'deepthroatfucker' and 'Discerning Adonis'
Men and cybersex

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A B S T R A C T ● This article uses interviews with male cybersex participants to examine their experiences of cybersex and considers constructions of 'self' and 'sex' in their discussions. It asks how the adoption of a cybersex persona is understood by participants and how they characterize their cybersexual practices in order to develop a clearer picture of the ways in which new forms of communication technology are implicated in producing new forms of sexual practice and how these relate to contemporary perceptions of what sex is. ●

K E Y W O R D S ● chat room ● cybersex ● self ● sex

Framing cybersex

In contemporary societies, new kinds of sexual experience are emerging and sex is taking on new forms and meanings. Online sexual activities are perhaps the most visible manifestation of this. Today people access porn, buy sex toys and seek advice about sex online, and as O'Brien and Shapiro argue, 'sex-related activities can be seen as a major variable in the technological and economic growth and development of the Internet' (2004: 115). It is also increasingly common for people to connect and interact sexually with each other online.

This article focuses on the online sexual activity often referred to as 'cybersex'; a term which is sometimes used to describe any 'combination of sex and computer technology' (Madden, n.d: 1), but which here refers to a form of interaction carried out entirely through text on various online services such as Internet Relay Channels, messenger systems and dedicated chat

rooms. Real-time encounters are used to construct relatively realistic sexual experiences, jointly constructed through various types of dialogue. While its form represents a radical departure from existing types of sexual encounter, cybersex approximates these in that it is undertaken for the purposes of 'desire, expression, intimacy, play, experimentation, arousal and/or orgasm' (Waskul, 2006). The article uses interviews with male cybersex participants to examine their experiences of cybersex and considers constructions of 'self' and 'sex' in their discussions. It is part of a broader project concerned with men's and women's experiences and understandings of online sex in a variety of settings. Focusing here on men's cybersex practices, I aim to examine how the adoption of a cybersex persona is understood by participants and how they characterize their cybersexual practices in order to develop a clearer picture of the ways in which new forms of communication technology are implicated in producing new forms of sexual practice – and how these relate to contemporary perceptions of what sex is.

One focus of academic writing on cybersex has been the potential offered by new forms of technologically mediated sexual experiences. As Michael Ross notes, online sexual activity has made it possible for new categories of sexual identity to emerge, such as men who have Internet, but not 'real-life' sex with other men (2005: 13). According to Diane Wysocki, cybersex is sought out because it allows people to share sexual fantasies with others and to experience the freedom to take on different sexual personae (1998: 435). Online sexual activity has been conceptualized as potentially empowering, especially for women (Doring, 2000: 21); a space 'to be and do anything' (Odzer, 1997: 43) and for 'advanced sexual education and experimentation' (Screenseductress, 2005: 30). Dennis Waskul has shown that many people who practise cybersex 'claim to learn new sexual techniques, discover new sexual turn-ons, and vicariously experience sexual arousal in ways that they would not, or could not, experience in "real" face-to-face sexual encounters', and because of this they rate their experiences as meaningful and sometimes highly valuable (2003: 21).

Often this potential has been examined in terms of the opportunity cybersex affords for *playing* with sex and gender, especially in multi-user domains which allow people to 'experience rather than merely observe what it feels like to be the opposite gender or have no gender at all' (Bruckman, 1993), to negotiate gender in playful and imaginative ways (McRae, 1996), and to create virtual personae which are 'objects-to-think-with for reflecting on the social construction of gender' (Turkle, 1995: 213).

Other writers have taken a more critical view of gender play, arguing that this may involve nothing more than reproducing 'conventional gendered sexual intercourse' (O'Brien, n.d: 7), simply allowing people to swap positions within the existing framework. Don Slater argues that online sex and gender play may in fact work to police sexual desires and to reproduce body ideals which conform to the generic conventions of mainstream heterosexual porn (1998: 103). In this way, rather than challenging existing constructions of sex,

gender and sexuality, forms of cybersexuality may work to eroticize them (Rival et al., 1998: 304). As Slater indicates, while participants may be aware of the performativity of their online selves, this is often underpinned by a strong belief in a pre-existing 'real self' which finds expression through sexual practices. Sexuality is used 'as an idiom through which an authentic self finds its own normality, even by way of actions which outsiders might find to be extreme' (Rival et al., 1998: 302). Other elements of online sexual activity, such as participants' tendency to chat about everyday life, their conceptualization of online encounters as an 'escape' from reality, and their attempts to monitor and make sense of online encounters in terms of everyday rules and ethics, demonstrate that what is really striking about such sexual practices is their 'intimate connection with the mundane' (1998: 305). Waskul also finds that in cybersex the body remains important in a symbolic way, particularly in the participants' concerns about the sex, age and appearance of their cybersex partners (2003: 24). Although they may believe that they escape the limits of the physical body in their encounters, their performances occur 'in highly predictable forms' and they tend to reconstruct themselves in line with cultural norms of attractiveness (2003: 25).

Similar observations have been made about the ways webcam sex is framed by existing sexual practices and repertoires (Kibby and Costello 1999, 2001). While women draw on a wide range of settings, costumes, props and poses in constructing their displays for the webcam, men's repertoire tends to be restricted to a gay porn aesthetic, which relies heavily on props such as leather jackets and cowboy boots (1999: 6). Men tend to code themselves as active, often depicting themselves standing or moving about. They rarely show their faces and tend to privilege shots of (preferably large) penises as a key sign of masculinity (1999: 4). These modes of display suggest that male sexual performance is 'a sort of self-conscious badge of masculinity rather than the object of female pleasure and desire' (1999: 5). However, Kibby and Costello note that cybersex 'allows for the possibility of rewriting gendered codes of sexuality, in that it blurs the distinction between the subject and the object, the consumer and the consumed, the image and the act' (2001: 367). In this sense, although cybersex is clearly constrained by existing gender conventions, it also creates a space where the development of a polymorphous masculine sexuality, and the exploration of marginalized sexualities are made possible (1999: 8).

My interest in this article is not so much with the radical potential or otherwise of cybersex for constructions of gender, but in the broader context of developments in forms of intimacy and communication. Some accounts of cybersex do deal with this, seeing cybersex encounters as a form of playful or 'ludic' interaction which operates as a reaction against orderly intimate relationships (Waskul and Vannini, 2008), as a form of autosexual 'self-game' (Waskul, 2003), and as a form of communicative play disconnected from sexuality (Waskul, 2005). Here, communication technologies are understood as extending the recreational possibilities of sexual encounters, allowing a quick intimacy to develop in the conditions of anonymity, physical distance and

transience that the Internet makes possible. Such connections have been described as 'more frequent and more shallow, more intense and more brief' than those which take place offline (Bauman, 2003: 62), and can be seen as a technologically assisted form of 'episodic sexuality' typically associated with men and finding expression in commodified sexual practices such as prostitution and pornography (Giddens, 1992: 415). Paradoxically, such 'shallow' online practices have been seen as closer to 'genuine, unadulterated, real reality' (Bauman, 2003: 63) – more 'real' than 'real life sex' (Ross, 2005: 345) because their functioning at the symbolic level provides 'a better form of expressing and fulfilling desire than "real" sex' (Ross, 2005: 346). Thus, while cybersex is seen as a form of play, with the lack of authenticity that this implies, it may also be viewed as providing 'a kind of missing link between fantasies, desires for intimacy, the traditional role of text in expressing these, and sexuality' (Ross, 2005: 344).

Doing cybersex

Online research presents interesting ethical and methodological problems as a number of researchers have argued (Bruckman 2004; Buchanan 2000). Researching online *sexual* activity introduces a further set of challenges (Binik et al., 1999). Public perceptions of online sexual activity as deviant, addictive and predatory create a potential climate of fear and suspicion for researchers and their subjects. Online sexual activity may be clandestine and transgressive, and, as such, experienced as intensely private. In addition, researchers may be working in virtual spaces which are very sexually charged and where normal rules of sexual etiquette and expression do not operate. Issues of privacy, honesty, sensitivity and safety are therefore extremely important.

As many researchers have noted, there is a dearth of literature on how to carry out this kind of work (DiMarco and DiMarco 2003; Whitty and Carr 2006). Individual researchers take a variety of approaches to researching online sex environments and to key issues of ethics and methodology. In their discussion of chat room research, Andy and Heather DiMarco argue that, whatever the details of the approach, it is paramount that researchers are careful to distinguish between social and researcher identities (2003: 168), carry out their work in accordance with the rules of the group being studied, make a clear assessment of what constitutes public and private material within that environment (2003: 169) and, most important of all, treat participants with respect.

My study was based in a chat room which is part of a more comprehensive sex site, Literotica, founded in 1998. In studying the site, I adopted the methods of observation, participant observation and interviews. Given the special importance of anonymity in a site devoted to sexual exchanges, which in some, though not all, instances are likely to be private, I have taken care to disguise the identity of the participants and have removed either usernames

or profile details (and usually both) here. The initial phase of the study involved 'lurking' on the site, a position taken by any user of the site who is not actively engaged in sexual activity or general chat. I spent several weeks familiarizing myself with the site before I began to interview users. This stage was absolutely necessary to enable me to understand how the chat room functioned, to see the range of activities and interactions taking place there, and experience what it is like to be a visitor to the site. It allowed me to study the site's organization – its architecture, publicly accessible profiles, monitoring systems, forms of public exchange and so on. Any conclusions I have reached as a result of this period of observation cannot be used to trace any users of the site who have not explicitly consented to take part in the study.

What was particularly important in this initial stage was gaining an understanding of how men present themselves on the site. The chat system provides access to a profile for each user which may contain very little or quite a bit of information. A range of sexual styles were used by men in presenting themselves, as two usernames – 'deepthroatfucker' and 'Discerning Adonis' – indicate. A few examples taken from men's profiles[1] are also useful to establish some of the ways men present themselves on the site. As these show, men identify themselves in a relatively wide variety of ways; tender and tough, dominant and submissive, playful and provocative, high minded and dirty minded.

> Very Loving and Tender … unless you ask otherwise;). Somedays I want to please my baby, teach and guide her … other days I just Need to Have her!

> responsive pleasure victim seeks sexually powerful female for teasing (please more!) and forced orgasms (please stop!). Share fantasies, experiences or cyber.

> Dom, 38, in search of women who want to explore their submissive side. Novices encouraged.

> I love imagining situations with you. Somehow the classics always deliver. Let me know what you'd like to imagine – Dr/patient, teacher/student, Uncle/sexy niece, deserted beach, mile high. Inspire!

> A soul in search of the better in humanity. It's the journey … not the destination.

> Beautiful women were put on this Earth to be used, fucked and humiliated. If you want tenderness, go rent a fucking Tom Hanks movie. If you want to get gagfucked and covered with cum, I'm your guy.

> Queer theorist deliberately seeks porn.

This variety of styles of presentation and address was something that was striking throughout the project. Cybersex and cybersex personae, albeit often drawing on well-established sexual conventions, encompass a considerable amount of diversity which challenges the notion of a stable or clearly identifiable 'male sexuality'.

The second phase of the study – participant observation – allowed me to engage with users and extend my knowledge of the site and its use. In this phase I responded to users, articulated questions in group settings and engaged in one-to-one discussions. This stage of the research allowed me to experience communicating within the environment. I found that many of the people I spoke to were keen to talk to me about their experiences and were curious about my research, and I was careful to ensure that where users showed an interest in talking about their own use of the site I revealed my identity as a researcher in order to avoid misleading them. What I learned in this phase has been useful in enhancing my general understanding of the site and its use, but I have not drawn on it explicitly in my discussion.

The lack of guidance on this kind of work, my own lack of experience with sex chat sites and the obvious trickiness of conducting research in sexually charged environments make this kind of project difficult to navigate. In particular, given that this particular piece of research involved talking to participants in an atmosphere where talk is often explicitly sexual, and indeed functions *as* sex, the work opened up all kinds of potential for miscommunication. Two of the particular difficulties I envisaged were how to approach site users who were clearly 'at play' without causing offence or irritation and how to steer a respectful and ethical way through exchanges which might be read as sexual encounters by participants. I spent quite a bit of time writing and rewriting my own guidelines for communicating with site users during this time, based on what I saw and the conversations that I had.

In the event, I was perhaps lucky in that the first few lengthy conversations I had were with young men who were extremely at ease with their own cybersex practices and with talking to me. In addition, as I soon discovered, men on the particular site I was studying spent quite a bit of time under-occupied while trying to initiate or develop satisfying sexual encounters with other site users, and their position as semi-involved 'lurkers' like me undoubtedly made the research much easier to carry out, both in terms of having people to talk to and relieving my anxieties about distracting site users during their leisure time. All the same, maintaining a strong sense of researcher identity during the very lengthy periods I spent on the site and during long and sometimes rather intimate exchanges was difficult, particularly as I became more familiar with some users. However, staging the research in this way, with the inevitably less clear cut and messy processes of informal exchange early on in the study, coupled with the decision not to draw on this explicitly in publication, and a more careful and controlled phase of interviews where I was able to make sure all the participants were informed and comfortable about the process, meant that I was able to navigate my way through potential problems with some semblance of clarity and structure.

Thus, in the third phase of the study I interviewed some users of the site. Interviews, conducted on IM (Instant Messenger), except where participants requested another format, were of a length and at a time to suit the participants. These have not been made accessible to any other parties and the format of the

interview has meant that participants were able to retain a copy of the interview themselves. Interview questions were available to participants in advance of interviews, along with information about myself, my work and the purpose of the study, and I offered to discuss my conclusions at the end of the project with everyone who participated. In this way, I aimed to be absolutely clear about the nature of our interaction and to do all I could to ensure that participants made an informed choice about whether to participate and what to divulge. All participants have been given a pseudonym of their choice in lieu of their username, thus twice removing them from identification. It is therefore impossible to identify participants in the study from anything I have written here without existing and detailed knowledge of those people.

All the interviewees were able to comment on anything not covered by our discussion at the end of the interview. All recorded their permission to use their contributions in my work. All those who expressed an opinion on the interviewing process said that they had found it valuable in some way. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed basic information about the participants' cybersex practices to be collated and compared easily. It also allowed me to pursue particular lines of enquiry that were derived from existing studies or from my observations of the site. Other themes were introduced by the participants themselves, who were often very reflective about their experiences and keen to analyse them. Indeed, the particular character of the site, which seemed to attract users who prided themselves on their confident and articulate self-presentation, often expressed through discussions about the importance of intelligence and of 'good writing' in cybersex, undoubtedly made my task easier here. Self-reflection was often an explicit feature of discussion.

As interviewees, men in their twenties were highly visible and extremely open to discussion. Men in their thirties were less visible but still happy to talk. Men older than this were scarce and, despite their eagerness to be included in the study and the measures I used to ensure their anonymity, were often too nervous to give a formal interview. I interviewed 14 men aged between 24 and 68, with most of these concentrated in their twenties and thirties. Their occupations were a teacher, a scientist, two software developers, a designer, an architect, an accountant, several managers and administrators, and two retired men. The majority were from North America or the United Kingdom, plus one Canadian, one Australian and one German. Most were straight, one was bisexual, one described himself as '95 percent heterosexual'. Two were into D/s sex,[2] both on and offline. Half the men in their twenties and thirties were single, the other half were in long-term relationships, but none had children. All the older men were married with children.

Among the men I interviewed there was a range of experiences and understandings of chat room use and cybersex. The length of time they had used chat rooms varied between one evening and ten years, and frequency of use varied from every day to once a month. For some, chatting online was an integrated and long term part of their lives; for others it was something they did periodically or for specific reasons; one man had adopted it as a short-term

strategy while he recuperated with a broken leg. Chat rooms were used for a variety of activities; most commonly, role-play, sharing sexual experiences and general chatting. Other sexual activities also resulted from chatting – half the men swapped pictures and arranged phone sex – and a minority used the site to arrange offline meetings. Some men noted the particular pleasures of talking about sex rather than engaging directly in sex, or as Mark put it, 'being sexy with someone' rather than 'having sex with them'. Less common activities included organizing group get-togethers, swapping recipes and teaching algebra to a student.

Older men reported that their online sexual activities put them in touch with 'nice' 'intelligent' and 'interesting' people, and most of the participants noted their enjoyment of meeting people who were enthusiastic about sex and the pleasures of playing with language. These might be combined, as Al commented, in the 'exchange', in the same way that 'meeting up with friends is fun for the banter', or, as Sam noted, in the 'arousal, anticipation, buildup' of cybersex encounters and the knowledge that 'what you have typed has had a powerful effect'. The most commonly cited displeasures were the routine problems of rejection by other users of the site, losing connection during interactions, and dull encounters. Only one reported a disturbing incident – and this was from Thomas, a man who had engaged in cybersex for many years – which involved encounters with women who wanted to explore abusive fantasies. Mark cited the lack of real intimacy, 'the inability to cuddle after cybering someone', as a drawback, while Graham referred to (unconfirmed) reports of marriage breakups and a suicide among chat room users. He noted that, for him, the best and the worst aspects of the chat room were, in both cases, 'the people'.

And yet, for all these comments that focused on interaction and intimacy as important to participants, the pleasures of the chat site were generally described as deriving from anonymity, the ability to speak openly about sex, break taboos and live out fantasies in a safe space. A number of men commented on this. For Walter, the chat site added the 'spice' that swinging had previously brought to his long-term relationship. Thomas noted how it 'strips away a sense of shame from people' and Blank said that it had allowed him to 'play in fantasyland'. The participants' descriptions of their best experiences also drew on the pleasures of both anonymity and casual playfulness, and more grounded senses of community and social interaction, but, in both cases, depended on what Jeff described as 'mutual pleasure'. They included an extended group truth-or-dare session played out over a whole weekend which was great 'because we all got to know and trust each other', some experiments with performing a female persona, the rare 'meeting of minds' and interacting with a particular partner with 'a real gift for dialogue'.

Self and sex in cybersex

Roughly half of the men I spoke to used one name and persona for their cyber-encounters, while the others had tried out female or 'dominant male' personae.

A minority experimented with different ages. Carlo, who was 56, sometimes used a male persona aged 32 because he felt women of all ages were more likely to speak to him if they thought he was younger. Mark, on the other hand, who really was 32 experimented with being 42 or 47 because he felt that women preferred older men. This kind of experimentation aside, most claimed that whatever persona they adopted, they were still, 'always me' or 'pretty much me', and that, even when performing a particular role or persona, there was a clear relation between aspects of the self and their performance. Carlo, for example, noted that, whatever happened, his behaviour was 'true to character'. Similarly, Will had a 'mostly-me' persona and several 'not-me' personae which were '80 percent me + performance'. In contrast, Dave took on a character very different from himself in order to engage in extreme forms of sex. There was an interesting divergence of opinion on the importance of authentic identity in cybersex, ranging from a complete lack of concern to extreme anxiety, especially about men who pass themselves off as women.

Some participants explored the question of authenticity at length, talking about the differences between what was real and role, or between play and deceit. Blank noted the importance for him of using the same name, rather than employing disguises because, as he said: 'I do not like deception, even in fantasyland.' As he went on to explain, 'I DETEST phonies … or people who deceive in the sense that they manipulate people.' On the other hand, 'playing without hurting people is fine … and roles allow all of us to dig into our inner selves'. The relationship between self and persona might be complicated as this comment on the use of roles to 'dig into self' suggests. In the past, Blank said, he had had 'r/t facades' (real-time facades) which he was able to escape online where he was, less complicatedly, 'me'. After years online this situation changed and he was able to become 'little different r/t … basically the same … as online'. An acceptance of cybersex as a type of performance which might still bear some relation to the real was also expressed in a general lack of interest in the actual physical appearance of cyber-partners. For Al what mattered was that encounters were 'consistent and convincing', while Will described the importance of a partner's ability to 'credibly sustain the illusion'. Dave said that 'as long as they are faceless, they are as I imagine them', while Thomas noted that he would 'rejig them in my head anyway'.

All the men I spoke to had used the chat room for various sexual activities and almost all engaged in general chat. The majority reported that their activities involved masturbation accompanying sex talk and almost all indulged in role-play, though there were differences in the way this term was used: in a general way to denote sexual interaction, more specifically to describe the development of a clearly defined scenario, or more individually to indicate an adherence to a particular set of formulae and personae. Carlo elaborated on the various forms of 'cyber' he had experienced, describing three particular types of chat he engaged in: companiable chat, sexual discussion and role-playing:

> The first approach is just for companionship … about hobbies or other interests. Some people are uncomfortable talking about anything erotic so

I am flexible enough to accommodate them.… These people can become internet friends if there are true common interests, with or without any erotic discussions …

The second approach is to ask about experiences and fantasies and to share those stories. These people clearly indicate they are interested in something erotic but say they don't do cyber sex. This is not what people usually consider cyber sex but a lot of masturbation results …

The third approach is to do role playing. I am attracted to names and quite often try to jump right in. For example if 'sexy secretary' is logged on, I will respond with 'this is your boss, I need to see you right away.' If they respond, I might tell them I have good news, perhaps a promotion. At that point the game is on. It's totally interactive, total fantasy, and can go anywhere depending on the other person's imagination.

As Carlo's discussion indicates, 'cyber' might cover quite a range of interactions beyond the common understanding of cybersex as a form of sexual encounter, though in fact he was one of only a few men who used the term 'sex' to categorize what they did in a chat site, Carlo remarking that: 'That's how it would be viewed by others such as my wife if she ever found out.' Most of the participants located their practices on some kind of continuum, which included partner sex, porn, masturbation, solitary fantasy and so on. Cybersex was often described as 'sex-like': for Sam it was 'sexual involvement', and for Ross it was 'sexual activity but not sex'. Many qualifying comments were offered; cybersex was 'more about writing, surely?', 'a form of intellectual exercise, rather like chess', 'analogous to flirting', 'just stimulation', 'discreet bartalk'. Many men also described a link between their speech and writing in cybersex encounters and other forms of text, for example, porn. Four wrote fiction and were interested in the nature of cybersex *as* text, whether as a conventionalized framework, as creative expression or as interactive play. Will suggested I read up on accounts of the way children develop through play as a way of understanding the chat room, and recommended particular books I might find useful. Although this level of reflection was not always apparent throughout the interviews, there was a clear sense that cybersex was perceived as a practice which occupied an unusual cultural position.

Only a minority of men saw cybersex as involving any emotional connection with partners or discussed the relation between their experiences in chat rooms and their offline lives in any detail. These men – Graham, Mark, Blank and Thomas – had sometimes experienced chat rooms as a kind of community, and perceived strong links between their online and offline lives at a number of different levels; because they were involved in D/s practices on and offline and/or because they had had met long-term partners on a sex chat site. They gave markedly different accounts of cybersex from the other participants and appeared to have more complex understandings of authenticity and connection. For example, they differentiated much more clearly between

types of encounter; for Graham, cybersex might count as masturbation with a casual partner, but 'when you have committed to be exclusive then I think it has crossed the line into sex' and 'the better the connection, the better the sex'. For these men, the offline and online worlds were not necessarily organizing principles of understanding. Cybersex relationships had been an integrated part of their lives and were understood as a form of human interaction in 'the real world'. For Mark, some instances of cybersex involved 'real people' and were generally associated with offline meetings, whereas exclusively virtual encounters were described as taking place with 'imaginary people'. Different levels of authenticity and honesty were expected accordingly. Thus, as he explained, 'The imaginary ones can be who they like and whatever they like, but the trick is not to lead whoever they talk to on in any way.' On the other hand, 'if you want me to trust you, and you should if you want to be in a relationship, you tell the truth about everything'. All the same, telling the truth did not preclude taking on different personae as this interviewee had done for a number of years, so long as it didn't lead to partners, 'thinking that I wanted them to be with me/meet me/be anything in reality'.

For the majority of men I spoke to though, cybersex was much more routinely and clearly related to the expression of *desires* – often discussed in terms of 'fantasy' – rather than their experiences with partner sex or their desire to forge online relationships. 'Desires' talked about how he liked it when women 'welcome me into their sex life and tell me intimate things', while Thomas described the enjoyment of 'putting a woman in a position where she can be anybody she likes' and the fascination of 'watching her choose who she wants to be'. Freedom, play and fantasy emerged as key features in these accounts. Dave elaborated on the distinctions that could be made within this; noting the difference between the fantasies he shared offline with his girlfriend and the more transgressive forms of play he sought out anonymously, and unbeknown to her, in chat – 'the more extreme and outrageous the better as long as it is consensual'. Even so, for him the thrill of cybersex was not always focused on his own pleasure:

> … sometimes … the actual thing that i am talking about does not excite me or turn me on in the least, it is … the fact that … they are getting off on it that excites me … it is not necessarily the act but the reciprocation.

Existing research has dealt with the production of self and sex in cybersex by focusing on two aspects of the way cybersex relates to 'reality'. The first concerns the extent to which cybersex engages with cultural norms and asks whether it simply reproduces them, in the process reconstructing a notion of the self as a stable entity, or whether it can rewrite these through performances of the self. The second concerns how cybersex might disconnect sexual interaction from physical encounters, or from committed relationships or from sexual identity, allowing new forms of self-interaction or playful intimacy. While both are important areas of investigation which provide directions for future research, I would like to suggest that more attention should

be paid to developing a clearer idea of the space of cybersex as a 'space between fantasy and action' (Ross, 2005: 351) and its significance for its practitioners.

For the men I talked to, cybersex appeared to be a meaningful and valued form of sexual practice and an addition to their sexual repertoires, alongside partner sex, masturbation and the use of sexually explicit materials. Men characterized themselves in different ways, using different styles of presentation to build their cybersexual personae. Their comments suggested that cybersex functioned for them in a variety of ways; compensatory, escapist, educational, creative, interpersonal and therapeutic – and that it allowed them to experiment with sexual practices and identities. Some men used cybersex as an opportunity to play with gender and identity, though it was not clear that this had the radical implications described by theorists or evident in more flamboyantly creative online domains. For those men who experienced the links between their online and offline realities as complex and involved, the creation of sexual personae did work as an 'object to think with'. But the experience of cybersex varied a great deal, even in this small group of men, and this suggests that cybersex is practised in different ways and plays different roles in its practitioners' lives. Its significance appears to depend on a range of contextual factors, with age, offline sexual identity and familiarity with computer-mediated communication being the most important. This is, perhaps, an obvious and expected finding, and yet it is important in directing attention to the fact that technology is taken up for sex in quite different ways and with varying attitudes. Similarly, there was a clear distinction between younger men's willingness to talk to me very openly – probably because they were more confident with technology for social and leisure pursuits and more likely to be without children – and the reluctance and suspicion of many older men I met online. Yet this was not uniform – the oldest participant was possibly the most comfortable and practised in online settings and a cybersex veteran.

The construction of the cybersex self also appeared to vary more than existing research has suggested. For example, cybersex personae were understood as self, as not-self, as a variation on the self or as a repressed or unexplored part of self. In some instances they appeared to operate as a way of 'doing without being' (Ross, 2005). Thus, Dave could try out extreme forms of sex which did not match his offline identity, nor even especially his 'repressed' desires. In others, they worked as a way of bringing aspects of the self together, making different forms of doing into being. For Graham, cybersex was an extension of his offline practices and interests, no more or less real than them. In yet others, they worked as a way of *becoming*, or being through doing. In Blank's case, cybersex was part of developing a self through the realization that he could be more 'me' online than off. The fine distinctions involved in these manoeuvres pose challenges for the ways we might think about identity online, and also for thinking about identity in other forms of sexual encounter. The complex interactions between 'person', 'player' and 'personae' across the

realms of reality, imagination and fantasy in the role-playing games discussed by Waskul and Lust (2004) suggest a set of possible corresponding relationships, moving us beyond simple notions of 'authentic self' and 'performance', and acknowledging the particular possibilities for experimenting with roles and personae which online interactions open up to its participants. Authenticity is both more and less elastic in some of the participants' accounts than previous discussions of cybersex have suggested: not simply a case of expressing the pre-existing real self or escaping it for other selves, but admitting a range of states – playing with roles to achieve a consistency of self-presentation, experimenting with 'mostly-me' personae, losing the self altogether in the pleasure of reciprocation, or developing the 'consistency' and 'credibility' necessary for playful performances.

'Cybersex' indicated a range of activities from 'having sex' to 'being sexy', from talking about sex to very specific forms of role play. According to the participants, it was variously 'sex', 'sex-like' and like a range of other non-sexual things: recreational pursuit, media consumption, cultural performance and communicative practice. This, for me, was what was so striking about cybersex; not its refusal or reinforcement of existing realities but that it admitted both possibilities and many more. The sheer variety of the uses, experiences and understandings of cybersex depends on the instability of cybersex as a category – its status as a form of 'fantasies-in-action' (Turkle, 1995: 226), 'masturbation, mutual masturbation, erotica, pornography and sex all at the same time' (Gillis, 2004: 12). The particular conditions – and joy – of cybersex – the possibility of anonymity coupled with the opportunity for self-disclosure – help to explain how it opens up so readily to a multiplicity of uses. For many men, the significance of communication technologies and of cybersex was that they allowed access to a realm that already existed in their own auto-erotic repertoires, and, more importantly, provided the opportunity to extend their engagements with that realm through a range of interactions. But this opportunity is also related to a set of broader social developments: the use of communication technologies more generally for interaction, the growth of new forms of intimacy, a cultural preoccupation with self-pleasure and the rise of a concept of sex as a type of individualized leisure activity. In this sense, the Internet 'transfigures' sexuality, illuminating aspects of contemporary life (Ross, 2005: 342). However, it does not merely repeat them, and it is necessary to develop an understanding of online sexual activity not as the simple reproduction of sexual relations in a new space, nor as an escape from them, but as both attached to and developing from the broader culture.

Despite the variety of cybersex experiences reported in the participants' accounts, the sharing of fantasies, breaking of taboos, rejection of shame and creation of intimacy appear to be central to its pleasure and its significance, along with an appreciation of various levels of 'exchange', 'reciprocation', 'mutuality' and 'connection'. For the participants, whether it was understood as shallow and escapist, as an attempt to find, express or develop the self, or a means of making connections with others, the space of cybersex was a space for *play*. Life

online may illuminate a broader tendency for pursuing play and the kind of space that cybersex represents may be assuming more importance in the wider social context of late modernity. Indeed, thinking on play and imagination may be becoming more important generally for understanding how sex is developing as a form of recreation. As Karlyn Lotney puts it in her guide to strap-on sex:

> By being playful with sex, you can try out new personas, genders, and power dynamics … travel to any time or place you like … share love and affection with a partner, explore new kinds of stimulation, make discoveries about yourself, and receive affirmation for secret parts of yourself. (2004: ix)

This view of sex, increasingly visible in self-help and lifestyle texts, considerably loosens up its status as a particular type of physical practice and with an established set of meanings in relation to reproduction or relationship formation. And, while non-commercial sex – both on and offline – is increasingly marked as a form of recreation, commercial sexual encounters increasingly function as 'erotic interludes that are "more real and human" than would be satisfying oneself alone' (Bernstein, 2001: 398), but ones which remain distinct from mechanical and romantic types of sex. These new and more ambiguous meanings of sex need to inform our discussion of specific sexual practices and may be useful in expanding our understanding of contemporary forms of intimacy such as the 'pure' relationship and 'episodic' practices described by Giddens (1992), and of the relations between sex, sexuality and gender. 'Play' may also be the term we need to move the discussion of cybersex forward, beyond claims that it represents a radical disturbance of existing realities or simply their extension into new realms, that it is a refusal of intimacy or its embrace, fantasy or action, symbolic or real. Whether men take on the personae of 'deepthroatfucker' or 'Discerning Adonis', learn to express their 'real' selves online, play with being 'mostly me' or do something else entirely, their accounts of their cybersex practices suggest we need to rethink our ideas about the self and pay more attention to the ways that sexual encounters may be changing.

Notes

1 These users present themselves as men, but of course, it is not possible to know for certain that they are biological males.
2 Sexual behaviours based on dominance and submission, part of a broader set of BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) sexual practices.

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