

Online Life and Netsex or Cybersex

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INTRODUCTION

Netsex, or cybersex, may be thought of as the mutual textual simulation, or narration, of sexual activity between people online. Branwyn (1993, p. 786) divides Netsex into three different types. First is that in which people “describe and embellish real-world circumstances” such as touching themselves, taking their clothes off, and so on. They may or may not be performing these actions, but probably not if they are typing reasonably steadily. The second type involves “a pure fantasy scenario” in which people jointly create a story with relatively coherent expectations. This can be performed before an audience. The third type involves one party giving instructions to another who supposedly performs them. These techniques involve textual references to sexually charged notions of gender (anatomy, actions, clothing, and so on), which are frequently exaggerated to fit the story.

It is now possible to transmit real-time video pictures from a camera attached to a person’s computer, and this may also be used for Netsex. However, people often express ambivalence about this, perhaps because it emphasises the distance between people, is not as mutually intense, or because it increases possible disjunctions. The disruption of expectations of narrative in Netsex is often a source of online humour. A final, often mentioned, but currently fictional form of Netsex is virtual teledildonics, in which a complete sensory field is simulated via electronics.

BACKGROUND

Prevalence of Netsex

Netsex is reputedly quite common. Hamman (1997) states that in his experience, about half of all AOL (America Online) chat rooms “have sex related names,” and he believes that a large number of AOL

users, if not the majority of them, “have at least experimented with having cybersex” (Hamman, 1996). Sannicolas (1997) looked at the chat rooms open on the Microsoft Network (MSN) over a 2-week period and discovered that in the nonregistered rooms, “an average of 98 (21.2%) listed sexual topics.” A survey posted to an MSN notice board gained over 9,000 responses and revealed that 45% of respondents claimed to spend over an hour a week on “sexually related activities,” with more than 7% reporting they spent 11 or more hours a week on those activities (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999).

Netsex shades into online dating and into using the Internet to meet potential partners (Elias, 1997; Olson, 1999-2000). Obviously, the intensity of any person’s use of the Internet for sexual or romantic purposes may vary over their life online.

Explanations for Netsex

Netsex has been explained in terms of sex drive, male dominance, difficulties in finding partners, psychoanalytic projection, addiction, and liberation, as will be described below.

Common motives are that technological development is driven by sex, people will use new technology for sex, and the easier the technology is to use, then the quicker it will be embraced for sex (Dery, 1996). Such theories seem exaggerated, assume a ubiquity and uniformity of sex drives, and have little to do with the actual uses or forms of Netsex as actually employed between people.

Sometimes the prevalence of sex online is explained as the way the Net is marked as a male domain. In this view, women are excluded and harassed by sex talk, and by males trying to pick them up or render them sexual beings alone. Sherman (1995) has even suggested that the publicity given to harassment online was a deliberate attempt on the part of the male-controlled media to frighten women away from the Net. However, harassment is not

uncommon for women on the Internet, particularly in chat environments (see Brail, 1997; Branwyn, 1993), and males can also feel harassed by female demands for online sex (Tober, 1995). One of the most famous tales of online life is Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" (1999), in which the takeover of a woman's avatar and her sense of self is described and given the almost mythic function of originating formal social control and civilisation.

However, online groups may disapprove of sexual harassment and clearly distinguish it from Netsex, and it seems that women participate in Netsex with as much enthusiasm or ambiguity as men (Marshall, 2003). Given this, it is necessary to separate Netsex, a usually private, mutual activity, from the use of sex talk and harassment in public.

Netsex and online pairing is often explained by claiming that people find it extremely difficult to meet potential sexual partners in modern Western society. Albright and Conran (n.d.) write, "Online communities accelerate the expansion of opportunities for relationships begun by personals, video dating, and telephone chat line," while Hamman (1997) claims that a "lot of these people are isolated, either geographically [or] socially." In this view, Netsex can be seen as part of wider social processes that have resulted in increasing isolation, with the suggestion that pairing and sexuality are extremely important in the construction of gender and self-identity (particularly as sexual activity is usually gendered), and in ensuring survival in the contemporary world.

In slight contradiction to this theory of meeting potential partners, it seems that many such affairs involve people who are married and claim their marriages are happy. Over half the cyberromance stories commented upon by Vixen (n.d.) involved at least one married person. Olson (1999-2000) claims that in his survey, despite almost half his respondents claiming to have been in love online and one third of them dating people met online, over 70% claimed to be married (Olson, 1999-2000). The Internet can be seen as a safe place to have affairs and thus even to save marriages as a result (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004).

The prevalence and intensity of sex online can be explained by the supposed blankness of the computer screen, psychoanalytic projection or transference, and the easy activation of fantasy (Albright & Conran, n.d.; Bednarczyk, 1994; Elias, 1997; Hamman,

n.d.; Odzer, 1997; Vixen, n.d.). This explanation can be formulated in terms of escape as when Hering (1994) writes, "Simply stated, the internet is a place where men, women, and children can exercise their fantasies, as well as escape the realities of their boring and pathetic lives; or maybe they're escaping their exciting and overly burdening lives." As it stands, this explanation is little more than a restatement of what is observed: that people often find it easy to have online sex and that it is powerful. We still do not know why projection should so easily take a sexual form, and fantasy is part of the standard explanation for why online sexual relationships, which may sustain people for years, often fail on meeting off-line (Adamse & Motta, 1996; Hamman, n.d.).

A medical-like model phrases Internet usage in terms of addiction, with Netsex seen as either reinforcing this addiction or as a special subcategory of addiction. Cooper, Scherer et al. (1999, p. 154) state, "The first position to emerge was that Internet sexuality is pathological." One therapist quoted by Shachtman (2000) claimed that "cybersex is the crack-cocaine of sex addiction." Online therapist Kimberly Young (n.d.-a) argues that "Cybersexual addiction has become a specific sub-type of Internet addiction" and estimates that 1 in 5 Internet addicts are engaged in online sexual activity. Young (n.d.-a) goes on to remark on the rapid engagement of those with "no prior criminal or psychiatric history" in such behaviour (see also Delmonico, 1997). This is pathologising with a vengeance and guides attention away from events into morals.

Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, and Boise (1999, p. 77) distinguish three types of users of Netsex. First, there are the "recreational or nonpathological users." Second, there are "[i]ndividuals who exhibit sexually compulsive traits and experience a fair amount of trouble in their lives." Third, there are users without histories of sexual compulsivity, but whose "online sexual pursuits have caused problems in their lives" (p. 80). The latter group is held to contain "depressives" who withdraw from off-line social interaction, and "stress reactive types" who use Internet sex to cope with stress or to escape from certain feelings. For another division, see Leiblum (1997). Ferree (2003) claims that women are overrepresented among Internet sex addicts, basing her claims almost entirely on Cooper, Scherer, et al.'s (1999) MSN survey. While it would be

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