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Cyberspace is empty – who is afraid of avatars?
Cyberspace, Psychosis and the Internet

Cyberspace is empty
In the 10th book of the 'Metamorphoses', Ovid tells the story of Pygmalion. He begins his story with a description of those women who had refused to praise the goddess Venus, and were turned to stone for their insolence. Pygmalion is working as a sculptor, and is constantly improving his skills. The work on the ivory sculpture of a woman, especially, is taking up all his effort and ambition. He has perfected this work so much that he finally falls in love with his creation. He experiences the statue as alive and starts behaving towards it as if it were a living person. He kisses the ivory statue, embraces it, and gives it presents, always wanting to change it into a living woman. One day, he comes home to find that the sculpture has turned into a woman. He names her Eliza and they live happily together, so the story tells.

In 1964, Joseph Weizenbaum wrote a program to help gain more information about language analysis. He called this program 'Eliza', after the Pygmalion story, because it was capable of learning. Since speech always has to have a subject within a certain context, the program was constructed with two tapes, the first providing the speech analyser, the second containing the script. A script is a certain set of rules, comparable to those binding an actor to a certain subject within which he is free to improvise.
The first experiment with Eliza was to reproduce the language of a psychoanalyst with a new patient. According to Weizenbaum, such talk is quite easy to imitate, as the technique lies in the effort to get the patient to talk.

Weizenbaum called this special program 'Doctor'. It was soon quite famous, even outside of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where it was invented. It was used to show the capacities of computers to process information.

Weizenbaum himself, however, became more and more critical about the purpose of the program. He states three points especially:

* a number of psychiatrists at the time believed in the actual substitution of personal treatment through such a program. Weizenbaum stresses that he had conceived the idea in a parodistic sense, to show the borders and re- strictions of such a program.

* he describes his astonishment and dismay about the close emotional relationships people around him established with 'Doctor'. His interest in this phenomenon, however, lead him to continue his research.

* originally, Weizenbaum had written the program to show the impossibility of a general solution to the problem of language communication. As language can only be under- stood in certain contexts--and even within these contexts only by specialists--this program was intended to prove false the assumption that a computer could understand natural language.

Weizenbaum's insight is that the public believes in techno- logy without having acquired the background to justify such a belief. The strong impact of public opinion on the new technologies poses for Weizenbaum questions such as the responsibility of scientists to publish their works or not.

The above mentioned examples show, that the creation of an artificial being, be it Eliza, the statue, or 'Eliza', the program, is a method: the artist/programmer creates a work (of

art), that in the given context mutates to a living being, able to learn and develop an own or multiple identity(ies).

Now, why is cyberspace empty? Because cyberspace is only filled with the projections of its users, projections of other identities than those grounded in real life.

Who is afraid of Avatars?
In the original sense, the word 'avatar' is used in the Indian language, to describe a human personalization of one of the many indian gods. But avatars are creations made by human beings.

In the context of cyberspace, the word 'avatar' is used for visual figures/forms that represent their creator in visual online worlds. From creations that needed profound pro-gramming language, it is getting more and more user-fri- endly to build one's own avatar. I would also like to in- clude those identities that are based on the usage of text, like in chat-rooms or with fake names/identities in e-mail correspondence.

In analogy to the program 'Eliza', people with no or not much knowledge in programming are enabled to create their personal representations in cyberspace. And as the users of 'Eliza', many believe in their creations and let them come alive, let them develop an own life. These on- line representations/ identities might overwhelm the real life identity and lead to recent forms of psychiatric dis- orders, such as Multiple Personality Disorder or Internet Addiction Disorder.

One might define cyberspace as a mirror or place for pro- jections of real life persons. Their creations, be they net.art, lecture pages, home pages, become alive. They are online, other people respond to them, the author(ess) is in the position to answer incoming questions.

Who is it then, we are meeting in cyberspace, e.g. in chat- rooms, in e-mails, in web pages?

At the 'August 1997 meeting' of the American Psychological Association (APA), examination of the facts on the issue of 'Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD)' were dis-cussed. The director of the online service 'mentalhealth.net', Dr. John Grohol, expresses his critique towards the unacademic invention and introduction of the so-called 'Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD)' by Kimberley S. Young. In her paper, 'Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Clinical Disorder', she states the existence of IAD, but gives no explanation for her theses. Grohol draws attention to the fact that the media quickly respond to such a statement--he gives an example in his online text. As long as there are no efficient medical researches, in his view, it is not possible to speak of 'Internet Addicition Disorder (IAD)'. At the '1997 APA convention', Young provides a response to this critique online, 'What Makes Online Usage Stimulating: Potential Explanations for Pathological Internet Use'.

Dr. John Grohol: http://mentalhelp.net/archives/editor22.htm http://psychcentral.com/ Dr. Kimberley Young: http://mentalhelp.net/apa/young.htm

Dr. Kimberly S. Young is head of the 'Center for On-Line Addiction', as the 'Resources on the Psychology of Cyberspace to the World's First Consultation Firm and Virtual Clinic for Cyber-Related Issues', founded in 1995. Her print publication 'Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction and A Winning Strategy for Recovery' was published by John Wiley & Sons in 1998. 'Center for On-Line Addiction': http://netaddiction.com

Dr. Nicola Döring, a German Psychiatrist, comments on the Kimberley-Grohol-discussion and supplies a list with furt- her information, international and national, in an article from July 1998. http://paeps.psi.uni-heidelberg.de/doering/sucht.htm

Apart from the international discussion between psychia- trists about the definition of internet addiction, since 1998, not only online ravers, but also people who seek professional help in psychiatry, are offered a broad variety of offers online. But is an online therapy, an e-mail or an onli- ne-chat offered by psychotherapists or cybertherapists on the web able to serve as a substitute for a face-to-face meeting? Can social isolation--known to be an important parameter in psychotic disorders--be treated by another hour in front of the screen?
Internet Therapy: http://www.metanoia.org/imhs/

All in all, the enormous number of online mental health resources as well as discussions, billboards and e-mail ser- vices 'Online Dictionary of Mental Health' contribute to the above mentioned information available online. 'Online Dictionary of Mental Health': http://www.shef.ac.uk/~psysc/psychotherapy/

Based on the experience with more than 1,500 first-epi- sode patients since the initiation of the Aubrey Lewis Recovery Program in 1986 and the subsequent development of the Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre (EPPIC) in 1992, the 'Early Psychosis Training Pack' is primarily targeted at mental health workers who already work with people with psychotic disorders. The project is based in Melbourne, Australia, and aims at the early intervention in psychotic disorders in order to reduce long-term morbidity and improve recovery. The site is run by a major provider of neuroleptica medicine. 'Early Psychosis Training Pack': http://www.futur.com/edu-info/training.htm

Improving recognition is not only meant to educate primary care providers, but also to educate the community and reduce the stigma associated with psychotic disorders. Additionally to a detailed description of the 'why- and-hows', the web page also contains links to a so- called 'Trainer's guide'. The practical exercises are designed to reinforce the information presented in each module.

The use of the internet by institutions, universities and research projects, has an informative character. Those webpages that are provided by private people, mostly relatives or former patients of psychosis become more and more impor- tant. Detailed desriptions give other patients the awareness that they are not alone with their experiences. Through such uncensored descriptions of psychotic experiences, a discourse is evoked that was not possible before.

Ian Chovil's Homepage is based in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. His page was created in February 1997, and gives a description about his own sufferings from schizophrenia. Next to that, an interesting chapter with the alternatives to the medical treatment of schizophrenia--which can be found in religious and spiritual experiences--is part of his page.
Ian Chovil's Homepage': http://www.mgl.ca/~chovil/

Inspired by the page of Ian Chovil, an anonymous German author decided to create a web page (German and English) showing his experiences with schizophrenia.
http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/Pahaschi/autor.htm

Marianne Kestler has been suffering from an endogene depression. On her web page, she presents her personal hypotheses on the internet as a new drug. She is also the editor of an activist web page on the subject of psychosis, a German page called 'Kuckucksnest'.

Marianne Kestler: http://members.aol.com/idiot07/droge/cyber.htm
Kuckucksnest: http://kuckuck.solution.de/

Through recent developments, the need for reliable infor- mation is evident. For Germany, a professional web site which offers national and local information and links, can be found under: http://psychiatrie.de/

But not only scientists and former patients are active. Also people who came in contact with psychosis through sufferings e.g. in their family. Such as the 'Not-for-Profit Information, Support and Education Center' which has been created in September 1996 by Brain Chiko, in memory of his brother John who suffered from schizophrenia, and who committed suicide in November 1995. Among other features, this site offers a regular newsletter on recent developments relating to schizophrenia, which you can have delivered free by e-mail, and a search engine that brings together information from 200 schizophrenia websites.
Brain Chiko: http://www.schizophrenia.com/

While the international scientific world is still struggling to find definitions, clear descriptions and treatments, the internet community is already using the possibilities of the internet such as publication and communication.

Cyberfeminism, Psychosis and Internet
In the context of cyberfeminism, this active and pragmatic use of computer and internet technology is transforming the encouragement to work with this technology, such as e.g. Anne Balsamo underlines in an interview in April 1998. She describes the importance of taking risks and gaining experience in order to handle the latest technology and the internet. Anne Balsamo: http://www.obn.de/

In this sense, education should be highly concerned with the potentially harmful aspects of computer technology, such as physical and psychological disorders. While physical illnesses were the subject of Josephine Bosma's workshop given at the first Cyberfeministic International in September 1997 on the subject of RSI (repetitive strain injury), my article is concerned with the psychological realm.
Psychotic disorders can also be defined as states of awareness which create realities parallel to real life experiences.

They can be triggered by drugs, meditation and states of ecstasy such as those produced by lack of sleep or irregular nourishment. Such experiences are not new. In the 16th century, the Spanish nun Theresa of Avila, forbade the women in her cloisters to fast for more than three days in a row. She also had to make sure that they got enough sleep.

Looking at the culture history of psychoses and schizophre- nia, at least since the end of the 18th century, a tendency can be traced: from religious systems towards technologi- cally complex systems. As a common feature it can be stated, that in all times, the fears and objects which are caught up in a psychological muddle are related to common trends and beliefs. So, around 1800, the devil and Goya's 'The dream/ sleep of reason produces monsters' became the likely subjects of delusion. During the time of the Cold War, the East-West confrontation was a common subject, not only in Berlin. Since the middle of the 20th century, experiences of persecution mania, telepathy and megalomania are projected onto communication and inter- net technology (satellites and wired communication), nano-technology (with the purpose of observation) and gene- manipulated food.

Today, as described, the pragmatic way is to look behind the screen--to learn about machine language, program- ming codes and hardware mechanisms, thus avoiding the seduction of interface simulations and questioning the myth of technology.

Both, Pygmalion and Weizenbaum, used their skills--sculp- turing and programming--with a purpose: Pygmalion crea- ted the sculpture of a woman that turned into a living being, Weizenbaum used this story in an ironical sense. He wanted to create a program that would show that it was not able to develop an own identity but remain a piece of software. His astonishment and critique of the numerous users of 'Eliza' who turned into believers, without getting the warning in his work, shall serve in this context as a reminder for excessive users of information technology.

The complexity of the subject of psychosis, however, re- quires sensitive handling, and it can therefore not be addressed in detail in this context. For more information, please refer to the following literature. Sherry Turkle's book, 'Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet', New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995, and the German version 'Leben im Netz — Identität in Zeiten des Internet', Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1998, describes numerous ways of living with computers, and especially the internet. Turkle claims that „the time on screen can be time to develop a greater sense of self and identity". Sherry Turkle: http://franklin.icsd.k12.ny.us/it/turkle.htm Further Reference: Ludwig Janssen (Hg.), Auf der virtuellen Couch - Selbsthilfe, Beratung und Therapie im Internet. Bonn: Psychiatrie-Verlag, 1998. http://www.psychiatrie.de