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**From ASCII to Holodecks:
Cyberpsychology of an Online Multimedia Community**

John Suler, Ph.D.
Rider University

Imagine this.

You materialize in a lovely, old mansion. Immediately you notice that several of your friends are already there, some sitting on the velvet couch, some hovering in midair near the giggling suit of armor, and one joker suspended upside down from the chandelier. "Here's Johnnnnnie!" a friend calls out in a perfectly replicated Jack Nickelson's voice. "Come on, we were just headed to the beach." You follow them through the gilded mirror and arrive on the coast of a surrealistic Big Sur. In a silly adolescent attempt to outdo your friends who have shapeshifted into their Bay Watch characters, you transform yourself into Arnold Schwarzenegger wearing a polka dot 1920s bathing suit. With the blanket laid out over the waves, everyone relaxes to enjoy the glasses of wine that materialize in their hands. A few people get caught up in a game of tic-tac-toe drawn in the sky, until community politics comes up in the conversation. Should third level wizards be allowed to clone other members' avatars? What should be done about the latest wave of clueless newbies, or that new snert gang that is bent on crashing the server? "Forget that stuff," a voice calls out from the sky, "It's time for that psychologist's lecture on the 27 genders of cyberspace." "Hey, we can stay right here and have it pumped in," you reply. "True," a friend ESPs to you so no one else can hear, "but then we wouldn't be able to gossip about everyone's avatar."

So, is this a scene from a Star Trek holodeck? It very well could be, someday. Actually, many aspects of this scenario are already taking place right now on the internet. Technology has moved far beyond the text-only communication of chat environments, as in AOL and IRC. Now there are multimedia chat communities where users interact in a visual scene, with text, sound, movement, and visual representations of themselves called "avatars." True, this is all happening on a computer monitor and not in a 3D physical space, as in a Star Trek holodeck. But we're moving in that direction.

The Palace

In this presentation I'd like to discuss my ongoing research on the community that has developed within the multimedia chat environment known as the Palace. The Palace is a client/server program where users can purchase the client and/or the server. That means that a user can visit other people's Palace sites or create his or her own site. Over the past two years since Palace was introduced, hundreds of Palace sites have been created. The most highly populated sites are those created by the company that introduced the program,

The Palace Incorporated (aka, "TPI"). In my research, I've focused mainly on these TPI sites.

Here's a scene from one Palace site. The visual backdrop (called a "room") for this particular scene is... well.... a room, though the backdrop could be anything. Users create small graphics called "avatars" to represent themselves. You can move your avatar anywhere on the screen. These avatars can be any picture the user desires. Users communicate with each other through typed text that appear on the screen as balloons similar to comic strips. They also communicate with prerecorded sounds (.wav files) and in how they move their avatars about the screen.

My Research Methods

Now that you have some idea of what the Palace is like, let me describe my research. First, my methods. As an undergraduate, I had a biology professor who once told us that if all biologists got together to intensely study one single species of fly and attempted to integrate all information about that fly - its anatomy, biochemistry, neurology, genetics, behavior - then we would REALLY understand something.

This is the approach I've taken to Palace. An intensive case study. I'm attempting to study and integrate findings on as many aspects of Palace as possible - including the psychological impact of its visual features, the individual's experience of Palace, interpersonal and group dynamics, norms and deviance, addiction, and historical stages. I gathered information through four basic methods: (1) field observations (which, paradoxically, I conducted from an armchair in my living room...this is one of the perks of cyberpsychology research), (2) email interviews, (3) studies of the various Palace mailing lists, and, (4) participant observation. That last one - participant observation - is especially interesting. As a psychoanalytically trained psychologist, I've always been fascinated by research that juggles the issues of subjectivity and objectivity, transference and countertransference. I firmly believe that a powerful way to understand the Palace experience and the Palace community was to become a Palatian myself.

So far I've covered a lot of territory in this research, so let me just highlight a few of my findings. If you're interested in reading more, all of my papers on this research are published on my Psychology of Cyberspace web site. By the way, I'm also interested in the topic of publishing scholarly work online in hypertext format (what some people call "web sites") - but that's a topic for another day.

Avatars and Graphical Space

First let's take the psychology of avatars and graphical space. There's no doubt that adding visuals to a chat environment greatly magnifies its social and psychological subtlety and complexity. You can tell a lot about people by how they position and move their avatars in a room. Some people place their avatars in the corner of the room, some obey the supposed laws of physics and sit in chairs or stand on tables, some defy the laws of physics and hang from the ceiling. All the rules of personal space apply. Old timers sometimes have a specific spot in the room that everyone respects as their territory. If you place your avatar close to someone, it often is taken as either a gesture of intimacy or a violation of their personal space, depending on your relationship to that person.

Even more powerful is the psychology of avatar selection. Because avatars are the images that people use to represent themselves, a great deal of thought and creativity goes into the collection of avatars that a user creates. I've categorized them into various types: cartoon avatars, celebrity avatars, evil avatars, power avatars, seductive avatars, symbols and abstract designs, and, of course, pictures of your real face. They reflect your moods, your intentions, your personal interests, and various aspects of your personality - real and wished for, conscious and unconscious. To display a picture of your real face often is a sign of honesty, openness, and in some cases, an act of intimacy.

Most Palatians are very attached to their avatars and very captivated by the process of creating them and showing them off to others. I think this high psychic investment in avatars reflects a deep psychological dynamic which is present in many online environments - and that's the need to experiment with one's identity, to try out new personae and express previously unexpressed aspects of one's personality.

Group and Community Dynamics

Now let me say a little bit about the community that has evolved within this environment. Let me do that from a historical perspective. History is always a complex subject, but I think I can succinctly summarize what has happened to Palace during its first two years of rapid development. It started off as a small, intimate community of a few dozen people dwelling mostly at one TPI site. Then the population started to boom, and with that came a whole slew of fascinating social psychological dynamics. Cliques, organizations, class systems and bureaucracies developed. Intergroup conflicts flared up. More complex rules, regulations, and social norms emerged. Immigrants (aka "newbies") became the target of prejudice. New Palace sites were created and colonized, each with its own distinct culture.

The driving force behind many of these changes was the need to establish an identity, a sense of belonging, and some feeling of power and efficacy. As the

intimacy of the small community faded with the arrival of the masses, the Palace population differentiated into a complex system of smaller groups where people felt they belonged, where they possessed some status and identity, where they felt they had some impact on their environment. In other words, the history of Palace is a microcosm of life and a recapitulation of the rise of civilization.

A big problem in the growing Palace community was similar to that found in any expanding, urbanizing population - deviance and crime. As in the "real" world, deviance spanned the range from mild to severe. "Blocking" someone else by placing your avatar on top of theirs is equivalent to sitting on someone in real life. It's an interpersonal faux pas. Wearing seductive looking avatars may be playful exhibitionism or flirting, but where do you draw the line between that and pornography? A difficult question for Palace officials. The most serious problems were the development of gangs that verbally abused other users or attempted to crash the server. Most interesting, though, are those crimes that are rather unique to cyberspace and point to its power in allowing people to play with social identity. Stealing someone's avatar and wearing it is like stealing their persona, but even worse is deliberately impersonating another Palatian by using their avatar AND username, and then attempting to destroy their reputation.

There's a lot more to say about deviance, but let me add just one more point. Much is being said nowadays about how anonymity on the internet tends to act as a disinhibiting factor. People act out more, regress, and are more sexual and aggressive when no one knows who they are. I believe this is true, but I think it's important to give this idea a slightly different spin. Rarely does someone wish to be totally anonymous, invisible, without any name or identity. Everyone wants and needs to express some aspect of who they are. The internet offers the opportunity to hide some features of your identity, while expressing others. People who are acting out sexually and aggressively are expressing a need, an aspect of self. They want people to acknowledge it, to react to it. But they may also want to hide or dissociate this from their "real world" public identity.

Community Infrastructures

So far, I've been talking about the Palace community mostly in terms of the Palace chat program itself. I think it's important to point out that there's a lot more to the community than that particular environment - and this is probably true of other chat communities. There are several other internet resources and paths of communication that supplement and enrich the social activity at the Palace sites: (1) numerous web pages which act as libraries of technical and social information about Palace life, (2) several mailing lists where there are group discussions about Palace, (3) private e-mail, which allows more personal conversations between pairs of people and acts as a complex communication network that is a backbone of the community, (4)

telephone contacts, and lastly, (5) face-to-face meetings of people, either in small gatherings or the larger Palace parties which take place every few months in various cities throughout the US. A sign of the health of a particular online community is the extent to which these other resources and paths of communication are developed.

This Thing that Is Eating My Life

In the spa at the Palace, if you happen to use the word "Palace" in a sentence - like "I just downloaded the new version of Palace" - the program plays an interesting joke on you. Instead of the word "Palace" appearing on your screen, you'll see the words "This thing that is eating my life." And so your sentence becomes "I just downloaded the new version of this thing that is eating my life."

Some people spend a great deal of time there. Some would say that it's a bit "addictive" (and I use that term in the non-technical sense). I think there are a variety of reasons why people are drawn to the program and the community. In part, it's simply an cyberspace novelty. But there's more to it than that.

In one of the articles on my Psychology of Cyberspace web site I discuss - somewhat tongue in cheek - how Palace satisfies many of the needs in Maslow's hierarchy. On the lowest level, if you're interested in satisfying your sexual desires, there's cybersex Palace style, which means you and your partner can play with avatars. It may be lacking on the physical/tactile dimension, but when it comes to visuals, the sky is the limit. Relatively few people are interested in Palace for sexual reasons. Higher on Maslow's hierarchy, you satisfy your social needs. People do make good friends at the Palace, and it can become - like the TV program Cheers - a place where everyone knows your name. Higher yet on the hierarchy, people satisfy their need to learn, their curiosity, and their need to develop a sense of mastery. The Palace is a highly complex social and technical environment. It's a fascinating place to explore. For the engineering types, you can stretch and apply your knowledge of computers and programming. For the social types, you can meet people from around the world and explore the subtleties of the community. For the artistic types, you can create avatars or even an entire Palace site.

Now, at the top of Maslow's hierarchy... is there self-actualization? This is an interesting question. At the Palace you can assume any name you want, any appearance you want. You can experiment with your identity and new ways to relate to other people. Could that be a path to self-actualization.... Maybe.

There's one other interesting quality of Palace that makes it attractive. The Palace experience is a bit dream-like. The graphics are imaginary, sometimes surrealistic. Physical laws don't apply. You can shapeshift, float in the air, walk through walls, make objects appear out of nowhere, and

instantaneously move to another place. It's like magic. Some psychological norms also don't apply. You telepathically can speak with another person in a room filled with other people who can't hear you. You can talk to person you can't see in another room.

All of these features mimic the dream and unconscious styles of thinking (in psychoanalytic theory known as "primary process"). Palace may be attractive to some people because it is a mild altered state of consciousness. It's an opportunity to dream while awake - and like the dream, it may allow the individual to express, explore, and master aspects of oneself and one's life.

Is it Just Chat?

A few weeks ago I briefly mentioned my research to one of my colleagues in the biology department. His reply was, "Oh, I think those online things are just plain silly." Are these online communities just a novelty, just an idle form of entertainment without any real value. I think not. Just from the viewpoint of basic research in social and organizational psychology, it's fascinating to study how the development of these online worlds compare to the "real world." Because online worlds develop very rapidly, we can observe an accelerated recapitulation of real world events.

But it's also very interesting - and very valuable, I believe - to study the psychological effect of these communities as a leisure activity. Imaginary worlds like Palace are very flexible in how they provide users with many opportunities to shape themselves and their environment. People often end up creating a world that is a microcosm of their real and/or ideal world - a microcosm where they have more leeway to experiment with their identity. In the worst case scenario, people use this world as a substitute for face-to-face living or as a place to act out their same old problems. In the best scenario, the microcosm is therapeutic. People use it to understand and maybe even change themselves. They use it as a tool for supplementing and enriching their "real" life.