AVATAR DREAMS:

An Ethnography of Desire for the Virtual Body

By

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For Mom,

who has always been my inspiration by example

and for Dad,

the true sociologist in the family.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the appeal of the virtual body, or the desire to be embodied virtually through technology. To date, scholars writing about the lure of extending embodiment in cyberspace have done so by examining text-based forums online and have found these texts to be rich and interesting vehicles for self-representation and communication. Now with the rise of graphical interfaces for Internet interaction, new, engaging settings for broaching questions of bodies are possible. These settings have been largely unstudied as of yet, despite the move towards graphical real-time interaction for chat, computer gaming, business applications and educational software.

As a critique of the widespread notion in both academe and popular discourse that cyberspace is an arena of disembodied interaction, this paper presents four types of desire for the virtual body discussed in the literature, including desires to restore the body, to escape the body, to perfect the body and to rework the body. To explore these ideas, an ethnographic study of "Petal", a three-dimensional graphic-based avatar entertainment environment, was conducted in the spring of 2000. My analysis then explores the four types of desire for the virtual body in light of ethnographic observations from the Petal community. Under investigation, these concepts complement, criss-cross and conflict with one another, but I argue that they ultimately do not capture the essence of a will to virtuality. Instead, I propose a provisional theory of "avatar dreams" and the need for more research into questions of embodiment, desire and virtuality.

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Introduction

"Ever smiled in 3D?" (Introduction tour, Petal community)

After booting up my computer and getting online, I take a sip of coffee while I wait for the community site to finish loading. And then suddenly, there I am. My screen fills with the rooms of my house and I see myself standing expectantly at the door to the entryway. I am wearing what I picked out yesterday, jeans and a white T-shirt over my tall, slim and unbelievably buxom female frame. I quickly look around to make sure all is in order and then, anxious to escape the eerily empty feeling of my house, I head out to find some company. A friend of mine, Candy, is around, so I knock on her door. She welcomes me in with a hug and we sit down on the couch to chat. Others mill about and we occasionally eavesdrop a little to catch their comments. Candy wants to show me a new picture she has just put on her wall, so we walk over to check it out. New people walk in and Candy greets them with a wave and an enthusiastic "hi!!!" as she tells me that she wants me to try on an outfit of hers that she thinks will suit me. I test it out and a few others around make admiring comments. One guy in a suit and tie is especially appreciative of the summer dress I have changed into and starts making suggestive comments. I walk away a little abruptly and he apparently gathers that I am not interested in him, for a few minutes later he is dancing with two German-speaking girls in a corner of the room. After chatting a few more minutes, I say my goodbyes to Candy and the others on the couch near me and head for home. The quiet of my house now seems nice and I linger a few minutes more. Then I shut down the browser. My screen goes dark as I get up from my desk and stretch out my limbs. I head downstairs to refresh my coffee, now gone ice-cold.

In reviewing both classic and contemporary sociological works in search of foundations for a new "embodied sociology," Simon Williams and Gillian Bendelow suggest that "the body is both everywhere and nowhere in social theory today" (1998: 1). In other words, although the body has been emerging as a topic of more serious inquiry in recent scholarship, it remains a highly elusive concept. As social theory shakes off the remnants of Cartesian dualism that dominated the discussion on embodiment for centuries, new developments in medical science and communication and information technology pose additional challenges to an idea of the body already rendered fragmented, fluid, multiple and contested in poststructuralist study.

In the flurry of recent research on new media and communication technologies, researchers such as Howard Rheingold, Sherry Turkle and Stephen Jones have written extensively on how participants use environments such as Internet relay chat (IRC) platforms, Multi User Dimensions (MUDs and MOOs), bulletin boards, newsgroups, and other electronic forums to communicate with others who are not physically co-present. Interestingly, the discussion here is often centered on the possibilities inherent in a "matrix of minds" free from the embodied context of physical existence. Scholars of cyberspace suggest that in an arena removed from the physical body, Internet interaction offers "a tool kit for reconfiguring consciousness," (Slouka 1995: 63), "a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth" (Barlow 1996) and a place for "gender to become a verb," (McRae 1997: 80). However, these claims are problematic. Embodiment does not dissolve with the acquisition of an IP address. Symptomatic of a forgetting of the body in theorizing about technology and communication, imagining the Internet as a 'cyber-slate'

wiped clean of social bias illustrates an important misreading of the complexity of our interaction as embodied beings. As Sandy Stone tells us, "even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies" (1991: 113). How then how can we understand embodiment in a culture fascinated with supposedly cerebral and ethereal cyberspaces?

To begin a discussion of the body and cyberspace it is imperative to critique the popular claim that cyberspace is an arena of disembodied interaction. Instead of bumping theories of the body up against borders of skin and bone, an arguably more useful imagining of the body is the stretchy project of being bodied. If the body can be conceptualized as encompassing the sounds and smells it makes, 'personal space' or any other extension beyond epidermal limits, embodiment must instead by thought of as a kind of flexible performance that can be extended via technology. This notion is taken up further in my review of the literature on the virtual body, but for our purposes here, it must be made clear that cyberspace in this study is conceived of as not only an embodied space, but also a space particularly in need of theorizing about constructions of embodiment. The imperative to reverse the popular theoretical dismissal of the body as irrelevant and absent in 'disembodied' cyberspace is especially vital given the tendency to associate a disembodied cyberspace with an apolitical cyberspace despite the work of those who have reflected on cyberspace and biopolitical performances, body-based systems of bias and other embodiment narratives alive and well in this supposed matrix of minds.[1]

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[1] The sociology of the body owes a very large debt to a body of literature not taken up in detail here, that of feminist scholarship. The work of feminists such as Judith Butler, Susan Bordo and Elizabeth Grosz has framed much of the important debate surrounding embodiment and embodied discourses of difference, identity politics and discrimination in social theory. However due to its limited length and breadth, this

To date, most of these scholars writing about the body in cyberspace have done so by examining text-based forums existing online and have found these texts to be rich and interesting vehicles for self-representation and communication. However, what of a setting that allows for visual representations of bodies in motion, navigating the scene of interaction and even engaging in "physical" contact with one another? The rise of graphical interfaces for Internet interaction provide new, engaging settings for broaching questions of bodies which, as of yet, have been largely unstudied despite the move towards graphical real-time interaction for chat, computer gaming, business applications and educational software.

Graphic settings are also of particular interest because they introduce a graphic visual embodiment for participants. Instead of using textual description and symbols to convey physicality, one can now be seen and heard as a "bodied" individual in real-time interaction. Flirting has morphed from the textual wink ;) to an animated face in which the corners of the mouth turn up, an eyebrow subtly lifts and one eyelid drops closed and opens again as you watch. But if a wink can be accomplished with two keystrokes, what is the appeal of accomplishing a graphical demonstration of the same sentiment? And why the wink in the first place? What does the desire to convey facial expressions and other nuances of physicality online mean? Why are graphical platforms for interaction becoming rapidly more popular and plentiful on the Internet? Is this simply because they are new and fun to play with? Or are there other desires driving cybernauts to virtual embodiment? Jeffrey Fisher suggests that the seeking of the cyberbody is evidence of a

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thesis engages with feminist theorists that speak more specifically to the relationship between embodiment and technology, notably Donna Haraway, Ann Balsamo and Sandy Stone. A more comprehensive study of embodiment would need to address the wider range of writing done on the body in feminist scholarship.

postmodern "will to virtuality" (1997: 121) that begs theorizing. Exploring this will to virtuality is precisely the interest of my project.

Chapter I of this project outlines the thinking of the most influential theorists of the body and technology with respect to what appears to be the motivating desires for virtual embodiment. This review discusses four types of desire that appear in the literature and serve as organizing ideas for my electronic ethnography. First, the literature suggests simply the desire to *restore the body* where it is seemingly absent. Secondly, the will to virtuality is presented as a product of the desire to *escape the body*, or transcend the limitations of physical 'meat'. Next, the appeal of the virtual body is explored as neither a desire to restore or escape corporeality, but to *perfect the body*. Finally, this chapter examines the will to virtuality as the desire to *rework the body* in online spaces

Chapter II of this thesis addresses the methodological components of the study. The particular potential in employing ethnographic methodology to the project at hand is discussed. As well, the unique philosophical and practical characteristics intrinsic to the Internet are considered in order to devise methodology capable of producing research that is interesting, accountable and faithful both theoretically and ethically to the spirit of the medium. This chapter then highlights some important concerns for the sociologist in conducting research that is necessarily contextual, demographically distinct, fluid, personal, public and ethically intricate due to it's computer-mediated context. Next, the specific research design of the project is detailed with attention to how these characteristics are addressed within the chosen methodology. Chapter II also outlines

the logistics of the study, including the community I chose, the types of interactions I sought out, my methods of logging data and the ethical concerns of my study design.

Where Chapters I and II are mainly concerned with the theoretical framework and study design of the ethnography, Chapter III of this work includes the phenomena observed with each progressive stage of the field work from downloading the software, establishing an online persona, watching others interact to engaging socially myself. My entry into the field is described, including my familiarization with the software, the process of choosing an avatar and my experiences learning to navigate the program. This chapter also describes my observations of others in the community and the digital demographics of its avatar population. Also considered here are the relationships I fostered with others in the community and my experiences with touch, personal space and bodied etiquette online. As well, this chapter addresses the presence and absence of bodies online and negotiation between embodiment in virtual space and in the offline physical realm. A particularly interesting set of avatar acquaintances I made then became my guides in uncovering a subculture of avatar cybersex, discussed here as an important exercising of the technology. With their virtual variations on foreplay and fetishes, "Candy", "Bitsy", "Sinthya", "Cutie", "Freshplay", "Harley" and others reveal unique work with embodiment through their cybersexual accounts.

Returning to an analysis of the initial research questions in light of these ethnographic and autoethnographic findings, Chapter IV bears witness to a deconstruction of the four types of desire theorized in Chapter I. Each of these types of desire for the reinstating, escaping, perfecting and reworking of the body respectively is challenged by the field study and revealed to be more complex and interrelated than

originally suggested. In response to these relationships of different types of desire, I conclude this work with a proposal for a preliminary theory of "avatar dreams", a constructive argument for the importance and multifaceted nature of embodied phenomenon, in spaces both online and offline.

The anecdote from my ethnographic research that opened this chapter is more than just a recounting of events and interactions in an hour of research. Like the dozens of other stories included in this work and the many that remain in field-note form, it illustrates ideas about digital demographics, absence and presence online, and embodied identity performance within a graphical interface, to name just a few themes. However, more importantly, my tale of time in a 3D chat community is about why people actively choose to extend themselves in this way, navigating virtual bodies through cyberspace while their coffee cools. It is my hope that by undertaking this work, I might begin to explore theories for better understanding the will to virtuality. After all, as Donna Haraway suggests, questioning contemporary embodiment is not only the key to understanding bodies in the current context, but also to ensuring our survival into the future.

Chapter I: Review of the Literature

In assembling a theoretical framework from which to undertake this particular project, I feel it is most useful to describe the literature and thinking that has been done about the body in cyberspace thus far in terms of four descriptions of desire for the virtual body. These four discourses often crisscross, couple or contradict with one another, but are interesting to consider as distinct themes more generally within the studies I have reviewed for this project. These four types of desire include desires to *reinstate the body*, to *escape the body*, to *perfect the body* and to *rework the body*.

Desire to Reinstate the body

The first type of desire often suggested in discussions of virtual embodiment is simply that people wish to *reinstate the body* where it is seemingly absent. In other words, communication online is shifting to include bodily referents due to the perceived incompleteness of communication without a semblance of visual cues, body language, formal and informal touch and other embodied aspects of interaction. In text-based venues online, participants will often narrate their own actions in the third person as if to make the body perceivable to others in the conversation. An example of this type of body 'add-in' from a previous study of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) I conducted begins when a participant whose handle is "Redneck*s*" types that she is enjoying a sundae. The postings that follow are reproduced here;

> Thurs Apr 14 04:50:56 1999 |**Sexy Wombat** *said* to **Redneck*s***
> Ooooo can I have some??? [wide-eyed]
>
> Thurs Apr 14 04:52:14 1999 | **Redneck*s*** *said* to **Sexy Wombat**
> Uh.....*spoons out a lil bite for you*

Thurs Apr 14 04:52:42 1999 |s.. *said*
~slides in~

Thurs Apr 14 04:53:02 1999 | **Redneck*s*** *said* to **slayer**
l.....*spoons you out a bite too*

Thurs Apr 14 04:53:12 1999 |**Sexy Wombat** *said* to **Redneck*s***
[chomps down] Yummy stuff! Hehehehe. :P
[wonders how long it'll take....hmmmmm] :)

Thurs Apr 14 04:53:31 1999 | 43765984 *said* to **Redneck*s***
sheeit *L*.. look at all these mooches.. i'll just take that..*snatches it from ya*.. tanks..*runs outta cafe* hehehehe

Thurs Apr 14 04:53:43 1999 | **Redneck*s*** *said* to **Big Pete**
lol Damn...never knew how many pals I had til now....*spoons out yet another bite for you*

Thurs Apr 1 04:54:05 1999 | **Big Pete** *said* to **Redneck*s***
I see none for me I see how ya are

Thurs Apr 1 04:54:15 1999 | 43765984 *said* to **slayer**
that i am slayer.. *G*.. catch ya on tha flip side G.. *waves.. flips and somersaults out* hehe

Thurs Apr 1 04:54:53 1999 | **Sexy Wombat** *said* to **43765984**
HEY! GET BACK HERE YA THIEF!!! THAT WAS MY--uh I mean her--STUFF!!

Thurs Apr 1 04:54:55 1999 | **slayer** *said* to **Redneck*s***
Thanks, want a coffee?

Thurs Apr 1 04:55:06 1999 | **Redneck*s *** *said* to **437659**

warps out Karate moves and snatches my sundae back....hehehe, sorry, I'll share, but ya ain't leavin' with it. [2]

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[2] An ethnographic explanation is in order here to make this interchange understandable. Although some of the comments appear to be out of order and sporadically arranged, this is due simply to the fact that individual participants are engaging in real-time speeds of chat and therefore cannot necessarily finish reading a comment and write their own response to a post before another person has already responded. This creates a somewhat confused narrative. This conversation was available at http://chat.bianca.com/cgi-bin/bchat/shack/coffee/chat?6185+ Thursday April 1st, 1999.

The coded language and acronyms used here denote certain actions or words. In this passage, for example, "lol" stands for "laughing out loud"[3]. An even further simplification of amusement is to type *L* or *G* to suggest laughing or grinning respectively. In fact, any phrase bracketed by parentheses, asterisks or other punctuation bookends is commonly meant to suggest an action in chat. The symbols ":P" and ":)" used by Sexy Wombat in this conversation also indicate emotions. These "faces", viewed from the side are called "graphic accents" (Witmer and Katzman 1998) or more commonly, "emoticons" and are very popular in chat and email discourse. As attempts to "put the body back in" to mediated communication these symbols clarify and nuance otherwise primarily textual information. The implication many have made about these "emoticons" replacing an otherwise absent body stems from the idea that face-to-face communication exists as the ideal for all models of communication (Schudson 1978; Heim 1993; Palmer 1995; Rafaeli 1998). With this ideal in mind, attempts to add action or expressions are thought to correct communication crippled by the technological intervention. As a remnant of Cartesian ideas of a separable mind, this theory suggests that the body is "lost" online, a critical amputation. This lack of physical presence creates an environment of risk, for if we cannot see a communicator, we have difficulty placing our trust in their message. As removed agents, we cannot verify that the actions of others are in keeping with their social or economic contracts (Giddens 1990:25). To put the body back in through emoticons, narrated actions or visual representations of bodies is to restore this trust and corporeal context.

This idea of replacing the body is a fairly simplistic and limited theory for understanding the desire to engage the body with technology. There is no room here for

[3] A short list of commonly used acronyms is available as an appendix to this ethnography.

"body work" or mythologies of embodiment beyond the idea that our proper physical bodies are somehow taken from us in online interaction and this "true" body should be replaced through whatever procedures possible. Moreover, this hypothesis does not consider the idea that the endeavor of cybercitizens is not replacing the body, but evading it altogether.

Desire to Escape the Body

This second theme of desire for the virtual body suggests that the will to *escape the body*, or leave behind the limitations of physical 'meat' is the organizing desire in cyberspace. This desire is not for a body to be restored, but retired. Katherine Hayles tells us that not since the Middle Ages has "the fantasy of leaving the body behind been so widely dispersed through the population, and never has it been so strongly linked with existing technologies" (1993: 173). In this will to virtuality, we yearn "for the hypercorporeality of cyberspace, where we can leave behind the physical and mental limitations of our bodies. We could go more places, know more—be more—if only we could get beyond this mortal coil" (Fisher 1997: 113). This desire can be thought of as essentially a religious will to transcendence. The move to cyberspace disembodies us, and in Christianity, only those without bodies are admitted into heaven. With the leaving behind of the body, memory is also absolved, since while in the body, a human being knows things physically (Fisher 1997: 115). In this sense, the desire for transcendence of the body is also a desire for immortality, incorruptibility, ahistoricity and fundamentally, a will to oblivion. This discourse is one that Jeffrey Fisher terms "technosophical", a synthesis of theological and technological grammars (1997: 114). He explains that social

constructions of cyberspace position it as a postmodern paradise that captures our hopes of virtual existence and as such, becomes the hope for our desires to escape bodies and their flaws. In other words, "where transcendence was once considered theologically possible, we now conceive of it as technologically feasible" (Fisher 1997: 122).

The term "avatar" itself hints towards this legacy of cyberspace religiosity and transcendence. The word appears to have been first used to denote an online body-representation in Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel Snow Crash, and has since found its way into popular usage. However, the origins of the word are much older and important to revisit. The term became part of Sanskrit grammar in the 4th century B.C., a compilation of the verb "tri", meaning to cross over, attain or save, with the prefix "ava" or down. Thus "avatri" is to descend into, appear, become incarnate and an "avatar" is that which has descended or been incarnated (Parrinder 1970: 19). In Hindu belief, the term avatar expresses the descent of gods to earth in bodily form. Similar in some ways to Western conceptions of Christ, an avatar in Hinduism is understood as a deity walking in the world of humans for the duration of a human life span. Important avatars include Krishna, Rama and Buddha, avatars of the god Vishnu, although Shiva and other Hindu gods also have had avatars. In Avatar and Incarnation, Geoffrey Parrinder suggests that there are twelve important characteristics of avatar doctrines (1970). Among these are the suggestions that avatars are real, since they are "bodily and visible" (Parrinder 1970: 120), that they take worldly birth as humans or other creatures, encompass elements of both the divine and mortal and eventually die. The avatar descends to the world with work to do in establishing dharma, or harmony although there is also room for play or "lila", especially in the case of the mischievous, amorous Krishna (Parrinder 1970: 74).

More philosophically, the avatar exists as an example of character for humans and proof that a benevolent, gracious god exists. Some avatar doings encompass historical events and personages while others are informed by myth, as in the case of animal avatars. As well, in Hindu belief the descent of gods as avatars is believed to occur again and again throughout the ages, or even such that two avatars of a god can walk the earth at the same time (Parrinder 1970).

To suggest here that there could be parallels between the belief in "avatara" or the divine descent and the avatar as graphical body-representation encountered in cyberspace is in no way intended to undermine or trivialize a central component of Hindu faith. It is nevertheless interesting to consider why Stephenson chose to use this term in Snow Crash to indicate the virtual body. It could be he intended the term only to invoke a rough idea of bodily manifestation. However, if the choice was a considered one, it is interesting to examine the analogy he was making and the appropriateness of the term given the situation of these cyber-bodies in contemporary culture.

The Hindu avatar remains a reincarnation and as such, a re-embodiment. Perhaps then, the will to virtuality as a technosophical drive is not a pure desire to escape the body, but to be reincarnated in a better one. The problem of the body in paradise according to Dante is that the separated soul is limited by its disembodiment and yearns to be re-bodied. Therefore, in many religions, the (deserving) deceased are eventually re-embodied into perfected, glorious angelic bodies. In the same way, it can be said that cybernauts also yearn for disembodiment but once situated in a realm where the physical body is not readily available, seek out ways to be re-fitted in better bodies. Though perhaps not intentional or obvious to the participants of present-day cyberspace, the same

desires and myths of transcendence and glorious reincarnation captured in Hindu and Christian beliefs appear to also be manifest in the technosophy that drives this envy. Angels have simply been traded in for avatars.

Desire to Perfect the Body

A third way of framing desire for the virtual body suggests that, instead of understanding cyberspace as either a replacement of the physical or "acorporeal spiritual space" (Simmons 1995: 154) the will to virtuality is best stated as a desire to *perfect the body*. It is important to note that my use of the word "perfect" here denotes a very specific type of perfection effort, namely the drive to "clean up" corporeality and conform one's shape to culturally constructed ideals of embodiment. The appeal for the virtual body in this theory is rooted in the degree of control cybernauts have over how they will be bodied. After all, "men (sic) are never nearer the gods or more partakers of their ecstasy then when they are creators" (A.E. 1933:38)

The work of Ann Balsamo provides one place from which to answer these questions about the desire for what she calls "techno-bodies". In Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women, she speaks of how the material body is often thought of bearing "no relation to the disembodied, floating point of view of the cyberspace traveler except as a hat stand for the...rig" (Balsamo 1996: 14). However, she insists that the physical body "does not disappear materially in the interface... or for that matter, in the phenomenological frame of the user" (Balsamo 1996: 126). Thus, she suggests it is important to study the "biopolitics of the virtual body" by moving away from discussions of what is represented in cyberspace, but instead questioning what

reality is *created* therein and how this reality "articulates relationships among technologies, bodies, and narratives" (Balsamo 1996: 15). She is curious about how interfaces manage the material body of a user in relation to a point of view either left free-floating or "connected in some fashion to a virtual puppet". She wants to know what the demographics of virtual bodies look like and how the mediated gaze one assumes through such a body is "marked by the signs or logic of gender and race" (Balsamo 1996: 126). Her hypothesis is that traditional gendered, race-marked narratives about embodiment, body images and nature are largely preserved in the marriage of the new technology of the Internet to the old technologies of social inequality (Balsamo 1996: 15). Female avatars tend to be beautiful, highly sexualized, although sometimes violent women while men are likewise exaggeratedly masculine and overwhelmingly portrayed as white (Balsamo 1996; Williams, 1998).

But perhaps it is not surprising that cyberspace is predominantly found to be populated with cyber-Barbies and cyber-Kens, marked by traditional gender and race signifiers of beauty, strength and sexuality. As Balsamo reminds us, "a reconstructed body does not guarantee a reconstructed cultural identity. Nor does "freedom from a body" imply that people will exercise the "freedom to be" any other kind of body than the one they already enjoy or desire" (1996: 128). The irony in this re-establishing of very familiar "body-based systems of domination and difference"(Balsamo 1996: 128) is noted by Nigel Clark, who suggests that the early computer hackers were perhaps retreating from the demands of a highly aestheticized embodiment into an electronic haven, only to quickly populate it with the epitome of these bodies (Clark 1995).

So if the same old narratives are being scripted online that have been seen again and again in other environments, what does the virtual world offer? Balsamo suggests the main attraction remains the illusion of control. Embodiment is a risky endeavor, given the rise of AIDS in the last 20 years as well as the ever-present vulnerability to gender, race, ethnicity, ability and attractiveness critiques (Balsamo 1996: 127). In contrast, the enviable avatar suggests control over "reality, nature and especially over the unruly, gender-and race-marked, essentially mortal body" (Balsamo 1996: 127). The virtual body presumably does not have to concern itself with the intricacies of hygiene, bodily processes of potential embarrassment or any of other 'unattractive' features tied up in physical embodiment. The virtual body does not leak, excrete, emit, stain, grumble, drip or smell. It does not get hungry, sleepy, sick, sore or thirsty.[4] After all, what would be the appeal of a hologram with halitosis?

To further sweeten the deal, control over the online body also seemingly includes the freedom to forget. In Fisher's analogy of the postmodern paradise, entering cyberspace can be compared to bathing in the mythical Lethe, the river of oblivion. He explains that the technology, "encourages us to forget about social problems, (and) constructs cyberspace as a postmodern version of a medieval paradise, a space of transcendence in which evil and responsibility are left behind in a blissful conjunction with the really real. (Fisher 1997, 125). In the category of "really real" reside the burdens of cultural and historical identities, wishfully thought to be absent in cyberspace.

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[4] It is perhaps pertinent to note that in some cases, virtual bodies have been coded to do these things. For example, in a popular online game called "the Sims", graphical characters have to attend to physical needs such as eating, emptying their bladders and sleeping or they get sick and can potentially "die" (For more information see http://www.thesims.com. Available February 2001.) However, my point here is that whereas these features are compulsory for the physical body to survive, they are not prerequisite considerations for the virtual body. Since life is arguably more convenient without these characteristics, they are usually not created in cyberspaces.

Instead, as Balsamo tells us, these old biopolitical hierarchies are being reproduced and the "enticing retreat" that cyberspace promises remains a mirage. Even rape is reproduced online, as one well-known incident of virtual violence against an online body illustrates.

This incident of assault involved a character, Mr. Bungle, who was one of many registered members in an online community called "LambdaMOO". By employing a program called a "voodoo doll" that allows temporary control of the words of other characters, Mr. Bungle narrated acts of sexual assault against two fellow cyber-personae, the androgynous "legba" and female-presenting "Starsinger". With their "actions" under his control, Bungle, "forced" these characters to sexually service him and other characters in the room. As well, he had legba eat his/her own pubic hair and caused Starsinger to violate herself with a steak knife. These actions were eventually halted by another character who utilized yet another program to "freeze" Mr. Bungle's online actions (Dibbel 1993).

The incident prompted an online forum in which the victims, perpetrator and many other users debated the issue of rape in cyberspace. The questions raised in this forum are at the very heart of the debate around embodiment and cyberspace. "Where does the body end and the mind begin?" "Is not the mind a part of the body?" "In (a cybercommunity) the body is the mind." "All reality might consist of ideas, who knows?" (Dibbel 1993: 7). The case is an interesting one, for in the digital realm, "very knotty metaphysical conundrums come undone" (Dibbel 1993:7). Julian Dibbel writes,

> The incident ...asks us to behold the new bodies awaiting us in virtual space undazzled by their phantom powers, and to get to the crucial work of sorting out the socially meaningful differences between those bodies and our physical ones. And most forthrightly, it asks us to wrap our late-modern ontologies,

> epistemologies, sexual ethics, and common sense around the curious notion of rape by voodoo doll – and to try not to warp them beyond recognition in the process (Dibbel 1993:3).

Although Dibbel's notion of the virtual body as "new" and distinct from the physical body are problematic to my project, his example of rape in virtual space makes clear the nature of embodiment online as complex and "real", implicating and involving notions of body. Dibbel relates that on the day after the incident, legba wrote a bitter note to the community denouncing the act and calling for justice. While typing the words, "posttraumatic tears were streaming down her face—a real-life fact that should suffice to prove that the words' emotional content was no mere playacting" (Dibbel 1993: 9). In other words, perfecting and controlling the virtual body is perhaps a difficult endeavor.

Desire to Rework the body

The final theory of desire I maintain as important to understanding the literature surrounding embodiment and virtuality is the increasingly pervasive trend to portray the will to virtuality as the desire to *rework the body*. This theory suggests that the flexibility of virtual spaces is attractive to participants as a way to reimagine their bodily capabilities and perform embodiment as fluid, myriad and reflexive. Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto" is perhaps the most influential and controversial treatment of embodiment and technology within this vein in recent history. Haraway suggests in this article that in the late twentieth century, we have all become cyborgs in theoretical and practical ways. In other words, boundaries between humans and machines have become blurred, but also that those between humans and animals and more generally, between the

physical and non-physical, are obscured. She then proposes that this is not a reason for lament, but celebration. Haraway describes her Cyborg Manifesto as an "argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (Haraway 1991: 150). She says, this confusion, although it may seem scary, is about,

> lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many headed monsters (Haraway 1991:154).

Her central image, the cyborg, is explained in many rich and descriptive ways, but perhaps most tellingly as an oppositional, utopian entity completely without innocence, "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" which raises for analysis relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those for polarity and hierarchical domination (Haraway 1991: 151). The body in this framework becomes a fragmented, recombinant "monster" made up of animal, machine and mortal components, but at the same time, offers a responsible and situated way of being.

But what do these ideas have to do with cyberspace? Firstly, Haraway has become a resource for many writing about the Internet in ways both faithful to and far from her own ideas. Shannon McRae (1997) suggests that the cyborg is no longer a "fiction mapping our social and bodily reality", as Haraway described it, but now "the lived experience of millions of people who spend most of their time working and playing in digital space" (1997: 74) McRae also draws from Haraway's idea that the cyborg is "a creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway 1991: 150) to suggest that because online, "the choice of gender is an option rather than a strictly reified social construct, the

potential exists for gender as a primary marker of identity to be subverted" (McRae 1997: 79).

Amy Bruckman likewise suggests that cyberspace allows for gender flexibility and details instances of gender "swapping" or posing as the opposite gender in a cyber-community to illustrate her point. She states that, because this "swap" is possible, the cyber-community,

> throws issues of the impact of gender on human relations into high relief...Without makeup, special clothing, or risk of social stigma, gender becomes malleable...When gender becomes a property that can be reset with a line of code, one bit in a data structure, it becomes an "object to think with"...people can explore the impact of gender on their lives and their constructions of themselves...Gender swapping is an extreme example of a fundamental fact: the network is in the process of changing not only how we work, but how we think of ourselves—and ultimately, who we are (Bruckman 1995: 323).

However, this appears to be an important misreading of Haraway's ideas. The Cyborg Manifesto suggests that the cyborg could be a route through which we could learn not to be afraid of "permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 1991: 154). Thus, Haraway's notion of the cyborg represents a hope for affinity, not identity with others (1991: 155). Even so, it seems perhaps naive to assume either affinity or identity is routinely taking place in online "gender-swapping". Changing an online name from "Bruno" to "Bambi" does not necessarily invite the reflection on the politics of complex identity structures Haraway's cyborg myth demands. As m.c. schraefel puts it, "Online gender-appropriation assumes that playing at stereotypes of gender is actually exploring gender, rather than redrawing again and again the stereotypes so helpful to male domination" (1999: 157)

This is not to say that the Internet could not be used to think about one's representation and identity, but is it possible to value the characteristics of the technology that lend themselves to exploration and imagination without resorting to the denial of relations surrounding gender, race, sexuality and other markers of identities? For as Victor Seidler suggests, "In thinking that we have entered a realm that can transcend traditional identities, we can end up producing visions of homogeneity" (Seidler 1998: 20). As for Haraway, the suggestion that comes through most clearly in her writing is that her cyborg myth is not a call for the formation of a universal theory, but a celebration of multiplicity and monsters. In her eloquent words, "This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (1991: 181) She asks why our bodies must "end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" when to distinguish between machines and organisms is to carry out an obsolete, unnecessary practice since "for us, in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves" (Haraway 1991:178). Thus, the cyborg articulates the desire to rework the body in imaginative engagements with embodiment, where body play and its political possibilities become the powerful force behind the will to virtuality.

These four desires for the virtual body encompass much of the literature to date about embodiment and virtuality and are provided here in order to form a foundation of work for the discussion of ethnographic experiences to follow. As well, although the aim of this research is largely exploratory, and thus does not lend itself well to hypothesizing, these are the specific ideas and expressions of embodiment this ethnography focuses on exploring. Which, if any, of these theoretically posited positions on the appeal of the

virtual body will the ethnography illuminate? Do participants in virtual environments appear to wish their bodies reinstated, dissolved, idealized or reimagined? As useful as these four themes are to the organization of preliminary thinking about the body and technology, I anticipate that one, or even all of these four ideas cannot encompass the intricacies of the virtual body. Instead, it is my hope and my expectation that they will serve as sociological springboards for discussing desire and virtuality as they reflect upon larger understandings and experiences of embodiment.

Chapter II: Methodology - Research Theory and Study Design

Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun (Geertz 1973).

The Internet and Social Research

Although he was referring somewhat generally to the socially constructed nature of cultures, Geertz's idea of "webs of significance" is also an apt conceptualization when taken more literally to consider the world-wide web. The Internet is considered a web of such "significance," in fact, it has been called "the biggest thing since the invention of the wheel" (Jones 1999: xii) and "a potential sociological earthquake" (Goyder 1997: 186). Arguably, we can learn much from electronic communication that can be applied in other milieus and just as fruitfully bring more classical notions to bear upon understanding this new venue.

This said, it is important to consider *how* to go about studying social phenomena on-line. Simply setting in with methods of sociological study established in other settings is not an assurance of methodological success. The unique philosophical and practical characteristics intrinsic to the Internet bear consideration in order to devise methodology capable of producing research that is interesting, accountable and faithful both theoretically and ethically to the spirit of the medium.

After framing the debate surrounding the relevance of diverse social science methods to on-line study, this chapter will examine the particular potential in employing ethnographic methodology to the computer-mediated context. The methodological particularities inherent in such a research project will next be considered, with attention to six important characteristics of the electronic environment. Specifically, exploration will be made of the ethnographic methods most appropriate to a setting

that is a) *contextual*, b) *demographically distinct*, c) *fluid*, d) *personal*, e) *public* and f) *ethically intricate*. This investigation is taken up in the hopes of providing a theoretical backdrop for ethnographic study designed in an elucidating and conscientious manner.

Considering Methodology

My consideration of Internet research methodology is made with the acknowledgment that many diverse methods have been put to use in this area thus far. Published works include but are not limited to ethnographic accounts, cost-benefit analyses, network analyses, laboratory experiments, hermeneutic interpretations, electronic surveys, legal and normative analyses, and feminist methodology applications (Paccagnella 1997). However, much debate is centered on the viability and comprehensibility of these methods in relation to one another. As is the case in many other fields, the contention here is largely based on the value of quantitative methods versus qualitative methods.

Those scholars interested in quantitative data suggest that there is an "inviting empiricism" inherent in Internet study. While navigating cyberspace on a computer, a great number of "tracks" are left behind which can be counted and categorized, including "hits' on sites, files downloaded, patterns of viewing, the information one fills out on forms, on-line consumer behaviour and so forth. Any quantitative researcher "who has an opportunity to watch logs of WWW servers, and who is even a little bit of a social scientist, cannot help but marvel at the research opportunities these logs open" (Newhagen and Rafaeli 1996). On the other hand, scholars who utilize qualitative and naturalistic methods find that the Internet is a veritable "garden in the machine", with a plentiful crop of "virtual communities" and social episodes to observe. This camp

suggests that in-depth immersion into a specific social setting is the more revealing method of understanding interaction in cyberspace.

As has been similarly asked in other areas, the question remains: Why the methodological dichotomy? Certainly qualitative and quantitative methods have been associated with mutually exclusive views on methodological priority and research philosophy and continue to be thus divided in social science. However, the usefulness of the separation is questionable given that each methodological approach has particular strengths and weaknesses to bear upon a given research project.

One perspective proposes that this distinction between the "types" of methods social scientists practise in cyberspace study and other areas is counterproductive. Instead, the focus of methodological debate can be shifted to a method's applicability to the specific parameters of a research question. Which method or combination of methods is capable of producing the most comprehensive picture of the phenomenon? Methods in combination, or triangulation, can be employed to balance the weaknesses of specific methods with the strengths of others. This type of study is becoming more prevalent in Internet analysis, bringing to the field what Jonathon Sterne terms "a hybrid approach- most often combining in various degrees, ethnography, autobiography, and textual analysis" (1999: 269). This compounding of techniques is perhaps most important given the largely unknown and unique social landscape the Internet has brought into sociological view. When one is not sure what will be found, perhaps as Luciano Paccagnella suggests, "wisdom lies in being tolerant and shamelessly eclectic in our use of methods" (1997)

The Electronic Ethnography

One of the most interesting and perhaps appropriate methodological approaches that can be encompassed into an Internet study in this manner is ethnography. As a descriptive and exploratory practice of gathering data, naturalistic research is invaluable in shedding light into what remains largely a black box of social activity. In "Welcome to Cyberia", a treatise on the anthropology of cyberculture, Arturo Escobar suggests that forays into the discipline must start as a rather traditional ethnographic project:

> To describe, in the manner of an initial cultural diagnosis, what is happening in terms of the emerging practices and transformations...cyberculture is indeed creating a host of veritable "technologies of the self" that go beyond the view of self as machine, and the cultural productivity of these notions can only be assessed ethnographically (1994: 218)

This sense that cyberspace is a technology "of the self" also lends validity to the applicability of ethnography, which employs the "self" of the researcher as the medium or instrument of research (Lofland and Lofland 1995:3). As a participant and witness in the on-line lives of others, the ethnographer in cyberspace spends time "with" other participants in a specific setting, getting to know the particular norms and understandings of the group. This allows for the building of trust and perception in interpreting the social interaction occurring in these forums. Although very different from other forms of ethnography that involve many more physical and auditory cues, the online ethnography reflects other observable and relatable aspects of interaction unique to the medium. Lori Kendall suggests that this "shared history of time spent together as well as repetition of on-line performances and stories about that shared history compensate for the relative paucity of interactional cues available on-line" (1999: 70).

Ethnographic methods are also revealing in terms of the "performances" of identity and politics of identity that occur in electronic contexts (Kendall 1999: 71). Well-known experiments involving laboratory studies of computer-mediated communication have suggested that cyberspace has a "leveling" effect upon interaction, effectively erasing the meaning of gender, race, socioeconomic status and other political characteristics in the on-line milieu (Paccagnella 1997). This notion has become popular with cyber-enthusiasts and academic researchers who laud the democratic potential of the technology. However, many naturalistic accounts have strongly repudiated this claim, suggesting that the experience of contextualized interaction is in fact faithful to traditional social boundaries and hierarchies. As will be later suggested, the mediated nature of the setting may even exacerbate stereotyping and hierarchical behaviour. With reliance on experimental and quantitative methods alone, this counter-finding would likely not have emerged.

The electronic ethnography also offers a particularly practical way of collecting and analyzing rich descriptive accounts of a social group or setting. Textual and graphical artefacts serve as transcripts even as the social banter is occurring, a feature of on-line study ethnographers in other fields would no doubt envy. As well, the social setting is accessible at any hour from the relative comfort and convenience of a computer terminal. In writing about his own on-line participant observation experiences, John Suler describes how "you can be in the middle of exploring a very unusual psychological phenomenon on a server in Australia, and then take a break for five minutes to fetch a glass of milk from the fridge or answer a phone call from your mother" (Suler 1999). Getting "the seat of your pants dirty" in ethnographic research as Robert Park suggested

now involves simply keeping that same seat stationed on a (comparatively clean) computer chair.

Ethnography is thus, a most appropriate method for illuminating the largely yet unknown nature of on-line interaction. In this way, field study can be done on an exploratory basis "to refine our understanding of both influences and outcomes"(Baym 1997: 161). Through its theory building exercise, naturalistic research may become the methodological foundation for much of our strong understandings of on-line social phenomenon just beginning to emerge.

Methodological Particularities

Although ethnographic research is by nature exploratory, the suggestion cannot be made that its application to Internet research can occur without taking into account the particularities of the medium. Several characteristics of the on-line social setting challenge a methodology adapted to different interaction environments. The main considerations to keep in mind while designing, conducting and analyzing the research include the importance of studying the on-line setting in context, recognizing the demographic distinctiveness of the Internet population, accepting the fluidity of cyberspace, perceiving the largely personal nature of the interaction despite the public nature of the medium and taking care to address the ethical intricacies of research on-line. Each of these characteristics will consequently be taken under examination to provide a better picture of the research task at hand.

a) Contextuality

Of course, one would assume that the most obvious identifying characteristic of the on-line setting is its "on-line" status. The mediation of the computer network technology allows for the interaction to occur and dictates its terms in very specific ways. It is always present and yet, often "invisible" to participants and researchers alike. It is important to continually "remind" the research that the presence of the technology limits the interaction in ways that an unmediated setting would not experience. However, one must be careful not to entirely divorce the experiences of "off-line" and "on-line" from one another.

One of the most difficult tasks for the researcher interested in studying the Internet is establishing the social practices that take place in cyberspace as "real". Due in part to the popular use of the word "virtual" to describe much of the phenomena that occur in cyberspace, the "on-line world" is often conceptualized as somehow artificial and apart from other modes of experience. However, the interactions that take place through this medium exist as truly as any other form of communication between individuals and thus warrant serious sociological study. As researchers, we must therefore think carefully about the question, "Should we consider the Internet an environment in itself or should we consider it a complementary part or an extension of our own environment?" (Sudweeks and Simoff 1999: 31).

By virtue of this perceived difference between the mediated environment and unmediated events, a dichotomy of "off-line" and "on-line" mutually exclusive experiences has developed in the public consciousness. "Off-line" knowledge, norms and experiences are often thought irrelevant to the independent "world" of cyberspace.

However, as Kendell tells us, "Nobody lives only in cyberspace" (1999:70). Internet interaction cannot be separated from the social and political contexts within which lives are lived out. Like unmediated experiences, virtual events are informed by "human culture, knowledge and values as well" (Kellogg, Carroll et al. 1991: 430). Jones tells us that studying the Internet as an isolated, "world" separate from other experiences seriously ignores the context of the mediated interaction. He says, "not only is it important to be aware of and attuned to the diversity of on-line experience, it is important to recognize that on-line experience is at all times tethered in some fashion to off-line experience" (Jones 1999:xii). Thus, the idea that cyber-citizens "split" their time between worlds is misleading, since their experiences occur in one and the same reality. The computer gaming enthusiast may be traversing through fantasy adventures, slaying monsters in a wooded forest, but she is also simultaneously slouched in front of a flashing screen, fingers moving across the plastic of the keyboard. These two experiences do not occur separately, an important realization for the researcher to keep in mind. Kendall agrees that "scholars need to at least acknowledge the embodiment of on-line participants and keep in mind the possible effects of these off-line contexts on participant understandings of their on-line experiences" (Kendall 1999: 62). In other words, when describing a lively conversation between participants, the ethnographer must not forget that the experiences of those participants were not limited to the observed interaction, but also encompassed embodied personalities living the experience in different ways, usually largely unavailable to the researcher.

This "forgetting" frequently leads to the framing of cyberspace as a new "frontier", an unmarked space for communities to be built and new norms established.

James Costigan proclaims that "the Internet is in many ways the Wild West, the new frontier of our times, but its limits will not be reached" (1999: xxiii). Jan Fernback suggests "just as the exploration of the American western frontier provided an opportunity for humanity to conquer new space, so does the exploration of cyberspace. We seek to pioneer new spaces, to create in them, to live in them" (1999: 214).

This frontier or "tabula rasa" notion of cyberspace portrays on-line spaces "almost wistfully as a new and discrete utopian world" (Kendall 1999:60). However, there are critical problems with this view. Like the settlers who believed the American frontier would be a society built from "scratch", cyber-enthusiasts speak of the electronic frontier as a place in which preconceived notions no longer apply, as per the laboratory experiments previously discussed. However, many who have studied cyber-culture, notably feminist researchers, suggest that the biases and hierarchies that inform other aspects of life are not miraculously abandoned with the logging on to cyberspace. Specifically in terms of gender, "the disadvantages suffered by women in society carry over... on the Internet: women are under-represented in these electronic places and are subjected to various forms of harassment and sexual abuse" (Poster 1997: 212). Race and ethnicity are not up for discussion either, creating a "whitening" of cyberspace which falls short in comparison to most real, diverse communities (Lockard 1997: 227)

In the largely anonymous space of the Internet, identity politics are not lost, as the utopian frontier mythos suggests. Instead, identity appears to be assumed until proven otherwise. Moreover, it is largely assumed in North American white, male, middle class form. Clearly, these electronic settings are not contextless, but social spaces laden with expectations of identity and challenges to notions of diversity. Cyber-citizens judge one

another, ascribe learned hierarchical ideologies to what they know of fellow citizens and recreate the power relationships that blossom in other contexts. Ethnographies without a recognition of this "carry-over" are in danger of forgetting "that 'new' is not an empirical description of a technology, but a value judgment about the technology that comes with a great deal of intellectual baggage" (Sterne 1999: 259).

An awareness of the contextuality of the computer-mediated social setting translates into a commitment on the part of the ethnographer to consider the interactions observed through the medium of the electronic network as valid, while at the same time avoiding the on-line vs. off-line binary conceptualization of lived experience. Whole, embodied participants are taken into account, as are non-users whenever possible. As well, a sense of context suggests that experiences mediated by computer technology do not take place in a social vacuum, but instead are necessarily imbibed with the values and ideas of other realms.

b) Demographic Distinctiveness

In an ethnographic study, the research sample is not generally expected to be representative of the larger population. As a primarily "case study" approach, the subjects involved in ethnographic study are usually different in certain aspects from one another, but also homogeneous in some way, having associated with one another on some common or relational ground. Groups in cyberspace are no different. In fact, the larger reach of the Internet's search capabilities can facilitate the interaction of extremely specific homogeneous groups, many of which would make very interesting ethnographic subjects.

However, it is important to note that the population of cyberspace in general is also demographically distinct in certain ways. This is meaningful in the way that specific presences and absences in research subject samples will almost always be present and should be considered in analysis. For example, a presence on the Internet necessitates access to a networked computer and a certain degree of computer literacy. This suggests that lower socioeconomic groups and the vast majority of developing country citizens will not be present online. Neither will less-educated or illiterate populations be represented. A predominance of English on the Internet implies that English-speaking individuals are more likely to successfully navigate cyberspace than other groups (Hamman 1997). In fact, the Internet user is predominantly young, male, white, middle to upper-class and working a white-collar job (Hess 1994: 224). Although there is evidence that this online population is shifting and becoming more inclusive, research must still take into account the current specificity of the on-line population sample, for as David Hess points out, "As all of us know only too well, for many people in the world most of Cyberia is a distant Siberia located well above the global glass ceiling" (Hess 1994: 224).

c) Fluidity

Perhaps the most interesting and also most infuriating characteristic of computer-mediated communication is its fluidity. Heralded as a post-modern phenomenon, the nature of the Internet is such that it exists as a radically decentralized medium, constantly in flux, and resistant to notions of authority and validity. These characteristics make it an exciting and unique setting in which to study social interaction. However, these aspects also render the medium challenging to grasp methodologically.

In a previous ethnographic investigation of a cyber-community, I experienced this challenge first-hand. As part of my study, I attempted to record "regulars" and their interaction in certain areas of the community in order to propose some sort of social order among members and non-members. However, given the technology underlying communication in the community, I found this impossible, since non-members could and often did alter their handle with each posting. As well, members and non-members alike could assume the handles of other non-members or give false or misleading information in their postings, further complicating my attempts. This frustration with the attempt to recognize individuals eventually resulted in the production of a chapter on the multiplicity and malleability of identity on-line (Cruikshank, 1999).

Rarely in other social settings do individuals have the same extent of control over the presentation of their "self" as they do on-line. Because representation and personality are constructed in self-selected textual or graphical form, the performance of an identity on-line may or may not bear little relationship to the person's other presentations of self in more physically available contexts. Moreover, an individual has the ability to create more than one character in interactions with others. However fascinating this facet of Internet capability is, it presents some sticky problems for the social scientist. If as one theory suggests, "face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition of participating in the mind of another human being" (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 16) then access to the "other" is arguably particularly unavailable in the computer-mediated context. However, neither are these visual and auditory clues available to anyone else participating in the cyber-community. This unavailability of physical cues also presents other particularities, such as a "narrow bandwidth" of understanding (Stone 1991;

Hamman 1997). This creates an environment of "interpretive flexibility" (Paccagnella 1997) that is interesting to observe, but can be problematic to grasping the intent and meaning of a message. I have suggested elsewhere that perhaps this inaccessibility of cues will lead to the honing of other "senses", much like the heightened experiences of taste, touch, hearing and smell documented by those who have lost the ability to see. Perhaps a speaker's choice of vocabulary or grammar or the timeliness of their reply will become more crucial to analyzing intent in the absence of body language (Cruikshank, 2001).

But is authenticity what the Internet is about? Or is it even what ethnography is about? The nature of the medium with its decentralized web of nodes allowing escape from censorship and ease of speech has "for the first time, provided a space where everyone can have a voice, and in questioning the authenticity of the voice, by couching the question in the language of empirical reliability", Mitra and Cohen suggest that the very purpose of the Internet is undermined (1999: 196), along with the majority of ethnography research.

A related idea is the notion that materials on the Internet are predominantly ephemeral in nature. The common announcement of a "404 error- page not found" is a symbol of the transient and impermanent nature not only of documents, but also interaction online. In some cases, discussion can be downloaded, archived or otherwise preserved, but computer-mediated communication is largely temporary. This creates not only practical difficulties in researching phenomena online but also an overarching sense of ahistoricity to the cyberspatial environment.

d) Personal Nature of Communication

As a result of its self-selective, transient, nonlinear nature, the Internet has become a medium of the vernacular and experiential. The communications that criss-cross the wires of the world network are made up in large part not of corporate missives and government documents, but personal accounts and individual testimonies. Support groups thrive and personal chat races across the real-time bandwidth. It is this interactivity that is perhaps "the real promise of the Net as a communication technology" (Newhagen and Rafaeli 1996). It is also this personal interchange that appeals so strongly to the sociological community. The technology of the Net has created an opportunity for the telling of emotional and personal anecdotes, self-stories that might not otherwise get heard. What are the implications for research here? A growing sentiment in the literature is the notion that personal accounts call for "personalized research" (Jones 1999:18). This encompasses a respect for and attention to the individual in the research, as opposed to emphasis on group behaviour. As well, a researcher of personal experiences is called upon to be sensitive to and aware of their own experiences on-line. In this way, the role of the researcher is understood as striving "to understand a place, to understand its people and practices, and to make a place for one's own understandings" (Jones 1999: 19). Or as Costigan suggests, "Our expressions of history and the Internet can be only personal and are valuable only when personalized" (Costigan 1999: xx)

Unique to this idea of a "personal" methodology is the notion of reflexivity in research. The observation of personal accounts perhaps calls for a participation in them as well. Not only an ethical idea, reflexivity is arguably appropriate methodologically as well, since participating in a meaningful way translates into the offering of one's own

experiences alongside those of other participants. In this manner, autobiographical aspects permeate the research. John Suler, in studying The Palace, a graphically-based cyber-community, suggests that as an active member in the discussion groups his research was strengthened, not compromised by subjective reflection. He notes that "this is a benefit for EACH of us, giving us all the opportunity to explore the subjective/objective cocktail of how we come to understand our lives, in-person and on-line" (Suler 1999).

Others would suggest that the personal nature of participant observation online is methodologically sticky, as the danger of "going native" in the traditional anthropological sense of losing any sense of one's objectivity as a researcher is constantly at hand. On-line groups are often close-knit as a result of their shared disclosure and can present difficulties in role management for the participant observer attempting both to maintain a certain amount of research distance and enjoy a sense of membership that may be evolving towards the group under study.

These personal accounts or "cyber-narratives" are founded in the everyday experiences of the people who write them, yet they are disseminated in the anonymous, mediated medium of cyberspace (Denzin 1999: 108). This suggests that although the content of computer-mediated communication is often personal, the medium remains a largely public one.

e) Public Nature of the Medium

Although no other form of mass media has historically offered the interactivity and self-reportage that the Internet offers, the medium remains mass. Although encouraging of personal communication, the Internet also presents the vast majority of

this interaction to millions of potential consumers around the world. An interesting distinction is here drawn between "personal" and "private." The content of computer-mediated communication is for the most part personal, but also made public.

In keeping with this notion of the public nature of personal publications on-line, an important consideration for sociological research of this interaction is the largely edited nature of comments. Unlike spontaneous speech, much of cyber-communication can be thought out, checked for errors, edited, and sent at a later time. Moreover, speakers and respondents can both refer back to original texts as points of reference. According to Norman Denzen, this makes on-line communication markedly different from other conversation in which persons contribute in turns, and may debate what was spoken or what was meant by what was spoken. He suggests therefore, "screen talk is deliberative, stilted, formal and clearly marked in sentences, with commas, exclamation and question marks and so on" (Denzin 1999: 114). Its "publicized" nature is distinct.

Finally, the issue of reporting arises as a feature of studying a public and personal climate of communication. With the completion of a research project, a method of expanding reflexivity, accountability and ethical validity would be to present findings on the Internet itself, either in an on-line journal, a personal web page, or linked to the location of the studied phenomenon. Jones discusses this idea with the note that to be faithful to the Internet philosophy that "information wants to be free" one has to directly contend with the philosophy that "people like to get paid" (Jones 1999: 20). However, the publication of Internet research online is also in his view, a method of increasing triangulation "by the publication, hyperlinking, and communication of research findings on-line" (Jones 1999:xiii). Slack also points out that as well as being published on the

web, Internet research should attempt to be accountable to Internet hypertextuality by incorporating multimedia aspects and links, as opposed to the simple transference of a paper publication to the Net. Finally, Suler suggests that the true accountability to the philosophy of the computer-mediated milieu is publication as much for the community as for scholarship. As he describes, "ideally, I'd like my work to fulfill both sides of the participant-researcher equation - to serve as a contribution to on-line communities as well as to cyberspace researchers" (Suler 1999).

f) Ethical Intricacies

Finally, we turn our methodological attention to the question of ethics in the study of on-line interaction. Many concerns for the ethical treatment of research subjects are pertinent in this unique research setting, including issues of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and narrative appropriation (Sharf 1999: 245).

In terms of privacy, the nature of much cyber-narrative as personal is again at issue. Although as we have recently discussed, the nature of information on the Internet is mostly public, for many posting to intimate-sized newsgroups and welcoming support groups, the feeling is likely that of a somewhat private exchange. It is possible that the contributors do not fully understand the public nature of information on the medium or more generally, the pervasiveness of the Internet. Considering the further likelihood that many of the contributors whose accounts would be most interesting to study are vulnerable individuals seeking support or advice, it is perhaps not ethical to take advantage of their personal accounts for research purposes. It is certainly legal, but a researcher would be prudent to consider the ethical ramifications of such a study carefully.

As for confidentiality, researchers would be wise to ensure that as in most other field studies, no identifying markers are associated with subjects in the data or analysis stage of the research. As well, if participants are operating under a pseudonym or a name believed to be an alias, researchers should make every attempt to preserve the position of this name as well. This consideration for the subjects of study proves the respect of the ethnographer for the social reality of cyberspace as well as for the subjects' "real" identities (Paccagnella 1997).

The main ethical query contesting this type of study is informed consent to participate in social research. Observing individuals interacting with one another and not informing or gaining the consent of these individuals could mark a study of concern scrupulously. However, in a large and active cyber-community, this may prove difficult or even impossible to facilitate. In this case, as Lofland and Lofland point out,

> If a setting is public and open, that is, defined in law and tradition as a place where "anyone" has a right to be, it is a very simple matter to enter it for purposes of doing research...While it can be argued that such research is clearly unethical (it does, after all, involve deceit by omission if not commission) serious ethical debate seldom lingers on this research situation. Presumably the impossibility, if not the ludicrousness, of removing the deception is one reason (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 33).

A related concern to informed consent in online research is the practice of "lurking". This slang term describes the observing of a community without making one's presence known to those observed. The practice is widely employed by individuals browsing through conversations or other content online, looking for interesting material. However, if a researcher simply adopts the role of a "lurker," larger ethical issues are raised, since no indication of an individual observing interaction is evident to participants at all. "Lurking" to find a topic of interest is a fairly benign activity, but even though

"lurkers" are known to exist on almost all forums, this practice as research method is arguably not an ethically sound one.

Finally, in terms of ethics, the appropriation and interpretation of narratives can be problematic in cases where individuals can be potentially quoted out of context or issues of ownership of accounts may arise. A counter to this type of ethical issue is to allow subjects to input into the correction of misinterpretations and otherwise give feedback on the research. This type of reflexivity is ethically sound in that it ensures the participation in, consent to and feeling of ownership over narratives for research subjects but again, methodologically problematic in the realization of the motivation of subjects to self-present in a positive light, or to self-censor entirely.

In considering cyberspace as a "space" for social research, it is important to clarify that although the study of social behaviour mediated through the Internet is not the study of a "new" social setting or a separate "virtual world," particularities of the medium suggest specific challenges and promises for methods of sociological research. The aim of this inquiry was to highlight and confront some of these particularities with particular attention to the applicability of ethnographic research for on-line study. However, in the words of Jonathon Sterne, "that said, the most important methodological principle for a cultural study of the Internet is simply to have one. To truly learn anything about the Internet, one has to ask carefully considered questions that can be answered only through some kind of organized research" (Sterne 1999: 265). In asking specific questions about the desire to be virtually embodied and considering methodological approaches to answering these with care, the ethnographic research for this study was designed as conscientiously as possible.

Research Design: The Petal Study

The main considerations gleaned from the theoretical framework for this methodology suggest that while designing, conducting and analyzing an online ethnography, the scholar must consider the setting in context of the existence of the off-line realm, recognize the demographic distinctiveness of the Internet population, accept the fluidity of the cyberspatial realm, perceive the largely personal nature of the interaction despite the public nature of the medium and take care to address the ethical intricacies of research on-line. Thus, both the design of the research questions and the study itself have been planned mindful of these field particularities.

Questions to Explore

Firstly, I was interested in how the program is designed. What type of organization created and maintains the community? What are their stated aims in doing so, if any? What claims to embodiment are made about the interface, if any such claims are made at all? How is the environment described and promoted? When one joins a specific graphical community, what types of "bodies" are available? How much license does one have in selecting or adapting representations of bodily form? Are human bodies the only available images? How are these bodies dressed, if dressed at all? If a range of representations is available, how well does this spectrum represent the diversity of human physical form? Are there different genders, races, sizes, and ages available? Once chosen, can a body be changed? How does the body move about the virtual space? What type of architecture do these bodies navigate? What types of movements and actions are the representative graphics capable of? Can one pick things up, change physical

surroundings and touch other "bodies"? How does this occur? What point of view is portrayed on the computer screen? Can new bodies and movements be authored? Are there limitations and regulations to this authorship built into the technology, or is it made readily possible?

Secondly, my interest in the virtual body begged to know how, given the above questions about the structure of the setting, participants in this environment use, abuse and understand their online interaction. How do people interact with one another as "bodied"? Do they follow norms of physical co-presence, maintaining such real-world etiquette as avoiding invasion of personal space, facing each other when interacting, etc.? Are there norms regarding movement and "body language"? How do participants describe the experience of being bodily represented by an image? Is graphical embodiment satisfying or frustrating? How is appreciation or disappointment with the limitations or abilities of the online "body" expressed? Do bodies engage in violence or sex? Do they eat? Sleep? Die? How faithful is the representation to the reality of physical embodiment? How faithful do participants want it to be? Are "actual" physical bodies discussed at all? How do participants reconcile the representation and the reality, if they understand disparities here at all?

It was my hope and my expectation in beginning this research that interesting findings would emerge from these questions. But how to begin to ask them? The design of this study was carefully considered in order to explore these ideas as well as leave room for the appearance of other interesting phenomena in relation to the broader research topic.

Ethnographic Design

Firstly, a cyber-community was chosen after a great deal of searching for a graphical environment conducive to research. The particular community chosen was selected for a number of reasons. It fit the research criteria as a predominantly graphically-focused setting of interaction and was available free online to any participant who wished to download the software. It also appeared upon first glance to be a fairly small, but internationally popular site, a feature I thought might prove interesting in terms of whether cultural differences were apparent. As well, the web pages explaining and promoting the community focused a great deal on the graphical bodies, or "actors" available to participants and the advantages of graphical interaction over more widespread textual forums. These characteristics made this particular community a good candidate for case study. Throughout this examination, I will call this particular cyber space the "Petal" community.

My entry into the field consisted of the downloading of the necessary software from the host web site, the installation of the Petal program on my home computer, and the creation of my own actor for interaction. The research was then conducted over a few months time, with "visits" to Petal almost daily between April 5th, 2000 and May 20th, 2000. These visits varied in length from 30 minutes to over four hours long, depending on the interaction and activities I was taking part in. The activities and discussions I participated in during these forays were not predetermined by my research design, but rather occurred as I learned how to operate the program, met other actors and tried to explore as much as I could during each session. However, I did plan before my entry to this community to spend my research time both learning the nuances of the program for

my own experiences, as well as interacting with others to observe theirs. While in the field, I would navigate the community, seek out others to chat with and log my observations, encounters and conversations either in a handwritten log or in a simultaneously running word processing program on my computer

The subjects of this study included myself, and various randomly encountered members of this community whom I either approached, or who approached me. Some individuals would interact with me for a substantial period of time, whereas others would come and go quickly. Although the number of subjects I came upon is necessarily an estimate, I would suggest that I encountered at least 40 different actors during my fieldwork. Clearly, this group is small and largely self-selected and therefore not presented as a representative sample even of the current cyber-citizenry. They are individuals who have access to a networked computer and are computer-literate, interested enough in this form of interaction to download and/or employ the necessary software and by chance or design happened to be presenting a representation available to me as I was presenting mine. It is difficult to identify other features of this sample as a group, since their geographical location, age, gender, sexual orientation, race, class and other demographic characteristics are not available except through their own voluntary reportage.

Ethical Considerations

A crucial component of research design that involves human subjects is the consideration of ethical ramifications. This ethnography was designed to be as ethically sound as possible and was approved by the Sociology Ethics Review Committee of

Queen's University. However, a discussion of the ethical concerns and precautions involved in this study remains important.

The main ethical query contesting this study is the absence of subjects' informed consent. The ever-changing sample of actors I encountered made the securing of informed consent from each problematic. Moreover, as this research was designed as an exploratory ethnography, securing the informed consent of participants would be not only practically troublesome, but also time-consuming in a study of only a few months duration. Finally, perhaps the largest concern to this ethical concession was the methodological problem of observing the authentic social presentations in this scenario. I felt it would have been detrimental to exploratory research to emphasize the presence of the research to participants who might then have acted differently than if they were not asked to understand and consent to be subjects of this short project.

This said, however, I do realize the ethically problematic nature of covert research. Although informed consent might not have been possible or feasible in this instance, it was never my intention to mislead or withhold information from those I observed about my intentions as a researcher. Instead, I included in my actor profile (which was easily accessible to any other actor who wished information about my online identity) my orientation as a student of Sociology studying online interaction. Moreover, if queried about this orientation to the community, I answered honestly and completely any questions or concerns about my work. Finally, I did not coerce or question any actor who did not voluntarily interact with me in this research.

As for anonymity and confidentiality, access to my research notes has not been and will not be available to others save in the conscientious presentation of my findings.

Moreover, nowhere were the actual names of participants recorded or used. As well, the chosen pseudonyms of online actors and the name of the community itself were also protected by their replacement in the research notes and findings with substitutes that aimed to capture the essence of the original name without being readily identifiable.

The material I observed in this setting was casual, social and consensual conversation between individuals who presumably understand the somewhat public nature of their comments and actions in communal online space. I did not ask participants to reveal information that I believed would be of an emotionally sensitive nature, nor did I interfere in their relationships or interactions.

These problems are important to raise for discussion as limitations to the research design. However, in reviewing these concerns carefully and passing the scrutiny of the Ethics Review Committee, this research was then undertaken with confidence that satisfactory ethical standards were upheld.

Chapter III: Ethnographic Findings - The Petal Study

Virtual environments offer a new arena for the staging of the body—what dramas will be played out in these virtual worlds? (Balsamo 1996: 131).

There are many aspects of the Petal community worthy of consideration that I simply could not encompass in my limited study. The community's "economy" of "Petal dollars" for time spent online, the significant growth in popularity of Petal and resulting changes in the community over the time I was involved with it, and the web of social networks that existed on Petal are just a few of the topics that would be very interesting to explore in sociological study. However, since this examination is primarily concerned with the body and virtually embodied experience, the ethnographic findings reported here describe my experiences, observations and conversations with others chiefly in terms of avatar actions and interactions. My interest remains in how desire for virtual embodiment is experienced or observed in this setting.

Groove and Petal

The Petal community is hosted by a software development company, "Groove", founded in Leverkusen, Germany in 1994. Company headquarters were moved to New York in 1996, and Groove continues to develop and market software world-wide. According to their literature on the World Wide Web, their mission is to combine "usefulness with entertainment" in the design of innovative technological software products. One interesting passage from this site tells us that,

> It all started with a vision ... of developing an entertaining and, simultaneously, useful 3D communication program. Why shouldn't it be possible to enjoy fantastic, real-time walks through virtual reality worlds – without cumbersome aids such as data gloves and helmets – and to meet friends and communicate with one another? It was also important to have an ergonomically designed program

> surface which enabled everyone to enter intuitively – without the need of poring over a manual in advance.

These goals for the interface are also part of a research project called KICK, which is a German acronym translated as "A Communication Platform for Informal and Computer-supported Communication at Telework and Tele Cooperation" which is primarily funded by DLR, the German National Aerospace Research Center. This particular coalition is interesting, and raises questions regarding the intended use of the technology.

Groove itself uses a large series of linked websites to promote the use of its software for other commercial ventures. They suggest in these pages that a corporation's telecommunication needs could be served in part by an animated meeting space. However, the main focus of the sales pitch both for Petal and for Groove's other products is the sophistication of the actors available. The avatars Groove has developed are fully polygonal and structured around a skeletal model, which allows for realistic-looking bodies that are able to move and act in natural looking ways. As well, each actor possesses its own "soul," Groove's term for individual sets of movements and facial expressions. Petal's promotional page suggests that with both "body" and "soul", the Petal community makes it possible for the first time to "chat with feelings". Intrigued by this focus on embodiment in Petal's promotional material, I downloaded the software from Groove's webpage and installed it on my computer.

Chloe's corner

Once I activated my newly acquired software, I was immediately struck by how the interface reminded me of playing with dolls. One of the first tasks I undertook was to choose my avatar, or "actor" as graphical characters are called on Petal. However,

despite grand promises of actor choice and customizability in the promotional web pages for the community, I was given the option of only three "bodies". Two of these graphics were realistic-looking, Caucasian twenty-something people, a man and a woman, with thin physiques, attractive features and business-type dress. "Betty" had short blonde hair and was wearing a red skirt and business jacket, while "Charles" was tall, with a chiseled jaw and short blonde hair as well, sporting a suit and tie. The other actor available was a funny graphic, which I later discovered was generally called the "red robot" or "bot". This figure, "Kurt," was a rough red block outline of a human-sized form with a line-drawn largely featureless face. It appeared androgynous, but was given a male name. I chose the actor "Betty," but wondered whether the range of options I had been promised would eventually materialize. I named my actor "Chloe" and was then presented with a form to fill in with a number of personal details, including my email address, home address, country of residence, phone number, occupation, website, gender, birthday, license plate number, company name and interests. However, most of this information was optional and, a bit alarmed with the detail of the requested information, I filled in only my country and occupation, as a student of online social interaction. The accompanying information explained that this requested information was to provide others with a profile of me, as well as to assist me in searching for like-minded "buddies".

Next, I was asked to name my "house". I didn't realize I would be given one, but nevertheless I named mine "Chloe's corner." My house, I soon found out as my actor suddenly appeared in it, consisted of five rooms, including "entry", "salon", "public" "private" and "my best friend." These rooms were actually white large, empty boxes that

varied in terms of their dimensions, as well as the types of windows (with trees depicted beyond), flooring, doors, and ceilings they featured. After experimenting with the program for a few moments, I realized that I could choose the "actor's view", which would give me a first person perspective from the position of my avatar; an "external view" which provided a third person perspective of the room from different corners, and a "bird's-eye view" looking down upon the scene from directly above. Later, when I came to experiment with these views, I found that while I wanted to use the "actor's view" at first, thinking it would seem the most natural, I ended up using the third person or "external view" most often, especially in interaction with others. This was mainly because I found it somewhat alarming to be in "actor's view" and to have someone come up behind or beside me and not be aware of another's presence in my actor's "space". As well, because the program is complex and the avatars a bit difficult to manipulate smoothly, I wanted to see what Chloe seemed to be doing to onlooking others. At first when I was still learning the software, I didn't realize that the program would occasionally animate the actors unprompted, having them shift their weight or look around. I wanted to see what it was "I" was doing since this feature of the program often made me feel a bit out of control of my avatar and didn't I want to inadvertently do something embarrassing. I did revert to actor's view to do some things, especially task-oriented movements such as walking through doors or moving my furniture around.

Furniture and other items such as plants or little animated pets were available by ordering a CD from Groove that includes a large menu of items with which to decorate one's house. I decided not to order this CD, as I imagined many of the Petal participants would not commit the time and thirty dollars American to bother with the software,

especially upon first encountering the community on the web. Without the CD, the menu of furniture I had access to was limited. I could decorate each room in my house with a "bed, nostalgic", "chair", "shelf, wooden", "sofa, pink" "cactus" and "table, wooden", or create artwork for my walls by inserting graphics from my computer or linking frames on the wall to web-pages. However, standing there in my "Betty" body that first night, I was not interested in interior decorating, nor did I want to watch my actor stand around in eerie empty rooms. I clicked on an icon named "community" to begin exploring.

Visiting my neighbours

The Petal program operates essentially as a custom version of Microsoft's Internet Explorer browser and the community site is actually a web page called "The Daily Petal". This page was designed to resemble a newspaper, with "articles" about the goings on of the community as well as links to bulletin boards for finding "buddies" or personals-style love matches. This page also has a list of the houses of other members currently logged on that one could visit. There was, to my surprise, no communal space such as a "coffee shop" or "bar" for socializing with others. As I later confirmed, it seemed that all interaction took place in individual members' homes, which one could visit by clicking on a house name from the community site. I chose the first on the list and a message window told me I was "on my way".

The interaction with others on Petal over the following weeks was rich and interesting, to say the least. Many of the actors I interacted with were actually scouts, or long-time users who acted as guides to the program. These volunteer guides were of invaluable help to me, telling me and showing me how to use the software more

effectively. This was important, because from the unsteady legs of a "newbie", my embodiment as Chloe was extremely awkward. At first I could only stand immobile at the front door of a house I had arrived at, and communicate via the text dialogue at the bottom of my screen. The program would reproduce the text I "spoke" both in the chat window, as well as in cartoon-style balloons above my actor's head. I felt "stuck" in my foreign body and embarrassed that I did not know how to move across the room at the invitation of the host to do so. However, little by little, I began to learn, either by trial and error, by exploring the command menus, or by taking advice from the scouts I encountered.

The actions available to me included "neutral" (standing still with a hand on my hip), "nod" (shaking my head up and down), "disagree" (shaking my head back and forth), "walk around" (walking continuously around the space), "look around" (turning my body and head to face each part of the room), "shake" (shake my body), "dance"(shift my feet and arms to a repetitive pattern), "Groove" (turn my head and shift my feet), "jump" (bend my knees and jump up and down), "backflip" (jump up and flip over backwards), "clap" (clap my hands together), "wave" (raise my right hand), "exercise" (squat down with my hands on my knees and raise up again), "higher", (straighten my posture) "lower" (slouch down) and "lie" (lie down, with hands behind my head and my right leg crossed over the other). This range of actions was interesting to use, although I startled myself more than once trying them out! Some of them were very quick and finite, such as waving or turning, while others would continue until I stopped them, like dancing and walking around. As well, I could change my facial expression from neutral

to happy, laughing, sad and angry or augment my movements with sounds such as laughing, screaming, or sighing.

Soon I discovered that I could also physically interact with others by selecting their actor and choosing from a menu including "meet" (walk over to), "greet" (shake hands with), "dance" (do the individual dance facing one another), "hug" (put my arms around another), "kiss" (lean forward with my face extended to another's), "throw at" (pick up an object and throw it at another person), "keep in view" (change my point of view to keep a specific actor's movements in sight), "copy view" (see the scene through another's point of view) "copy", (mirror the behaviour of another), "email", or "visit"(go to a person's house). Finally, it was also possible to "mental message" someone in order to communicate a thought or question that only they could see.

Interestingly, to do most of these movements involving another actor, one had to request and receive the consent of the other before the action would be animated. I found this a surprise the first time I was asked by the program whether I agreed to greet some one. This was also the first time I "touched" another actor and I immediately felt a connection with the scout who had asked to shake my hand. The encounter made me feel friendly and I changed my mood from neutral to happy. However, I also enjoyed the ability to refuse a touch, such as when an actor I hadn't met asked for a kiss and I refused. It was interesting to me that I followed norms of physical interaction insomuch as making decisions to accept or refuse touches. However, I did feel that this control was somehow important. As I got to know other actors, I did engage in actions such as hugging, kissing and dancing with them.

It is also perhaps interesting to note that the gender of actors dictated their movements to a certain extent. Although the same menu of actions was available in male, female or androgynous avatar bodies, gendered actions were coded into the software. The command to "sit" on a chair would leave a male avatar hunched over, legs apart, leaning on his elbows with his hands clasped between them. However, "sitting" as a female involved a straight back, hands resting in one's lap and legs crossed. As for androgynous avatars, they generally behaved as male actors. Sounds were also gender coded, with the "laugh" command inspiring a girlish giggle from a female avatar and a booming bass laugh from a male avatar.

While in the Petal browser, I would often use the links from the community site to look at help files or other web pages while still connected to a room. This wandering would effectively leave my body in a house, immobile and silent. This would also occur if an individual physically left their computer for a few minutes (most often to attend to very real, embodied physical needs). When this happened to others with whom I had been chatting, the effect was quite eerie. The actor would appear frozen and empty until their owner returned and brought them back to life again. A friendly female character named "Candy" whom I had become "buddies" with (confirmed pals allowed certain privileges via the software in each other houses), would often tell me she would "brb" (be right back) and upon her return, tell me that she had been getting a cup of coffee, or answering the phone or scolding her dog. These mentions of offline activity seemed a bit odd because her Petal body had been standing statuesque for minutes, making it seem as if she was doing nothing at all.

On my first night on Petal I left Chloe in a busy room while looking at web pages about the program. After checking the progress of the conversation in a few moments, I noticed that it had shifted from being directed at me to about me. Two actors were discussing whether I was still there (although my avatar clearly was), and one mentioned the possibility of "hitting me with a stick to bring me back". At this point, I returned to the room to defend my actor's body from attack, although I had guessed the comment was a joke. Joke or no joke, stick or no stick, the comment did succeed in bringing me back!

I quickly noticed that although many rules of physical etiquette such as not invading others' immediate personal space, facing someone when speaking to them, etc. were respected in Petal life, there were certainly exceptions. Actions and gestures inappropriate to physically visiting another's home were routine here. For example, it was not unusual to see actors walking over a host's furniture to get to their destination across a room. Actors would also walk through each other's bodies or away from a speaking other before they were finished the conversation. Newbies to the community would often use another's home to test out their newly acquired virtual bodies by backflipping, dancing on tables and trying to kiss other actors. Although I was guilty of this behaviour myself at first, I later came to think animating an actor in this way seemed a bit rude and I asked a number of hosts whether this seemed odd to them, but the answer was almost always no, that this was acceptable and normal for new participants to Petal. I also found myself wanting to maintain normal physical behaviors of visiting another, such as shaking their hand or hugging them upon entering, sitting down on a chair or sofa to talk and standing up to greet newcomers.

I was curious as to why the Petal experience was attractive to individuals, and what sorts of individuals it actually attracted. The participants I spent time talking with about this were informative, telling me they liked to "see" who they were talking to and navigate the spaces "physically". Although I didn't anticipate this case, many of the actors I spoke to were also heavily interested in computer gaming, graphics and other forms of online visual or "embodied" experience. A character named "Bitsy" who I came to know later in the study also confided to me that he was actually a cancer patient in physical life and Petal provided him an escape from thinking about his chemotherapy rounds. A number of actors told me that they enjoyed "playing" on Petal when they couldn't sleep at night or when they were bored.

My first forays of this kind were fun, but frustrating as I adapted to the program and tried to get used to the scenes around me. I couldn't understand why, when I first logged on, everyone appeared to me as Kurt, the red robot. When I asked a scout about this, he told me that if I hadn't downloaded the "outfits" of others they would appear to me as the default red robot and not in their chosen attire, most of which were original creations. This was annoying and discouraging to me, as I knew I was not seeing people as they had chosen to present themselves. Moreover, I was still stuck in my impersonal "Betty" body, an "outfit" I didn't really enjoy wearing. Almost immediately upon introducing myself to my first scout acquaintance, I asked how I could remedy this situation. He directed me to an avatar page on the World Wide Web where I could download about 60 other members' creations. And so, one by one, I began to see the "true" virtual bodies of my neighbours and the larger range of representations I had expected from the commencement of the study.

Digital Demographics

An analysis of the "outfits" or bodies that members had created could make up an entire study of its own. The program supplied about 10 character bodies with names like "Sarah", "John" and "Crystal", which were then customizable by participants who owned the CD software, who would either change the colour and style of the avatar's clothing or more identifying features such as hair colour, eye color and the avatar's name. Once customized, these bodies could be uploaded to the main page and then downloaded by other participants, including those without the CD software, in order to see them worn or wear them themselves. These bodies were extremely revealing, in both senses of the word. Most of the actor outfits were female, and were almost exclusively dressed in body-hugging, scant attire such as halter-tops, bikini tops, cat suits, thigh-high boots, and mini-skirts. Some of the female characters were in fact nude, or wearing just stockings, high heels, or chokers. There was also a virtual closet full of leather dominatrix outfits, merry widow garter sets, and thongs. The female actors were, without exception, thin, beautiful, twentyish and highly sexualized. They were also predominantly portrayed as Caucasian with racial diversity limited to two outfits featuring black women.

The male actors were also faithful to stereotypes of male attractiveness, featuring wide shoulders, large muscles, small waists and strong, square facial features. They were either dressed in casual shorts and T-shirt combinations or business suits. There were a few male revealing actors, including a chiseled guy in a silver Speedo and another in a muscle shirt and tight shorts. No black males were present, but there was one body named Carlos, with a Latin dance outfit and large sideburns.

Aside from these "He-Man" and "Barbie" bodies, there were a few actors available in non-human form. There was a character named "Myst" who appeared to be an alien of some kind, dressed in a variety of hooded gowns. While most of these were androgynous representations, two did have breasts and were given female names. There was also a robot named "Pailpal" with no gender specified. Finally, there were a few holiday avatars, including Santa and a pair of Easter Eggs, male and female.

After downloading these body files or "outfits", I was able to see any actors wearing these outfits. However, if an actor had created another outfit which was not yet available on the website via a mediated poster, they again appeared to me as a default body. However, after acquiring the outfits from the community web page, this default was no longer always Kurt. In fact, many female characters would default to nude bodies, a feature that I found odd and that many of them resented. It was not uncommon to hear someone say to the unfortunate actor, "Um, Diana? I hate to tell you this, but you're nekkid again!" However, I never saw a male actor default to any other character except the "standard suit" character, Charles.

After acquiring these files, I could also "wear" any of the outfits I desired. At first I was hard pressed to find an outfit that covered both my shoulders and navel, but eventually settled upon a blonde girl in jeans and a T-shirt (tight, of course). I noticed by checking the artist name for each "outfit" that the majority of the outfits, although female avatars, were seemingly created by men. This did not entirely surprise me, although I wondered if they were assuming these outfits themselves or hoping other female characters would "put them on". I was not able to create an outfit myself without the Groove CD software, but I remain curious as to what types of options and shapes are

possible in this process. The majority of the actors I interacted with were either males dressed in suits, or women wearing the most suggestive of the outfits. I never did encounter any actor who had assumed a non-human body.

With the discovery of these sexualized bodies, I began to wonder if there was a side to the Petal community that I had not observed as of yet. I asked Candy whether there was a community of cybersex activity on Petal. She confirmed that there certainly was such a community and a thriving one at that. She offered to show me around a bit if I was interested, an offer I felt as ethnographer I could hardly refuse!

Graphic Sex: "Cyber-ing" on Petal

I asked Candy at first to explain to me how cybersex with avatars takes place, given that I knew only of text-based cybersex. She told me that Petal cybersex was much like cybersex in other text-based communities, involving the mutual narration and description of sexual acts and expressions. However, in the graphical interface, one could also get "intimate" with other avatar's bodies by using a program on Petal to author new body positions and animated movements. She offered to show me an example and then proceeded to animate her body to gyrate suggestively. I was embarrassed by this demonstration and although she quickly resumed her "neutral" pose, was taken aback by her willingness to put her virtual body in a sexual position that way in a room full of onlookers. She also explained that actors could "lock" a door, by refusing access to the room to others and thus it was not surprising that I was not observing the virtual coitus, as it took place largely behind "closed doors". I had seen the "door is locked" warning message before and suspected as much. To further illustrate her stories, Candy invited

me to hang out at her place more often with her group of friends to see for myself how things were done.

Over the course of the next week or two, I did just that. Candy would have parties of a sort where a group of people would be sitting or standing around, talking and flirting with one another and if it became apparent that two or more of them were interested in escalating their actions to cybersex, Candy would use the command to lock the door. Often the type of actions that took place in this living room atmosphere in front of four or five others would be a kind of foreplay, encompassing mostly kissing, sexual talk and occasionally changing into role-playing clothing or nude avatars. It was fairly common to see female avatars engaged in interaction such as mouth kissing and other suggestive touches, but I did not witness two male avatars engaged in this type of exchange. This type of play would usually escalate until either the participants chose to go to another room in the house to be alone together, or until they completed their cybersex escapades in front of the group.

It was at one of these gatherings that Candy introduced me to "Bitsy", the cancer patient who became another "buddy" of mine. Bitsy would often use the body manipulation program to shrink his size down to an inch high and then beg female actors to step on him. His virtual variation on a foot fetish seemed to amuse the female actors, who would stomp all over him while he alternated between begging them to stop and exclaiming how great being squashed by high heels was. This creative use of the technology for cybersex play was not uncommon and the range of commands provided by the Petal software allowed for some interesting animations. An actor could "grow" (appear larger), "shrink" (appear smaller), "stretch" (be pulled taller), "squash"

(compress shorter), "flatten" (appear thinner), "mutate" (have one random body part grow or shrink) or "potato-head" (have their head appear disproportionately large) by selecting a command from the avatar "Modify Body" menu. Moreover, individual participants could author unique actions and modifications, making a very broad range of movements and actions possible. I did not see this type of modification and action-authoring in use very often in the chatting on Petal, except in cybersex situations. On these occasions however, creativity was exercised in myriad ways. Avatars would levitate, twist in physically impossible contortions, mutate continuously or grow large or small to illustrate relationships of dominance or submissiveness to each other.

I asked Candy if she thought the "bodied" aspect of cybersex available through graphics added to her sexual experiences. She indicated to me that in fact, no, she preferred text forms and found that even in a virtually bodied environment such as Petal, she focused her fantasy on the textual description of actions, as opposed to the animation of her actor. She explained to me that in her opinion, "you can just say so much more than you can do with an actor." As well, she noted that "no one has had the sence (sic) to do an act file in diff stages of undress". In other words, a clothed actor was simply replaced by a nude one when cybersex was imminent. I asked if it was possible to create files with increasingly undressed characters. She told me that yes, it was certainly possible and a good idea. She told me she was "just the girl for the job", and typed "even here, foreplay is important! I want the bastard to work for it!!! LOL!!"

My experience with this community of cybersex or "cyber-ing" as many Petal participants called it, came only at the end of my study and largely through Candy, Bitsy and their friends who would gather to talk or flirt in Candy's house. A few times I

witnessed cybersex take place between strangers in other homes where I was present, but this was rare. Thus, aside from the events Candy invited me to witness, much of the cybersex on Petal was not available to me or only available through second or third-hand stories. Later on in the study, I found the homepage of a Petal participant who was collecting cybersex stories from community members to illustrate his claim that Petal was "the cyber-sexiest community around". These interviews, although not reported to me directly, are interesting to this research nonetheless since they add to the anecdotes of the small circle of Petal people I came to know.

Called "True Virtual Life Confessions", this homepage introduces the cybersex interviews with the suggestion that once you join Petal, "it soon becomes clear that there are definite possibilities for some saucy shenanigans in those actor theatrics euphemistically labeled "Gym" - and there's something very voyeuristic about the fly-on-the wall viewpoints." The page goes on to explain that the anecdotes are "extracts from real interviews with real (Petal) residents...their thoughts, feelings and points of view about being 'cybersexy' in (Petal). Only the names have been changed to protect the 'innocent'. Any similarity between names used here and names of (Petal) residents are purely coincidental". Whether in jest or in a true effort to protect online aliases, small pictures of the avatars interviewed accompany their stories, but with their eyes concealed by black bars.

In one excerpt, the interviewer asks "Sinthya", "ok...so when did you discover how to be cybersexy?" She responds,

Cybersexy, what a nice word
Here at (petal), you can be who you like fantasy
you can express yourself...
many people here at (Petal) are very nice

looking for some company
to share with
have some laughs
giggles and maybe even more
I have met some very close friends here as well

Later in the interview she elaborates on the appeal of cybersex, saying:

cybersexy to me is very kool indeed...
For me personally
cybersexy is a way of expression to me
i love to get dressed up and show off
show the other side of me

From here, the interview exchange turns to whether or not cybersexual exchanges are about "real" intimacy. Sinthya suggest that although cybersex is fun and "expressive", she feels a part of her becomes tied up emotionally as well. She suggests that feelings should not come into play in Petal sex, but they do regardless. The interviewer then asks her whether she "loves" the other people she meets in some way or if it is just "mutual fun". Sinthya says:

Love is a strong word, i would not say that
but, you do have a connection with that person
and yes its mutual fun
and this just does not happen with everyone
there are select few that you just say wow too
hehe
grins

The interviewer then asks Sinthya to offer an example of cybersex narration, which she does. She tells us that:

expression of words is what i am best at
well
you start to flirt
kid around
mutual

then he may ask
may i kiss you
saying nice things
you comply and return in a mutual way
then words as a say are the key

Interviewer:
and what kind of words?

Sinthya:
expression of your feelings are essential

Interviewer:
explicit or flowery?

Sinthya:
you need to use your imagination as if you were
actually there with the person
words like: I look deep in your eyes
seeing the smile on your face, you look back
at me and my heart melts with every heart beat
smiles
he may say: your skin is soo soft as I touch your
breasts with my hand:....
and a reply of : moving my hand down your back.....
i feel the heat rise from your shirt
i touch your face and kiss you soo deeply you
i wrap my hands around your neck and bring you
closer to me
i feel you getting warmer
as you stand in front of me, i look in your eyes.....passionately
you hold me tighter next to you
slowly i move my hands down your back feeling
your strong muscles holding me
I kiss you softly on your lips moving to your
neck kissing softly
kiss your ear and give you a lick as you
moan for me
i whisper, do you like this
you nod and say ohh yes
then you start to kiss my neck softly as your
hands move down my chest
as my heart begins to race with excitement

well you get the idea :)

Other participants interviewed on this site also ruminate about the "real" or "unreal" qualities of cybersex in this setting. An interview subject called "Cutie" admits "I don't really cyber," because she finds this type of exchange "stupid". When pressed about why by the interviewer, she says that she doesn't buy the "story" of cybersex with its references to senses that are not involved in online flirting. She finds this sexual role-playing game to be tedious and prefers "real" conversation

oh yes..close in emotions..true feelings..where
you feel warm and content..
and times when I have been able to do that..sometimes..I cry..
I think that..real emotion can be shared
if one does it right
and really has a compassion for that person
a real interest beside just a cyber pop

The male actors interviewed about their experiences with cybersex also had very interesting comments to make. One participant called "Freshplay", wearing "Charles" the Petal standard male "outfit", said that he thinks cybersex is more fun for women then men. He says,

It's CHEAP THRILLS!
That's all it is.
It's a joke, really.
I've done it...
I reckon I'm pretty good at it..LOL
But...
I believe that...
it's much better for WOMAN...
than for men.

When the interviewer asks him why, Freshplay explains,

it's more 'emotional'...
The Words....

And this is ALL words!
For a man...
it's visual.
And...
I can't get TOO HARD over a cartoon!
LOL

In most of this anecdotes, the Petal participants interviewed describe an event that clarified the virtual or real nature of cybersex for them. Cutie talks about how she didn't realize a guy who was flirting with her had started cybersex until her screen filled with "lick" and "suck" descriptives. She relates that while this was occurring, she was laughing and thinking "what the hell is he talking about? during which..I am eating a tuna sandwich." Freshplay relates how he was "obliging" a female avatar with cybersex when he decided "to read her 'bio'... (What if she's a nutcase?)" After noting that her personal page listed her as married, he stopped the encounter. He told the interviewer,

I have my failings...
weaknesses...
But, I won't have a married woman!
I mean...
I reckon I have a 'twisted'...kinky mind...
but...
at least I have that.

Another participant whose avatar sports a stereotypical "biker" look, claimed he was "jumped by a cyber-vixen" in Petal. Unlike the highly textual cybersex other participants describe, this encounter was largely based on his aggressor's superior skill in manipulating her avatar. He tells the interviewer,

i mean i let this chick jump my actors bones and
i laughed my ass off, but i didnt know how to

do anything back to her

The interviewer then asks this character, "Harley", how he felt during this episode. He replies, "like laughing. as a matter of fact it happened twice".

Harley:
and the bad part was, i didnt even have a nude actor!!!!

Interviewer:
so clothes were falling off...
and then what?

Harley:
she copped a squat

Interviewer:
did she ask first?

Harley:
no
she just let her actor start hummin on mine!!! lmao (laughing my ass off)

Interviewer:
and how long did the hummin go on for?

Harley:
til the saints came marchin in

Interviewer:
and were you tittilated by her humming?

Harley:
i was freakin rolling on the floor literally

Interviewer:
with pleasure ...or laughing?

Harley:
i couldnt even watch because i fell off my chair
from laughing

Interviewer:
and when it was over ...what happened then?

Harley:
she left me

Interviewer:
just like that?

Harley:
just like that
she said sorry to use you but i have to go now
hey who are you anyways?

Interviewer:
soo...do you plan to have cyber again ever?

Harley:
i never planned to in the first place
im still amazed at what she could make her actor do!

These interview transcripts, in combination with the ethnographic narrative, supply a rich resource of findings for analysis. Chapter IV now looks at the stories and comments reported here in order to revisit the four hypotheses of desire initially posited in Chapter I.

Chapter IV: Theorizing Desire for the Virtual Body

The four types of desire I outlined in the literature review as being potential ways of thinking about the will to virtuality in online worlds and specifically graphic settings provide the framework for this analysis, but as is obvious in the pages to follow, clearly do not tell the whole story as distinct categories of desire. In fact, the explosion of these categories became the most interesting and useful feature of my ethnographic analysis. By way of reminder, these four types traced out desires to *reinstate*, *escape*, *perfect* and *rework* the body in virtual spaces. This chapter will look at each of these four ideas about virtual embodiment and then at the processes by which each has become problematic.

Revisiting Reinstating the Body

The analysis of desire from this ethnography begins with my own motivations. Why was I attracted to studying the Petal community specifically? Before beginning this research, I had seen a few virtual environments and was always a bit disappointed in how "clunky" they had seemed. The visual look of these settings was usually incomplete, sparse and dark. Perhaps my point of reference in making these judgments was the relatively smooth animation environments and digital bodies I had seen in action in various computer games such as "Tomb Raider" or "NBA Live 2000" and computer-animated films such as "Final Fantasy" and "Toy Story". Online visual environments such as Active Worlds, Avaterra and the Palace looked primordial in comparison, with avatars appearing as either a two-dimensional image that would bump along the "floor" of the chat room like a paper doll or a coarse cartoon that could walk in stilted steps around a slow-loading setting. When I found Petal's webpage, I was instantly intrigued

by the smoothness of the avatars and as such, the possibilities for subtleties of interaction. It was the imagined "authenticity" of complex embodied action that drew me to study Petal. It promised to be "easy on the eyes", with realistic-looking bodies executing realistic movements. Or, as the promotional web pages explained, the Petal browser is a "program surface that enables everyone to enter intuitively -- without the need of poring over a manual in advance". Later, I became very conscious of how this "intuitiveness" was constructed and how my own experiences of engaging uncomfortably with the technology were an important contradiction to this claim.

In large part, Petal's promotional material is an appeal to this desire to replace the body in the "disembodiment" of online spaces. In this way, desire is framed as a crucial "lack." By letting us know that "now you can chat with feeling," Petal's suggestion is that comprehensive communication involves a body that in the short history of popular computer-mediated communication, has been keenly missed. Thus, not only is Petal putting the body back in, it is putting it back as realistically and faithfully to physical specifications as possible. Petal's avatars are constructed upon a skeletal model and move in ways that human beings might in carrying out conversations with one another. They are coded to complete handshakes and hugs, and shift their weight after standing for a considerable period of time. They walk with hips swaying and even sidle sideways between a table and a couch before sitting down. They can change their facial expressions to five different moods and these visual representations are augmented by audio options that allow the laughter, screams and sighs of physical space to be heard. These avatars even come complete with "souls," Petal's term for "personalized" sets of movements that emulate the individual ways in which different bodies carry out specific

actions. Of course, this claim of "individuality" is ironic as these souls are still highly constructed and standardized. This attempt to commodify the most deep-seated particularities of embodiment is a troubling theme, suggesting that perhaps corporate-run communities endeavour to take the body away from us and then sell it back to us again in idealized form. Sandy Stone may not be so far off in her suggestion that we may one day be able to rent "prepackaged body forms complete with voice and touch... multiple personality as commodity fetish!" (1991:85).

Apart from the clear efforts of Petal's designers to facilitate body 'replacement,' my own reaction seemed to me to often imply this desire. I found myself immediately wanting to choose an avatar that resembled the way I imagine myself to look. The range of bodies initially available to me was disappointing, since I didn't feel comfortable in the "skin" of any of these avatars. I wanted to appear as female, not male or androgynous, yet the female avatars were too curvaceous, appeared to be wearing too much makeup and didn't dress the way that I would. It seems to me that I wanted to replace the body that I felt familiar with, the tall, gangly woman in jeans with short blonde hair that is my avatar in physical manifestation.

I also found myself consistently trying to follow embodied norms of interaction, wanting to use furniture in a realistic way or touch others in a way that would be 'natural' to me in physical space. This struck me as a reaction to the type of amputation implicated in a desire to reinstate a body perceived as missing. I felt somehow straight jacketed by the software and missed the ease of physical interaction I was used to. As I became more adept at using the software, I also felt a piece of me was returned as an embodied actor in this setting. In a way, I felt more complete.

However, this body "replacement" was not consistent. The playing at physical embodiment was only believable as long as people appeared to be willing to consistently make an effort to carry on this narrative. At times when this narrative was interrupted, the effect would be a ripple of 'reality' throughout the virtual environment. In other words, any dropping of the story thread by a participant would serve to remind all others in the virtual vicinity that the environment was not a faithful or convincing replication of physical space. For example, despite the widespread practice and acceptance of cybersex on Petal, "Freshplay" suggests that this type of sex just "doesn't do it for him". When asked why, he says "I can't get TOO HARD over a cartoon". By suggesting that although he is a self-proclaimed "horny b*****d", he doesn't buy into the virtual version of sex, Freshplay is pointing out the paleness he perceives Petal sex exhibits next to the "real deal". After all, perhaps the most well known description of cyberspace is that from William Gibson's Neuromancer, of a "consensual hallucination" (Gibson 1984:5) and in this case, perhaps the graphical act is simply not credible enough to inspire its consensual imagining.

However, a more common "lag" of this type in the ethnography would occur whenever a Petal participant would pause their online action to engage in some sort of way with the world away from their computer. To be moving around and dancing, hugging and back-flipping online necessarily means that one's physical body is largely immobile in front of a computer terminal. However, the reverse is also true. To be sleeping, working, washing dishes, feeding the dog, getting a drink or greeting family members in physical spaces necessitates the virtual body to remain motionless. When Candy would tell me she would "brb" (be right back) she would often, upon her return,

tell me that she had been getting a cup of coffee, answering the phone or scolding her dog, embodied actions that made reference to the invisible but necessarily involved offline corporeality she experiences. Meanwhile, her body would be motionless to me, a seemingly abandoned shell of a self. While she was frozen in this way, others around online would move around her and talk about her as if she was gone, although her avatar was still there. If the program animated an automatic movement, the virtual Candy representation would shift or turn her head, although her "spirit" was not there. This was particularly eerie and caused me to think about Candy as a character. If the puppeteer never returned, would Candy's animated body live on online? Would she exist as a sort of virtual vegetable? Would her avatar be treated as such and eventually stored carefully in a chair to stare vacantly and silently? But this never happened, and eventually Candy would return and her avatar would come to life, shift and begin walking. This interplay of absence and presence served to interrupt the replacement of one body with another and instead make transparent the ongoing interplay of embodied negotiation between virtual and physical spaces.

Revisiting Escaping the Body

As for the desire to escape the body, the Petal community appears at first to lend credence to the hypothesis that transcendence and subsequent reincarnation in a "heavenly body" is part of the appeal of cyberspace. Like the avatar in Hinduism discussed earlier, the Petal avatar is understood as a body chosen to be a vessel for the spirit for the sake of interaction. The avatar is not mistaken for the true, complete person, but an incarnation of personality in "our own image". As well, like the Hindu avatar, the

Petal avatar is often capable of feats both human and seemingly superhuman. In my Chloe incarnation, I could complete actions within usual human reach, such as walking, dancing, shaking hands and back flipping, as well as those beyond the limits of human physical embodiment, such as levitating, growing, shrinking, and shape-shifting. This is in keeping with the abilities of Hindu avatars such as Krishna, who could vanish, multiply himself a thousand fold, read minds, and move mountains (Parrinder 1970). Avatars in Hindu theology are "eternally existent and free from the laws of matter, time and space... Although They may portray human weaknesses such as grief and anger, They are never to be considered ordinary people" (Nikhilino 1999).

Petal participants don't consider their avatars to be "ordinary" people either, since Sinthya tells us that unlike physical environments, in this space, "you can let your mind go and be free of your emotions as well." But if the desire is to escape the body, why build a virtual community based precisely around embodiment? This theory seems especially inapplicable since the avatar body is arguably even more restrictive and less intuitive than the physical meat the cybercitizen is thought to want to transcend. It requires relearning how to use a body that can only do the things it is coded to do, not the range of actions the physical body could feasibly perform. I notice in reviewing my field notes from my time exploring Petal that much of the ethnographic narrative deals with my own feelings of vulnerability in skillfully using this technology as I essentially learned how to take my first steps all over again. Thus I suspect that my unease with using the "actor's view", which I would have thought to have been the most natural viewpoint, was mostly a technological claustrophobia. In my physical view of the world, I simply turn my head to see to the side of me. In Petal, one has to not only turn the

avatar's head, which is tricky from the actor's view, but also change the "camera angle," accomplishable only in small, awkward increments to accomplish an embodied look around. As well, because my avatar body did not have peripheral vision or the sense of someone being near that my physical body does, the actor's view did not supply a large part of the social information of the scene. Embodied interaction was much easier and much more comfortable for me when I wasn't looking *as* Chloe, but looking *at* Chloe. After realizing this, I spent most my remaining time in Petal with the camera angle stationary at the back of a room, and concentrated my efforts on moving my virtual body, not the view. This provided what Donna Haraway calls "a conquering gaze from nowhere" (1991: 176), a problematic view for maintaining a sense of subjectivity and particularity in my research, for as Haraway says, it provides the illusion of an omnipresent perspective. It is a type of "god-trick" of being able to see everything from "nowhere", which denies partial views and embodied vision (Haraway 1991). No being is able to look upon the world in this omnipresent, "objective" way, and the programming of Petal's environment such that this perspective is the most functional for interaction suggests that the desire for transcendence is perhaps instead simply demarcation from genuine seeing.

Revisiting Perfecting the Body

So then, do Petal participants seek to inhabit "ideal" bodies? Or in the words of our third description of desire, do they seek to perfect their bodies through controlled incarnations online? The remarkably close adherence to western stereotypes of superior bodies in this community would propose that they do.

In my own research in the Petal community, the bodies I encountered were extremely faithful to idealized norms of body shape, type, gender and race. An analysis of the "outfits" or bodies that members had created could make up an entire study of its own. It was not surprising that the Petal community was populated with throngs of scantily attired or naked women. Nor was it a shock that representations of racial diversity were nonexistent. As Balsamo tells us, the recreation of familiar hierarchies in a "new" space is much more likely than a rethinking of historically established systems of bias. Without the range of physical heights, shapes and features physical bodies provide, a population of "perfected" virtual bodies does not problematize stereotypes, but reinforces them by representing them again and again. In this project, the role of software programmers and virtual environment designers is tantamount. The skills necessary in manipulating complicated graphic representations and settings make graphic cyber-communities highly scripted from inception. As previously noted, the authors of these scripts are still largely members of a white, middle to upper-class, well-educated male caste (Stone 1991: 106). The perfect body as conceived by these programmers is a very specific ideal. J.C. Herz puts this point memorably by suggesting that the Internet is "an outlet for gorgeous white women trapped in the bodies of male computer programmers" (Herz 1995:150).

Even aside from the selection of racial, sexual and attractiveness ideals for the Petal population, these bodies achieve ideals of embodiment unattainable by any physical body. There are no washrooms in Petal houses, because programmers and participants have chosen not to recreate bodily functions that are undesirable or inconvenient. They

don't have kitchens. Petal bodies can dance and back- flip, but they don't eat or drink[5]. They aren't born, they don't grow old, and they don't die (unless they simply 'log off' and never return). But they do have sex.

The existence of cybersex activity on Petal was presupposed in many ways. It was clear to me from my first involvements with the community that this type of interaction was not only part of the appeal of Petal; it was built into the structure of the software. The promotional material showed again and again a male and female positioned in flirtatious poses, with accompanying captions promising that on Petal, you could "make new friends easily", and "invite them back to your own house". As well, the "Daily Petal", the web page community newspaper, was largely concerned with personal ads for "buddies" and a section called "love match" for those looking for virtual romance. Later in the study, "marriage announcements" were even added to this page.

As for the program itself, not only were the "default" bodies and their hyper-sexualized appearance suggestive of cyber-seduction, a larger indication seemed to be the intricacy and complexity of movement possible for avatar bodies with not much to do with themselves. These "fully polygonal, skeletal-based" bodies spent a great deal of time standing around and exchanging words, which could have been much more efficiently accomplished in a text-based chat of some kind if that was the intended aim of the interface. As stated earlier, I knew this type of advanced graphical body previously only in applications such as computer games, where there were active tasks and goals and

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[5] This strikes me as interesting given the largely social nature of much food and drink consumption in our society. The Petal community could theoretically include bars, coffee shops, diners, etc. to facilitate certain types of conversation. However, this was not the case when I studied the community. Even if this type of space were created later as part of the Petal play, the point is that even if these bodies were adapted so that they could eat, they still don't *have* to. The necessity of nourishment known to all physical bodies is not applicable for virtual bodies.

combats for bodies to carry out. The presence of these 'gaming'-style graphics suggested that some sort of more involved action than sitting on couches and idly walking around was implicitly involved. As well, in comparison to other avatar environments that offer cartoon-style, "funny-looking" or caricature visuals, this look of the Petal setting struck me as an attempt towards a very 'adult' and sexy atmosphere. This underlying cybersexual intent was also supported by software that offered the voyeuristic "bird's eye" and "third person" camera angles, a very satisfied-sounding moan for the "sigh" audio command, and a range of preprogrammed "gymnastic" movements and poses that did not seem to me to be realistic inclusions into any gymnastic floor program I've ever seen. All of these features suggest that Petal's status as the "sexiest spot on the net", as one participant boasted, was not the sly appropriation of the technology by participants, but a very carefully coded goal for the community from its inception.

In speaking about the desire to control and perfect the body, cybersex features very critically. It is interesting how, of all physical bodied capabilities, sex is the one we want to keep. However, this version of sex is not the grunt and sweat of carnal coitus, but a tightly controlled and idealized act. There are no unwanted Petal pregnancies to fear, no cyber-STDs to catch, no electronic erectile dysfunction to dread. As Cutie describes, sex can be an emotionally and practically messy experience, "but this is virtually perfect..."

no trash to take out
no bills to discuss
or..I hate the way you pick your teeth
or why do you make that noise when you sleep
Take all those things away...and its perfect...

Part of the appeal of Petal could be simply this possibility of performing perfect sex with perfect bodies. The embodied risks are removed and cybersex basically becomes "sorta like safe sex", as Sinthya tells us. However, although she claims this sex is "safe", and surely the removal of physical referents is reassuring in some ways, as Cutie tells us, the emotional involvement of online intercourse is very real:

people say this is all fantasy...
people really get hurt in these places
really hurt
..you come to a chat place to meet and have fun...
but in time..emotions are tied..

Sinthya confirms this slippage of control, confessing that "feelings here should not come into play but with me they do... I do give a part of myself."

These unexpected relegations of power over one's virtual presence suggest that again, this idea of control and perfection as desire for the virtual body does not adequately capture the phenomena of virtual embodiment. As a participant of another world points out, "you are kidding yourself if you think you will be able to control or even predict what will happen to your avatar" (Taylor 1996:441). In my own experiences, this loss of control figured very prominently. Even after learning to interact in the third person view, I often felt like I was largely powerless to effectively use the Petal technology and thus my body. Movements that were supposed to be "mine" felt foreign to me. This caused me to often feel as if my avatar could be harmed or taken advantage of by others who were more adept at using the technology than I. Like the incident of rape in cyberspace described in an earlier chapter, power in Petal, including power over the bodies of others, is accomplished with technological weapons.

In recounting his encounter with a "cyber-vixen" who "jumped" him, the interviewee "Harley" counts himself a casualty of this type of technological assault. He recounts his shock, embarrassment and amusement when his actor was approached by an avatar he describes as "some long hair bitch," who proceeded to remove her clothes and then perform what was tantamount to fellatio on his avatar without his consent. He relates,

i laughed my ass off, but i didnt know how to
do anything back to her
i felt like i was in high school again
i wasnt a newbie..imagine the embarassment!!!!

His embarrassment in this situation seems a product of his inability to match his aggressor's level of expertise with avatar manipulation and thus, his involuntary submissiveness to her actions. Harley admits that he "was just so impressed with what she could make her actor do!!!! pretty damn graphic!" His claim that he "wasn't a newbie" suggests that with time in the community and practice manipulating the technology, he feels he should have been able to better match her abilities, but clearly was not able to. In other words, it would be understandable for a newbie to not know what to do in this situation, but much more embarrassing for a seasoned Petal participant like himself.

This incident is fascinating in not only illuminating the relationship between embodied ease and technological expertise, but also in its gender implications. It would be very interesting to know whether Harley's avatar aggressor was actually the extension of a physical female using an unusually high level of technological expertise to assert authority and reverse traditional gender power dynamics, or whether this avatar was instead linked to a virtual vixen motivated by a voyeuristic male gaze. In either case,

Harley's reaction is indicative of being unwittingly overwhelmed, in this case by someone with superior technical skill. His embarrassment was undoubtedly further exacerbated by his avatar's appearance of physical power, since his look suggests a motorcycle gang member complete with huge muscles, tattoos and dark stubble. Being sexually and technically conquered by a naked woman is clearly a major blow to Harley's macho ego. It is little wonder he responds by calling her a "long-hair bitch".

Similar in some ways, the incident I described earlier of my avatar being threatened with a stick, although a joke (especially since this action is, as far as I know, not even possible in the range of actions available on Petal), still made me feel at risk and increasingly protective of my Chloe self. This vulnerability was exacerbated by the knowledge that although I couldn't see the avatars at the time the comment was made, I knew I had left Chloe surrounded by male characters. I'm not sure I would have rushed back to protect her as quickly had the comment been made by female characters in the same setting.

Another example of embodied unease I experienced took place a few times when I was still new to the community. I would be downloading outfit files or experimenting with decorating my rooms alone in the "privacy" of my own home when someone would walk in uninvited. The intrusion would always cause me to feel a twinge of alarm, as I certainly would if I were home at my apartment in Kingston and a stranger opened the door and strode in. My apprehension seemed to me to be a fear for my safety, especially if the intruder was male, although this type of unsolicited "visit" was common in the community and in fact the basis for most of the social interaction that took place on Petal. However, this knowledge did not change the vulnerability I would instinctively

experience, or the fact that after a few of these unwanted visitors, I made a practice of "locking" my Petal house door. Clearly the desire for the virtual body is not linked to an accomplishing of increased control over digital incarnations, for as we have seen, the inexperienced body seems to be rendered especially vulnerable in its virtual version.

Revisiting Reworking the Body

With the three other theories of desire for the virtual body under question, I turn now to the last one, the desire to rework the body. Based on Haraway's notion of the cyborg, if "machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves" (Haraway 1991:178), it is perhaps not difficult to see how we often imagine technologically enhanced bodies as "better selves". As Neil Harris put it after all, "the passion for deliverance by Machine dies hard" (1990).

Sandy Stone and Joseph Dumit position this passion as "cyborg envy", a condition stemming from a century of fervor for military research and technophilic trends in popular culture (1995). In this context, the ever-present fear that technology will outpace the human species heightens, making way for the emergence of a dream of individual technological redemption through improved human 'being'. These forces condition us to yearn for technologically enhanced bodies and to harbor disdain for the outdated or deficient human technology we currently inhabit and operate. (Dumit 1995: 348). No doubt spurred on by science fiction characterizations of specially engineered and modified super-humans, cyborg envy epitomizes the shift from thinking about technological and scientific modifications to our bodies as primarily therapeutic measures, to imagining what these same types of technologies could make possible for

enhancing and controlling of physical and mental abilities. In this way "machines are able to transform desires for essential self-depiction and self-control into specific ways of life with the machines at the center. They thus produce a manifest cyborg person within a discourse of cyborg envy" (Dumit 1995: 358).

To illustrate ideas about cyborg envy, Dumit examines the marketing of various "brain inscription" devices that claim to reduce stress by altering brain wave patterns, ensuring that "in only 28 minutes, you'll be meditating like a Zen Monk" (1995: 352). Although these types of devices offer an interesting and amusing example of cyborg envy at work, it is certainly not the only application possible for this theory. Cyborg envy is also very much at work in the zeal to interact with others through the technologically mediated realm of cyberspace. Sandy Stone says there is a "protean quality about cybernetic interaction, a sense of physical as well as conceptual mutability that is implied in the sense of exciting, dizzying physical movement within purely conceptual space" (Stone 1991: 109). In her formulation, the longing for interaction in this kind of space is closely related to a desire to bridge the human/machine boundary and to penetrate and merge into the technology. Penetrating the "smoothness" of cyberspace involves a "state change from the physical, biological space of the embodied viewer to the symbolic, metaphorical 'consensual hallucination' of cyberspace; a space that is a locus of intense desire for refigured embodiment" (Stone 1991: 109).

How does this "intense" desire to rework the body play out in Petal? Sinthya tells us that in Petal interaction,

you can be who you like fantasy
you can express yourself
show desires
wants.

She also says that "the actors can let you use your imagination as to real life you may not even think of being". As well, as we have seen, the Petal participants use the technology of the program to create sexual positions and performances that physical laws of biology and physics do not allow in offline sexual engagement. They couple with the machine to imagine more creative couplings with each other in this way.

Whether or not this type of play in fact acts as a refiguring of embodiment is not so important as the perception that it does. This desire to rethink one's body is also recognition of the constant negotiation of offline and online embodiment involved in a setting such as Petal. Sinthya tells us that she carries her online sexual expressiveness into other venues of her life "to a certain point".

there are limits
i certainly would not walk around public
showing my boobs lol (*laughing out loud*)
but, in the same sense i do like to act sensual
soo yes, part of me is here and in r/l (*real life)*
most of the time, I am me, heheh (*laughing)*
sensual, listener, friend.

I find interesting her suggestion that although part of her is "here" and part in "r/l", most of the time she is herself. In other words, the "parts" of herself or the ways she inhabits online and offline spaces are not separate, though she acts differently in each setting. She is still "her" in the ways that she explains her personality, "sensual, listener, friend".

The ideas of virtuality and reality are contested ones in the lived experiences of Petal participants, especially in terms of cybersex. It matters to these people that cybersex be either counted or discounted as residing in the realm of the "virtual" or the

"real". Moreover, there is no agreement, even among participants in the same community conducting the same types of interaction, as to what constitutes the actual or the fantastical. Sinthya believes that "you need to use your imagination as if you were actually there with the person" and narrates an example of cybersex for us, involving licks, moans, heat, eye contact, and other physical referents. However, as Cutie tells us, she will only engage in cybersex that does not pretend to involve these physical senses.

I 'm saying...that
if you are really going to touch someones emotions
in cyber
you need to be as real as you can with it.
I mean..sure describe what you want to do to that
person..yes
but to say..Ohhhhh you taste good...
i mean that would blow it for me

However, Cutie's experiences with cybersex are no less intense for their recognition of the removed bodies involved. She tells us that the intimacy of emotional connection, not physical fantasy is the key for her.

close in emotions..true feelings..where
you feel warm and content..
and times when I have been able to do that..sometimes..I cry..
I think that..real emotion can be shared
if one does it right

Freshplay also problematizes the nature of "real" and "virtual" in his account of a personal cybersexual moral dilemma. In choosing not to have cybersex with a woman he discovered to be married in real life, he draws lines on moral transgressions where others (including presumably the woman he was flirting with), do not take issue. Freshplay expresses disgust that he seems to be one of the few who consider cyberspace a space where genuine adultery can occur. He complains that "there are NO values in this mythical world of (Petal.) No one cares."

These differing experiences of virtual body "authenticity" are often illuminated through the practice of cybersex . As McRae tells us, "some find technologically facilitated eroticism to be disembodied, alienated and meaningless, others suggest it can be "involving, intense and transformative" (1997:75). One argument is that much of what is termed cybersex could be considered simply pornography and co-authored erotica, forms of erotic experience that existed long before their Internet adaptations. The argument goes; there is no physical involvement and therefore, it is not sex. In a tutorial about virtuality I was moderating, my students became very adamant about making precisely this distinction, debating the bodily involvement of cybersex in graphic minutiae about whether one could reach different stages of arousal, masturbation or orgasm while engaging in cybersex. However, their insistence on the disembodied, or nonphysical nature of cybersex was complicated by my revealing to them that in fact, there are now "cyberdildonic" products available that allow distant partners to control sex toys via computer software programs over the Internet. The narrowing of the physicality debate down to sex toys controlled remotely compared to sex toys controlled in person became a much more slippery distinction. Richard Kadrey suggests that the appeal for this type of experience seems elusive, given that "there is something ghostly, even ridiculous, about today's cyberdildonic sex—a clumsy little machine, working through its simple and repetitive motions, untouched by human hands" (Kadrey 1999: 44). However, Shannon McRae suggests that cybersex is a natural extension of the body through technological means, a "reclaiming of technology for bodies". She suggests that "eroticizing our technology does not mean giving up the ghost, but rather giving in to the pleasures of corporeality that renders meaningless the arbitrary divisions of animal, spirit

and machine" (1997:85). In any case, this innovation makes of cybersex a much more convincingly social and physical project.

Desire in Disarray

The slippages between the four types of desire I identified for the appeal of the virtual body at the outset of this thesis are not so much problematic as they are interesting. Clearly, desires for control and escape are similar, in that they both imply a discontent with the limitations of physical embodiment. They both suggest the final desire, that of reworking bodies, with different means to the end. Desires of controlling the "normal" body or escaping the "usual" body could be translated into wanting to rework this notion of body. Williams and Bendelow suggest that the recent broad range of technological advances translate into an ability to 'control' the human body that continues to grow exponentially (1998: 23). On the other hand, it is these very "technologies of control" which have served to challenge our certainties of what the body is, what it can become, and where precisely the one body ends and another begins. The virtual body is a slippery, or perhaps a "flickering" concept.

If we examine each of these desires and what they would look like if they existed in isolation, we would find online spaces populated very differently. For example, if the desire for the virtual body was solely to *reinstate* an amputated embodiment, participants in interaction online would describe themselves or choose avatars as close to their actual perceived physical appearance as possible. If this desire could instead be isolated as an attempt to *escape* embodiment, the body would never be represented online at all. Alternatively, if the socially constructed *perfect* body was the goal, the stereotyped ideal

would be the only type of body present in Petal. Finally, if participants were looking to solely *rework* the body, they would opt for a wide spectrum of imaginative virtual embodiments, including incarnations as animals, insects, inanimate objects, plant life, aliens, or natural phenomena to name a very few possibilities. However, none of these possibilities of desire manifest were observed independently on Petal. Instead, there is evidence for each of these desires, in combination and contradiction with each of the others.

Perhaps the virtual body is best not thought of as a component of human "being", but to use Elizabeth Grosz's terminology, as a "becoming" (Grosz 2001) . After all, surely the nature of embodiment mediated by the Internet is complex, but in comparison to what more solidified "off-line" manifestation? The body online is involved and transmogrifying, as is the body in other realms of existence. The flurry of literature that has emerged in the last decade largely serves either to exhilarate or lament the move away from the body, but what is the "body"? What exactly is it that is being augmented or abandoned? Corporeality in itself is still largely a matter on which the jury is out. Perhaps we would be wisest to, as Kirby suggests, move away from notions of mind and body. Instead, she suggests,

> We might think the body as myriad interfacings, infinite partitionings—as a field of transformational regenerative splittings, and differings that are never not pensive. Flesh, blood and bone—literary matter—never ceases to reread and rewrite itself through endless incarnations. (Kirby 1997: 148)

If the body is "literary matter" or a text, it can not only be written or inscribed upon, but also read in a variety of ways. Being that the body is "pensive," perhaps we can take our cue from Stone's suggestion that the most useful idea in thinking about embodiment is that it is still important to think about. She reminds that "even in the age

of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies" (1991). Regardless of what boundless sensations, foreign experiences or appalling dangers we may live through in our wanderings through the digital landscape, it is the embodied reality of the sore neck, tired fingers, rumbling stomach, stiff back and aching eyes that we still return to after prolonged hours in front of the computer. To take for granted this holistic nature of the embodied self is to take for granted our increasingly cyborg selves, and as Haraway says, this is a dangerous thing to do.

Conclusions: Avatar Dreams and Touching Screens

In retrospect, the concept of "desire" clearly undergoes an important evolution throughout my thesis research and analysis. Conceived of originally as largely an organizational tool to sort out the literature written thus far, desire and the four categories I posed seemed simply to provide a useful foundation from which to proceed to the research task. However, as the ethnography and subsequent analysis show, the concept became much more central and complex in my writing about Petal and the "appealing" virtual bodies that inhabit it. The four original "types of desire" became "theories of desire" as each was increasingly enriched and problematized. The extent of this evolution was something of a surprise to me, given that my focus was originally more concerned with the embodiment and technology than theorizing desire. I imagined that by looking at the literature written on why people are attracted to virtual embodiment, I could use ethnographic research to present the characteristics of virtual bodies actually found online. Instead, I have found that the active desiring of the virtual body remains the interesting, albeit elusive idea that requires further research. From here, my interest in desire and virtual embodiment requires a deeper understanding and engagement with the psychoanalytic and feminist theories that inform the notion in social theory thus far. The dialogue between desire and cyberspace suggested here is not one that has been taken up in a substantial way by cyberculture theorists as of yet. The closest theory to this idea and most useful discussion of desire in the cyberculture literature I have read thus far is the theory of cyborg-envy suggested by Stone. In this formulation, cyborg-envy involves the desire to penetrate and merge with the smoothness

of the technology. A passage of interview transcript I find particularly poignant in illustrating this desire occurs when the interviewer asks Cutie if she has ever touched her computer screen "to feel closer". The question itself surprised me, as it made reference to a seemingly common experience I did not expect nor did I observe in my ethnography, due to the unavailability of other participants' physical actions. Cutie responds to this question by saying,

oh yes..I have
I've traced their actor with my arrow
People here are so real to me here...
the ones I let myself get close to me are very real

This actual touching of the screen is a fascinating image of evidence for the power of desire for virtuality. I can imagine a person's physical body sitting alone in a darkened room, perhaps late at night, since Petal play appears to be a popular antidote for insomnia. The figure is silent, but reaching out tentatively to the iridescent computer screen in front of them to touch the image they see. This moment is evocative of Alice moving through the looking glass, or perhaps more aptly, Narcissus reaching out to his own reflection in the water. When Cutie tells us she is "very in touch with it", meaning the Petal experience, the inferred connection here is not only imaginary, but also physical. An embodied reaching out and touching of technology speaks to the powerful desire to fuse physically with it. Similarly, the outlining of another's avatar with a computer cursor seems a "feeling out" of the bodies that walk with yours, a way of tracing the line back to the physically bodied being that must be involved in the avatar. In delegating their agency to avatars and interacting with the avatars of others in this way, cybercitizens have, according to Stone, "become accustomed to what might be called

lucid dreaming in an awake state... a participatory social practice in which the actions of the reader have consequences in the world of the dream" (1991: 104). Thus the desire to be virtually embodied becomes cyborg-envy in cyberspace, or "avatar dreams".

Although the inspiration for a theory of avatar dreams stems from Stone's work, this idea is also a reflection of my own existence as an avatar online, very much a dream-like experience. The agonizingly slow process of learning how to navigate the glittering world of shiny, sexy bodies I was studying reminded me of the familiar nightmare in which one's body can only move leadenly through a sea of seemingly expert others. When the program would default female avatar outfits by stripping them naked, exposing pre-programmed pink breasts and neat triangles of pubic hair, I thought of the common dream of realizing one is suddenly naked in a room full of onlookers, although fully clothed a moment ago. Even the eeriness of the third person view and the empty space of my own "house" invoked a spooky dream of some sort, where barren spaces stretch out all around (Flannagan 1998).

These nightmares are dreams of embodied vulnerability, scripted sexual hierarchy and body-based bias. Critics have suggested that given the presence of these biopolitics in cyberspace, Haraway's optimistic vision of an emancipatory cyborg future can be "little more than a postmodern pipe dream" (Williams and Bendelow 1998: 88). However, a revisiting of Haraway's manifesto reveals that she never suggested a utopian cyborg existence free of struggle from oppressive discourses. Instead she states that her cyborg writing is "about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway 1991: 175). Her conception of feminist objectivity is one that encompasses surprises,

ironies and an awareness that "we are not in charge of the world. We just live here and try to strike up noninnocent conversations by means of our prosthetic devices" (Haraway 1991: 184). Recognizing the non-innocence of each of our monstrous identities is part of the freedom of the cyborg she suggests provides a continuing hope for imagining and practicing existence in the modern world. Although much of what is elucidated by the study of Petal suggests an all too-familiar nightmare of stereotypes and body-based biases is recurring in virtual spaces, there is also this vision of possibility in avatar dreams. Like the images that appear, contradict each other and yet melt together in REM sleep, the avatar dream is a multifarious experience of fluidity and volatility and thus, possibility.

This notion of cyborg-envy becoming avatar dreams does not suggest that to engage the virtual in theorizing is to have one's eyes shut or to slumber through the matter. On the contrary, to suggest that one is not conscious while dreaming is to miss the often-rich resource of imagery and larger insight that an analysis of dreams can bring to other realms of being. After all, "no dream ever comes just to tell you what you already know... All dreams carry new information and energy in their metaphors and symbols" (Viglizzo 1997: 356). Likewise, virtual embodiment is not "pretend" embodiment or "almost" embodiment. Playing on Petal, or indeed engaging with any technology in this way is not to carve out existences as a virtual body and/or a physical body. Instead, by extending and inscribing the body across spaces and times, the body is both "particular *and* plural... an imaginative engagement that extends subjectivity beyond the self" (Hillis 1999: 172).

It is also important to emphasize that, like the world of the dream, virtual spaces only maintain their meaning within the context of other realms of lived experience. In

other words, one cannot live in cyberspace alone, since any attempt to reside solely in REM is to render oneself essentially unconscious. The "becoming" of human being is to take on these different spheres and ways of being bodied together, wrestling with their discrepancies and embracing the monstrous mixtures that emerge. For as Haraway suggests, "We need to learn in our bodies...in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name" (Haraway 1991: 177). Only through this embracing and interrogating of many ways of being bodied can we understand our own embodiment in any situating and stimulating sense. This is imperative after all, for as Haraway tells us, we need to critically examine the production of meaning and bodies, not in order to deny either of these, but "in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for a future" (Haraway 1991: 175).

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Appendix A: Commonly Used Chat Abbreviations

There are countless abbreviations for words and phrases in popular use in email and chat conversation. The following few serve as examples and explanation for the abbreviations cited within this thesis.

BRB - "Be right back"

F2F - "Face to face"

G - "grin"

HEHE - "hee, hee!"

IMO - "In my opinion"

IMHO - "In my humble opinion"

LOL - "Laughing out loud"

LMAO - "Laughing my ass off"

R/L - "Real life"

TTYL - "Talk to you later"