator of attraction is called 'object caress', where individuals fondle with their keys or perhaps their wine glasses.

Defining Cyberspace: The Disembodied Form

Before moving on to examine how people might flirt online, we need to consider what cyberspace actually is. It is generally understood that cyberspace is the space generated by software within a computer that produces a virtual reality. More important to the discussion in this paper, cyberspace has been typically defined as a space where disembodied communication can take place. For example, Argyle and Shields (1996) contended that 'technology is often viewed as source of separation between people, a barrier' (p. 58). In addition, Clark (1997) has proposed that in 'the virtual environment, we can exist in either a disembodied or a cyberspatial form' (p. 86). In both of these examples the emphasis is placed on the absence of the body in cyberspace.

When theorists discuss relationships developed in cyberspace they also often focus their writings on the absence of the body. Cybersex, for instance, has been a popular topic of discussion. In their discussions of cybersex, theorists often emphasize the idea that participants can engage in virtual sex without the *real presence* of bodies. In respect to Internet romantic relationships, one writer has commented that 'some Internet lovers come to the conclusion that they love each other before they even meet or without ever meeting' (Gwinnell, 1998, p. 89). The implication here is that bodies can only meet offline. To give a further example, McRae (1996) has defined cybersex or virtual sex as 'a generic term for erotic interaction between individuals whose bodies may never touch' (p. 243). Again this writer is focusing on the lack of bodies online.

An alternative view of cyberspace is that it existed before the origins of the Internet, in the form of telephone calls. As such, theorists such as Stratton (1997) argue, cyberspace should essentially be understood 'simply as the space produced by human communication when it is mediated by technology in such a way that the body is absent' (p. 29).

The possibility of email affairs has also been outlined by Stratton (1997). Again he emphasizes the lack of body in these encounters: 'Because the couple have not met, there is even greater latitude for the development of bodyless selves, and for the fantastic creation of virtual bodies for those selves' (p. 30).

This view of cyberspace as being a place where there is no body is a very narrow construction of how we should conceive of this space and the activity that occurs within it. In contrast to this very restricted view, which is somewhat of a metaphysical interpretation, it is argued in this paper that the phenomenon of flirting behaviour in cyberspace is such that it is in fact the reconstruction of the body that is imperative to the success of many interpersonal interactions over the Internet.

For example, Stone (1995) has discussed the importance of the body in telephone sex. She has pointed out that telephone sex is clearly a different kind of sex to physical or 'embodied' sex. Physical sex involves a range of senses, touch, sight, sound, smell and hearing. In contrast, telephone sex workers are required to translate the physical experience of sex into an audible form. In turn, the receiver at the other end of the line needs to reconstitute these images. As Stone (1995) describes, 'what's being sent back and forth over the wires isn't merely information, it's bodies, not physical objects, but the information necessary to reconstruct the meaning of body to almost any desired depth and complexity' (p. 244).

In respect to cyberspace, while it cannot be denied that the physical body is not present in the textual exchanges in cyberspace, how the real physical body is reconstructed should be of interest to researchers. For although we do not have physical, tangible bodies in cyberspace, we do nevertheless have bodies. If one were to peruse the textual exchanges on bulletin boards,

discussion boards or chat rooms, one would find ample evidence of constructed bodies. For instance, people describe what their bodies look like and feel like. Hence, although the physical bodies are not present in cyberspace, the body still does matter.

Online Flirting: New Rules

The obvious question then arises as to how the body might translate to online Internet flirting. How might we conceptualize flirting online? When interacting in cyberspace *through text only* (I deliberately place an emphasis here on text only, given that, with the change in technology, such as web-cams, there will be more opportunities to witness the 'real body' online), none of the offline flirting signals described previously are physically present. There is not an *actual* physical body to provide these non-verbal signals of sexual interest. For flirting to occur in cyberspace the body needs to be represented through text. If one studies Internet activity, it does appear that some basic rules about online flirting are emerging, and indeed we find some evidence for how the body may be reconstructed via text.

For instance, rather than make an effort to look good, individuals can create a lasting first impression by describing how attractive they look. This is not necessarily a description of our actual bodies. Cyberspace allows us, through text, to create new attractive bodies. Indeed, we can devise an entirely new attractive being, one that has a good job, a self that earns huge sums of money, and is well educated.

Demure glances and eyebrow flashes are not easily replicated online. However, there are some alternatives to these non-verbal gestures. For example, emoticons, which are drawings made from grammatical symbols, might be a useful alternative. We can use facial expressions such as smiley faces, winks and kisses as a substitute for body language. Moreover, rather than use audible laughing and giggling, individuals can use acronyms, such as LOL (laugh out loud or lots of laughs) and <BG> (Big Grin). Screen names are another device people can add to their repertoire of online flirting behaviours.

Some offline flirting behaviours are not so easy to translate online. For example, it is difficult to find substitutes, or an equivalence, for olfactics, vocalics and proxemics. Online participants do not know what the person they are chatting with smells like, nor are they allured by their sexy deep voice. Chatting with CAPITALS IS CONSIDERED TO BE SHOUTING! However, the subtleties of voice, such as pitch and tone, are not evident online. Pauses in conversation might be attributed to a poor Internet connection, or bad typing skills, as opposed to a lack of interest. Individuals also cannot indicate attraction online by leaning closer to one another or by mirroring their body movements. Moreover, in revisiting Givens' (1978)

phases of courting, we find that the stages that occur offline are not as distinctive online. Instead, these appear to merge into one phase, given that the reconstruction of the body that is occurring online is interwoven throughout the conversation that has already been initiated.

Online Flirting: Playing at Love

In addition to pointing out the differences in how one is able to flirt online in comparison to offline, I want to propose here another important distinction between the two activities, that is, that cyber-flirting can be understood as a type of play. (Notwithstanding the possibility that other types of play are also available in cyberspace, an in-depth discussion of this kind is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Although play is an activity typically associated with childhood, some researchers have also focused on play in adulthood. For example, Carr (in press) has argued that play exists in work settings. He has explained that although play can be a means to some other end, it is also an activity that is enjoyable in itself. In addition to this view of play, Abramis (1990) has proposed that another type of play is simply 'goofing around'.

In considering play, I would like to draw from a psychoanalytic perspective. A psychodynamic view of play emphasizes the importance of the ephemeral quality of illusion in play (Modell, 1990). As Carr (in press) states:

> Those who champion a psychoanalytic approach to the understanding of play insist that play is all about illusion and that such illusion can only be sustained provided play can be kept within a frame of its own—a frame which seeks to separate it from ordinary life.

Modell (1990) has also stressed the importance of considering play as separate from ordinary life. Play can be separated from ordinary life, in a number of ways, as he has explained:

> Playing takes place in a certain space and has certain limitations regarding the duration of time, as in games that are 'played out' within a certain limit of time. Yet playing may have its own quality of timelessness. Playing is also separated from ordinary life by the 'rules of the game': all play has its rules that pertain to the temporary world in which playing takes place. Rules are in effect a means of containing a space in which illusions can flourish. (p. 27)

In respect to cyber-flirting, this is an activity separate from ordinary life. For example, as was outlined above, given the absence of non-verbal offline cues, new rules are required to enable one to flirt online. In addition, a certain amount of illusion needs to be sustained in order for the activity to take place, given that this is an interaction between characters that are reconstructed through text.

It has been observed that some relationships that begin on the Internet often extend beyond the net (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). It could, therefore, be argued that the 'game is over' or playing has ceased once the couple decides to introduce more social cues to the interaction. This is not to say that cyber-interactions are not intimate, but rather the illusion of the body that was constructed through the text becomes deconstructed once more is known about the 'actual' body. In fact, my own research has identified that some relationships seem to work better exclusively on the Internet (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). For example, this 18-year-old woman in our study stated that:

> *It developed through an interesting chat on IRC and a series of about 500 e-mails. The attraction was merely someone who cared and listened. He was very sensitive and caring, and his picture was hot! {laughs} . . . we exchanged addresses and he sent me presents on Valentines Day and Easter. We would write a two page e-mail every day, send sounds to each other, and eventually after six months we talked on the phone. Our phone conversation was very weak so we decided to stick to e-mail . . .* (p. 628)

In this woman's case, perhaps the illusion of the person that was constructed through text was spoilt once she was exposed to the actual person. As Modell (1990) and Carr (in press) comment, play is ephemeral and separate from ordinary life. Moving to another mode of communication for this woman might have meant 'game over'.

Applying Winnicott's Notions of Play to Cyberspace

Winnicott (1971/1997) also believed that play is as an important activity during adulthood. He stated that: 'Whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well' (p. 40). In line with Freud's view on play, Winnicott argued that 'play transcended the serious and non-serious opposi-tional binary' (Carr, 2001, p. 544). Winnicott's significant contributions to a psychoanalytic perspective of play are drawn upon here to explain how the Internet offers a unique space to play at love.

Winnicott (1971/1997) was very interested in the 'potential space' be-tween the mother and the infant. He contrasted this 'potential space (a) with the inner world (which is related to the psychosomatic partnership) and (b) with actual, or external reality' (p. 41). Winnicott understood 'potential spaces' to be spaces where connections may be maintained between an external world and an internal conception of self; the space between the subject and object. To quote from Winnicott (1971/1997), potential space is

> . . . the hypothetical area that exists (but cannot exist) between the baby and the object (mother or part of mother) during the phase of the repudiation of the object as not-me, that is, at the end of being merged in with the object. (p. 107)

Although potential space originates between the mother and the infant, Winnicott argues that later on it becomes possible for the individual child or adult to develop his/her own capacity to generate potential space. For example, he proposed that such spaces could exist between the patient and analyst. While Winnicott could be criticized for developing a universal assumption about the relationship between the mother and infant, his notions are still highly useful.

According to Winnicott, potential space is the place where play takes place and creativity becomes possible. As he expresses it:

> The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. (p. 100)

It is critical to our understanding of Winnicott's work to note that potential space is not inner psychic reality. Rather, as he understood it, potential space 'is outside the individual, but it is not the external world. . . . Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the services of . . . inner or personal reality' (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 51).

As illustrated in the above quote, potential space is not pure fantasy, nor is it pure reality. As Ogden (1985) has expressed it, 'In the absence of potential space, there is only fantasy; within potential space imagination can develop' (p. 133). It is in this space that meanings and self are continually being created and re-created. Interestingly, Winnicott (1971/1997) strongly argued that 'it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self' (p. 54). Hence, he believed that play is central to individual growth. He stated that, given a 'good enough' environment, the interplay of the inner world and external reality promotes the development of self and facilitates growth.

> In other words, *it is play that is the universal*, and that belongs to health: playing facilitates growth and therefore health; playing leads into group relationships; playing can be a form of communication in psychotherapy; and lastly, psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others. (p. 41)

Others too have suggested that play is fundamental to the development of self. Mos and Boodt (1991) state that 'Play is directed towards an understanding of one's personal growth and the acceptance of the uniqueness of others. In whatever human endeavor, play comes to express the drama and tragedy and the suffering and joy of human existence' (p. 139).

In line with Winnicott's theoretical conception of play, I would argue that cyberspace could be understood as potential space. As elucidated in Gibson's fictional work, cyberspace is a place where people are liberated to be whoever they want to be. Gibson himself perceives cyberspace as a

'hyper-reality'. Cyberspace is perhaps a space somewhere outside the individual, but it is still not the external world. The participants, the computers, monitors, keyboards, mice, software, modems, text, cables, telephone lines, and so forth, all occupy this potential space, this space between the 'real individuals' and the 'fantasy individuals'. Indeed the web might be conceptualized as a potential playground.

It is contended here that flirting is a type of play that can occur in this potential space—cyberspace. Playing at love on the Internet, although synonymous in some ways with offline flirting, is characterized here as a *unique activity* that is a form of play. There is greater opportunity online for fantasy than there is offline. Online participants can inhabit any body they desire, whether that is a youthful body, an attractive body or even a body of the opposite sex. In recent research, I have found that men, in particular, swap genders online (Whitty, 2001, 2002). Moreover, the participant can invent what their fantasy partner looks like, feels like, and feels about them. Participants can fantasize that they are attracted to others, and, in turn, others are attracted to them.

Therefore, as argued earlier in this paper, while clearly the body is not physically present during online interactions, it still does matter. In this 'potential space', participants can play with a variety of identities, including their physical identity. This is illustrated in the following extract from an interview I conducted with a 22-year-old man (in a previous study) who discussed how he flirted on the web:

> They all think I'm a six foot tall tanned lifesaver. I tell them certain things that are true, but other things are bullshit. I mean, I can get away with it so why not. What they don't know won't hurt them. I will admit that I am pretty sly when it comes to smooth talking certain ladies on the net. (Whitty & Gavin, 2001, p. 629)

In this participant's case it would be difficult to play with being a six-foot tanned lifesaver in a face-to-face interaction if his 'real' physical body was that of an obese, pale, five-foot-tall individual. This type of flirtation is clearly different to offline flirting. However, despite the differences, this example does illustrate the importance of considering the reconstruction of the body online rather than emphasizing the absence of body. In what ways the body is reconstructed in this play should be of interest to researchers. For instance, what does it mean for this young man to play with inhabiting a stereotypical Australian attractive body? How else has he re-created his body online? How has this altered his dialogue with others? Therefore, rather than arguing that one can interact without the body online, it is more meaningful to question how one can play with one's body in this potential space.

In addition to playing with the shape and form of one's own physical body, cyberspace provides an opportunity to play with other bodies. The

following quote from another 18-year-old woman illustrates how one might play with other bodies in this potential space:

> *Usually I just block out the photo they have sent me if I don't like it and just pretend they look a certain way. It's more fun that way!* (Whitty & Gavin, 2000)

This quote is contrary to the view that the Internet is simply a place for a meeting of minds. Rather, it demonstrates that even in cyberspace the body plays an important role. This is again supported in the following statement by a 21-year-old man:

> *Well you always wanna know what the other person looks like and you're always hoping for it to be some good-looking chick.*

Interestingly, in response to whether he would continue communicating with a woman who turned out to be unattractive, this man stated:

> *Well then yeah in that case I would still talk to them but I know that I would change towards them . . . Like I wouldn't be flirty or anything like that.* (Whitty & Gavin, 2000)

Aitken and Herman (1997) have proposed that Winnicott's framework 'allows the possibility of a flexible manipulation of meanings and relationships' (p. 11). They argue that objects, cultural practices and self-images may become elements of this space. Moreover, they suggest that these elements can be altered 'as an individual adjusts and updates knowledge throughout a lifetime' (p. 11). Indeed play can challenge society's rules. In Winnicott's potential space, reality is plastic and meanings can be reconstituted. Applying this to cyberspace, stereotypical gender roles can be challenged by playing online. For example, women might initiate conversation, and men might utilize more facial signals, in the form of emoticons, to flirt with. It could therefore be argued that this potential space allows one to play and experiment with traditional cultural meanings of the self and gender. An individual can play, by trying out different identities, to discover, to use Winnicott's terms, what is 'me' and what is 'not-me'. This type of play has significant implications for therapeutic outcomes, and, of course, the potential for psychopathologies to develop from this activity cannot be discounted.

Germane to Winnicott's argument is that potential space is a safe space, a place where one can be spontaneous and experimentation can take place. He argues that in order for one to play there needs to be trust. For example, he argues that if psychotherapy is to be successful, '*playing has to be spontaneous, and not compliant or acquiescent*' (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 51). In line with these qualities of potential space, cyberspace potentially provides a safer space than offline space in which to play and experiment at flirting. Rejection is less likely to cause distress when you can disconnect at any time, and the chances are remarkably decreased as to the likelihood of

ever having a chance meeting with your cyber-playmate. Moreover, there are more opportunities for an individual to be creative and experiment with flirting online. As is elucidated in Gibson's fictional work, cyberspace offers us the opportunity to create and play with different selves. For example, MUDs (multiple-user dungeons, or more commonly understood these days to mean multi-user dimensions) were originally spaces where interactive role-playing games could be played, very similar to Dungeons and Dragons. Presently, hundreds of MUDs are available on the Internet. These are often based on popular science-fiction/fantasy; however, there are numerous MUDs where people get together and socialize. What is evidenced here is people experimenting with and playing with multiple characters. In the Winnicottian sense, this can be conceived as playing at discovering what is 'me' and what is 'not-me'.

Winnicott also employed the term *'transitional objects'* in his theorizing about play. He observed that infants often become fond of a special object, such as a teddy bear, a doll or a blanket, as if addicted to this object. The infant develops an attachment to this object, and might suck the object, or suck their thumb or fingers while holding the object. This object Winnicott named the 'transitional object', or the 'not-me' object. What he means by the 'transitional object' in the case of the child sucking a blanket or some other object is that it is an object that is not the breast but that treating it as such allows the infant to make a distinction between the 'me' and the 'not-me'. In respect to play, Winnicott (1971/1997) asserted that 'when we witness an infant's employment of a transitional object, the first not-me possession, we are witnessing both the child's first use of a symbol and the first experience of play' (p. 96). Applying this to cyber-flirting, the 'hard-ware' of the Internet could be examples of transitional objects, i.e. the computers, monitors, keyboards, mice, software, modems, text, cables, telephone lines, that allow forms of play.

Bollas's (1992) extensions on Winnicott's work can also add to our understanding of flirting in cyberspace. He has suggested that,

> . . . as we encounter the object world we are substantially metamorphosed by the structure of objects; internally transformed by objects that leave their traces within us, whether it be the effect of a musical structure, a novel, or a person. In play the subject releases the idiom of himself to the field of objects, where he is then transformed by the structure of that experience, and will bear the history of that encounter in the unconscious. (p. 59)

In other words, Bollas is arguing that transitional objects, like all objects, '*leave a trace*' within us. He believes that when we use some objects, 'it is as if we know the terms of engagement' (p. 60). As Carr (in press) explains it: 'Some objects seem to have much more inner meaning for us and unlock unconscious thought processes and affective states.' In respect to online interactions, it may be that the transitional objects such as the computers,

monitors, keyboards, mice, modems, and so forth, 'leave a trace' within us. Once we log on, it is as if we must acknowledge 'the rules' of the game of cyber-flirting. Playing at love online is restrained by certain rules. Some of these rules have been imposed from people's understandings of offline flirting; however, many new rules have evolved in order for online inter-actions to take place (as described in an earlier section of this paper).

One also needs to acknowledge that part of the leaving of a trace may be such that individuals simply touching their computer or thinking about going online triggers certain emotions. For example, Lupton (1995) describes the effect turning on the computer has on her:

> When I turn on my personal computer . . . it makes a little sound. This little sound I sometimes playfully interpret as a cheerful 'Good morning' greeting, for the action of bringing my computer to life usually happens first thing in the morning . . . .In conjunction with my cup of tea, the sound helps to prepare me emotionally and physically for the working day ahead, a day that will involve much tapping on the computer keyboard and staring into the pale blue face of the display monitor. (p. 97)

Thus a very embodied response to the object itself is a matter that needs to be recognized in our theorizing about the Internet.

Winnicott argued that normally the transitional object provides a healthy experience, which loses its meaning after a while. He believed that the first 'transitional object' stood for the breast in an illusory way (Winnicott, 1953). Later on in a child's life, he suggested that objects, such as toys, represent body parts. Problems can arise, however, if attachment to a transitional object persists for too long. Winnicott (1971/1997) proposed that the 'transitional object may eventually develop into a fetish object and so persist as a characteristic of the adult sexual life' (p. 9). As Pierloot (1988) describes it, 'it can persist in pathological states such as the talisman of obsessional rituals, in addictions, lying and stealing' (p. 298). It might be the case that playing at cyber-flirting for too long may cease to be a healthy experience. For example, Cooper, Putnam, Planchon and Boies (1999) have identified a certain kind of person who would never have developed a sexual addiction if it were not for the Internet. Perhaps in these individuals' cases the transitional object (the computer) eventually developed into a fetish object.

Bollas' (1992) notion of generational objects has relevance to this paper. He contends that:

> Were we to study this psychology of generations closely, it would be of interest to contrast the nature of generational potential spaces, to note those objects selected as signature of a generation's consciousness, and to analyse the field of such objects as unconscious ideas that may be generative or pathological. (p. 266)

He states that generational objects weave into historical time, and argues that '[g]enerations form objects that signify the history of childhoods, that speak

to the collective march through time of a vast group expecting and expected to shape history' (p. 267). Although it is too early to tell, in decades to come we might look back over objects such as computers, modems, keyboards, and so forth, and, in retrospect, see these items are signifying meaning for a particular generation in history. Cyberspace might not always provide the potential space for playing at love as described in this paper.

Magic Realism

> *Play is immensely exciting. It is exciting not primarily because the instincts are involved, be it understood! The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable.* (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 47)

Again taking our cue from Winnicott, I would like to conclude this paper with the proposition that the term *magic realism* is a potentially important notion to consider in understanding cyber-flirting. Carr (in press) has defined magic realism as 'a form of representation that juxtaposes reality and fantasy'. Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Carlos Fuentes have written stories employing this method of magic realism: that is, stories that have realistic elements, but also contain fictional events and situations that are impossible. Carr (in press) argues that 'magic realism, as a form of play, affords us the opportunity to see again elements of our world that we have either taken for granted or never recognized in the first place'. As with Winnicott's potential space, magic realism combines fantastic and realistic elements.

Magic realism, as a form of play, is evident in cyber-flirting. The Internet is a place where there is a blurring of the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Carr (2001) has stated that:

> It is by recasting the everyday experiences, and the ordinary, in a way as to become extraordinary, that the hidden, the neglected the suppressed and the repressed may gain a 'new' appearance and new possibilities might be liberated from the activity of this 'new recognition'. (p. 547)

Indeed, both fantastic and realistic elements are present when people flirt online. Realistic elements are evident in the text that online participants construct. For example, as described earlier on in this paper, in order to flirt participants need to describe smiling, laughter and even touch. Another realistic aspect is the emotions generated from this play. In contrast, the fantastic elements include how they re-create the body they inhabit and their identity. This is evident in the imaginative play of individuals, who are free to create new selves. This process is magical since the individual is not

restricted to describing what they actually look like, or their actual self, but rather they can play with a possible or ideal self.

What makes cyber-flirting a unique experience compared to offline flirtation is that when we consider the physical sense of reality, these events are not actually occurring. Hence, like the magic realism technique employed by novelists, reality and fantasy are indeed parallel. Unlike offline flirting, when one flirts online, there is no possibility for physical intimacy at the end of the evening. However, to reiterate, despite this lack of physical connection between bodies, the body still does play a crucial role in cyber-flirting, the difference being that online the participant is free to create this body. Again the point being emphasized here is that cyberspace is a place for bodies.

Drawing once more from Winnicott, the transitional objects involved in cyber-flirting could be said to have their own magic value and force: for example, the magical qualities the participant might ascribe to the computer as colourfully described by Lupton earlier on in this paper. Objects can take on new meanings, and in this way a new understanding of the self might emerge. In Winnicottian terms, playing with what is 'me' and not-me' can take place in this space, which is separate from ordinary life. For instance, individuals can experiment with being a successful attractive lover, so long as this illusion remains in this magical realm of cyberspace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is argued that Winnicott's notions of potential space and transitional objects are useful terms to employ to make sense of flirting in cyberspace. Although online flirting is based on elements of a physical reality, an illusion needs to be sustained in this space in order for flirtatious interactions to take place. It also needs to be recognized that although this paper describes possibilities that cyberspace could offer the participant who desires to 'play at love', it could nevertheless be the case that players do not take advantage of the opportunities that the Internet affords. Empirical research into how participants actually flirt online has yet to be undertaken. Nevertheless, this paper does highlight an alternative view on the construction of cyberspace, the importance of consideration to the reconstruction of the body online, and a theoretical framework for understanding playing at love on the Internet.

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