COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE ON THE

INTERNET

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(Note: this lecture will be accompanied by Powerpoint digital slides.)
[slide #1]

PART I. INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a vast, amorphous network of networks created by live links between computers. As many people know, it began as a project of the American Department of Defense, the so-called ARPAnet, in the 1960s and early 1970s. The original goal of ARPAnet was to maintain communication among military personnel if one node in the network should become inoperative.

In the 40 or so years since then, the Internet has undergone many dramatic, mostly unforeseen transformations. Digital technologies challenge many aspects of print culture. It is producing new forms of human sociation and cultural activity, as well as changing older ones. The speed of change is so great that it is often difficult to generalize about these developments—something like trying to photograph a rapidly moving train. Already in the late 1990s I heard it said of a person who only used email—that is, did not participate in chat or surf the World Wide Web—that he or she was "living in the Stone Age." The gap between children and teenagers, who are growing up as natural, full-fledged participants

in this new world, and their parents can sometimes be daunting, challenging traditional parental authority. In this lecture I will necessarily focus on just a few aspects of these developments.

There are many modes of communication online [slide #2], and obviously, I cannot review them all here in any detail. In its current incarnation, at least, the World Wide Web is primarily experienced by individuals alone at their computers; it is not a medium for direct interpersonal communication; I will therefore not discuss it further in this lecture.

Apart from two-person email, both private and public, a new phase in the history of letter-writing, there are important forms of group-based asynchronous communication. In all asynchronous modes, as in traditional paper letters, there is a lag between the composition and dispatch of a message and the time that the recipient receives or reads it. The earliest asynchronous mode beyond the original military technology was the electronic bulletin board. BBSs, as they are called, flourished in the 1980s among hackers and other technically oriented people involved with computers, mostly males. Today, 1000s of listserv discussion lists, Usenet newsgroups, and other asynchronous group modes allow people of common interests--whether stamp-collecting or medieval philosophy--who are geographically dispersed, to communicate at their convenience, even in the middle of the night and in their pajamas. Typically, contributions are archived, creating vast repositories of typed text. Despite high turnover in many of these groups, stable regulars contribute to the emergence of

group cultural patterns and norms. Here are some of the norms that are common to many such groups. [slide #3].

Synchronous, real-time communication online, including both private instant messaging and online chat, has become part of the daily life of millions, especially teenagers, but also of adults, reviving or maintaining contact with family and friends, and of young people pursuing mates or friendships online. In the latter part of this lecture I will focus on real-time communication on IRC (Internet Relay Chat), one of the world's most popular synchronous modes, run entirely on a volunteer basis. Another form of popular real-time chat is what are known as MOOs or MUDs, text-based virtual realities, "worlds" created with words alone, in which participants engage in elaborate role-playing and fantasy. Probably the best known publication about what goes on in MOOs is Sherry Turkle's 1995 book, **Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet**. My second lecture will be devoted to the language of email, the most widely used form of asynchronous online communication. I will devote the remainder of this lecture to synchronous communication. Later I will offer brief introductory overviews of two case studies of verbal and visual aspects of communication on IRC.

FROM INSTRUMENTAL TO EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

One of the most striking developments on the Internet has been the shift from purely instrumental uses to expressive ones. New media facilitate the development of social relationships, the expression of emotion, and creativity of many kinds. In its early applications beyond defense needs, the medium was

primarily used in work settings. As a consequence, social scientists were slow to pay attention to emergent expressive aspects, because they too had a primarily instrumental orientation toward computers. For instance, early research between 1975 and 1990 studied how email affected communication at work, whether it undermined hierarchical relationships, and so on. Terms like "teleconferencing" and "conferences" were common in research published during that period. Thus, people expected the frame of all messages exchanged to be serious. Researchers in the early 1980s saw the medium as cold, anonymous, and lacking in "social presence" because of the absence of non-verbal cues such as facial expression. The commonly used metaphor "the Information Highway" has also perpetuated perception of the new media as mere conduits for the transfer of bits and bytes.

Today we know that cyberspace is as much about people and their activities as about the transfer of information. By the mid- to late 1990s, cyberspace was, in *my* preferred metaphor, a buzzing beehive of social and cultural activity. As the millennium approached, an older paradigm of computers as rational tools competed with the newer one of computers as arenas for ***play, social experience and dramatic interaction***.

My book, ***Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online***, published in 2001 [slide #4], presents five studies of playfulness in digital writing and communication. In the latter half of the 1990s, many forms of playful, expressive activity flourished on the Internet. Documenting and analyzing this trend, the book focuses on overt manifestations of spontaneous playfulness on the computer screen-- some of the

ways that people frolicked and gamboled and capered about with, or experimented with, the stuff of speech and writing, as well as with graphics and color. I also refer secondarily to evidence for the fun that people had, the joy and exhilaration that they experienced, and the humor that accompanied or characterized their activities.

THE INTERNET AS A SPACE FOR PLAY AND PLAYFULNESS

As Johan Huizinga's classic *Homo Ludens* eloquently expounded, play has always been an important component in human culture. In a reworked version of Huizinga's formulation, Roger Caillois suggests that play is activity which has six features [slide #5]. It is:

1. **Free: … playing is not obligatory...**
2. **Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance**
3. **Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained before hand and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative**
4. **Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth...**
5. **Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts**
6. **Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality, or of a free unreality, as against real life.**

All of these features except the second fit playful activity on the Internet—activity online is of course *not* circumscribed in space and time. Among the various forms of online communication, chat modes are especially conducive to the activation of a play frame. Because the medium is dynamic and because identity is disguised, participants enjoy reduced accountability for their actions, and can engage in "pretend" or "make-believe" behavior of all kinds.

In the mid- to late 1990s cyberspace was anarchic, playful even carnivalesque, despite the absence of the body, or at least a radical transformation of its role. In the terms of the anthropologist Victor Turner, it was a *liminal space*, "betwixt and between," freed from the rules and expectations that normally govern daily life, governed by the subjunctive mode of possibility and experiment. This was so both because it was new and still relatively uncharted culturally, and because, at least in its textual forms, it frequently masked identity and reduced accountability as efficiently as all-enveloping costumes and masks worn at carnival time.

To what extent may we continue to characterize the Internet as a whole as carnivalesque and playful today? With the participation of 100s of millions of rank and file persons whose backgrounds differ greatly from those of the hackers, programmers and computer professionals who created these technologies, and many processes of institutionalization and normalization under way, such broad generalizations are no longer appropriate. The Internet has become like the rest of contemporary life—highly differentiated and complex, as well as increasingly integrated with the offline world, making generalizations difficult. In this lecture I focus primarily on what I believe were major trends in the late 1990s, leaving assessment of the Internet today for others or for another time.

WHY SO PLAYFUL?

Why was interaction involving computers so playful? There is no simple answer. I believe that at least four factors worked together to promote it [slide #6].

<u>Interactivity</u>

An important factor--really a set of features--is "interactivity." The nature of the computer as medium fosters playfulness, but just what is involved is a matter of some debate. Many people use the term "interactivity," but they understand the term differently. The dynamic nature of digital interaction is made possible by the shift "from atoms to bits," to use Nicholas Negroponte's apt phrase, or to put it somewhat more dramatically, the release from the tyranny of materiality.

Interaction of all kinds with computers is often felt to be totally absorbing; computers are experienced as an extension of the self, even as a "second self", in Sherry Turkle's phrase. Users have a sense of "flow" and lose track of time. The "magical" quality of instant efficaciousness in interaction with the computer-- even when no human partner is involved--enhances this sense of flow. We receive instant feedback to our choices. The astonishing speed and ease with which formerly difficult, time-consuming tasks can now be done, and the ephemerality of the medium invite playfulness. In his book, ***Writing Space: the Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing***, Jay David Bolter wrote:

> **Playfulness is a defining quality of this new medium. Electronic literature will remain a game, just as all computer programming is a game. [Hypertext]...grows out of ... computer games..... the impermanence of electronic literature cuts both ways: as there is no lasting success, there there is also no failure that needs to last. By contrast, there is a solemnity at the center of printed literature--even comedy, romance and satire--because of the immutability of the printed page.**

Another approach to interactivity focuses on the metaphor of the theater, as in the work of Brenda Laurel, Richard Lanham and Allucquère Stone. In **Computers as Theatre**, Brenda Laurel suggests that the more choices we have, the more often we can make them, the more they matter, and the more immersive the experience, the more interactive it is. This view can apply both to solo interaction with computers and to interpersonal communication mediated by them.

Richard Lanham, author of the **Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology and the Arts**, views the personal computer as "a device of intrinsic dramaticality." The speed, flexibility, interactivity, and richness of possibilities it offers--even in mere text, let alone when multimedia options are available--turn every user into a kind of "director" of his or her own show. Macintosh users were the first to experience computing as "flying," as extraordinarily liberating, in the mid-1980s. Today, 100s of millions experience it, usually via Microsoft Windows.

Hacker Culture

Hacker culture was a second important influence on emergent Net practices. Playfulness is absolutely central to what hackers do and how they perceive themselves [slide #7]. I am not referring to today's criminal hackers in the news, whose activities are strongly rejected by those adhering to the original hacker ethic. According to hackers' self-definition in the famous **New Hackers' Dictionary**, known as the "Jargon File" in its online version, a hacker is "A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities," or "one who enjoys the intellectual challenge of

creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations." To "hack" is "to interact with a computer in a playful and exploratory rather than a goal-directed way". Hackers love to play with words and symbols, and are known for punning and other clever, irreverent uses of language. The expression "snail mail" for ordinary paper mail is just one of their neologisms which have become part of the vocabulary of many participants in online culture.

Hacker typography is often intentionally illegible and transgressive. In this slide [slide #8] we see eccentric text produced almost exclusively with means available in plain ASCII, the typographic characters available for use across all operating systems on the Internet. Features include unusual placement of lower case and capital letters, and the substitution of "ph" for "f" as in "phreaking." The first example in the next slide [slide #9] displays the typographic characters in a full-fledged digital font called "Anarchy Mono." Unusual characters have eccentrically been substituted for the conventional ones of the alphabet. Thus, typing the letter "e" in its usual location will produce, instead, the symbol for pounds sterling; similarly if one presses the key for the conventional letter "s," the result will be a dollar sign or the legal "double-S." In the second example, we see how regular text would look if rendered in another distracting hacker font called "Hacker Argot."

Cyberspace as a New Social and Cultural Frontier

A third major factor fostering playfulness on the Internet was the frontier-like quality of this new world in the 1980s and 1990s [slide #10], highlighted in the titles of several books, Howard Rheingold's ***The Virtual Community:***

Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier, Katie Hafner and John Markhoff's

Cyberpunk: Outlaws and Hackers on the Computer Frontier, and Peter

Ludlow's *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier.* John Perry Barlow, a well-

known commentator on the new technologies, suggested in 1990 that:

> **cyberspace, in its present condition, has a lot in common with the 19th century West. It is vast, unmapped, culturally and legally ambiguous, verbally terse..., hard to get around in, and up for grabs. Large institutions already claim to own the place, but most of the actual natives are solitary and independent, sometimes to the point of sociopathy. It is, of course, a perfect breeding ground for both outlaws and new ideas about liberty.**

Already in the late 1990s one could take issue with the frontier metaphor.

There was much evidence of growing social organization in cyberspace. Usenet

newsgroups and listserv lists were rapidly developing their own subcultures,

including rules to govern interaction and sanctions for offenders. Websites of

MUDs and IRC channels served as community bulletin boards, posting

photographs of regulars, rules, and information about past and upcoming real-

world and online social events. Ferment in the media and in emergent

cyberspace law in the late 1990s about the problematics of regulating

pornography, racism, and libelous communication, and of preventing and

punishing computer crime was part of the struggle to domesticate this "Wild

West." Certainly, the fact that there was no "Mr. Internet," no central governing

body supervising the behavior of all participants, contributed to this sense of an

open frontier. While Barlow and others celebrated the unregulated nature of the

Internet, others critiqued it. In Lawrence Lessig's recent book *Code and Other*

Laws of Cyberspace, he advocated recognition of the need for regulation in

cyberspace and an end to glorification of the frontier metaphor.

<u>The Masking of Identity</u>

A fourth factor promoting playfulness, already mentioned earlier, was the

anonymity of the medium. Textual chat modes were especially carnivalesque

because they generally masked identity more completely than email. Nicknames

or pseudonyms and the typed text provided the mask. This point was brought

home in the famous New Yorker cartoon, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're

a dog." [slide #11]

The absence of non-verbal and other social or material cues to identity freed

participants to behave in novel ways, or to explore aspects of their personality

which had hitherto gone unexpressed, especially when participants developed

elaborate fictive personas, as in MOOs. Nicknames were ***de rigueur*** on IRC and

in chat modes generally. While IRC players could change their nick (IRCese for

nickname) at any time, they generally chose one carefully and used it

consistently over time. I will not elaborate further on this topic, since it will be the

topic of a lecture by Prof. Anna Maria de Rosa.

As I have hinted, play with identity was far more elaborate on MOOs than on

IRC, and probably more far-reaching in its consequences. When they join a

MOO, individuals create an elaborate "persona" or "character," whose description

is registered and available for reading by anyone logged on to them. After

registering their character, which may be an animal, a fantasy creature, even a

pair of persons, such as "king and queen," players may role-play in this guise for

months or years. Textual "cross-dressing"—pretending to be a member of the

opposite gender-- was the most attention-getting form of play with identity on MOOs, and some people even adopted a gender-neutral identity

In some respects it was probably justified to speak in monolithic fashion of "Internet culture" or "virtual culture" in the late 1990s. To some extent, so-called "Netizens" did come increasingly to share some elements of a common way of life--common jargon, attitudes, skills, and practices, as well as norms like those in the slide seen earlier. However, in other respects the Internet was not monolithic at all. Every online group with a fairly stable core of regulars," whether synchronous or asynchronous, develops its own subculture, its own little "world," which may be unique in important respects.

PART II. COMMUNICATION, ART AND CULTURE ON IRC: TWO TYPES OF PERFORMANCE

Two studies of communication and culture on IRC in my book ***Cyberpl@y*** are about varieties of online ***performance***. They illustrate the fact that-- surprisingly and paradoxically-- communication online in real time partially resembles communication in ***oral cultures***—cultures without writing. As in them, communication tends to be highly stylized. How a message is formulated can be just as important, or more important than its content. In this half of my lecture I will focus on two topics: (1) aspects of ***verbal art*** and playful performance in typed synchronous communication, and on (2) a new form of ***digital folk art on IRC***, in which visual images created from the elements of text—letters and other typographic symbols—serve both as "art" and as a means of communicating online.

"Typed Jazz"

One chapter in ***Cyberpl@y*** is about written communication on IRC as a form of what I call "typed jazz." I use this expression because spontaneous writing in real time is a form of ***improvisational performance***. The interactive nature of the medium (together with the absence of identifying features of the typist) calls attention to style, to message form, as well as content. When the performance frame is activated, participants in effect communicate, "Look at me!" or "Look at us, and at what we can do!" In a famous essay called "Verbal Art as Performance," Richard Bauman, a well known folklorist and student of the ethnography of communication, wrote [slide #12]:

...performance...consists in the assumption of responsibility for a display of communicative competence...the act of expression on the part of the performer is …subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence...Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity.

My chapter about typed communication on IRC presents two sets of evidence for the claim that performance is salient. First, I analyze a remarkable sequence in which the players, most of whom have never met online before, simulate smoking marihuana, via words and typographic symbols. We can conceptualize what takes place in the channel as occurring in a set of five nested "frames" of interaction [slide #13], "real life," the IRC "game" (participation generally on IRC), "party," and so on. At the "party" the participants are engaging in a form of "pretend play" in which "performance" is salient.

Herre are two sequences from the simulation that took place [slide #14] The entire simulation was logged by my then collaborator, Lucia Ruedenberg-Wright. While she and the person nicknamed <thunder> had planned to meet online for a

session that would somehow relate to her interests in "performance," the others spontaneously joined the channel, playfully called **"#weed,"** and thus did not know in advance what was to happen.

The most interesting parts of the improvisation are contributed by <thunder> and <kang>. Notice how they simulate various stages of smoking marihuana both verbally, in a manner than partially resembles comic book conventions, and graphically, as in the multiple uses of the letter "s" to simulate the sinuous smoke from the joint and the sound made when smoking it. In both examples there are evaluative "meta-comments" about the performance. In the first instance, both <kang> and Lucia, my collaborator, "wink" typographically at the clever simulation [using the "smiley" for a wink-- **;-)**]. In the second example <thunder> is so impressed with his own performance simulating the undulating smoke that he typed "wow".

The activities of a group called the "Hamnet Players," also discussed in the same chapter of my book, illustrate playful improvisational performance online in a much more extensive manner. The expression "Hamnet" is of course a play on "Hamlet" as well as on the expression "hamming it up on the Net." To "ham it up" is to overact, onstage.

Active in 1993-94 and founded by a man called Stuart Harris, an Englishman with both experience in theater and a computer professional, the Hamnet Players engaged in the first-ever experiments in virtual theater. [slide #15] Harris [slide #16] wrote parodies of **Hamlet** and Tennessee Williams's **Streetcar Named Desire,** and his wife wrote "PcBeth: an IBM Clone," a parody of **Macbeth.** The In

this photograph Harris and Kidder are in Elizabethan costume, in celebration of their Shakespearean activities. Both parodies contained ASCII "sets", built into the script. [slide #17], and for "PCbeth" Kidder also created some color graphics.

Hamnet scripts are hilarious, incongruous juxtapositions of Shakespearean language and content with IRC jargon and commands and other material drawn from contemporary popular culture. To give you an idea of what they are like, here is Scene 2 from "Hamnet". [slide #18] Each play was performed online twice. I regret that I cannot take the time to explain how this was done here.

There were many forms of brilliant improvisation when scripts were performed online. Most impressive of all was elaborate, spontaneous **interactive** "ping pong" punning. Here are some simple solo improvisations [slide #19]. The various forms of improvisation were especially remarkable, considering that the performers had never met in the real world, could not see each other, and had at their disposal only their computer keyboards and their imaginations.

Images as "Quilting in Time:" Art and Communication on IRC

The pioneering experiments in virtual theater by the Hamnet Players are an example of an effort **to transfer old genres to a new medium**—in this case the theatrical genre of parody, pastiche or farce, from the real-world stage to the Internet. Thus, they were experiments in **virtual theater**, a seeming contradiction in terms, since both laypersons and professionals have generally thought of theater as requiring the physical co-presence of performers and audience.

Perhaps even more interesting is the emergence of **new** cultural forms on the Internet, having few or even no precedents in the physical world. In the course of

this lecture, I can offer just one example, but a very striking one. In 1997 I discovered that in certain channels on IRC ,participants communicated primarily via the display of images rather than words. Chapter 6 of **Cyberpl@y** reports on my study of two channels on the Undernet, one of the major IRC networks of serverscalled **#mirc_colors** and **#mirc_rainbow**, or **colors** and **rainbow**, for short.

I call this art "**pixel patchwork**" [slide #20] because it partially resembles quilting and patchwork quilts like these [slide#21]. In the present case, this is quilting "in time" rather than in space. The patches are intangible, created from pixels. IRC images also partially resemble other traditional crafts, including weaving and embroidery. The resemblance to these crafts derives primarily from the fact that IRC text, like all word processing, is basically produced on a **grid**.

IRC images may be either abstract or figurative [slides #22, #23]. In the case of figurative images, a short pre-fabricated text has usually been added, turning the image into something like a paper greeting card. This art is a new stage in naïve **text-based** art, art literally made from the elements of text, on computers. Its immediate predecessor, which may be familiar to some, is ASCII art, made from the basic characters or typographic symbols on the computer keyboard [slide #24]. This art has existed since the 1960s, and is stored today in large collections on the World Wide Web.

Social Profile of the Players

The participants in **colors** and **rainbow** are ordinary people of all walks of life, mainly of lower middle-class to lower-class background, of moderate

education—high school or post-high school vocational training, about 60% women and 40% men. They are of all ages, from kids to people in their 60s and 70s, though most are in their middle years. While most are Americans, concentrated in the South, Southwest and West, there are also participants from many other countries. This study thus documents the integration in the late 1990s into the Internet of ordinary people who are not members of elites and far in ideology and lifestyle from the subculture that originally created computers and the Net.

In the next two slides [slides #25, #26] we see pictures of the leaders of *colors* and *rainbow*, including a woman nicknamed <sher>, *rainbow*'s most prolific, most popular artist. The leader of *rainbow* today is a woman nicknamed <patches>, reflecting her skill as an experienced quilter. While *colors* closed its virtual doors in December 2000, *rainbow* has flourished, at least until recently, when there are signs that it too may be losing players' interest.

As the next slide shows [slide #27], when individuals join the channel, they are greeted by others, usually via images. Many players use images created by others, as "tokens for interaction." At the right of the channel window we see the list of nicks of all players currently in the channel. The players select an image and insert the recipient's nick at the last moment before displaying it. Here, a player nicknamed <motosume> has just joined the channel. Note how players already present greet him, as well as another player already in the channel called <bizbille>. We can see that there is very little verbal communication. In short,

images are both "art" and tokens for interaction, both "art" and

"communication."

Hypotheses

In my analyses of image form, I have been working with two hypotheses [slide #28], one primarily psychological, and the other social in nature. Chapter 6 presents evidence for my hypothesis that ***creating, playing, and even viewing images with certain formal features, notably the prominence of pattern and symmetry, are all a means to strive for a sense of closure, completion or perfection***. The players aspire to create a protected, even quasi-magical world where they feel safe and loved.

In more recent work I have sought to connect the social aspects of channel activity more directly with the art itself. My second hypothesis is that ***bilateral symmetry—what is often called "mirror" symmetry-- in images serves as a visual metaphor for communitas, for group solidarity***. One of the most eloquent expressions of the longing for solidarity is an image which used to be on the ***rainbow*** Website [slide #29]. An archetypal pair of outstretched arms encircles nine little faces, all constructed from ASCII characters. Under the image is the message, "We love everyone here on ***#mirc_rainbow***."

Pattern and Symmetry as a Means to Strive for Closure

IRC images are full of ornament, pattern, and symmetry. Despite their intangibility, they have striking continuities with many forms of tangible decorative and ethnographic art of the past. As defined by James Trilling in his book ***The Language of Ornament***, ornament is "the elaboration of functionally complete

objects for the sake of visual pleasure." A manual for graphic designers defines

pattern as "a design composed of one or more motifs, multiplied and arranged in

an orderly sequence; a single motif is a unit with which the designer composes a

pattern by repeating it at regular intervals over a surface."

Mathematicians have identified 17 types of symmetry. Symmetry is "the

correspondence in size, form and arrangement of parts on oppposite sides of a

plane, line, or point." The best known, most easily identified type is **bilateral** or

mirror symmetry. If "folded" along an axis either vertically or horizontally, the two

halves of an image containing bilateral symmetry would overlap perfectly.

 In IRC art, as in past decorative art, pattern and symmetry are created

through many kinds of **repetition**-- of words, typographic symbols, and of

stylized figurative motifs.The next slide [slide #30] an enlargement of an image

seen earlier, is an especially dramatic example, containing not only very

elaborate systematic play with typography, but also four axes of symmetry,

vertical and horizontal as well as two diagonal axes, because it is a square. In

the next two slides we see examples of repetition of a word or nickname [slide

#31] or of a stylized figurative motif [slide #32]. Images displayed are

experienced as "virtual hugs." In many cases, the word "hug" itself actually

appears on the image [slide #33].

Bilateral Symmetry and Group Solidarity

To recapitulate, my second hypothesis, developed after the publication of

Cyberpl@y, is that in creating, displaying and viewing images containing

bilateral or mirror symmetry, the players are expressing their longing for a sense

of community. In recent research I compared images created to celebrate
anniversaries of the channel called *rainbow*—in other words, the birthday of the
group—with images created to celebrate the birthdays of specific individuals.
The next slide [slide #34] contains four examples of anniversary images. Note
that the upper two contain perfect vertical and horizontal bilateral symmetry,
whereas the lower left image is intermediate (somewhat symmetrical), and the
lower right one is asymmetrical. Here are examples of asymmetrical images
created to celebrate <texxy>'s birthday. [slide #35].

Remarkably, I find that **channel anniversary images are twice as likely to
contain bilateral symmetry (usually vertical) as individual birthday images,
and that birthday images are nearly twice as likely to be irregular or
asymmetrical.** Here also is the image [slide #36] that <texxy> had prepared in
advance to thank the others for his online party: a near perfect square, containing
four axes of symmetry; similarly the little squares within each quadrant also
contain 4 axes of symmetry!

Figurative Images: Teddy Bears Galore

Although I cannot discuss figurative images in any detail, I would like to say at
least a few more words about them. Look again now at the figurative images that
I showed you earlier in this lecture [slide #37]. They are either sentimental or
playful and humorous; many could be classified as "cute" or "sweet kitsch." Many
are child-like and regressive. Nothing expresses better than images of teddy
bears [slide #38], which are very common in my material, the longing of the

players for a simpler, safer, more comforting world than the one in which they live.

Ritualized Play and Performance

My current work on IRC art has led me to realize that we see not one, but **two** quite different types of performance online. In the case of the simulation of smoking marihuana and the productions of the Hamnet Players, both involving textual improvisation, we were invited to appreciate the skills of individuals. In the case of IRC art, we are dealing instead, I believe, with a case of **collective** performance. I believe that this is so even though the accomplishments of certain artists are recognized by the group. ***IRC art is a form of ritualized play or playful secular ritual,*** in which it doesn't much matter who is greeting whom or how, as long as the group continues to engage in a ritual in which "phatic communion," the experience of being together, is expressed and reaffirmed. Regrettably, for lack of time I cannot develop these ideas in any detail in this lecture. The transfer of ritual to the new technologies is an important topic in its own right.

CONCLUSIONS

We should recognize that, along with its important information-distributing functions, the Internet has become a kind of grand "grand piano"—an exciting expressive instrument that has opened up many new avenues for human expression and communication, for people of all walks of life without extensive formal training in programming or hardware aspects of computing. We have seen that some efforts are directed to the transfer of old cultural genres to new media

and to exploitation of new possibilities opened up by them. In other instances, we are witnessing new cultural experiments, such as the IRC art I have discussed.

I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture that the rate of change in our times is dizzying, and that this poses great difficulties for researchers eager to generalize about what is happening and how it is affecting our lives. My case study of playful performance in textual communication online illuminates, I believe, a general tendency that flourishes particularly in synchronous chat. It also "bubbles up" occasionally, *even* in email, as we shall see in my next lecture.

As for IRC art, this particular phenomenon may well disappear in the not too distant future, as new technologies and new uses of technologies displace the old. But this case study illustrates two points of lasting significance. First, it demonstrates that people of average education and moderate computer skills are able to create new cultural forms that have important continuities with past traditions and values, but at the same time help them adapt to disorienting change. I distinguish between the individual, psychological level of analysis and the cultural: whether this activity actually benefits individuals is beyond my mandate, though I do believe it has the potential to enrich their lives. Second, the study offers a glimmer of what may be at stake in the creation of religious and secular ritual online. Ten years ago, I thought that ritual was one domain of human activity that was not likely to be transferred to the new media, particularly because of the absence of direct appeal to the senses, stressed in the literature on the anthropology of ritual. I have changed my mind.

Suggested Reading

Baym, Nancy. 2000. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, CA & London: Sage. (about r.a.t.s. (rec.arts.tv.soaps), a Usenet newsgroup that follows soap operas)

Bolter, Jay David. 1991. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Chaps 1-4, pp. 1-62.

Cherny, Lynn. 1999. *Conversation and Community: Chat in a Virtual World*. Stanford: CSLI Publications, Stanford, chaps. 1, 7. (about ElseMOO, a role-playing virtual reality that was a spin-off of LambdaMOO, the original MOO).

Danet, Brenda. 2001. *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, chapters 1, 3, 6. Chapter 6, about IRC art, is also available online at the book's Companion Website, http://atar.mscc.huji.ac.il/~msdanet/cyberpl@y/. Best viewed in Internet Explorer. The online version includes all illustrations as well as the text. A text-only .pdf version can also be downloaded.

Danet, Brenda, Lucia Ruedenberg, and Yehudit Rosenbaum-Tamari. 1997. "'Hmmm...Where's That Smoke Coming From?' " Writing, Play and Performance on Internet Relay Chat". *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*, 2, 4. http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue4/.

Jones, Steven G., ed. 1997. *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage.

Porter, David, ed. 1997. *Internet Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, especially papers by Shawn P.Wilbur, Derek Fioster, and Dave Healy.

Raymond, Eric S. 1996. *The New Hackers' Dictionary* (3rd ed). Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press. Especially Guy Steele Jr., "Confessions of a Happy Hacker," and Appendix B, "A Portrait of J. Random Hacker." See also the online version, "The Jargon File," http://beast.cc.emory.edu/Jargon30/JARGON.HTML or http://www.tuxedo.org/%7Eesr/jargon/ or http://www.logophilia.com/jargon/jargon.html.

Reid, Elizabeth. 1996. Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat: Constructing Communities. In *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, edited by P. Ludlow. Cambridge, Ma: M.I.T. Press. (excerpted from Reid, Elizabeth. 1991. Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat. http://home.earthlink.net/~aluluei/work.htm; pioneering student study of communication and culture on IRC).

Turkle, Sherry. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. Introduction and Chapter 1, pp. 9-49.

Werry, Christopher C. 1996. "Linguistic and Interactional Features of Internet Relay Chat." Pp. 47-64 in *Computer-mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-cultural Perspectives*, edited by S. C. Herring, pp. 47-64. Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins.