

Life on the Screen Identity in the Age of the Internet

Sherry Turkle

(A Book Contemplation By Dorit Winter)

Life on the Screen is commendable as an introduction to interactive computer use. Sherry Turkle explains the nascent computer culture of a simulation called Multi-User Domains, or MUDs, very thoroughly. Essentially, “MUDs provide worlds for anonymous social interactions in which one can play a role as close to or as far away from one’s ‘real self’ as one chooses.” (p. 12) To impart a bit more of a flavor of MUD existence, I can do no better than to quote the book:

In the course of a day, players move in and out of the active game space. As they do so, some experience their lives as a “cycling through” between the real, world, RL, and a series of virtual worlds. I say a series because people are frequently connected to several MUDs at a time. In an MIT computer cluster at 2 a.m.. an eighteen-year-old freshman sits at a networked machine and points to the four boxed-off areas on his vibrantly colored computer screen. “On this MUD I’m relaxing, shooting the breeze. On this MUD I’m in aflame war. On this last one I’m into heavy sexual things. I’m traveling between the MUDs and a physics homework assignment due at 10 tomorrow morning.”

And here is Doug, a midwestern college junior: “I split my mind. I’m getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more... I go from window to window... And then I’ll get a real-time message and I guess that’s Real Life. It’s just one more window. Real Life is just one more window and it’s usually not my best..” (pp. 12-13)

There are lots of people like Doug in this book, most of them college students, many of them high school students, and plenty of children, too. Their virtual world of self-assumed screen identities is what Turkle’s book is about. As such it is comprehensive, and for anyone wanting insight into that world, it is a fascinating study. The technology, the psychology, the rules and etiquette, as well as the mystique of the various types of interactive MUD games are skillfully explained.

But, Turkle herself is part of the culture she is studying. Although she is a conscientious researcher and claims neutrality, her premises are part and parcel of the world she is examining. To some extent this is true of anyone alive today. We are all ruled by electricity. But whereas Turkle provides a footnote in the text to explain “flame war” (“computer culture jargon for an incendiary expression of differences of opinion . . .”) she refers to quintessentially unsocial situations as “social interaction” without irony. Of course, the entire book is an attempt to characterize this so-called “social” interaction. Clearly, Ms. Turkle sees nothing sinister in the “Culture of Simulation.” Or does she assume her daughter is old enough to “click in The Playroom”? Then again, “it is no longer unusual to find MUDS where eight- and nine-year-olds ‘play’ such grade school icons as Barbie or the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers.” Mother and daughter are doing no more than participating in Real Life, in Real Life that contains MUDs.

The dust jacket tells us that nearly two decades of field work have gone into this book. It is a serious study. The author is a Professor of the Sociology of Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a licensed clinical psychologist holding a joint Ph.D. in Personal Psychology and Sociology from Harvard. She is well-steeped. Her research is important enough to have warranted support from the Guggenheim, MacArthur, Rockefeller and National Science Foundations.

But here we are at the essential crux of the matter of computer research from a Waldorf perspective. A Waldorf perspective includes as much of the spiritual world as we Waldorf researchers can muster. Access to that world is threatened by the very qualifications so impressively listed under the author's dust jacket portrait. She is examining the social nature of an activity which healthy common sense would tell us is intrinsically unsocial. She is showing us that "our relationship to computers is changing our minds and our hearts," and her effort to do so is welcome and laudable. But her own mind and heart have, very understandably, been affected by her 20 years of investigations. For her, healthy common sense is, evidently, not enough. Nor can it be; it has been eroded by her professional pre-occupation, just as my faith in conventional science has been eroded by mine.

Healthy common sense is, as Rudolf Steiner often mentions, a sound basis for the study of spiritual science. In the context of that science, this book overflows with symptoms of "the end of the century." Here is just one example: Turkle quotes a student as speaking of his "machine part" and his "animal part." Her interpretation of such a statement is based on the Sociology of Science, her area of expertise. She mentions the student in her examination of how the computer has influenced people's views of themselves. For her, this student's self-definition is an inconspicuous detail. Yet it perfectly reflects the dangers predicted by spiritual science in *The Work of the Angels in Man's Astral Body*. Her book is filled with case studies of individuals whose egos seem to light up only on screen. She has documented a forceful trend. We can only be grateful to her. She seems to be a sensitive, intelligent, caring person. Throughout the book she makes perceptive remarks about the phenomena she is investigating, including their effects on children. In no way do I want to flame her or her book, but because her concept of human being has suffered decades of research into virtual reality, she doesn't quite realize that she is revealing virtual detritus when, for example, she begins her chapter on "Tinysex and Gender Trouble" with a confession: "From my earliest effort to construct an online persona, it occurred to me that being a virtual man might be more comfortable than being a virtual woman." (p. 210)

There we have it. The investigator sucked into the virtual world where identity is arbitrary. How does that world look from the perspective that includes the real world?

How does such vicarious identity look to a Waldorf teacher struggling to *educate*? How can we bring out of children what is in them, if what is in them is deleted and replaced, even if only potentially, from an early age? Is temporary assumption of an arbitrary identity destructive to the true self?

We cannot expect Sherry Turkle to answer such questions for us. We will have to answer them for ourselves. Her book allows us to orient ourselves in the nascent and expanding end-of-the-century culture it examines without having to submit ourselves to the lure of Life on the Screen. *Life on the Screen* allows us to be virtually virtual, to get some idea of interactive MUDS without playing those games. Among the people on whom Waldorf education depends, i.e., the parents and children of our schools, there are at least four categories rife with research possibilities: parents who play interactive MUD games, and those who don't; children who do, and those still naive. Twenty years from now will we be able to demonstrate that Life Without a Screen is inherently valuable? Will it be?

Online, Waldorf teachers from around the world are finding each other. And why not?

We had better start our research now.