1 *The seductive space*

The most exciting attractions are between two
opposites that never meet.

Andy Warhol

The appearance of computer-mediated communication has intro-
duced a new type of discourse and consequently a new type of per-
sonal relationship has developed. There are various kinds of computer-
mediated relationships that differ in some significant aspects: one-to-one
or group communication formats, interrelating with real people or fan-
tasy personas, interrelating with anonymous or identified people, and
communicating in synchronous or asynchronous formats. Such types of
communication can be text-based, voice-based, video-based, or a combi-
nation of any of these. My main concern is with those types of communi-
cation that facilitate romantic relationships. Foremost among such types
are email, which is asynchronous text-based communication that can be
one-to-one or one-to-many, and chat or instant messaging that allows
for synchronous text-based communication, either one-to-one or many-
to-many. These types of communication take place between real people
who, while not completely anonymous, may have not fully disclosed their
identity: in most cases, you cannot see or hear the other person.

The interactive revolution in imagination

We waste time looking for the perfect lover, instead of
creating the perfect love.

Tom Robbins

Cyberspace is a psychological and social domain. It is not tan-
gible and some of its dimensions, such as distance, and location, are
not measured by physical parameters, but by psychological content. This

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often imaginary reality is not limited to the private domain of a specific person; rather, it is shared by many people. Such a novel psychological reality is supported by sophisticated technology, but it is not defined by this technology; it is defined by the various psychological interactions occurring in it.[1]

Cyberspace is virtual in the sense that imagination is intrinsic to that space. In many online relationships, you can imagine your cybermate in whatever way you wish to and you can describe yourself as you want to be seen. When people are asked why they engaged in sexual relationships online, the most common reason given is that they have specific fantasies and desires that are not being fulfilled in their offline relationships.[2] However, in another important sense cyberspace is not virtual: online relationships are conducted between actual, flesh-and-blood people. Although this relationship involves many imaginative aspects, the relationship itself is not imaginary. Cyberspace is a part of reality; it is, therefore, incorrect to regard it as the direct opposite of real space. Cyberspace is part of real space, and online relationships are real relationships. The term "actual" may be slightly more accurate than "real" in denoting the opposite of "virtual" – although it raises certain difficulties, too. Another term that I will use often to denote the opposite of "online" is "offline."

People typically consider the virtual, or imaginative, nature of cyberspace to be its unique characteristic. Although cyberspace involves imaginary characters and events of a kind and magnitude not seen before, less developed virtual realities have always been integral parts of human life. All forms of art, including cave drawings made by our Stone Age ancestors, involve some kind of virtual reality. In this sense, cyberspace does not offer a totally new dimension to human life. What is new about cyberspace is its interactive nature and this interactivity has made it a psychological reality as well as a social reality. It is a space where real people have actual interactions with other real people, while being able to shape, or even create, their own and other people's personalities. The move from passive imaginary reality to the interactive virtual reality of cyberspace is much more radical than the move from photographs to movies.

Most other types of virtual realities are essentially one-dimensional: the person may passively receive the informational content from outside (as in art), or create it by herself (as in imagination), but there is no actual interaction among the participants – the interaction is purely imaginary.

Communicating through writing letters or speaking on the phone involve actual interaction, but none of these involve a comprehensive virtual environment – the participants in such communication are typically fully immersed in their own ordinary, non-imaginary environment. Cyberspace provides a whole virtual environment in which such actions take

place. The closest imaginary reality to the virtual one associated with cyberspace is that elicited by phone sex. Actual interaction is also part of phone sex, but the imaginary environment is limited to a certain sexual activity only. Hence, its impact is limited as well.

Interactivity is a crucial element in the psychological reality of cyberspace. The greater and the more profound the interaction is, the greater degree of psychological reality we attach to it. Thus, psychological reality is perceived to be greater if what we send and what we receive consist not merely of words that we type, but also of voices, pictures, and body movements. The outputs we send are of greater psychological reality for us the more their execution seems natural to us; for example, the less effort we need to control them. The psychological reality of the inputs we receive is determined by features such as the speed and frequency of the responses that express the sender's psychological attitude toward us. An immediate response is psychologically more exciting, just as live broadcasting is more exciting. Similarly, instant messaging is psychologically more real than corresponding by email. The more similar the inputs and outputs are to offline interaction, the more real they are typically perceived to be.[3]

The greater interactivity of cyberspace implies that we have greater control over our personal relationships. For example, when we so desire, we can either slow them down or increase their pace. If someone surprises you – say, by expressing her love for you – you have time to consider your response. You do not have to rely merely on your spontaneous responses. In this sense, it is easier to cope with online relationships. The sense of greater control is often central to enjoyable experiences.[4]

Cyberspace is similar to fictional space in the sense that in both cases the flight into virtual reality is not so much a denial of reality as a form of exploring and playing with it. One crucial difference between the two is the interactive nature of cyberspace. In cyberspace, people do not merely read or watch a romantic affair undertaken by others, but in a sense they are actually participating in it. As one woman says: **"It's almost as though you were reading erotica, except you are also writing the erotic story, and you don't know what's going to happen next."**[5] Karl Marx once said that people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please."[6] In cyberspace, they can finally make it exactly as they please.

In cyberspace, we are more actively involved than we are when we read novels, but, in addition, online communication touches upon more personal and specific aspects than does reading novels. As one woman writes: **"I love reading about sexual things. When I know that the writer is thinking of me specifically, it is completely, absolutely thrilling. And when I find someone who enjoys the same level of explicitness I do and has similar writing skills, it's particularly alluring."**[7] Since the personal aspect is of special

importance in stimulating intense emotions, cyberlove and cybersex are typically more exciting than reading novels or watching television.

When reading fiction or watching a movie we enter the imaginary world even if we remain aware of its imaginary nature. We suspend disbelief and though, on one level, we accept the fictional reality of the characters, on another we recognize that the situation is make-believe. In cyberspace this recognition is often absent.

The imaginary journey into the fictional reality of novels or movies is not usually condemned unless it is perceived to have a negative influence on our everyday life. The moment that such negative impact is present, as in the case of violent movies, the effect of the imaginary reality is condemned. The interactive nature of cyberspace makes it more susceptible to moral criticism, as its practical impact is greater. As one man argues: **"Cybersex is closer to having a hooker than plain pornography because there is a real and active person involved on the other end. People are touching each others' minds in a mutual and cooperative way that silent fantasy does not permit."**[8] Indeed, in a survey of Internet users, 75% stated that they would find it acceptable for their significant other to visit an adult site, whereas 77% said that it would not be acceptable for their significant other to participate in an adult one-on-one online video conversation with a member of the opposite sex whom they do not know.[9] Due to the interactive nature of cyberspace, virtual activities on the Net are accorded moral significance.

Cyberlove and cybersex

Online sex is a wonderful invention. Now, if only everyone could type faster.

Unknown[10]

The interactive element in cyberlove and cybersex has made these options very attractive. The nature of cyberlove and cybersex will be explored throughout the book. In this section, I characterize some of their salient features.

Cyberlove is a romantic relationship consisting mainly of computer-mediated communication. Despite the fact that the partner is physically remote and is to a certain extent anonymous, in one important aspect this relationship is similar to an offline romantic relationship – the emotion of love is experienced as fully and as intensely as in an offline relationship.

In a broad sense, cybersex refers to all types of sexually related activities offered in cyberspace. In this sense, the viewing of sexually explicit materials on the Internet is also a type of cybersex. Since this book is concerned with personal relationships, I am less interested in this type of cybersex and will use the term in the narrower sense, referring to a social interaction between at least two people who are exchanging real-time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused. People send provocative and erotic messages to each other, with the purpose of bringing each other to orgasm as they masturbate together in real time. These messages are typically sent via a private communication, such as an email or instant message, but can also be part of a public chat room – in which case, they could be considered as public sexual activity. The messages may be of various types – video, audio, and text-based; here I mainly refer to text-based cybersex. In cybersex (or in slang, "cybering"), people describe body characteristics to one another, verbalize sexual actions and reactions, and make believe that the virtual happenings are real. Cybersex requires the articulation of sexual desire to an extent that would be most unusual in face-to-face encounters. In cyberspace, that which often remains unspoken must be put into words.[11]

When people are involved in cybersex, they cannot actually kiss each other, but nevertheless the kiss they may send is emotionally vivid and its emotional impact is often similar to that of an actual kiss. Our active role in cyberspace makes this environment more exciting and seductive than that of daydreams, erotic novels, or X-rated movies; hence the temptation to engage in sexual activities is greater. A married man whose wife of fourteen years is having cybersex, reports: **"I offered a compromise and suggested that she read adult stories or look at pictures instead of a one-to-one chat. She refused. I even suggested that while she's cybering, she types, I do the things the other person describes, but she flatly refused and told me that it was a personal chat and is nothing to do with me."**[12] The personal interaction, rather than the mere aspect of imagination, is what excites his wife. Since the line separating passive observation from full interaction has already been crossed in cybersex, it becomes easier to blur the line separating imagination from reality.

Participants in cyberlove take the reality of cyberspace seriously. Thus, people speak of their cybermates or even their online husbands or online wives. People have even got cybermarried and vowed to remain faithful to each other. One woman wrote that what attracted her to respond to the first message sent by her online lover, with whom she is now deeply in love, is that he asked her to cyberdance with him.[13] Some women have claimed that they do not want to engage in cybersex with the first person who asks

6   *Love Online*

them, since they want to save their virtual virginity for the right man. Similarly, some say that they do not want to have a one-night cyberstand, but rather wish to have a more extended and meaningful online sexual affair. A man who often participates in cybersex writes:

> I love to cyber; I think it's great. The only thing is I can't cyber with someone I have never talked to before. Someone sent me a message and went right into cybering without asking my name or if I even wanted to. I know it's probably silly since the person you cyber with is a stranger, but I would just like to have a regular conversation first. I guess some reality does play a part here, because I would not have sex (in real life) with someone whose name I didn't even know.[14]

People complain that they now have the added pressure of faking cyberorgasms too. In one survey, 36% of Net surfers who had engaged in cybersex said they had reached orgasm; 25% said they had faked it; and the rest neither reached orgasm nor faked it. (The percentage of people faking orgasms in offline circumstances seems to be somewhat greater: in one survey, 56% of women and 23% of men claimed to have faked an orgasm.)[15] One married woman described her online sexual partner: he was **"self-centered on his part and not very exciting and I found myself faking an orgasm over the computer and thought I had totally lost my mind."**[16] The illusory nature of cyberspace does not diminish the need to resort to the same illusory methods used in offline circumstances.

The presence of interactive characteristics in the imaginary realm of online relationship is a tremendous revolution in personal relationships, as it enables people to reap most of the benefits associated with offline relationships without investing significant resources.

The interactive revolution in online romantic and sexual relationships has promoted both greater social interaction and more solitary activities. In comparison with standard fantasies, online relationships involve more social activities with other people. However, in comparison with offline relationships, many romantic activities are performed while someone is all alone sitting in front of a computer. Take, for example, cybersex. Compared with offline masturbation, cybersex (like phone sex) is a much more social interaction, as it is done while communicating with another person. While in offline masturbation, orgasm comes courtesy of the person's own hands and mind, in cybersex, orgasm also comes courtesy of another person's mind. Cybersex narrows the gap between masturbation and offline sex, as it involves the active contribution of another person. However, compared with offline sexual relationships, cybersex is less social and it can in fact reduce the need for actual social interactions.

Letter, telegraph, and telephone

Pardon me, but I am writing a phone book – can I have your
number?

Unknown

Online romantic relationships are not the only kind of romantic relationships that use communication to overcome spatial limitations. Other examples include relationships that are based purely on conventional letters, telegraph, or phone conversations.[17]

Falling in love through letter writing is not a new phenomenon: it has been going on for hundreds of years. It has been particularly prevalent during prolonged periods of war when men were far away from home and the only way to communicate with them was through letters. Writing love letters is also common in peacetime when the two lovers are in different places. Online relationships are based upon an improved version of an old-fashioned way of communicating: writing. In the new version, the time gap between writing, sending, receiving, and reading has been made almost instantaneous – the sender can receive a reply while still in the state of emotions in which she sent the original message. This difference, which may appear merely technical, is of great emotional significance, as emotions are brief and involve the urge to act immediately. In this sense, instant messaging is better than email. A man comparing the two methods remarks: "I think I prefer the IM's. I have had cybersex once or twice, and it's nice to have that instant feedback from the woman (God, I hope they're women) that you're with."[18]

Writing romantic letters to a person you hardly know and online romantic communication have certain aspects in common: for example, the scanty amount of information the partners have about each other at the beginning of the relationship, the significant role of imagination, the reliance on writing skills and verbal communication, the spatial separation, discontinuity of communication, and marginal physical investment. In both types of relationships, people fall in love with individuals who are almost strangers to them and about whom they know only what they glean from the written word. The information we rely on when we write letters is often greater than that available through online communication. When we write a letter, we usually know the real name and address of the recipient. If the letter is being written under special circumstances, such as during a period of war, we may be able to detect further details – that the person is a soldier, his rank, his probable age, and a rough idea of his present situation. Some information can also be gathered about the

sender from the type of paper she writes on, her handwriting, and her name.[19]

Even this amount of information may be absent in online relationships: we have neither the real address nor the real name of our online friend, and there are usually no special circumstances that can provide further information. Of course, the name our partner chooses to use or the type of chat room we are in can provide some clues, but these are typically insufficient and unreliable. Thus, if the name of the chat room is "Married & Flirting," you can assume that most participants are married people who would like to have an affair, but even this meager information may be unreliable. It should be noted, however, that most sites now offer online profiles from which you can gather a reasonable amount of identifying and personal information about someone; sometimes even photos are included.

The presence of partial information, and hence the need to fill the informational gap, explains the significant role of imagination both in letter writing and in online communication. When someone is not physically present, imagination takes on some of the functions typically fulfilled by vision but people have to be careful about their underlying assumptions.

Letter writing and online communication are based on writing skills and verbal communication and not on external appearance. In offline affairs, two partners can have sex or go to a restaurant without talking too much to each other. In online affairs, every activity consists essentially of verbal communication. The emphasis on verbal communication forces the participants to enlarge or deepen the scope of their mutual interest. Extended communication between two partners cannot be limited to sexual messages; other aspects must be explored as well.

The great temporal gap between one letter and another does not suit the impetuous nature of romantic affairs. A snail-mail affair is also less immediate in the sense that you cannot just speak your mind; you need to find an envelope, a stamp, and a postbox before (slow) communication can take place. Other features distinguishing online communication from conventional letters are related, for example, to convenience, ability to copy the message and send it to other people, a possible use of multimedia, and a convenient manner in which incoming and outgoing messages can be stored.

Telegraphic communication between private wireless operators who made Morse contact with other operators is similar in many respects to cyber communication. Both cases involve online exchanges between people who do not meet face-to-face. In both types of communication,

speed and writing style are more important than external appearance. One significant difference between the two types is that, whereas access to cyberspace is open to almost anyone, telegraphic communication was limited to a closed, exclusive community of telegraph operators. Another difference concerns the lack of privacy in telegraphic communication, as opposed to the anonymity typical of cyberspace communication.

Despite the apparently impersonal nature of telegraphic communication, it generated profound and intimate romances; some of these came to an abrupt halt when the two parties met for the first time. Accordingly, at the end of the nineteenth century, several articles and even a book were published on telegraphic romances, bearing titles such as "Romances via the telegraph," "Making love by telegraph," "Wired love," and "The dangers of wired love."

The powerful romantic impact of the written communication that is typical of cyberspace is clearly expressed in telegraphic communication as well. Thus, an article discussing a love relationship by telegraph describes a man who was involved in "a red hot row" with a young female operator. After some time, he started to feel in love with the woman, realizing that "nothing short of an angel could work that wire." After meeting face-to-face, they married and remained happily married for a long time.[20]

Limited access, limited vocabulary, the expense involved, and lack of anonymity are among the main reasons for the limited impact of the telegraph upon romantic affairs. In this sense, the introduction of the telephone has been much more significant.

Interpersonal relationships conducted exclusively via phone conversations have some features in common with online relationships. Telephone conversations often involve sincere self-disclosure, as do online relationships. Like cybersex, phone sex involves no fear of unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. In both types of sexual activity, external appearance is not significant.

Phone communication, however, is closer to face-to-face communication than online communication is. Phone sex does not involve typing but engages with the other person's real voice, whispers, sighs, moans, groans, and other sexually arousing sounds; it involves the immediacy of face-to-face interaction.[21] Phone conversations involve a lesser degree of anonymity – typically, your gender and approximate age are detectable – and hence imagination has a lesser role in such communication. Phone communication is also more expensive than online communication and this may influence the length and thus the content of the conversation.

Another important issue in this regard is that of continuity. The ability to call the other partner whenever one wants to may prevent the

participants from disconnecting themselves from this relationship if they want to end the affair. Unlike online communication, in which you choose when and how to respond without immediate time or psychological pressures, phone communication is more intrusive and insistent. The telephone forces you to respond at a time and in a manner that may be inconvenient for you: it induces a sense of obligation and urgency that is hard to ignore. Moreover, since most telephones do not have off switches, this further enhances the sense of urgency in replying to the phone's ring. This sense is even more pronounced in the case of the telegraph.[22]

It is easier to avoid or defer responding to unpleasant questions in email communication than in phone conversations. An obsessive romantic partner can intrude upon our everyday routine much more by phone than by online communication. Merely pressing a button cannot end intimate phone relationships. If you do not pick up the phone and merely respond to messages on an answer machine, communication by phone may be less intrusive, but then it loses some of its advantages, such as immediacy. Today, with the extensive use of mobile phones, there are even fewer opportunities to escape incoming calls. However, mobile phones do have off switches that enable you to mark the boundary of your private zone and so can be less intrusive.

In many chat rooms and instant messaging communication, there are buddy lists that enable people to know when you are online. This increases the continuity aspect that is more problematic in email relationships. Even when taking into account this feature, phone communication is still more intrusive and less anonymous than online communication. The latter provides, therefore, a greater degree of safety. Hence, it is more likely that a woman will give a strange man her email address, rather than her phone number. A man who presents himself as an expert in these matters argues: "I've found that getting an email address is not only easier, but it gets more positive responses later on. And I've found that emails are answered FAR more often than voicemail messages."[23] Indeed, giving someone your email, then your phone number, and finally your address, represents increasing levels of trust in the other person and your commitment to the relationship.[24]

The greater similarity of phone conversations to face-to-face communication increases the reality of such conversations. This is nicely expressed in the following description by a 26-year-old woman who has engaged in both cybersex and phone sex:

> I met lots of men, and eventually I had cybersex with many of them. This did not seem promiscuous to me. I would never have sex with so many men in real life. After three months of this, I met