Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where the internet and the world wide web have, in the matter of only two decades, shifted from being at the forefront of a new frontier of communication technology, to being for most people an incredibly unremarkable part of our culture and daily life. Many once held an optimism that the internet would, for example, revolutionise work and office life, and create active, engaged citizens instead of the passive subjects of the broadcast media age (Poster, 1995), or lead to the creation of alternative communities, worlds and even identities free from the prejudices of offline society (Rheingold, 1993).

However, as the internet has become something used by the majority of the population in advanced economies, that population has brought with it all of the habits, inclinations and prejudices which are endemic to society as a whole. As a result, much of this early optimism that the internet would radically change our culture in some sort of knowledge revolution has begun to fade in light of the realisation that our culture has perhaps transformed the internet more than vice versa.

The internet has now become a major part of work, leisure, social and political life, for most people in advanced economic nations. It is no longer its novelty, uniqueness, or potential to transform life, but its mundane nature and pervasiveness that now gives the internet its significance. Not in the sense that it has profoundly 'changed' the world, but in the sense that it has become enmeshed within the enduring structures of our society. As such, the online sphere is no longer a realm separate from the offline 'real world', but fully integrated into offline life.

This integration has only been enhanced by the massive popularity of mobile technologies, particularly mobile phones, the latest generation of which allow almost perpetual contact to the world wide web, as well as to our friends, relatives, bosses and significant others. As a result, digital culture now involves more than merely sitting at a computer terminal, and studies of the information age are moving on from the preoccupation with 'internet studies' to consider the pervasive use of mobile phones and other wireless Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). What this means practically is that this is not simply a book about 'internet studies', but a book that considers many wider forms of digital culture, including mobile communications technologies, gaming and technological bodies (to name a few) within and beyond the internet, to demonstrate how digital technology in a broad sense is used within the wider contexts of everyday life.

REVOLUTIONARY TECHNOLOGIES?

In 1975, roughly two decades after the rise of television as a mass medium in Britain was ushered in by the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 (the same time as 'the golden age' of television in the United States), acclaimed cultural theorist Raymond Williams wrote *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, an investigation into the cultural influence of television as a form and practice in British and American cultural life. He begins by introducing a set of statements that were representative of how television was seen as 'changing' the world:

i   Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. Its power as a medium of news and entertainment was then so great that it altered all preceding media of news and entertainment.

ii Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. Its power as a medium of social communication was then so great that it altered many of our institutions and forms of social relationships.

iii Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. Its inherent properties as an electronic medium altered our basic perceptions of reality, and thence our relations with each other and with the world.

iv Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. As a powerful medium of communication and entertainment it took its place with other factors – such as greatly increased physical mobility, itself the result of other newly invented technologies – in altering the scale and form of our societies.

v   Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research, and developed as a medium of entertainment and news. It then had unforeseen consequences, not only on other entertainment and news media, which reduced in viability and importance, but on some of the central processes of family, cultural and social life.

vi Television, discovered as a possibility by scientific and technical research, was selected for investment and development to meet the needs of a new kind of society, especially in the provision of centralised entertainment and in the centralised formation of opinions and styles of behaviour.

vii Television, discovered as a possibility by scientific and technical research, was selected for investment and promotion as a new and profitable phase of a domestic consumer economy; it is then one of the characteristic 'machines for the home'.

viii Television became available as a result of scientific and technical research, and in its character and uses exploited and emphasised elements of a passivity, a cultural and psychological inadequacy, which had always been latent in people, but which television now organised and came to present.

ix Television became available as a result of scientific and technical research, and in its character and uses both served and exploited the needs of a new kind of large-scale and complex but atomised society. (Williams, 1990 [1975]: 11–12)

The reason I have quoted this passage at length is because I find it fairly striking how all of the characterisations of the effects of television on society Williams lists (apart from perhaps point viii) are today levelled at the internet, two decades after it was popularised through the invention of the world wide web (WWW) in 1991. In fact, many of these statements speak directly to the content of some chapters within this book. This highlights the point that perhaps we have been here before, many times. New technologies always breed anxiety about their consequences, and certainly the internet and mobile phones have bred both anxiety and optimism in their potential to shape the future. However, like television (but perhaps more so) it is important to realise that the internet, the web, and mobile digital technologies are more than just 'technologies', they are a set of social relations which incorporate the use of technologies with various results.

Determinisms

It is almost inevitable that any significant new technology will be predicted to transform society, or at least to embody the potential to transform society, for better or worse. It is often said, especially in the initial stages of the adoption of a particular technology, that the technology will generate social change based upon the implicit values, virtues, or vices possessed by that technology. This line of thinking is often referred to as *technological determinism* and, in this respect, the development of networked ICTs is no exception.

Raymond Williams (1990 [1975]) defined technological determinism as suggesting that new technologies set the conditions for social change and progress. In such a view, technology is seen as a law unto itself, in the sense that technological innovations are seen as drivers in the 'progress' (or sometimes 'decline') of society and culture. When *Time* magazine produces a headline such as 'How Twitter will change the way we live' (Johnson, 2009), they are engaging in a form of technological determinism which suggests that, in the relationship between technology and culture, culture is the passive agent and technology the active one: culture and society 'react' to technological developments in a cause-and-effect manner. [*handwritten note: Tech deter = passive culture*]

Implicit in this view is the vision of technology as something separate and independent of society. Inventions can merely 'happen', and then society has to deal with the consequences of that happening and the new ways of life that follow. Or, one can see science and technology as following some sort of inevitable path or autonomous logic (what Bimber (1990) refers to as a 'logical sequence') in which new technologies are part of a process that not only directly effects change on society, but also sets in motion the direction for future technological changes, as well as the necessary altering social forms and organisation. So the invention of the incandescent electric light bulb by Thomas Edison

in 1879 can be seen as the inevitable next stage in development from the gas lamp, and both inventions created fundamentally new ways of being to which people, businesses, and governments had to organise themselves around.

On the surface, technological determinism seems to make sense, and indeed as Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999) (from whom I borrow the light bulb analogy) suggest, it contains a partial truth. No one would argue that the invention of the light bulb was not a significant event in terms of the following consequences: extending our days, influencing the design and structure of buildings, revolutionising transportation, shaping the development of entire cities to sizes never thought possible, changing our work patterns and leading on to further innovations in lighting and electricity more generally.

Within the context of digital culture, technological determinism has been rife, especially in the early days of internet studies (Bingham, 1996). Many authors that are seen as central in this book, including Karl Marx, Marshall McLuhan, Manuel Castells and Mark Poster have been accused, rightly or wrongly, as following this logic. For example, in Chapter 1, Poster is quoted:

> Electronic culture promotes the individual as an unstable identity in a continuous process of multiple identity formation. (Poster, 1995: 59)

Poster here is promoting an anti-essentialist view of identity, but in doing so, could also be accused of technological determinism, by insinuating that identity formations are directly linked to technological developments in 'electronic culture' and encourage the formation of multiple identities, or a certain *kind of person*. It is important for the reader to be critically aware of such logic when it is at work.

The social determination of technology

Putting Edison's invention of the light bulb into a social context reveals another view of the relationship between technology, society and culture which might be called *social* or *economic determinism*. Extreme ends of this view would characterise technology as the passive partner in the culture–technology relationship, and is referred to as 'symptomatic technology' by Williams (1990 [1975]). This refers to a form of determinism whereby social conditions create environments in which technologies are seen as either necessary by-products of social processes or, as early sociologist of technology William Ogburn argued, were *inevitable,* given the correct set of social conditions (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 8). From this perspective, new technologies *become necessary* at certain points of cultural development. So in the case of the light bulb, its invention becomes a symptom of wider social changes. Given what was going on in society at a particular time and the general march of 'progress', the light bulb *had* to happen.

This view is not particularly prevalent in contemporary popular or academic writing, but it arguably does make an appearance on some of the arguments of extropian posthumanism (see Chapter 9). Futurists such as Ray Kurzweil often make evolutionary-style predictions about the advancement of society more generally. In *The Singularity is Near* (2005), he suggests that an evolutionary jump in human society, the *singularity*, is an inevitable future occurrence: this is a point in the evolution of humanity in which technological advancements occur so rapidly, that humans themselves will not be able to keep pace and will be out-evolved by machines that are more intelligent than humans. Ultimately, in the 2040s, the singularity will spell the end of 'human' history (as humans will no longer exist outside machine-human hybrids), and the eventual transformation of the universe into a giant computational body. While in one sense this smacks of technological determinism, these transformations are seen by Kurzweil as *inevitable* epochal stages in human history.

Such evolutionary discussions are problematic. If inventions are basically inevitable, this gives very little agency to the inventions or the inventors themselves, and also little *vagancy* agency towards society itself or the people that make up society. Both are passive in the face of some sort of predetermined narrative of 'progress' or 'decline'. In Kurzweil's view of the future, it doesn't really matter what inventors of new technologies or businesses, governments and individuals *want* to see happen, what will happen is going to happen.

Technological enablement

In Williams' (1990 [1975]) view, both technological determinism and symptomatic technology approaches are as bad as each other, in that they depend on the isolation of technology from society either by viewing technology *creating* new ways of life on its own, or as simply providing materials for new ways of life already in formation. When considering the light bulb example above (or even 'the singularity'), one major piece of the puzzle missing is the notion of *intention*. As Williams suggests, new technologies are *looked for* and developed with purposes and practices in mind. These purposes are intended to change things and influence society: that is their point. In general, one can suggest new technologies are developed to:

- Fulfil a need or solve a problem.
- Bring about a certain condition in the future.
- Create a profit or some sort of personal gain.

All of these are interrelated and are motivating factors that have their basis in social circumstances and the desire to change those circumstances. Edison was trying to solve a problem (safe lighting), but his motivations, and the resources he was able to muster, were the results of a particular social context (capitalism), which values profit and makes profit possible. He also undoubtedly had a vision of how his invention could shape the future, but likely had no idea what myriad of uses eventually would develop out of his creation. Thus, technologies can be seen to set up a system of enablements with two potential outcomes: 'preferred', conventional or intended uses, as well as unexpected applications and novel cultural forms (Hayward, 1990).

The Edison example speaks specifically to the role of economic contexts within the technology–culture relationship, which naturally leads on to a discussion of Karl Marx. There is considerable debate as to whether Marx was a technological determinist or the opposite (see Resnik and Wolff (1982) and Shaw, (1979)) for good examples of either side). Bimber (1990) provides a thorough commentary which suggests that Marx viewed technology as an *enabling* factor within economic structures. While technological application is dependent on the material conditions of production (economic systems and labour relations), the presence of science and technology helps to enable these particular systems and relations, through first, the accumulation of capital by the bourgeoisie, and second, through the creation or alteration of labour markets. This is well illustrated by Marx's phrase:

> When capital enlists science into her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility. (Marx, 1990 [1867]: 564)

Within the contexts of capitalism, new technology is most often created with the implicit (and sometimes explicit) intention of creating wealth, or adapted for such ambitions. Thomas Edison did not just happen to invent the electric light – he planned to invent it. He wanted to find a way to sell electricity and provide light to people in order to make money for himself (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999). His research was funded by businesses who also intended to profit from his innovations. Edison was an entrepreneur, and was operating within the social environment of capitalism. This environment provided him with the means to develop a technology, and the motivation for him to sell that technology in a competitive market which already included gas lights, oil lanterns and candles. The market helped to determine the nature of his invention (it had to be cheaper and safer than gas), and helped to steer the course of its eventual use in society. Far from a separate world of science and technology, Edison's invention emerged and was constituted by a set of social and economic arrangements.

This enabling view within many Marxist approaches becomes clearly evident with regard to information technologies in Chapter 2, where the influential work of two Marxists, Manuel Castells and David Harvey, are discussed in relation to the economic foundations of the information age. Harvey (1989) proposed that capitalist enterprises continually look to increase profit through the opening up of new markets of (cheaper) raw materials, (cheaper) labour, or new consumers. For Harvey, these are inherently spatial concerns as such operations involve the increasing of spatial scales of practice, and this is seen in contemporary times in the process of globalisation.

The problem of increasing spatial scales is distance, and the time it takes to travel long distances (the friction of distance). Increasing this time cuts into profit by increasing 'turnover time' (the time it takes to turn raw materials into sellable commodities and ultimately receive the profits from these goods sold to consumers). Thus, capitalist enterprises are always looking for ways to reduce the friction of distance: to metaphorically pull the locations of raw materials, labour markets and consumer markets closer

together in time, while being able to increase their distance apart in space. New communications technologies allow this to happen by speeding up communications and transfers of money, as well as providing global access to certain types of labour and new consumers through *time–space compression* (Harvey, 1989). Castells (1996/2000) refers to this overcoming of distance and the resultant ability to communicate in real time on a global scale as *the space of flows* (see Chapter 2).

Base, superstructure, infrastructure

What can be gained from the discussion of time–space compression and the space of flows is the further consideration that digital communication technologies have importance as a system of *infrastructure* that enables certain practices and social relations. Infrastructure refers to the underlying framework or basic foundation of an organisation or system. Infrastructures are the basic facilities that enable something to function.

Marxists would suggest that, in the context of capitalism, the functions that are enabled are primarily intended for the practice of economic enterprise. Infrastructure can be seen as contributing to the economic *base* of society (the relations of production) upon which the *superstructure* of society (culture) is built, thus enabling both economic relations and ways of life. Marx himself illustrates this in his popular writing, in 'The future results of British rule in India' published in *The New York Daily Tribune* in 1853. He proposed that the British exploitation of India as an economic enterprise will revolve around the creation of a 'modern' infrastructure of railways and communications:

> The millocracy have discovered that the transformation of India into a reproductive country has become of vital importance to them, and, to that end, it is necessary above all to gift her with the means of irrigation and internal communication. They intend now drawing a net of railroads over India. And they will do it. The results must be inappreciable. (Marx, 1977 [1853]: 333)

Once the infrastructural base was laid, Marx predicted that the introduction of new infrastructures would enable new forms of work and labour markets:

> The railway system will therefore become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry. This is the more certain as the Hindus are allowed by British authorities themselves to possess particular aptitude for accommodating themselves to entirely new labour, and acquiring the requisite knowledge of machinery. (Marx, 1977 [1853]: 335)

In a more contemporary context, Graham and Marvin (1996, 2001) have recently re-inserted infrastructure back into the consideration of social scientists by brilliantly examining the changing form and constitution of cities within the wake of economic

globalisation and the new configuration of telecommunications infrastructure which enables that process.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the infrastructures of digital communications were not only developed to enable a particular set of economic initiatives (the need to globalise in search of profit), but also encouraged those initiatives at the same time. In turn, this infrastructural base provides a framework under which new forms of organisation, relationship and experience (culture, including virtual cultures) can emerge. In Chapter 4, the significance of infrastructure is perhaps most apparent in the discussion of digital divides and the role that mobile phone infrastructures are playing in the African context.

The creation of mobile communications technologies and infrastructures that support mobility has become a significant and increasing factor of contemporary life (Urry, 2000). Indeed, demands for mobility in many respects have been put forward as a primary impetus in the development of ITCs and their subsequent adoption and use. This is the case both in terms of production, with a demand for a more flexible, efficient and productive labour force (see Chapter 2), and in consumption, with increasing access to consumers and ease with which consumers can purchase and use (especially media) goods (see Chapter 3).

We all experience the increasing mobility of information technology in our use of an array of digital devices: mobile phones; PDAs; WiFi-enabled laptops and notebook computers; iPod's and many others. The most popular of these devices, mobile phones, have evolved through a series of generations, which have seen them move from instruments of purely voice communication, to ones that include SMS text, as well as image production and consumption, to their current state (typified by the iPhone) of embodying a full set of multimedia technologies, and full-blown access to the web.

These mobile technologies help to support certain ways of living that were intended by their inventors. However, this relationship is far from straightforward. No-one would have intended, nor expected, that the telecommunication structure of global capitalism would be used to buy and sell virtual clothing and sexual aids for avatars in the virtual world of *Second Life* (Meadows, 2008), and no-one would have expected the mobile phone infrastructure of the Philippines to be used as a way to send text messaged to God (Roman, 2009). Still, the notion of ICTs as an enabling (and now, thanks to mobile technologies, ubiquitous for many) infrastructure is something that readers should consider throughout this book. In some ways, it's difficult to imagine how digital culture can become much more 'mobile'. But it can.

In another example, recent innovations in computing infrastructure in the form of *cloud computing* have the potential to greatly increase mobility by unburdening computational devices from the need to maintain their own locally-installed software and storage capabilities. Cloud computing is a fundamental shift in how networked computers operate. At the moment, most networked computing uses an extremely decentralised infrastructural model. People are in the possession of powerful devices (such as PCs), which have their own individual sets of software installed on them, and have large amounts of storage capability to be able to run software as well as store data for the individual. In the cloud computing model, data storage, software provision, server provision and the maintenance of all these is centralised to a provider whose business is the maintenance and provision of these infrastructures. The provider then allows individual customers to use them, much in the same way as an electric utility company allows individuals access to a centralised power supply (Carr, 2008).

What this means *practically* is that individuals and organisations are freed from the costs and responsibility of buying software that may or may not be used very much, and the maintenance and security of that software, as well as the need to replace computers and devices which go out of date two years after their purchase. Organisations are also potentially freed from the burden of having to buy and maintain server systems. What this means *conceptually* is that individual devices have the freedom to be less powerful, because there are fewer demands on storage and computing power. Devices instead become more reliant on strong network connections to be able to use and access centralised software and data. These devices have the potential to be smaller, cheaper, easier to use and, perhaps most importantly, more compact and mobile. Cloud computing may have the potential to enable new ways of living but how, when, and in what matter this is realised is a matter for 'culture' to decide.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

7
DIGITAL IDENTITY

> I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thing which thinks, that is to say, a mind, understanding, or a reason, terms whose significance was hitherto unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing and really existing; but what thing? I have already said it: a thing which thinks. (Descartes, 1968 [1637]: 105)

> The hypermediated self is a network of affiliations which are constantly shifting. It is the self of newsgroups and email. (Bolter and Grusin, 2000: 232)

The two quotes above occupy two completely different worlds when it comes to discussions of 'identity' or 'the self'. The first passage by Descartes, begins from what would seem to be the most certain of philosophical positions: that the one thing that can be relied upon and that is beyond doubt, is the disembodied self as a thinking entity:

> But now I come back imperceptibly to the point I sought; for, since it is now known to me that, properly speaking, we perceive bodies only by the understanding which is in us, and not by the imagination, or the senses, and that we do not perceive them through seeing them or touching them but only because we conceive them in thought ... (Descartes, 1968[1637]: 112)

Descartes' proposition of radical scepticism, that all things are in doubt apart from the existence of one's own thinking mind and that all else emanates from this one certainty, was the cornerstone in a Western cultural tradition that still emphasises the notion of 'mind/body dualism', where the 'mind' or 'self' is seen as inherently separated from the material world around it, including the body. Since the existence of the mind is the one thing that can be counted upon in an otherwise contingent material world, implicit within this view is the further assumption that this disembodied self must be a consistent, stable, (hopefully) rational, entity.

The tradition of what Gergen (1996) and many others refer to as psychological essentialism in Western culture can be traced back even further to the ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle – who argued the superiority of 'mental life' – and Plato, who suggested that it was essences or 'pure forms', not the substances of the material world, which possessed the highest level of reality and that things in nature, including humans, were imperfect versions of such ideal concepts. An example of a 'pure form' would be a perfect circle. No one has ever seen one, but it exists as an ideal form, of which all circles in the material world are pale imitations.

The essentialist tradition solidifies further within the heritage of Judeo-Christianity, which emphasises the notion of the disembodied soul as the location of personness, the centre of healing and the recipient of everlasting life. Within Enlightenment philosophy, and as typified by Descartes above, the notion of the 'soul' is replaced by the notion of the non-material 'mind' as a rational and consistent entity within an irrational and variable material world open to suspicion. The Romantic period challenged the notion of rationality by exploring the significance of passions, drives and urges within the human experience, but still maintained the tradition that assumed an inner life that was, in many respects, more important or substantial than the outer material world (Gergen, 1996).

As Turkel (1999) suggests, the normal requirements of everyday life exert strong pressure on people to see themselves as consistent, unitary actors who must take responsibility for their actions. Indeed, a good portion of people, within Western culture at least, would still firmly identify with statements such as 'I am who I am', 'I was born the way I am', or that there is a 'real me' and 'this "me" inside me doesn't change'. So ingrained in us are these fundamental assumptions of personhood that to challenge them often seems threatening or insulting. After all, the ideal principles of Western society of democracy and freedom are based on the presumption of a civil society built of rational persons with the capacity and responsibility to exercise their individual will and power of choice.

However, by the 1980s and the 1990s, these essentialist modes of thinking were being challenged on the academic front by poststructural and postmodern theories that had emanated from France in the late 1960s and early 1970s through such authors as Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari. These theorists focussed on the primacy of language in the understanding of the world and of ourselves. Derrida, for example, deconstructed the notion of the self and made the point that identity is something that is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations constructed through marking differences. That is, identity is constructed, and always based on, excluding something, thereby establishing a kind of violent hierarchy between two resultant polls, such as man/woman, or black/white. In order to have an identity of 'man', for example, a negative/opposite identity of 'woman' needs to be created (Hall, 1990).

Lacan, influenced by Derrida, decentred the notion of the self by and arguing that there is no 'ego' at the centre of the self. He portrayed the self as based completely in language. Children, for example, have no sense of self before they acquire language but, as they acquire language, they acquire self-consciousness. In that respect, the self can be said to be seated within a realm of discourses, emerging externally not internally. Foucault follows a similar line, suggesting that identities as categories are constructed within discourses that are produced in specific historical contexts and by institutions with particular practices. So identities emerge from the exercise of power, in which some groups are created and then marked our as 'different' and can therefore be treated in specific ways. These categories of identity emerge and change over time, they are continually in construction, not fixed or essential categories of 'being'. For example, Foucault famously investigated such discursive practices in the historical formation of identities as 'criminal', 'homosexual' and 'insane'.

Identities are thus seen to be contingent upon time and place, and as much about exclusion and domination as they are about unity. People, for their part, embrace identities they see as positive and both embrace and contest identities seen as negative that are ascribed to them.

To sum up, the influential work of Barthes, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari challenged (and still challenges) more essentialist notions of identity by suggesting that:

- Identity is constructed, originating and being maintained in relational processes and through the application of power and the labelling of difference or otherness.

- Identity originates (externally) in language (not internally) and is maintained internally and externally through discourses and discursive practices.

- Identities are historically and geographically contingent, and thus change within different contexts and circumstances.

- As a result, identities are not unified, solid and stable, but maintained, changeable and often contradictory.

This leads Hall (1990) to suggest that the term 'identity' itself is problematic, and the more accurate way of describing processes of self awareness is through the term 'identification', which is more useful for characterising the processes, multiplicities, contradictions and the general 'work' involved in constructing and maintaining identities (see also Bell, 2001). This seems to be a reasonable view, especially within the context of digital culture.

I have set out this rather long introduction in this way because what I intend to do in the rest of this chapter is examine digital identity though a narrative. With the groundwork of the essentialist vs the poststructuralist (or social constructionist) view of identity laid, I would like to tell a story that relates various theories of identity with different forms of self-representation available in digital media as they have risen into prominence within digital culture of the last quarter century. I am following this strategy because different forms of self-presentation and identity construction made available online over time lend themselves to certain theories of identity, which have then been espoused in literature on digital culture. This follows a similar sentiment provided by Zygmunt Bauman:

> I suggest that the spectacular ride of 'identity discourse' can tell us more about the present-day state of human society than its conceptual or analytical results have told us thus far. (Bauman, 2001a: 121)

Thus, this chapter will start with a discussion of the poststructuralist turn in early work on the decentred nature of online identity and conclude with the suggestion that identity is now becoming 're-centred' as the internet has moved into a popular mass medium. It will also engage with 'cybersex' as a case of an online identity practice.

'OBJECTS TO THINK WITH': EARLY INTERNET STUDIES AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

In 1996, Sherry Turkel published *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. This was an ambitious text, which dealt with subjects such as artificial intelligence, the relationship between humans and computer interfaces and the 'reality' of online life. However, it made most of its impact in the ethnographic research Turkel conducted in 'Multi-User Domains' (MUDs), which were essentially online text-based chat rooms that often had a fantasy-oriented theme, frequently inspired by the face-to-face role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons.

Within the MUDs, Turkel found that MUDders, herself included, engaged in a significant amount of identity play (for example, the popular MUD *LambdaMoo* had ten genders from which to choose for one's persona) and invested a lot into the particular online personas they had created:

> 'You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. What-ever. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be. You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assump-tions. All they see is your words.' (Interview quote from Turkel, 1996: 184)

Not only were MUDders able to 'be whatever they want' by reinventing themselves through an online identity, but they would often reinvent themselves through several online identities. Turkel used the metaphor of 'windows' to describe this practice of switching between contexts and identities in everyday life, where each window on the computer screen represents a different context, set of relations and potential identity, to be called up or minimised at different points. Some of these windows will pertain to the online world of MUDs and some to the offline world. This was a view expressed by many writers at the time, including Bolter and Grusin (2000: 232): 'When we run a multimedia program on our desktop computer, each windowed space … offers us a different mediation of the subject'.

Indeed, Turkel's work was representative of a larger body of work investigating online culture at the time. Key theorists and texts such as Rheingold (1993), Stone (1995), and Poster (1995) all pointed to MUDs and other types of online interactions to demonstrate the large amount of identity play that was occurring within what was at the time, the new, exciting and mysterious phenomenon that was the internet. This was generally seen as resulting from four aspects of online environments:

1　The degree of anonymity that is possible in online environments creates a freedom not attainable in the offline world.

2　That a person can perform whatever identity one chooses, because online identities are based primarily on self-descriptive text that can be crafted in any manner desired by the user.

3　That multiple selves can be explored in parallel, creating an environment of identity shifting, hybridity and fluidity.

4　That identities can be created that are impossible in offline worlds.

The rising notoriety of the internet in the popular imagination as well as in academic discourse throughout the 1990s corresponded with the explosion of academic debate around identity. The humanities and the social sciences were firmly ensconced in a 'postmodern turn', brought about by the growing popularity of poststructuralist authors such as those mentioned above. Within this context, sentiments such as 'MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion' (Turkel, 1996: 241) were very consistent with the prevailing grain of academic thinking at the time.

Indeed, Turkel thoughtfully suggested that the advent of the online world had the potential to illustrate poststructuralism to a wider public audience. Across several writings, Turkel (1996, 1999) described MUDs and other online arenas as 'objects to think with'. Using her own experience as a postgraduate student in the late 1960s and 1970s, she suggested that her 'French lessons' in poststructuralist concepts of identity remained largely lost on her because these concepts were too abstract to speak to her own (or most other people's) experience in a society that emphasises stable, unified identities. In her encounter of MUDs, these theories that emphasised fluid, decentred identities finally came alive for her and, as result, Turkel suggested that MUDs and other online arenas were the 'objects' that would be able to demonstrate within common sense terms the validity of poststructuralist conceptions of identity: MUDs thus become 'objects to think with' for thinking about postmodern selves (Turkel, 1996: 185).

Gergen (1996) went further to suggest that the profusion of technologies such as the internet have an impact on how selves are constructed and maintained. Technology exposes us to more people, more cultures and increasingly varied understandings of the world. It offers us the opportunities of varied contexts which, when combined with anonymity, freedom of self expression, the ability to lead parallel lives (and introduce a quality of imagination into those lives), creates conditions that are increasingly untenable for the notion of a stable, centred self.

What happened in the early internet studies of the 1990s was a convergence between the prevailing academic discourse at the time, and an emerging technology interpreted within this context as supporting a particular point of view. In this case, authors of the day were

fragmented – which is in turn coalesced under the force of discourses and discursive regulation (as the deconstructionists argued) – is *extrinsically* based. That is, they suggested that everyday life is fragmented and multiple in terms of the demands that it makes upon people in different contexts, and that subjects actually work from within to create some sense of a coherent self and identity among a number of different roles, interests and preferences. They argue that personal web pages perform just this function.

Through the empirical example of personal web pages, Wynn and Katz suggested that 'identity' was still indeed grounded in embodied, offline life and that web users generally had a desire to maintain a coherent sense of identity in the online sphere. Rather than portraying a decentred, fragmented, disembodied self, personal home pages are actually attempts at identity integration by demonstrating to others what is important to the individual: 'an attempt to pull together a cohesive presentation of self across eclectic social contexts in which individuals participate' (Wynn and Katz, 1997: 324).

This notion of 'self presentation' is prevalent in much of the work on personal home pages in this period (see Chan, 2000; Schau and Gilly, 2003; Walker, 2000; Wynn and Katz, 1997). This belies a large influence of the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1975). For Goffman, identity is a contextually related personal and social front that is negotiated in face-to-face encounters, with the goal of presenting oneself as an acceptable person. Goffman's approach is seen as *dramaturgical* in the sense that self-presentation involves a performance of self in front of a particular set of observers, in which there are 'fronts', or public faces where fashioned selves are presented, and 'back' regions or more private contexts where the performance is able to be dropped to a certain extent. This performance will vary among different sets of observers and in that sense, everyday life is made up of different types of role playing within different contexts or 'frames'.

With a Goffman-informed perspective, studies of personal web pages and other internet phenomena such as online dating (Ellison et al., 2006), can easily demonstrate how such sites are ways of integrating the self and both online and offline concerns using new communication resources at hand. Whether these personal web pages happen to be oriented to relationships outside the internet (what Walker, (2000) calls *extrinsic* pages) or ones that are primarily concentrated on cultivating online relationships and personas (what Walker calls *intrinsic* pages), personal web sites are not examples of the free floating fragmented identities depicted in MUDs, but instead are situated in networks of online interaction at least, and usually within offline relationships, identities and affiliations as well.

From this point of view, Wynn and Katz also attack the assumption of (and indeed the preference for) anonymity on the internet as the basis for a liberating environment of identity play. They argue that:

- Anonymous identity play in MUD studies has demonstrated, at best, that such efforts are a way of working out real 'offline' issues, and is ultimately unsatisfactory as a mode of social interaction or social change.

- Anonymity is not the desire of mainstream internet users, who usually integrate aspects of offline life into online identities.

- Anonymity is not really possible to any great degree in online environments. People tend to use cues such as style and grammar to make assumptions about others in terms of education, class, gender. Furthermore, the internet itself is a panoptic technology where anonymity is more under threat than in regular, offline daily life (see Chapter 5).

Overall, Wynn and Katz suggest that the poststructuralist/deconstructivist online research represented by Turkel and Stone depends upon the imposition of a number of false distinctions, between the social and the technical, between the real and the virtual, between the public and the private. All of these are inconsistent with the technology and how it is actively used by the majority of people in everyday life contexts, which tend to blur these distinctions.

The critique of online deconstructionism and the study of MUDs, as represented here by symbolic interactionist studies of personal web pages, certainly provides much food for thought. As we will see, their suggestion that selves were 're-centred' in personal web pages was somewhat prophetic with the later advent and popularity of blogging and social networking. However, it may be fair to say that these studies of web pages repeat the same mistakes levelled at Turkel and Stone. It is entirely reasonable to suggest that excessive identity play within MUDs was a minority activity. However, it is equally fair to point out that the proportion of net users who had their own personal web page in, say 1998, was also rather small and could not be considered a mainstream internet activity. Indeed, if we take a historical perspective, two points can be made.

First, in terms of the technology, the research conducted by Turkel, Stone and others on MUDs took place at a point in time when the internet was very basic in terms of the environment it could create for its users. Because of bandwidth and memory limitations, it was almost completely made up of text. In that sense, it is not really comparable with the digital environment of the late 1990s, when convergence was starting to take place and when it became possible to include pictures of one's offline life, family and interests. It seems only natural that as the internet became more image-based that offline and 'meat' issues became more prominent, incorporating more of offline life into online identities. This becomes a more important point later on in this chapter.

Second, the explosion of popularity of the internet in the latter part of the 1990s and the demographic effect it had on who were using it, and for what purpose, has to be considered. Reliable demographic information about internet use is difficult to obtain, especially for the 1990s, but to take two examples, the *Computer Industry Almanac* (2006), which has been creating reports since 1990, report that in 1990 the United States had 7.2 internet users per 1000 population (not even one per cent). This number rose to 105 per thousand (or 10.5 per cent) in 1995, and to 476 (or 47.7 per cent) in the year 2000, a massive increase to say the least.

Moreover, if we look at more detailed demographic data from the Graphic Visualisation and Usability Centre's early surveys of internet users (1998), particularly comparing their third survey in 1995, to their tenth survey in 1998, massive demographic changes in internet users is evident. In 1995, the survey showed a four-to-one ratio of men

to women, an average age of 35.1 years, a high average income of $69,000, and 55.1 per cent of respondents occupationally involved with the higher education sector (as either students or staff), or from computer related fields. The tenth survey in 1998, just three years later, showed 36 per cent of respondents as women, an increased average age of 37.6 years, a decreased average income of $57,300, and only 34.8 per cent of respondents involved in either higher education or in computer related employment. It is clear that there is already, by 1998, a massive widening of participation and increasing diversity in the types of people using the web. It would be reasonable to assume that as the population of internet users gets older and less concentrated on the education sector, that there will be a smaller proportion of users who are likely to engage in large amounts of identity play and experimentation.

In conclusion, while it might be reasonable to suggest that early MUD-based work on internet identity was perhaps a bit sensational and even a tad technologically fetishist, it should be noted that such studies were, at least in part, a product of their time and technological circumstances as much as they were the products of a particular deconstructionist outlook and political project. The phenomena fit the theory, in the same way that personal web pages later on provided a persuasive counter-example to the decentred identity claims of MUD research. This trend in the saga of digital identity continues as we move on to discuss the phenomena of blogging and then social networking, which emerged as a popular form after the millennium.

PERSONAL BLOGGING, INDIVIDUALISATION AND THE REFLEXIVE PROJECT OF THE SELF

It is made clear that self-identity, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative: the narrative of the self is made explicit. Keeping a journal, and working through an autobiography, are central recommendations for sustaining an integrated sense of self ...

Yet autobiography – particularly in the broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned, whether written down or not is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life. Like any other formalised narrative, it is something that has to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course. (Giddens, 1991: 76)

The word 'blog' itself (as a contraction of 'web-log') was coined in 1997 and the phenomenon of blogging had its origins among the technologically minded in the late 1990s, who started to compile frequently updated lists and thematic links to interesting or noteworthy web sites. Blogs were popularised by the development of easy-to-use net-based software in 1999 (Pitas and Blogger). The popularity of blogs increased further because of two major political events (9/11 and the invasion of Iraq), which resulted in both a demand for accounts of these events outside mainstream media and a forum to voice opposition to government policies (Carl, 2003). Blogging as a popular phenomenon

peaked around 2004/2005, when personal journal blogging was adopted wholeheartedly by youth culture in the developed world. Blogs in particular have been lauded for greatly the expanding the accessibility for the 'average' person to publish on the internet, resulting in an explosion of online content. Many internet observers and academics pointed positively to the revolution in journalism, the democratic potential, and the potential for self expression, communication and communitarianism that blogs embodied.

There are, of course, many types of blogs, but the personal journal blog, a form of often intimate diary writing on the internet, emerged as the next wave of online identity research (see Hevern, 2004; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; MacDougal, 2005; McCullagh, 2008; Rak, 2005; Schmidt, 2007). While some of this research continued in the deconstructionist tradition (Rak, 2005, for example) and some continued in the symbolic interactionist perspective (MacDougal, 2005), many chose to examine the blogging phenomena from the point of view of the individualisation thesis popularised by Bauman, Beck, and Giddens (Hodkinson, 2007; Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; McCulloch, 2008; Miller, 2008; Schmidt, 2007).

In general, individualisation refers to a process in which communities and personal relationships, social forms and commitments are less bound by history, place and tradition. That is, individuals, freed from the contexts of tradition, history, and under globalisation, space, are free to, and perhaps forced to, actively construct their own biographies and social bonds. Due to the increasingly disembedded nature of late modern life, a major task of the individual is to continually rebuild and maintain social bonds, making individualisation by its nature non-linear, open ended and highly ambivalent (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Within this context of disembeddedness, consumer society offers up to the subject a range of choices from which to create biographies and narratives of the self, in addition to a set of relationships that can be seen as somewhat ephemeral or tenuous (Bauman, 2001b): 'I see the praxis of digital culture as an expression of individualization, postnationalism, and globalization' (Deuze, 2006: 64).

According to Giddens (1991), in an environment of disembedding and de-traditionalisation, the subject is 'unshackled' from predetermined life narratives such as class, religion, location and gender, which used to be more determinate in terms of life choices than they are today. This is a kind of double-edged freedom that enables individuals to have a relatively enhanced capacity to reshape and restyle their identities (though still limited by external discursive practices) through a panoply of lifestyle and consumer choices. Thus, identity becomes a 'reflexive project', a job that is undertaken that must be continually worked on and thought about. The self, for Giddens, is a person's understanding of their own narrative, which they attempt to shape in desirable ways. The struggle to build an identity and create a sense of belonging then gets acted upon through the engagement with consumer culture, an association with brands, types of music and material possessions in order to achieve affinity with others.

In The *Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Giddens moves on to discuss individualisation within the context of human relationships. He argued that in a context of disembeddedness, trust and security becomes of paramount importance. For Giddens trust, like the 'reflexive project of the self', is something that must be continually worked at. As a result,

Giddens argued that the late modern social milieu has led to a rise of 'pure' relationships: a social relationship entered into for what can be derived from the other. Such relationships are seen as voluntary – and therefore contingent – and have an intimacy based on the trust of mutual reflexivity and self-disclosure (see the case study on p. 176).

One aspect that is particularly relevant to blogging is the assertion that self-disclosure becomes increasingly important as a means to gain trust and achieve authentic (but contingent) relationships with others. Giddens argues that late modern subjects gravitate towards relationships that engender trust through constant communication and reflexive practice. In other words, we crave relationships that allow us to open up to others, and not just in the romantic sense, because in late modernity, the demand for intimacy becomes part of an overall project of self realisation.

In sum, the sociological context of blogging as far as the individualisation thesis is concerned rests on three premises:

1   A general context of social disembeddedness.

2   A need to create and sustain a self-narrative and to present that to others.

3   A need to establish trust, intimacy and understanding in an uncertain world through communication and acts of self-disclosure.

In this regard the internet in general and blogging in particular is seen as the ideal environment – largely because of its potential anonymity and lack of accountability – for pervasive self-disclosure and relationship building. The desire to tell one's life narrative to the world, to write about one's personal experiences of, for example, emotional pain, or one's opinions on world events through a kind of chronological public diary sits quite easily in a contemporary society in which compulsive intimacy has become a major way to overcome disembeddedness and work towards self-realisation. Furthermore, the creation of identity narratives through *bricolage*, the assembling of a number of different artefacts representing a range of interests (such as pictures, texts, sounds, consumer brands) that together are used to create an overall identity impression on blogging sites, leads some to suggest that online journals can be seen as 'virtual bedrooms' for youth who use blogs to carve out a personal space and exhibit their identities on the web (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008).

SOCIAL NETWORKS, PROFILES AND NETWORKED IDENTITY

> Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the net and the self. (Castells, 1996: 3)

Networks cannot be discussed without returning to the work of Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) and *The Power of Identity* (1997). Castells, as intimated by the passage above, sees an antagonistic relationship between 'identity' and the network society. Indeed, Castells views contemporary identity construction as a reaction to the faceless, placeless, anonymous aspects of the network society such as globalisation, timeless time and the space of flows (see Chapter 2). Identity becomes a response to the threat of the homogeneity of globalisation and the concurrent reduction of peculiarity and uniqueness in the world, and thus Castells argues that in the network society, identity becomes a tool of political mobilisation and resistance. This characterisation of the relationship between networks and identity by Castells is somewhat surprising, given the overall thesis in *The Rise of the Network Society*. It could be expected that an argument suggesting how identities in an age of ICTs would become increasingly embedded in networks would be more consistent and plausible.

In the discussion above on personal journal blogs, the point was made that the phenomenon of blogging could be seen as an overt attempt to construct and display a coherent identity narrative as part of the reflexive project of the self. However, constructing a narrative is not particularly meaningful when done in isolation. There is a difference between, for example, the classic (analog) personal diary that is not intended to have an audience outside the writer, and an online personal journal or blog, which has a potential audience and an interactive relationship with that audience. As Somers (1994) suggests:

> The chief characteristic of [identity] narrative is that it renders understanding only by *connecting* (however unstably) parts to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* of relationships … composed of symbolic, institutional and material practices. (Somers, 1994: 616)

For Somers, the narrative construction of identity is both relational and networked and has to be located within spatial and temporal configurations and cultural practices (Somers, 1994: 625). In its own way, the blog demonstrated this through links to other bloggers and membership in blogging circles, even though it was the text of the personal narrative that was generally emphasised. By 2004, the popularity of the blog within online culture started to be supplanted by Social Networking Web sites (SNWs) such as Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, Orkut and many others. These sites pushed the networking element of 'friends' or contacts into the forefront at the expense of textual content (Miller, 2008). The social networking profile has its roots in a combination of business networking sites (such as LinkedIn and Ryse), dating web sites and blogs. Today, sites such as Myspace, Facebook, Orkut and Flickr are among the most visited destinations on the web.

Within the narrative of this chapter, the rise of social networking profiles continues the move towards the re-centring of online identity within embodied, online life. As many articles have demonstrated, social networking profiles, much like online dating profiles, narrow the gap between multiple (or ideal) selves sometimes depicted in anonymous contexts, and selves that are grounded within corporeal daily life. In dating sites, the representation of self is usually grounded by the possibility of meeting online contacts in an

offline setting, with the ambition of a romantic relationship (Ellison et al., 2006; Hardey, 2002). In social networking sites, the self representing profile is grounded within the context of offline friends and contacts (Boyd, 2006; Boyd and Heer, 2006; Zhao et al., 2008), as well as in photographs, in what has developed into a highly image oriented medium (Strano, 2008).

An interesting point made by Zhao et al. (2008), in their analysis of identity construction on Facebook, is the move towards more implicit identity statements in social networking profiles. They suggest that there are three modes of identity construction apparent on Facebook:

1   The visual self or 'self as social actor', which is demonstrated through peer photographs and aimed at implicit identity claims. The aim is to generate desired impressions of self by 'showing without telling' the extent and depth of social ties.

2   The cultural self, which displays consumption and lifestyle tastes and preferences through photographs and lists in an act of self-definition by consumerist proxy.

3   Explicit descriptions of self, for instance, in 'about me' sections. For Zhao et al., this was the least elaborated of the three identity strategies on Facebook profiles.

The interesting thing here is that the defining characteristic of the blog – the explicit description of the self – is the least elaborated strategy on social networking profiles. These profiles instead infer identity statements by relationally situating the self among a network of social contacts and a set of relations to consumer culture, what Liu (2007) calls 'taste performances'. In effect, the identity statement emerges from the constellation of friendship networks and consumerist associations (see also Boyd and Heer, 2006).

In this regard, it may be useful to bring into consideration the concept of the 'situated self' as elaborated by Ismael (2007). For Ismael, the self is a reflexive representation in a continual cycle of self-location and relocation. In other words, the self continually maps itself egocentrically through representation and the creation of locational context. The social networking profile can be seen as one obvious attempt at an egocentric mapping of the self through the relational context of friends, images and consumer tastes.

Situatedness and the metaphor of 'mapping' allows us to consider the social networking profile (and the microblog) within the under-theorised context of mobile technologies. Van den Berg (2009) thoughtfully attempts to consider the notion of *situatedness* and how this has changed in an environment of almost ubiquitous mobile communication, suggesting that the self is becoming centred in a 'distributed presence', maintained by the variety of fixed and mobile communication technologies available. She argues, from a Goffmanesque perspective, that networked information technologies complicate the notion of 'framing' or 'definition' of a particular situation, since a distributed presence means that a person could potentially be involved in several frames or performances at the same time, thus having to continually switch back and forth between frames (this, in a way, brings us back to Turkel's 'windows' metaphor discussed above).

However, one could argue that the effect is the opposite. Instead of continually mixing frames the combination of social networking, especially when involving mobile

technologies and pervasive communication (such as microblogging), actually centres the subject even further by mixing frames and blending the diversity of contacts of one's life from a variety of roles and contexts (friends from varied parts and times of life, family members, business associates). There are plenty of examples in the popular press where people have lost their jobs or been suspended from school or university as a result of what they have said (or the kinds of photos displayed) on their social networking profile. It would seem that in these cases, the mixing of performance or identity 'frames' has served to demonstrate how subjects are becoming increasingly policed into more consistent identities by way of a kind of social networking panopticon that demands more consistency in represented identities across many different, sometimes incompatible, contexts.

AVATAR AND IDENTITY

> Every time someone makes an avatar they create a portrait, though it may be little to do with who one is in the real world. But this is nothing new for portraits – portraits have always been combinations of realism and the techniques artists use to communicate the subject's personality. (Meadows, 2008: 106)

The trend thus far discussed in this chapter is towards a centring of identity (both in terms of online identity, but also in the centring of offline and online identities) as the internet has become more image-based, and more oriented towards online/offline social networking. However, the increasing importance of the image in online identity construction and representation is not just confined to the more pragmatic world of social networking. The characteristics of identity have also changed within later generations of online fantasy worlds, more akin to the MUDs discussed at the beginning of this chapter. On the one hand, online worlds such as *World of Warcraft, Everquest, Second Life, Star Wars Galaxies* and *Second Life* are like MUDs in that they are predominantly anonymous online environments, as well as being fantasy-oriented worlds where there is great potential for identity and gender play. On the other hand, instead of text-based self description, characters in contemporary online worlds achieve an identity through the construction of avatars: their visual appearance, their skills and aptitude in the given environment and their social interaction (Lister et al., 2009). An avatar can be defined as 'an interactive social representation of a user' (Meadows, 2008: 13).

In this discussion of 'avatar and identity', there is the potential to return full circle to the phenomenon of MUDs, in terms of the fragmented, decentred postmodern subject as epitomised in the work of Turkel or Stone. Some, such as Jones (2006) see avatar identity in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG's) and other online worlds very much in these terms. However, there is a larger body of work which argues that the task-oriented nature of these games determines a certain consistency of character that largely works against such fragmentation (Blinka, 2008; Boellstorff, 2008; Chee et al., 2006; Duchenaut and Moore, 2004; Wolfendale, 2007, for examples).

Ambitions such as 'levelling up' (i.e., creating a more powerful character with gameplay experience), acquisition of wealth and power, building a house, acquiring consumer items, becoming more socially popular, are all explicit and implicit goals for players within all types of these worlds, and such ambitions encourage character longevity and identity consistency.

This drive towards consistency is also a function of both intentional and unintentional game design. It is very difficult to engage in, for example, the combat and purposeful exploration involved in fantasy-themed MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, or the less purposeful exploration, chatting and socialising of *Second Life*, successfully, while operating two or more characters at the same time. In addition, game designers often actively prevent players from using multiple avatars at the same time by restricting one login per computer. This prevention of multi-character play is based on the assumption from game designers that too much identity fragmentation in terms of multiple use of avatars harms the building of trust, relationships and community, a necessary part to successful game play (Ducheneaut and Moore, 2004). In this respect, Turkel's (1996) 'windows' metaphor is not applicable to the sorts of identity performances that occur in graphical online worlds.

The preference for consistent identities is seen by players as important for establishing reputations and social contacts, which are a major part of the enjoyment of game play. For example, Krzywinska's (2007: 109) ethnography of *World of Warcraft* notes:

> Many players with greater experience are often more likely to group with people with whom they have played regularly … Most players will add people to the player-generated friends list when they have grouped with another player with whom they feel some sort of affinity.

Similarly, Boellstroff (2008) in his ethnographic study of *Second life*, finds this to be the case even in less task oriented social worlds:

> When I first started, I alternated between two main avatars, and was planning on making more, but since I started actually meeting and hanging out with some people, I haven't really changed my basic look … I started having static relationships and wanted to remain a single entity. (Interview quote from Boellstroff, 2008: 129–130)

Thus, similarly to social networking web sites, the network of friendships on MMORPGs performs the function of situating the avatar identity within a relational network of others. Contacts with others, membership in groups (especially elite groups or 'guilds') creates a context in which the identity of the avatar emerges from a situation.

It must be pointed out that this does not necessarily mean that players have only one online identity. In fact the use of 'alts' or alternative identities is very common. However, given the logistics of game play, these 'alts' are not used simultaneously, but are alternated with the use of the primary character identity or avatar. Research suggests that

the use of 'alts' does not conform with free form identity play, but are instead normally used in pragmatic ways to accomplish certain tasks:

- Within fantasy oriented role playing games, 'alts' are used to explore different aspects of the game through different characterisations (for example, to experience the online world as a 'cleric' as opposed to a 'warrior' or a female as opposed to a male) (Duchenaut and Moore, 2004).

- Also typically within fantasy-oriented games, 'alts' are often used in conjunction with other characters to assist in game play success. So for example, if one's 'warrior' becomes wounded, a player will often bring in another character, such as a cleric, who can heal the primary character (Bucheneaut and Moore, 2004).

- In *Second Life*, Boellstroff (2008) notes how many players have 'alts' on reserve for times when they want to accomplish certain tasks, like building, without interruption or social obligations. The anonymous 'alts' allows someone to log on and get things done within a site, without other friends knowing that the person associated with the primary avatar is online.

It seems clear that in the majority, excessive decentred avatar identity play is not compatible with the ambitions or appeal of online worlds. Avatars establish reputations, relationships, and complete short and long term tasks. That is their reason for being. For Chee et al. (2006), this kind of pragmatic outlook is characteristic of the relationship between players and their avatars. They see the avatar/player relationship not so much as representations of self or identification with self. Their interview-based research suggests that *Everquest* players see avatars as tools for accomplishing tasks and the ambitions of the player: social and game-oriented. Wolfendale (2007) similarly suggests that the attachment that people feel towards their avatars is based on what the avatar provides for the player. So while the attachment is real, and even emotional, it is not seen as a reflection of the self but more like a character that one has grown fond of, which might have some aspects of oneself in it. This could be compared with the attachment that people feel towards characters in books or films, or the attachment an author has towards a character he/she has created, or an actor's attachment and engagement with a particular role being performed.

This also seems to be the case, among adult players at least, in research conducted by Blinka (2008), who suggested three types of identity relationships among players and avatars:

1 *Identification* with avatars, where there is a unity expressed between players and avatars. This is rare but more common in adolescent gamers.

2 An *independent status* between player and avatar, where the avatar is seen in terms of its capacity as a game tool, most common among adult players.

3 Avatars as *compensation*, in the sense that the avatar is seen as a kind of idealistic projection of some of the qualities of the player.

This third factor, that avatars can be considered idealised or 'truer' reflections of the player, seems fairly supported in much of the quantitative-based literature (see Bessière et al., 2007; Taylor, 2002; Vasalou et al., 2008). In this sense, there is an expressed link between avatars and offline identity: avatar characters include aspects of offline identity, but realise them in a more idealised form online:

> I am not suggesting that identity is always fixed or indeed 'hard wired', but rather that one of the pleasures of playing games such as *World of Warcraft* might be located in the 'shoring up' of a player's existing identity rather than changing it in any profound sense... (Krzywinska, 2007: 114)

Case Study: Cybersex, Online Intimacy and the Self

Sex appeal is fifty per cent what you've got and fifty per cent what people think you've got. (*Sophia Loren*)

Cybersex has been defined as '...a social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real-time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused and satisfied' (Döring, 2000: 863). Basically, cybersex is a sexually-charged computer-mediated personal interaction in which the parties in question are seeking arousal and satisfaction. Thus, it is not merely a conversation about sex, but a form of sexual encounter (Döring, 2000: 864) that has several novel qualities:

- The participants may be completely anonymous to each other.

- The participants will not be co-present in physical space, but are telepresent with each other through the use of real-time digital communication (chat, text, email).

- The sexual encounter, and the relationship more generally, takes place entirely within the virtual space or the imaginations of the participants.

However, far from being a unique phenomenon to the internet, sexually-related activities and eroticism associated with cybersex have typically gone hand-in-hand with technological advances in communication. As Hearn (2006) suggests, ICTs are part of a broader set of trends involving the increasing publicisation of sexualities and technologies of the senses. The inventions of the telephone (and even the telegraph) brought about the idea of remote, real-time erotic chat with others epitomised in 'call girls', and telephone sex services (Hearn, 2006), and currently manifest in controversies over mobile phone 'sexting' in which people exchange erotic text and photos through mobile phone SMS services (for example, see CBS, 2009). In that respect, there has always been a clear link between new communication technologies and eroticism.

The notion of online intimacy or cybersex raises a number of interesting questions about identity and the relationship of online or virtual behaviour to the offline world. As suggested in Chapter 1, the virtual can be considered 'real but not actual' (Shields, 2003). When cybersex is limited to online interaction, it remains in the virtual, and takes on a degree of simulation as the sex act revolves around idealisations and imaginative scenarios that will never be actual.

More recent developments further enhance the simulative nature of online sexual behaviour. In virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, the exchange of text-based sexual chat is supplemented by graphic sexual imagery using avatars that simulate sex. Indeed, *Second Life* has a thriving sexual culture and a wide diversity of sexual subcultures, with two of the largest being 'Furries' and 'Goreans'. The former follow a theme of animal-human hybrids and the latter a theme of hyper-masculine male domination (Boellstorff, 2008; Meadows, 2008). Virtual prostitution has also made a notable presence (Boellstorff, 2008; Wagner, 2007).

In a slightly more wholesome context, the Chinese phenomenon of 'Web Marriage' sites expands the simulation to encompass relationships, marriage, home building and children (McLaren, 2007). Less sexually-oriented, but definitely romantic, web marriage provides an online forum for young Chinese adults to participate in the adult practices of courting, relationship building, marriage and family building with anonymous virtual partners. Many of these virtual relationships last over a year or even several years (McLaren, 2007).

This study will demonstrate how cybersex emerges from a set of late-modern cultural attitudes towards identity, sex and relationships, and how these attitudes have combined with technology to create a new kind of sexual interaction, which may in the long run challenge current cultural norms.

The late-modern context of love and intimacy

In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Anthony Giddens suggests that romantic relationships have undergone a series of transformations within Western culture from pre-modern, to romantic, to pure or confluent love. Beginning at the mid-twentieth century, Giddens suggests that a cultural shift away from romantic love and towards 'pure' or 'confluent' love, has been taking place. Where romantic love is generally seen as a fated, lifetime commitment towards a 'true love' or a 'soul-mate', pure or confluent relationships – as we will see – are described by Giddens as based on the idea of 'choice' instead of 'fate'. They are seen as more contingent, rather than permanent, lifetime, 'til death do us part' relationships.

Giddens attributes this shift to two general processes, the first being the general framework of *detraditionalisation*. By detraditionalisation, Giddens is referring to the disembedding, increased life choices and greater potential number of life narratives offered up to individuals in the context of globalisation and late modern consumer culture (see Chapter 7). This freedom from traditional life narratives and plethora of lifestyles places the burden of identity construction on the individual in the form of the *reflexive project of the self*. These changes are perhaps even more profound for women, as

improvements in contraceptive technology (separating sex from reproduction), greater legal and social acceptance of divorce and cohabitation, and feminist campaigns that pushed for equal rights for women in general, have all served to provide women with greater equality and more autonomy in romantic relationships as compared with the past.

In these contexts, Giddens suggests that the 'pure' relationship or confluent love is becoming the archetypal relationship of contemporary times. The pure relationship is:

- *Voluntary* in that commitment is contingent and open to change. Pure relationships are sought as part of a means of self-development. When relationships cease to be seen as useful or are seen as preventative to self-actualisation within the reflexive project of the self, they can be ended. This contrasts the lifelong commitment and 'for better or worse' expectation embodied in romantic love.

- Based on *equality* between parties, who are both expected – and expect – to benefit from the relationship.

- *Reflexive*, in that the relationship is not taken for granted but continually open to scrutiny and evaluation.

- Based on *intimacy*, which is achieved through constant communication (particularly expression of self and needs), and the gaining of knowledge of the other's intimate self. This in turn creates *mutual* trust.

The end result is that pure relationships are based on communication, equality and understanding, and in that sense can be seen as superior to previous forms of romantic relationship. However, the instrumental and contingent nature of confluent love does have its drawbacks, notably the 'until further notice' nature that creates insecurity in the individual as, essentially, the pure relationship is really about one's self and one's own self fulfilment. Giddens suggests this insecurity is manifested in rising rates of compulsive behaviour and addictions within contemporary society, such as additions to drugs, work, sex, as well as eating disorders.

Giddens suggests that sex becomes another tool or property to bring to the reflexive project of the self, becoming simultaneously a means of self-expression and a means towards achieving intimacy and self-disclosure with another. In this sense, sex becomes another way to evaluate a pure relationship and sexual fulfilment, as part of the overall attempt to construct a desirable self-narrative. Moving to the online sphere, Ross (2005) suggests that online sexual behaviour epitomises both Giddens' pure relationship and the reflexive project of the self. It demonstrates the ultimate removal of sex from reproduction, and thus leaves room for sex to be reflexively investigated as a property of the individual in the construction of a sexual identity.

Cybersex: a novel form of intimacy

Ben Ze'ev (2004) suggests that there are four main features that enable online intimacy and make it a novel form of relationship. First, there is *imagination*, in that since the situations are virtual, there are no practical limitations in how settings, scenarios, partners or even selves can be constructed. Thus it becomes extremely easy to idealise situations and people. Second, *interactivity* fosters reciprocity in communications, which both increases self disclosure and places fewer burdens on the actors involved. Third, *availability* suggests that online there is easy access to many available options, meaning that it is easy to find partners (among a large pool of prospects) and that they are continually available through ubiquity of internet and mobile communications. Last, *anonymity* reduces the risk of online activities when compared to offline risks. It decreases vulnerability and the weight of social norms upon behaviour. This makes it easier for people to act according to their desires, increasing self-disclosure and therefore intimacy and seductiveness.

For Ben Ze'ev, these features and contexts create a fundamentally new form of relationship whose feature is *detached attachment*: intimate closeness at a distance. Detached attachment consists of several seemingly contradictory elements that, in Ben Ze'ev's view, make it both appealing and problematic:

- *Distance* and *immediacy*: Temporal immediacy created through real-time and ubiquitous communication technologies can be achieved despite people being separated by physical distance. This creates an emotional immediacy and continued (tele)presence despite a lack of physical contact.

- *Lean and rich communication*: The mostly text-based interaction in online social environments is, on the one hand, a 'lean' form of communication in that it is one-dimensional, but this leanness also paradoxically encourages greater efforts of expression and perception, allowing a communicative richness that promotes intimacy.

- *Anonymity and self-disclosure*: The anonymity available online creates reduced feelings of vulnerability, often encouraging more open and honest communication. Where complete honesty, especially in terms of sexual matters, can sometimes be seen as threatening in real-life relationships, an environment of anonymity can encourage more honesty, and therefore intimacy. This is sometimes also called the 'online disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2004).

- *Continuity and discontinuity*: Online relationships are ultimately very tenuous. People can simply disappear and in that sense such relationships are discontinuous. At the same time, ubiquitous connection through ICTs can create an environment of continual presence in one another's lives.

- *Physical and mental investment*: Online relationships demand relatively little in terms of physical resources, but can demand a lot in terms of mental and emotional investment.

- *Distant relationships*: Online relationships often involve a yearning for circumstances that cannot be bought to bear or cannot exist. They instil a desire for ideal circumstances that are impossible. This gives them a quality of intensity involved with yearning, yet a distance related to the consumption of fantasy.

As a result of these factors, Ben Ze'ev suggests that online intimacy provides an easy and desirable alternative to the difficult circumstances of real life relationships. One can achieve maximum amounts of intimacy with a minimum amount of investment. The distance and potential anonymity allows for a forum in which experimentation and the taking on of different sexual persona allow a continual investigation of the sexual aspects of self, which is only encouraged by the lack of much social control and sexual regulation experienced in offline society. Perhaps most importantly, online intimacy and cybersex, because they normally rely on the exchange of descriptive texts signifying preferences, wants and desires, provides a milieu of reflexivity and self-disclosure intensely compatible with the late-modern need to achieve intimacy through constant communication with valued others.

Similarly, several feminist-inspired studies have also suggested that engaging in cybersex can enhance self-esteem and sexual satisfaction for women in particular by allowing them to engage in consequence-free exploration and expression in a way not possible generally for women offline (Allbright, 2008; Döring, 2000). Ben Ze'ev suggests that online sexual behaviour can be described as 'intrinsically valuable' (meaning sex simply for the pleasure of the act) as opposed to 'goal-oriented' (sex as a means of advancement, as part of a duty or relationship obligation, or as a means of reproduction). Thus, in online sex, people are more likely to treat each other as equal/willing partners engaging in a pleasurable experience, such that the experience can be more intimate and satisfying than in many instances of offline sex. Such sentiments lead some feminist scholars such as Döring (2000) to present cybersex behaviour as largely empowering, for women in particular, as a means of exploring their sexual identities free from the vulnerabilities associated with a patriarchal offline world.[2]

In terms of drawbacks, as some psychological studies will attest, one main concern is addiction or the supporting of obsessive behaviour patterns, especially in individuals who have had previous problems with addictions to sex or pornography. In these cases, cybersex can be a new form of compulsive behaviour, or cause a relapse of prior conditions. Relatedly, there is concern over the increased likelihood of risky sexual behaviour that can occur if behaviour transfers from the online to the offline world. In one study, Schneider (2000) (cited in Allbright, 2008) suggested that 80 per cent of women who engaged in online erotic chat migrated to real-life sex with an online partner (perhaps surprisingly, this contrasted with only 30 per cent of men). This suggests that there is perhaps an increased chance of putting oneself at risk through casual encounters. In addition, moral criticism may be focussed on how the availability of partners for online sexual encounters can be seen as a sexual 'marketplace', in which people are treated as 'off the shelf' consumable objects for gratification or identity experimentation, rendering such relationships as shallow, instrumental and inconsequential (Ross, 2005).

The morally ambiguous nature of online sexual behaviour can also be seen as problematic when it comes to issues of offline relationships. For participants involved in an offline relationship, cybersex is often not considered 'adultery', as it is not 'actual' cheating on a spouse. However, this is often not the opinion of the partners themselves. Indeed, the notion of 'infidelity' (i.e., a betrayal of trust) is often viewed even more seriously than the physical act of adultery or cheating because of the emotional intimacy involved (Ben Ze'ev, 2004; Mileham, 2004). In addition, because it falls into a moral grey area between the virtual and the actual, online sexual activity can easily lead to a 'slippery slope': from online flirting, to explicit sexual discussion, to virtual online sex, to 'actual' sexual encounters. Furthermore, the act of online infidelity can be destructive to the offline relationship both through the amount of emotional work and time involved in the online relationship, and the sexual energy and intimacy that is transferred from the offline relationship to the online one. In this respect, the mundane nature of everyday life in offline relationships can face tough competition from the hassle-free idealisation of online sexual encounters (Ben Ze'ev, 2004). As a result (although firm evidence is difficult), a number of sources suggest that roughly one-third of divorce litigation in the United States, for example, is linked to online infidelity (Infidelitycheck, 2002; Mileham, 2004).

This brings us full circle. If cybersex and online infidelity are contributing to the breakup of marriages and relationships, then such technologies would seem to be reinforcing the move towards more confluent or pure relationships and away from the permanence of romantic love. Indeed, the internet (both in terms of cybersex and in more traditional dating web sites) presents us with a whole world of choice of potential partners, and the ability to continually evaluate these virtual relationships against those in which we are currently involved.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has been as much a story about how different internet phenomena have lent themselves to different theoretical stances in terms of identity construction. Within this narrative, I have attempted to chart a wider move within digital culture from a point in the early 1990s when:

- Self representation was almost exclusively text-based.

- Online social environments were largely anonymous, or characterised as being such.

- There was seen to be little integration between 'online' and 'offline' spheres, which included the view that online identities were 'disembodied' and therefore free from embodied identity discourses.

Such an environment, as epitomised in MUDs, tended to support the poststructuralist view of identity as decentred, fragmented and multiple. Such environments were seen as illustrative of how identity is *performed* and not an *essential* quality. Two decades later,

as we move into contemporary uses of the internet and other forms of digital communication technologies, we find:

- An online environment increasingly dominated by images and, in particular, self-representations (for example on social networking sites) based on images, particularly photographs, at the expense of textual self-description.

- Mainstream online social environments have become more 'nonymous' in that social networking profiles in particular have become tools to represent and aid 'offline' selves.

- As a result, there has been an integration of 'offline' and 'online' frames or lifeworlds in a way that leaves little room for identity play or decentred identities. Instead, there has been a centring of the online self within the embodied, offline self.

These factors point to the suggestion that within digital culture, the self has arguably become more centred and situated, as the demands of 'distributed presence' (Van den Berg, 2009) and ubiquitous communication afforded by mobile networking technologies have led to a mixing of different social contexts and the roles associated with them (what Goffman would call 'frames'), in a way that was generally not as prevalent before the advent of these technologies. This can be seen especially well in the diversity of friendship networks on social networking and microblogging profiles, where all manner of contacts, friends and family members from different contexts and stages of life are kept up to date through the use of static and mobile technologies.

Interestingly, the author Ben Elton (2007), in his satirical novel *Blind Faith*, describes a future in which a dictatorial theocratic government demands that the population continually update everything about themselves using 'Face Space', 'podcasts' and 'WorldTube' sites. Attempts at describing selves, things and events using words (as opposed to photographs and video) seem utterly pointless and indeed sinful acts of hubris:

> The Lord has blessed us with digital recording equipment with which we can capture, celebrate and worship in diamond detail the exactitude of every nuance of his creation and yet you, you in your vanity, think that your description, the world of your lowly, humble, inadequate imagination, can somehow do the job better! You believe your description, your fiction, to be a better medium for representing God's work than digitised reality! (Elton, 2007: 28)

Predictably, this is a world where privacy has become offensive, but more implicitly, this is also a world where the idea of identity performance becomes bound, through constant self-reporting and display to others of all aspects of life, to the consistent performance of one single, panoptically policed, centred identity acceptable to all.

FURTHER READING

For a deeper investigation into poststructuralist and (techno)feminist views of identity the work of Butler (1993), Haraway (1991) and Turkel's classic *Life on the Screen* (1996) are important texts. Wynn and Katz (1997) provide a very thorough and important critique of poststructuralist identity theory as related to internet use, as well as a good example of the symbolic interactionist perspective. Anthony Giddens' work on identity (1991) and intimacy (1992) is very influential in later studies of Web 2.0 and user-generated content. Ross (2005) adapts Giddens' theories well to the context of cybersex. Meadows' *I, Avatar* (2008) and Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) are very interesting discussions of identity issues related to virtual worlds. Both also have interesting ethnographic accounts of cybersex in these arenas. Ben Ze'ev (2004) provides a very useful overall discussion of romantic relationships online.

NOTES

1 This claim, like the reverse claim, can be contested. Valkenberg et al. (2005), for example, conducted a quantitative study in which 50 per cent of their sample of adolescents had engaged in identity experimentation on the web.
2 Although some feminist scholars argue the opposite, that cybersex merely reinforces gender stereotypes and the idea of females as primarily sexual objects for men.