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The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behavior in a Multimedia Chat Community

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ABSTRACT

A wide variety of deviant behavior may arise as the population of an online multimedia community increases. That behavior can span the range from simple mischievous antics to more serious expressions of psychopathology, including depression, sociopathy, narcissism, dissociation, and borderline dynamics. In some cases the deviant behavior may be a process of pathological acting out—in others, a healthy attempt to work through. Several factors must be taken into consideration when explaining online deviance, such as social/cultural issues, the technical infrastructure of the environment, transference reactions, and the effects of the ambiguous, anonymous, and fantasy-driven atmosphere of cyberspace life. In what we may consider an "online community psychology," intervention strategies for deviant behavior can be explored along three dimensions: preventative versus remedial, user versus superuser based, and automated versus interpersonal.

INTRODUCTION

SNERT . . . THAT'S WHAT SOME CALL the trouble-makers of cyberspace. Attributed to Kurt Vonnegut, the term stands for "Snot-Nosed Eros-Ridden Teenager." It concisely captures much of what many cyberspace deviants are all about. They thumb their noses at authority figures and smear their discontent all over themselves and others. Frustrated sexual and aggressive drives seeking an outlet may fuel their misconduct. Often they are adolescents. If they aren't, then they are regressed adults acting like adolescents. In some communities, the term "snert" broadens to include any acting out, annoying, disruptive user.

The title of this chapter also suggests that they are males. Of course, there are bad girls in cyberspace, too, but they do seem to be outnumbered by the males. Why? Maybe online males—especially teenage males—have a more difficult time restraining or constructively expressing their Eros-ridden nature—i.e., they are not as mature. Maybe they tend to be a bit lacking in the compassion and interpersonal sensitivity that is needed to realize how other users are not Donkey Kong targets, but real people. Maybe there simply are more male users out there on the internet, resulting in a "boys club" atmosphere that encourages aggression, including the harassment of women.[1]

The purpose of this article is to explore deviant behavior in a multimedia chat community and strategies for dealing with that behavior. We will focus on the community known as the Palace, especially the sites called "Mansion" and "Welcome," which are maintained by The Palace Incorporated ("TPI"—creator of

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the Palace client and server programs). Our intensive case study of this community has enabled us to explore a wide variety of deviant behavior. In this multimedia environment, users interact in visual scenes with small icons called "avatars" to represent themselves. They communicate with typed text, sound (wav files), and in how they change their avatars from one picture to another and move those avatars about the room. This multimedia richness opens the door for a wider and more subtle range in how people interact, which means it also opens the door for a wider variety of deviant behavior.

A very large majority of the people at Mansion and Welcome are pleasant, thoughtful, and helpful. However, like all chat communities, problematic users wiggle their way in. The techniques for handling them that are described in this chapter were discussed or implemented by the TPI "wizards." As old-timers with a lot of experience and some special powers that other users do not have, wizards are the experts at this task of maintaining order in the community.

IT'S ALL RELATIVE . . . OR NOT

Two factors shape the universal and specific forms of deviance that surface in on-line communities—one technical, one social. Every chat community is built upon a unique software infrastructure that offers specific technical features for how people experience the environment and interact with each other. Misbehaving users will find a way to abuse almost any feature you offer them. If you build it, some will exploit it. In the world of multimeda chat, snerts can use sounds and visual images to harass others, which would be impossible in text-only environments like IRC or AOL.

The social factor may be partially or completely independent of the technical aspects of the environment. Every culture and subculture has its own standards about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior.[1] According to the theory of "cultural relativity," what is considered normal behavior in one culture may not be considered normal in another, and vice versa. A particular type of "deviance" that is despised in one chat community may be the norm in another. At the TPI Palace sites, taking and wearing someone else's avatar is akin to stealing that person's identity, while at some non-TPI sites (e.g., servers privately purchased and run by individuals) it may be the game people love to play. Standards may be generally more restrictive in one community compared to others. At the TPI Welcome site, where new and often naive Palace users arrive for the first time, the rules about wearing inappropriately sexy avatars are much more strictly enforced than at the Mansion site, where the more experienced members hang out. Even though Palace is one client/server chat program, PalaceSpace consists of hundreds of different communities located at different server sites, each being culturally unique, each with its own values and standards. Beyond PalaceSpace, there are thousands of other communities based on different software. Some observers even consider the growth of such communities as the spread of the western world's deviance via the colonization of cyberspace.[2]

Some on-line communities are privately owned. Some are commercial. This distinction can have an important impact on the deviance that is permitted. Some owners of private Palace sites have strict policies about misbehaving users. Get out of line, and you quickly are booted from the community. The overseers of the site are more concerned about the congeniality and integrity of the community than about the rights or psyche of the ill-behaved user. At commercially owned sites the business depends on sales, which may lead to a more lenient attitude. Ousting someone from the site may be viewed as the measure of last resort. Of course, if users get too snertish, they may drive off other potential customers. So, ultimately, it is a delicate balancing act between maintaining a congenial community where strict rules weed out the snerts, and a "customer's always right" attitude that encourages sales.

It is also important to remember that the large majority of chat communities are a leisure activity for most people, i.e., the community and all that is happening there is entertainment in the form of a recapitulation of the "real world." Deviant behavior may be a disruptive

turnoff to some people, but for others, it is part of the show.

GETTING KNOWN THROUGH ANONYMITY

Much has been said about how anonymity on the internet disinhibits people.[3–7] Feeling relatively safe with their real-world identity hidden, people say and do things they otherwise would not normally say or do in the face-to-face world. Parks and Floyd[8] explained this phenomenon in terms of the social context cues theory and social presence theory. The absence of relational cues (visual, tactile, auditory) as well as physical proximity to another person may result in behavior that is nonconforming according to usual social norms. In some cases, that has a positive effect. People may be more honest, open, generous, and helpful. In other cases, however, the nasty side of a person gets unleashed, accompanied by a tendency to depersonalize others. Hence, the snert. It is possible that the positive effects may outweigh the negative. In their research of Usenet newsgroups, Parks and Floyd were rather surprised that deviant behavior was not as widespread as previously believed.

Although this "disinhibition through anonymity" concept is valid, no one wants to be totally invisible, with no name or identity or presence or interpersonal impact at all. Everyone wants and needs to express some aspect of who they are, to have others acknowledge and react to some aspect of their identity. In some cases, it is a benign feature of who you are. In some cases, not. Anonymity on the internet allows people to set aside some aspects of their identity in order to safely express others. Snerts need someone to react to and affirm their offensive behavior. This need is a bit different than simply catharting their frustrated drives, as the "eros-ridden" idea suggests. Snerts are trying to express some unresolved and warded-off feature of their troubled identity in an attempt to have it acknowledged. Unfortunately, they do it in a way that abuses other people. Under ideal conditions, they may be able to accept and work through those inner feelings and self-concepts that torture them. If not, they will continue to vent that ooze through their on-line snert identities, while safely dissociating it from their "real world" identity.

Rather than the anonymity simply releasing the nasty side of a person, the person may experience the anonymity—the lack of an identity—as toxic. Feeling frustrated about not being known or having a place in the group, newbies may act out that frustration in an antisocial manner. They need to feel that they have SOME kind of impact on others. The ignored child starts acting "bad" in order to acquire attention from the parent, even if it is scolding and punishment. Humans, being humans, will almost always choose a connection to others over no connection at all, even if that connection is a negative one. Some snert guests may think (perhaps unconsciously) that their misbehavior is a justified retaliation against a community that they feel has stripped away their identity and alienated them. They reject because they feel rejected.

Does greater anonymity result in greater deviance? Because greater anonymity usually is associated with less accountability for one's actions, the answer would seem to be "yes." In the world of Palace, new users used to have to register (pay) for the software before they could permanently acquire the ability to give themselves names and create custom avatars. Until then, their name was a number ("Guest 232") and their avatar a generic smiley face. The greater anonymity for guests did seem to result in their misbehaving more often than members. But members misbehave, too. So there were other factors at work.

ACTING OUT OR WORKING THROUGH

As Turkle[9] noted, on-line behavior can be understood (borrowing traditional psychoanalytic terms) as "acting out" or "working through." The person who acts out is expressing unconscious needs and feelings in a cathartic fashion. By being inappropriately sexual or aggressive, he is "getting it off his chest" while having little conscious understanding of the underlying emotions and motives that drive his misbehavior. Encouraging him to gain some self-insight and modify his behavior probably

will not be easy. His objective is to vent, not understand or change. This is the classic snert. Holland[10] concluded that "Talking on the Internet, people regress. It's that simple." Acting out is fundamentally a regression to more primitive styles of expressing sexual and aggressive needs.

When "working through," a person may also act inappropriately, but there is an underlying drive towards understanding the meaning of one's misbehavior and to resolve the underlying psychological problems that fuel it. Cyberspace gives them a "second chance" to work and rework unresolved personal issues, especially identity issues involving control and mastery.[11,12] Such people are more likely to be capable of some self-reflection about what they are doing. They are more amenable to other's attempts to help them act appropriately.

The anonymity of cyberspace and the ability to alter personal identity most likely enhance both acting out and working through. The question is whether they enhance them equally. The mask of anonymity may favor acting out, while the ability to experiment with one's identity may pave the way for problematic but "creative" ways to work through one's troubles.

Cyberspace is an interpersonally ambiguous space. The absence of face-to-face cues and "facts" about one's identity make it ambiguous. This absence allows for anonymity and the experimentation with persona. But this absence also encourages all sorts of projections and transference reactions. Offering only typed text and avatars, the ambiguous on-line experience—like a Rorschach inkblot—easily becomes an open reservoir into which users pour their inner psychic world. Cyberspace becomes an extension of one's mind, a transitional space that mixes the "objective" reality of how other people behave with one's own subjective memories, fantasies, and expectations about how people behave. Whether deviant people are acting out or working through, they are struggling as much with their inner self and other representations as they are with the objective reality of other users. They may think the flame war is with their online cohorts, but the battle is really within their own psyche that has been expanded into the ambiguous zone of cyberspace. In this sense "anonymity" is a misconception. As interpersonal cues and facts become fewer, the increased "anonymity" is really an increase in the ambiguity of everyone's presence, which allows for greater transference and countertransference reactions—including the possibility of toxic reactions. The person who is working through comes to understand these reactions. The acting out person does not.

THE LOWER END OF DEVIANCE

Deviant behavior occurs along a continuum from mild to severe. The most severe types probably are those that would be universally detested anywhere, anytime, and probably involve acting out. The most mild types may be labeled as deviance or not depending upon the culture and the particular situation. For the most part, these mild and usually unintentional forms of deviance are the result of carelessness, playful mischief, immaturity, or simple ignorance. Correcting such misbehavior may be very easy. Briefly explaining the community's rules of etiquette, educating the user about the program, and/or encouraging the person, in a friendly way, to "ease up" often is enough. If that simple, benign intervention does not work, then the deviance may be more intentional and indicative of a personality problem. The mild forms of deviance include the following types:

Clueless newbies

Users entering the environment for the first time may be very confused about even the most basic aspects of how to move and communicate. As a result, they act inappropriately. People tend to regress and exaggerate their behavior when disoriented. They also may be insensitive to basic social norms. At the Palace, a newbie may innocently place his or her avatar on top of another user's avatar. It's a violation of personal space called "blocking," which irritates people.

Culture clash

Immigrating from one community to another, some people carry along customs that are not acceptable to the new environment. In the rather largely populated realm of AOL

chat rooms, it is acceptable to periodically ask the users in a room "M or F?", "Age/Location?", or "Any SWFs out there?" At the Palace, where the communities tend to be smaller and more intimate, such lines traditionally have been considered rather tacky. However, as Palace communities get larger and more diverse, such behavior may become more acceptable. As immigrants arrive and necessities change, cultures evolve by absorbing the norms and values brought from other cultures.

Mischief

Some on-line communities, like Palace, were intentionally designed to be a playful, somewhat mischievous environment. Playing jokes on fellow users (especially newbies) may be acceptable behavior. However, it is a thin line between acceptable pranks and unacceptable abuse. The distinction is a judgment call, with different people and communities setting different standards. Mischievous users often are testing the limits. In a regression to childish testing of authority, they want to see how far they can push the envelope before they "get caught." Adolescents who take delight in the apparent freedom of cyberspace may experiment with lewd language and avatars, or play the flatulent "wind" sound over and over again. "Parodists" mimic the behavior of snerts as a form of playful mischief,[13] although it probably speaks to their identification with the snert and a vicarious wish to act like one.

Graffiti

Palatians have the software ability to paint on the background graphics that make up a room. It allows people to interact with the environment and each other. However, painting is an example of the "If you build it some will abuse it" principle. Some users adorn the walls with obscene drawings or words, or black out an entire room. Freudians might label them as anal expulsive personalities. To vent their feelings of anger and helplessness, they deposit—often secretly and in defiance of authority—their unacceptable stuff all over everyone else.

Wannabes

Becoming a wizard is a sign of status and accomplishment. Wanting to attain that position is an understandable wish, but some users become a bit insistent and downright pushy in their quest. Such "wannabe" behavior tests the patience of the wizards, and has evolved into a social faux pas.

Deviant enclaves

Eccentric subcultures may evolve within specific, usually isolated locations of the larger community. On the TPI servers small groups of "weird" adolescents claimed specific rooms as their territory. The weirdness consisted mostly of off-color language and avatars that looked menacing, bizarre, or counterculture. No doubt the off-putting quality of their scenario helped define the identity of their group as well as firmed up the boundaries of their territory by making it a bit uncomfortable for outsiders to join in. These groups tended to form in areas that were relatively underpopulated, isolated, and undersupervised by wizards. Because they mostly kept to themselves, these counterculture groups posed no particular problem to the overall community. If an outsider happened to stumble onto their territory, the response varied. Sometimes the group was mildly hostile or ignored the newcomer. Sometimes they were quite pleasant. Problems tended to arise when some citizens complained to the authorities about how the neighborhood was "going downhill." As traffic increases to the underpopulated areas where deviant enclaves tend to develop, the enclave may naturally dissolve or move on.

Sleepers

If you follow the rules of etiquette, you put up BRB sign ("be right back") when you leave or are not paying attention to your computer. Due to either ignorance of this rule, forgetfulness, or deliberate and inconsiderate neglect, "sleepers" fail to do this, leaving their avatar on screen sitting motionless and silent. Other users may not know what to make of the sleeper's unresponsiveness—maybe he is BRB, lagged out, very shy, a passive voyeur, or a

snob. Sleeping exacerbates the already socially ambiguous atmosphere of cyberspace.

Commercials

It is a lot easier to create your own Palace site than it is to entice people to come visit or develop a stable community there. Some site owners try to recruit users from the more busy sites by announcing their site and displaying ads. Some salesmanship may be acceptable and beneficial to all of PalaceSpace. But there is competition among sites for visitors, so persistent attempts to draw people away will not be appreciated by the site owner. Commercialism in general is a faux pas according to traditional internet values.

DEVIANCE INVOLVING OFFENSIVE AVATARS

Some people use the anonymity of cyberspace as an opportunity to create avatars (also called "props" at the Palace) that test the limits of decency—which is why many multimedia communities do not give users the software ability to create custom avatars. Some users innocently wear avatars that they think are sexy in a cute way, without realizing some (but not all) users are offended by them. They may be trying to draw attention to themselves, communicating their interest in flirting or cybersex, expressing a sexual aspect of their personality (i.e., exhibitionist tendencies), or simply showing off their skills in avatar creation. If asked politely, they usually will remove the naughty attire—and perhaps even be apologetic and embarrassed about it. The more serious problem is the users who wear obviously offensive avatars that are intended to shock and victimize. They are looking for attention, control, and power by abusing others and violating the common sense rules of decency. In addition to people who parade around in tastelessly sexual avatars, deviant avatar behavior may include the the following types:

Flashing

Not being the bravest of souls, the flasher quickly clicks on a pornographic avatar, then clicks it off. It might be a playful tease, or a peek-a-boo attempt to draw attention, surprise, shock, or thumb your nose at the rules.

Prop-dropping

Even less brave than the flasher, a prop-dropper will toss an obscene prop into an empty room and then run. The exhibitionist and rebellious psychology of the prop-dropper is probably similar to the flasher, with the exception that they attempt to dissociate themselves from their dropping. A Freudian would love to speculate about the "anal expulsive" nature of their personality. Quite literally, they deposit their unsuitable stuff so others are forced to clean up after them. It is an act of defiant anger, and probably (similar to the flasher) disguises underlying feelings of shame.

Hate and violence avatars

Unfortunately, people use avatars not just to inappropriately express their sexual drives, but their aggressive ones as well. At the Palace, Hate avatars have included antigay and anti-women sentiment, religious prejudice, Nazi swastikas, and pictures of a guest smiley face with a bloody ax planted in its head. Violent avatars can span the range from menacing figures bearing weapons to mutilated bodies. As with sexual avatars, individual and cultural differences will determine what is acceptable and what is not. Controversies about political correctness may surface when dealing with the mild versions of "hate" avatars.

Abusive blocking

Palace users consider it a social faux pas to place your avatar on top of or too close to another person's prop. Unless the person is a friend who is in the mood to be close, it is an invasion of personal space. Some naive users (mostly guests) do this without knowing it is inappropriate, or the person may be lagging and unable to move. But some hostile people deliberately accost others by blocking or poking at their avatars. Snerts who are verbally abusing others may block to supplement their attacks. Blocking is one of those unique exam-

ples in which it is not the content of the avatar that is offensive, but rather how it moves (jumping your avatar frenetically about the screen also is considered inappropriate because it is both distracting and a source of lag).

Eavesdropping

Ironically, eavesdroppers are not deviant in the content or behavior of their avatars, but rather in the fact that they do not have one. By reducing their avatars to very tiny or camouflaged images—and their usernames to only one character—they try to become invisible so they can secretly listen in on conversations. They may search for couples who are alone, talking, or wait in a room for other users to enter. As a type of lurker, they are acting on voyeuristic (and perhaps schizoid) tendencies to avoid intimacy or attempting to gain a sense of advantage and power over others.

One of the biggest problems in controlling inappropriate props is defining exactly what is "inappropriate?" This is especially true of sexual avatars. Views will vary widely among people and cultures, both on-line and real-world. The supreme court has a difficult time determining what is pornographic, so the job is no easier for people running the show in virtual worlds. In small communities, official standards may not be needed because the implicit norms and social pressures of the group will keep people in line. As the population gets bigger, official and publicized rules may become necessary. Setting these standards will go hand-in-hand with defining the philosophy and purpose of the community. For example, one basic question is whether the site is intended for adults or children. Attempts to control pornographic avatars have been propelled by American politics,[14] and is part of the larger process of "taming" cyberspace—which is a necessary effort in alleviating the distrust, suspicion, and fear that threatens to undermine online life.[15]

At the TPI Welcome Palace—where a demographically wide variety of new users arrive—the rules about avatars are rather strict. It makes good business sense to keep the first Palace experience as benign as possible for as many people as possible. The rules are less strict at the Main Mansion site, where the users are more seasoned. The Mansion community also tries to remain true to the original philosophy that Palace is a somewhat mischievous place where people—according to Jim Bumgardner, the creator of Palace—should be allowed to "make of what they will" of the environment. The strictness of the rules also may vary from room to room at a particular site. Very public areas (e.g., where users arrive) may require more stringent standards than rooms with less traffic. Private rooms—those that can be locked—may be exempt from these rules. At the Palace, anything goes in a private room, as long as all the people in the room consent.

Setting public standards for appropriate and inappropriate avatars can make it easier for overseers, like the Palace wizards, to uniformly and fairly manage the types of avatars that users wore. Much less is left open to the vagaries of individual judgment. But creating those rules can be problematic. As is the case in any classification system, no matter how precisely you try to define "acceptable" and "unacceptable" avatars, there will always be borderline or ambiguous cases that do not fit the categories (is an avatar of someone pointing a gun at you acceptable?). Without adequate training in the rules, overseers may vary in how they interpret and apply them, resulting in inconsistent interventions and cries of "unfair!" No matter how fair or clear you try to make the rules, someone will not agree with them. All of these problems can lead to heated controversies in the community. It would not be a surprise if conflicts about the system of rules became more of a problem than the problem with avatars that the system was intended to solve. In the long run, many of these problems may subside as the bugs are worked out and everyone becomes familiar with (and hopefully accepts) the standards.

DEVIANCE INVOLVING OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

Indecent language is another deviant behavior that spans the range from mild to severe. Relatively benign examples involve "colorful" expressions in which less than polite words are

used to convey emphasis and emotion. No particular person is the "target" of the colorful expressions, and the words are not intended to offend, although they might insult some people. In the middle range are the lascivious users who try to seduce other users who are much less than interested in their advances. Due to inexperience or a basically tactless personality, their come-ons often are not at all subtle. Higher up on the continuum, foul mouths are deliberately aimed at antagonizing a specific person or the whole room. "Flaming," as Seabrook[16] noted, can have a powerful impact. Generally speaking, anonymity does encourage offensive language—either because it disinhibits underlying aggressive tendencies, or the newcomer with no name, identity, or status desperately attempts to attain some sense of impact and power. Deviance based on offensive language may fall into the following categories:

Breathers

The breather (a term coined by Jim Bumgardner) is a special species of lewd talker who continually propositions female users, usually by "whispering" (private messaging). Any member with an even remotely feminine name could be the victim, which suggests the rather "driven" (desperate) quality of the breather's motivational state. Bumgardner divides the breather into two types. The "horny breather" simply wants a sexual encounter and will typically say things like ""Want to go to a private room?" They usually go away when asked. Bumgardner calls the more pernicious type the "psychotic breather." They deliberately are attempting to offend, and their motives may be more aggressive than sexual. Their language tends to be more obscene and derogatory than the horny breather's. In rare cases they may launch violent threats at other users (one disturbed person told a female member that he was going to kill her and cut her up). Although probably not "psychotic" in the technical sense—because their reality testing most likely is intact—these breathers do not respond positively to others attempts to divert, reason with, or reprimand them. Instead, they become more persistent and offensive. They are looking for a passive or willing target for their hostile needs to shock, control, and hurt.

Verbal exhibitionists

Verbal exhibitionist engage in explicit sexual conversations out in the open, rather than in a private room or via whispering. Essentially, they are two (or more) breathers who are enjoying each other's company, but violating the ears of those around them. They may think—rather inappropriately—that their public display is just fun entertainment, or they may be trying to impress or shock other users.

Stalkers

Stalkers are hostile breathers who follow a victim from room to room. Their need to intrude upon, dominate, and control the other user is obvious—and probably reflects their own underlying anxieties about being helpless and victimized (doing to others what one fears will be done to oneself, also known as "turning the passive into the active"). Some victims of a stalker have described the experience as quite creepy and frightening, which attests to the potentially intense psychological impact of cyberspace interactions, despite the fact that it is all "just" on a computer monitor.

Guest bashers

In many communities, on-line or not, there is a tendency to mistreat newcomers. At the Palace, "guest bashers" were members (registered users) who found it amusing to badmouth and harass guests who were using the default smiley face and a number instead of a name. The bashers verbally abused them, donned names like "Guest Killer," falsely accused guests of whispering foul language, and displayed props that depicted their malicious sentiments, such as a picture of a guest smiley on a pet leash or with an ax planted in its head. At the bottom of the Palace class system, guests are a convenient target for prejudice and displaced hostility. Their greater anonymity (no name, no personal avatar) enhanced the tendency to treat them badly because they seem to be a nonperson with no established identity or status. Some guest bashers consciously think

that they are just having fun, and no harm is really intended. Unconsciously, they need to feel superior and powerful—to feel that they belong, while the guest does not. That need to feel "better-than" disguises underlying insecurities about their status in the community (and perhaps in life). Rarely do well-established members behave like this. Changing the Palace software to allow newcomers to create a name and choose an avatar for themselves helped alleviate the guest bashing problem.

Wizard bashers

These users go out of their way to antagonize wizards. They verbally abuse the wizard through whispers and in public. They attempt to whip up a room of users into siding with them against the "unfair" authority figure. Or they may try to set wizards against each other by befriending one wizard and then using that relationship to badmouth and accuse another wizard of various injustices. Persistence in this "splitting"—including the befriending and idealizing of a "good" wizard while attempting to criticize and destroy the "bad" wizard—is usually a sign of significant psychopathology. In fact, the more the group of wizards are in disagreement and conflict over a particular user, the more likely that user is engaged in multiple splittings, and the more serious that person's psychopathology. For some wizard bashers, a vicious paranoid cycle is set in motion. They think wizards are out to get them, which makes them angry, defiant, and abusive, which leads to wizards reprimanding and disconnecting ("killing") them, which confirms their feeling that wizards are out to get them, which perpetuates the cycle. Caught in a transference reaction, wizard bashers are acting out their need to challenge and rebel against authority figures in order to establish some sense of independence and power.

Self destroyers

Some blatant foul talkers and bashers may be self-destructive. They abuse others in the worst way they know how and recklessly provoke wizards because they WANT to be disconnected. Unimaginative examples are users who type over and over again "Suck my dick," "Wizard X is an asshole," or simply, "kill me, kill me, kill me." They may imagine themselves as bold and defiant rebels who dare to take a wizard's best hit. Teenage gangs often consider kills a badge of honor, and turn it into a contest where they compete with each other. For some users, provoking a kill may be their way to gain control over their feeling alienated and rejected. Because they intentionally create the rejection, they feel they have some mastery over it. The kill also justifies their hostility towards the community and its authorities, which they probably felt even before they arrive for the first time (more transference). Paradoxically, some people may use kills to establish a unique identity in the community. They are the outcasts, the bad boys. Masochistic dynamics may be at play.

Event crashing

Every month or so TPI sponsors or assists in some special event at a Palace site—for example, live rock concerts where visitors can speak to the musicians when they were offstage, or the special Palace site set up in Washington during the Inauguration of Bill Clinton. Some snerts take the event as a unique opportunity to harass people, especially famous people. They consider it a center stage to act out and attain some special sense of anonymous notoriety. They probably fancy themselves as brave and daring souls. Usually their attempts to disrupt the event are not subtle, and the wizards reactions to their behavior are not subtle either. At the first sign of obviously inappropriate behavior, the wizards act quickly and decisively. If you say "Are you queer?" to the lead singer, or "You suck!" to Vice President Gore, you are unceremoniously, expediently killed.

MORE COMPLEX SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The following types of users present problems that are a bit more difficult to deal with—difficult in the sense that it requires more psychological and social expertise to manage them. This does not mean that the psychological or social roots of their misbehavior are more com-

plex. Rather, the problem they present tends to be more intertwined with tricky cultural and interpersonal issues.

Revolutionaries

Bjorke[13] describes the "rabble rousers" and "political paranoids" who, on occasion, invade the Palace community. In some cases, they want to use the Palace as their personal soapbox to rally support for their questionable political sentiments. Antisocial types spouting Nazi ideology is one example. In other cases, these alienated people specifically target the Palace for their political attacks. They may claim that the Palace is a totalitarian state and that TPI is recording all chat, including whispers. It is sometimes hard to tell if they truly believe their political rhetoric, or simply are using it to act out their needs to gain attention and a sense of power by bombarding people with their ideology. Often they have some gripe against authority figures and consider themselves heroic underdogs. Attempts to reason with them and tone them down may lead to an entangled, futile discussion of politics. Revolutionaries may attempt to stir up controversy on the e-mail lists or newsgroups devoted to the community—a phenomenon that can snowball into a highly emotionally charged group dynamic.[17]

Freedom fighters

These users dwell on the argument that they have the right to freedom of speech and expression. Sometimes they have a specific political ideology to spout, like the revolutionary. More often they just want to flaunt their inappropriate avatars or mouth off with foul language without anyone restraining them because it is their "right" according to the First Amendment. The basic internet philosophy that users should be able to "do your own thing" may be fueling their psychology. Similar to attempting reason with the revolutionary, it is very easy to fall into a no-win debate with the freedom fighter. Their mental set about "discussion" is basically similar to other self-important philosophical wannabes who come to the Palace just to argue. Psychologists would categorize them as "oppositional personalities" who express their anger and frustrated need for independence through verbal/intellectual stubbornness. Wizards have joked about the possibility of creating an "Argument Clinic" (á la Monty Python) where freedom fighters and other recalcitrant debaters could be sent to spout their ideology at a bot that would mechanically reply with statements like, "I think I disagree" and "What's your proof on that point?"

Bible thumpers

TPI policy does not support blatant evangelism at their Palace sites. It is perfectly acceptable for people to express their religious beliefs and to engage in religious discussions, but active attempts to proselytize and convert other users is not permitted. Of course, there's a fine line between discussion and proselytizing—and many differences among members in how much evangelistic talk they are willing to hear. Usually, the types of Bible Thumping that TPI discourages are rather clear cut cases. Entering a room with a "Praise the Lord, All!" may be acceptable, but standing at the entrance to the Palace and shouting at new arrivals "Accept the Lord, Sinners! Or burn in hell!" obviously is not. Thumpers who make such proclamations probably are not very interested in discussion anyhow. They would rather launch sermons and apocalyptic warnings at people, which is tantamount to harassment. A more subtle example would be a loquacious Thumper's refusal to back off when someone says, "Well, that's fine but I don't really want to talk about this anymore." Persisting despite that request to stop is considered harassment.

Identity theft

People invest their personal identity in their avatars. If someone steals your avatar and wears it, they are stealing your identity, or at the very least diluting its uniqueness. If they seal your avatar and dump copies of it all over the site, they are deliberately demeaning the integrity of your identity and inviting others to steal it. Such identity "theft" may be an unintentional faux pas or a deliberate act of hostility.

Impostoring

Stealing someone's avatar, wearing it, and also using that person's name (or a variation of it) is the highest form of identity theft. You are abducting their entire identity. As a momentary joke to mimic your friends, this behavior is tolerated as fun. But some people—the impostors—are more insidious. Often as an act of revenge, they snatch the identity of the person that offended them and behave inappropriately in an attempt to damage the person's reputation. Impersonating a wizard is one of the more common types of impostoring—and also one of the more serious, because damaging the reputation of wizards damages their ability to work as well as the reputation of the community's authority structure. If the impostor is not seeking revenge, then he is most likely using the wizard identity in an attempt to impress or threaten other people, to persuade them into cybersex, or to make requests of users that even a real wizard would not request (like revealing your registration key). Some brave wizard impostors have even attempted to acquire the wizard password from other wizards.

Identity switching

Misbehaving users may employ identity switching to avoid detection and reprimands. Notorious snerts often rotate through a series of alias identities (names and avatars), which makes it more difficult for wizards to keep track of them. They may act perfectly nice under one identity and be a demon under another. The combination of this ability to switch identities and the fact that you never know for sure who is sitting at the keyboard sometimes makes it almost impossible to know who the snert is. When finally cornered, a misbehaving user who has switched through several identities to avoid detection may insist that "It wasn't ME who did that! It was my brother/sister/friend who was using my computer!" Teenagers have even pretended to be their parents who come on-line or send e-mail to TPI officials in order to plea the case for their misbehaving son who was banned from the site. When dealing with identity switchers, it is also a good idea to consider the possibility that they are suffering from a genuine identity disturbance.

Genuine identity disturbances

Unfortunate people suffering from disturbances in their identity may act out their turmoil in the personae they present on-line. For example, a virtual world where you can switch among alternate appearances might attract people suffering from a dissociative disorder. It would not be unusual for these people to act very appropriately in one identity, and very inappropriately in another. On occasion, wizards come across perplexing situations where a user's personality suddenly changes, or they seem to forget events that happened only minutes before. For example, a user may appear to be a misbehaving child who, when reprimanded, switches to an adult who is upset about his "daughter" being punished. Or a wizard reprimands a misbehaving user who then disconnects from the site only to reconnect moments later with a different avatar and no recollection of being reprimanded. Now it is very possible that these examples are simply the head games played by mischievous users. But it is also possible that in a small percentage of cases such users are suffering from a genuine identity disturbance.

Depressives

Another type of user who may not intentionally be causing difficulties, but nevertheless is difficult to deal with, is what Bumgardner calls the "depressive." Although, technically, these people may not all be suffering from a clinical depression (other mood disorders or a borderline personality may be involved), the term is mostly accurate as a catch-all category. They are unhappy people who attempt to use the on-line community as a form of therapy or escape. In some cases, a depressive, self-focused personality may predispose the person to verbally abuse others.[18] Other depressives may require or demand a great deal of attention, particularly in getting people to talk to them about their life problems. Some drop innuendoes about suicide, others show blatant suicidal ideation. They talk openly and at length about how miserable their life is and

how they want to end it. Attempts to encourage, support, and offer some friendly advice to these people are admirable, and in some cases helpful. However, the depressive's needs may be deeper than any sympathetic member can handle. The depressive may become highly dependent on someone who attempts to help, needing much more than the person can give. When this seems to be the case—especially when the person talks or even hints about suicide—a recommendation to seek professional help is essential. As King[19] points out, suicidal ideation often surfaces in virtual support groups.

Suicidal proselytization

On a few occasions, people expressing suicidal thinking at Palace have tried to convince others to join them. Shortly after the news of the Heaven's Gate cult, a small group of teens formed what seemed to be a suicide cult. They attempted to persuade other young users to join them in their quest to "move on to a better place." It is very possible that they were simply joking or playing with their concept of a new fad. However, as all clinicians know, when people seem to be "just talking" or "joking" about suicide, they should not be treated lightly. It is very possible that they are quite depressed beneath their humor and intellectualizations. Suicidal talk may be a strategy for "just" getting some attention, but it is often a serious cry for help as well. Even if it is only an adolescent prank, encouraging suicide among other users is not tolerated at TPI sites. Suicide can indeed become epidemic, especially among depressed adolescents.

Pedophiles

Foul talkers and breathers may direct their attentions towards younger Palace members, usually females. Users with names like "BigDaddy" may ask—either through whispers or publicly—if there are any "young girls" around. Once they locate someone they believe fits that category, they proceed to whisper seductive or blatantly lewd language to that person. Public displays are not the typical MO of pedophiles, who usually act in secrecy and disguise. So foul talkers and breathers who are speaking openly may not be genuine pedophiles. They may even be minors themselves. There have been no clearly documented cases of pedophiles at Palace. Minors are encouraged to report suspected people, although the issue of verifying pedophilic activity can be complex, similar to verifying any type of verbal abuse that takes place through whispering. Whispers cannot be seen by anyone except the person receiving the whisper, so there is no objective way to verify the claim that someone is being abusive.

Scams

Scams involve tricking people into giving away personal information. For example, while impersonating a wizard, the scam artist asks new members for their registration number, Visa number, real name, phone number, etc., because he needs that information for some important "official" reason. Another version of this scam involves approaching members to tell them that they have been chosen to become a wizard. Of course, the member must first provide "necessary" information, like their registration number, real name, etc. In other scams, the confidence artist may befriend users, only later to make some unusual requests. In what Bjorke[13] calls the notorious "Picture Scam," one member—who presented as a bisexual woman—asked her new friends for nude photos of themselves. In reality, the scam artist was posting the pictures on a pay-per-view web site. Because they work in secrecy, and thrive on being clever, scam artists are difficult to detect ahead of time. The best strategy is probably preventative. Users need to be informed of basic scam techniques, similar to how AOL warns users that AOL officials will never ask anyone for their password.

Gangs

Gangs have been an especially difficult problem at the TPI sites. Usually consisting of adolescents, some of these groups have come and gone. A few notable exceptions were more resistant to extinction. The gangs' deviant activities fall into many of the categories discussed elsewhere in this chapter—foul language, bashing, scams, offensive avatars, hacking, splitting,

etc. Often they become territorial and drive other users out of the room that they consider their turf. They adopt unusual keyboard character as insignia to place next to their name, thus indicating their gang colors. Wizards suspected that some of these gangs spent a great deal of time on as well as off Palace planning their escapades—as if creating havoc became a game where points were awarded to teams for chasing away and crashing innocent bystanders, or for the number of times a team member was disciplined by wizards. Of course, being adolescent, gangs thrived on any and all attempts to fight the authorities. Their favorite pastimes included bashing and impersonating wizards in an attempt to humiliate them or destroy their reputations. As willing self-destroyers, gang members tried to outdo each other by antagonizing wizards into punishing them. Like anyone else in the ever-expanding Palace community, gang members are trying to find a place for themselves, a feeling of belonging, a sense of purpose and status. Unfortunately, they try to achieve those goals by being hostile towards others and the establishment. Attacking outsiders and authority figures is one way an insecure, alienated group tenuously holds onto its own solidarity and identity. Suler[20] described a wide variety of techniques that were tried in an attempt to control or eliminate gangs—including dividing and conquering the group, "tough love" strategies, permanent bans, befriending, and rehabilitating them.

TECHNO-CRIMES (HACKING)

All on-line deviant behavior requires some degree of technical skill because it is being expressed via a computer. "Techno-crimes," on the other hand, require a bit more knowledge and skill than the ordinary user possesses. In some cases, it may be a rather simple trick that the troublemaker learned from a colleague or discovered on his own. In other cases, it may be a very sophisticated hack requiring considerable expertise. Basically, a techno-crime involves exploiting the software for purposes other than intended by the programmers. Mild versions would include mischievous pranks designed to impress or, at worst, confuse other users. For example, a user writes a script that makes closed doors look like they are open, or a vicarious lurker manages to alter the room occupancy number so everyone thinks there is an invisible user among them.

Flooding

Flooding is a good example of an unsophisticated techno-crime. A user repeatedly changes avatars, play sounds, or runs script in a deliberate attempt to flood the server. This slows down the conversation in the room, creating "lag." The flooder may be seeking attention ("see what I can do!") or trying to disrupt the socializing in the rooms. More insidious and slightly more clever snerts will target a specific person with repeated whispers packed full of abusive or nonsense text, which cripples the victim with lag. Gangs have been known to "gang-whisper" victims by pounding them over and over again with voluminous text messages. Deliberate flooders are driven by a need to feel powerful. Having to disrupt other people's ability to communicate probably reflects feelings of alienation and insecurities about relating to others. The server can be programmed to disconnect certain types of flooders.

Crashing

Crashing the operating system of other users, or the entire server, is a much more sophisticated techno-crime. Wizards intervene quickly with these antics, usually by disconnecting ("killing") the user—lest they become the victim of the crash also. But then comes the more challenging question. How did the snert do it? In some cases, it took the wizards and TPI officials a while to figure out these tricks. Crashing is a good example of the sometimes highly sophisticated technical battle of wits that get played out between the Forces of Good and the Forces of Evil. Looking at the half full glass, some wizards and TPI officials see crashers as an opportunity to fix loopholes in the software.

Password and registration key hacking

Some people define a "true hacker" as a user who illegitimately breaks into a system in or-

der to access restricted privileges or data bases. At the Palace, they try to crack the password safeguards to gain wizard powers. Others try to crack or bypass the registration key system in order to gain membership abilities without paying. Safeguards built into the Palace program eliminate some of the less sophisticated hacks. For more sophisticated hacks, it becomes a cat and mouse game where the Palace technical team detects the break-in and fixes the loophole. Sun Tzu, the famous Chinese warrior and strategist, stated that you must embrace the enemy's attempts to detect your weaknesses. With this knowledge, your defenses can be fortified.

What motivates the hacker? Some are captivated by the challenge and excitement of venturing into forbidden territories. They derive a sense of accomplishment, mastery, and power from doing what others cannot. Impressing other users, especially one's fellow hackers, is a source of self-esteem. Some are motivated by a rebellious nature. Cracking the system of the "institution" reflects a defiant attitude towards authority figures. Psychoanalytic theory would predict an underlying Oedipal striving to challenge and prove oneself better than the father. In extreme cases, a hacker—and especially hacker wannabes—feel pressured to demonstrate that they are better and smarter than anyone. The cat-and-mouse drama of beating the system becomes a tireless, relentless quest to prove oneself. "I will prevail" is their battle cry. Defeat creates feelings of powerlessness and humiliation that fuel the fires. Driven by inner insecurities, they brag about their accomplishments and supposed powers (like being able to kill). When other users (and undercover wizards) ask them to display these powers, they make excuses. Such false bravado and desperate needs to prove oneself may be more common in the hacker wannabe than in the truly skilled hacker.

PREVENTATIVE VERSUS REMEDIAL INTERVENTIONS

Suler[20] describes in detail a variety of strategies for managing deviance in on-line multimedia communities.[21] One dimension for understanding these strategies is whether the intervention is preventative or remedial. Does it create conditions that attempt to prevent the deviance from ever occurring, or does it attempt to fix the problem after it appears? Preventative measures shape the culture at the congenital level, while remedial measures correct aberrations in the culture's evolution.

A good example of prevention is setting publicized standards for appropriate and inappropriate avatars, as mentioned earlier, as well as rules for conduct in general. While people may enjoy the infamous freedoms of cyberspace anonymity and fantasy indulgence, they also will feel secure in knowing that there are rules to follow.

Another good example of prevention is the creation of restricted areas and the regulation of traffic flow through thoughtful design of the community infrastructure. Designating exactly where (or when) aberrant behaviors are tolerated is often a more reasonable approach than trying to stamp it out completely. When the population began to boom at the TPI Mansion site, misbehaving users became more prolific. Trying to eliminate the problem seemed impossible, and would have created an oppressive atmosphere. Instead, a new site called "Welcome" was created, where rules about misbehaving were more strictly enforced. The client program was changed so that new users were, by default setting, connected first to that site. Their initial Palace experience, therefore, would be the kinder, gentler atmosphere of Welcome than the more raucous Mansion. Even within a site, some areas can be more restrictive and some less. At the Mansion site, the rules are a bit stricter in the more public rooms where traffic is heavier, while few, if any, rules hold for users in private, locked rooms—as long as everyone in the room consents to what is going on there. The standards can be clearly spelled out, as in "Rules Room" where written descriptions of the standards can be easily accessed by everyone. If standards do vary from room to room, then attention must be paid to the juxtaposition of the rooms and the flow of traffic between them.

If you can create rooms with varying levels of strictness, then why not create a place where there are no rules at all? It could be a haven for

snerts that would draw them away from the mainstream. Something like this was attempted in the Dodge City experiment. At this TPI-sponsored site, there were no rules and no authorities looking over your shoulder. Snerts indeed gathered there. Unfortunately, they were not content with a kingdom of their own. They used Dodge City as a staging area to launch raids on the Main Mansion. Not long after it opened, Dodge City was closed down. Acting out is indeed acting OUT. Antisocial people will never be content with themselves. They need a more normal social structure to act against, thereby defining themselves. No matter what territory you yield to them, there will always be barbarians at the gate.

INTERPERSONAL INTERVENTIONS

Some remedial interventions rely mostly on a psychological/social approach to misbehaving users. Bumgardner's first bit of advice is that "Talk is good"—i.e., try to reason with a snert. If there is any hope of socializing a misbehaving user, that hope can only be realized if you talk to them first. The anonymity of cyberspace encourages people to act up, including some good people. There is no logic in throwing the baby out with the bath water. Talking gives people a chance, especially when their acting up is an attempt to gain some attention and a reaction to feeling left out. Any user or superuser can apply these purely social interventions, assuming they have the prerequisite interpersonal savvy to pull it off.

Wizards—who have the most experience in dealing with snerts and are formally trained for this work—have developed a variety of guidelines and strategies that are basically interpersonal in nature. Being polite and showing respect for even horrible snerts will model a humane attitude, while getting angry will confirm their beliefs about critical authority figures and escalate their hostility. Arguing only draws you into a never-ending, no-win debate. Sometimes a bit of light-hearted humor can alleviate the snert's obnoxious attitude and give you a chance to redirect the conversation into a more acceptable avenue. Simply establishing a presence—letting snerts know that authorities are around—encourages them to behave, which is why TPI recommends that wizards wear "badges" while they oversee the site. For those misbehaving users who excel at the "Eddie Haskel" maneuver—i.e., being perfect angels only when wizards are around—undercover work may be needed. Using a different name and avatar, a wizard blends into the crowd in order to quietly observe the snert's behavior. Because this tactic involves deception and eavesdropping, it is used only in extreme situations.

It is usually best to whisper to the misbehaving user. Public reprimands and warnings tend to be embarrassing, and could provoke snerts into even higher levels of acting out, especially if they deliberately are playing to the room or trying to save face. Later, they may seek revenge. Public confrontation tends to fuel the drama for all involved, including wizards, who are on the spot to do something. Whispering also can help reduce the tendency for other users in the room to harass the perpetrator when they see a wizard attempting to correct him. Lastly, whispering does establish a more personal connection to the user, which can be persuasive leverage.

If anonymity increases deviant behavior, then one way to deal with that deviance would be to circumvent that anonymity. If wizards know some personal information about a misbehaving user, they may mention it, thereby personalizing the situation. A more forceful version of this tactic is "spooking." For example, wizards have access to a user's computer address (IP), which indicates the user's location. It's possible to spook misbehaving users by revealing that you know "where they live." In some on-line communities, the e-mail addresses of the users are readily available to everyone. This policy probably does help minimize deviant behavior by minimizing anonymity and increasing accountability for one's actions. When dealing with chronic troublemakers, there's sometimes no choice but to completely bypass anonymity and enter the person's "real" world. In a last-ditch effort to reason with users, TPI officials have called them on the phone—or spoken to their parents. In some cases, the direct personal connection may have a powerful effect.

One of the greatest challenges is to befriend snerts and persuade them to become productive members of the community. Wizards who have succeeded at this task found it to be a highly rewarding experience. Some wizards like to specialize in it. Converting snerts requires considerable interpersonal skills, and is not something everyone can do. Snerts who respond to the rehabilitative efforts were probably healthier, psychologically speaking, in the first place. Others flat out reject any rehabilitation attempt. Some will pretend to respond as part of their mischievous game. Monumental efforts to convert such hardcore snerts might possibly succeed, but should that much effort be expended? It depends on the values of the community and the designated purpose of those who oversee it. As a TPI official once said to the wizards, "We're not social workers here."

TECHNOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS FOR USERS AND SUPERUSERS

Remedial interventions that are technologically based rely on some software tool specifically designed to control deviant behavior. Some of these tools are available to all members of the community, some only to super-users (wizards). The overarching issue is power—and who has it. Randy Farmer, a pioneer in the development of multimedia communities, often is quoted as saying "Push the power down." Give users as much power as possible in shaping their experience of the on-line environment rather than dictating it for them. This includes their ability to determine how much deviance they wish to experience. The Palace software provides a variety of deviance-fighting tools, many of which are found in other multimedia communities:

Hiding

Any user can delete his/her name from the list of users at the site and the room they are in, which will make it more difficult for troublemakers (like stalkers) to track the person.

Specific gagging

Each member has the power to "mute" any other user(s). All typed text of the shunned user(s) will be automatically vanquished from your screen. The beauty of the mute command is that it upholds the principle of "Have it your way." If you want to hear him, you can. If not, click him off.

Universal gagging

The "gag" command silences a badmouther's typed text so no one can see it. Because this power could be abused, it is available only to wizards.

Avatar gagging

Although this software option frequently has been suggested, Palace members cannot block out other user's offensive avatars. However, Wizards do have the ability to "gag" avatars—which forces them into a generic smiley face.

Pinning

Wizards can pin a misbehaving user's avatar into the corner of the screen. Because it is a visual/spatial action, it can be an effective attention getter. It actually feels like a decisive physical action has been taken. Pinning is an especially effective tool for controlling blockers, hyperkinetic people who jump their avatars all over the room (causing lag as well as visual annoyance), and "runners," who try to escape a wizard. Pinning tends to be a bit humiliating to the user, and can be perceived as a wizard's "power play."

Tracking

In on-line communities, the technology exists for marking and tracking offenders. At the Palace, registration codes and IP addresses provide two tags for detecting their arrival and following their movement around the site, regardless of what names and avatars they are using (especially useful in dealing with imposters and runners). Because there are potential controversies regarding privacy and prejudice against publicly "marked" users, the ability to track and the data it yields probably

should be reserved for the overseers of the site, which is the case for Palace wizards. Even then, biased attitudes among overseers like wizards might result in their perceiving more trouble than the previously labeled user is now actually creating. That label might even cause some overseers to encourage or bait the troublemaker into repeating their crime.

Disconnecting

Ousting a user from the site strikes a blow at the heart of what the internet means to people—being connected. At the Palace, to be "killed" means your misbehavior crossed the line. The more serious the crime, the longer you are blocked from returning ("kill time"). Sometimes the kill is initiated automatically by the server, as when you flood the server or attempt to crack the wizard password. Because these types of kills are less public and of short duration, people are less perturbed by them. When a wizard initiates the kill, the situation is more personal. The reactions can be intense and varied—humiliation, remorse, anger. Hardcore snerts will use the situation as a springboard for spiteful revenge. Killing is more the removal of a problem than a teaching method. It indicates that the community failed in socializing that particular user. For this reason, wizards appreciated the creation of tools like gag, propgag, and pin, which enabled them to "fire shots across the bow" and intervene at a more intermediate level. The word "kill" is a cultural phenomenon—a carryover from the world of multiuser games where characters indeed kill off each other as part of the contest. In most online communities, only overseers like wizards have the ability to disconnect other users.

Banning

According to TPI statistics, less than 1% of all users are killed more than once. Repeat offenders are the exception rather than the rule. Even more rare are those relentless troublemakers who challenge the "three strikes rule" and, consequently, find themselves permanently banned from the site. By tagging their member registration key or their IP address, the server automatically prevents them from signing on. Some of these users "see the light," send an apology to TPI, and promise to behave—at which point TPI may lift the ban. Other very persistent and now highly revengeful snerts find ways around the ban so they can return to the site.

Usually, these technological solutions alone are insufficient. Without a psychologically sophisticated person knowing when and how to use these tools, they may be applied inappropriately. Many intervention strategies combine the interpersonal and technical approaches in various mixtures. Without the human touch, technical tools like pin, gag, and kill will only be marginally effective.

FULLY AUTOMATED INTERVENTIONS

The beauty of computers is their ability to do simple, repetitive tasks much faster and more efficiently than humans. If you want to eliminate unpleasant words from a chat environment, apply the computer's strength to this relatively straightforward task. At the Palace, scripts intervene when people type "fuck" or "shit" so that only "F***" and "s***" show up on the screen. Variations on this "automated mouthwashing" might be scripts that detect bad language, then warn and/or temporarily gag the user. Instead of bleeping, scripts also can automatically substitute silly words for the offensive ones. For example "fuck" becomes "snugglebunnies" ("Snugglebunnies you!"). The power of humor should not be underestimated when attempting to control offensive behavior. Humor helps people step back from the feelings that fuels acting out.

There are a variety of complications associated with this automated mouthwashing. Some people activate the script over and over again as a form of entertainment or to figure out how it works. Creatively mischievous users experiment with new ways to spell the word that will defeat the script . . . such as "fuq," "phuk," and "phuq." If the script is unsophisticated, bleeping "cock" will also wreck the integrity of cockatoo, cocker spaniel, cocktails, and cockadoodledoo. For every inappropriate word that is bleeped, there will be other uncensored words or phrases that some people think are more offensive. Personal and cultural differences in

standards abound. If a server draws an international crowd, there may be hundreds of words from various languages and ethic backgrounds that could be considered inappropriate. It would be a lot of work programming in every foul possibility. Which words should be censored, and which ones not? Some users hate having their language automatically censored, especially if it is their whispering. Don't people have the right to use in private conversation whatever words they like? For public conversations, how much should adult language be curbed for the sake of protecting the sensitive ears of children?

One powerful and flexible solution to dealing with offensive language follows the "Have it Your Way" and "Push the Power Down" principles. The client program can offer the user the option of modifying a language filter. The user can add or delete words from the list of unacceptable words to be censored. If the user wants, the censor can be turned off completely in order to experience all language in its most raw form.

Another possible automated response to misbehavior is sending foul talkers to a "rules room" where they are temporarily held captive while the rules of the site are displayed for them. Overseers may send the offenders to the room, or scripts can detect lewd words and automatically deposit the offender into the time-out "tutoring" session. Whether this time-out method is effective or not depends on how infantilizing the experience feels to the offenders. If the display of rules sounds like it is "talking down" to them, or contains harshly reprimanding language, they may feel like they are being treated like a child, which might escalate their misbehavior. The very idea of being timed out reminds people of being a child sent to the corner, which can backfire. A purely automated punishment may aggravate rather than rehabilitate some people because there is no opportunity to explain or defend themselves. Automated reprimands might feel cold, impersonal, and confusing to some users. It is probably a good idea for an overseer to accompany the person to the room in order to explain what is happening, answer questions, and offer some friendly advice. Making the time-out experience humorous might alleviate the backfire effect. In some on-line communities, the time-out room looks like a prison, complete with a rat, bread, and water. The humorous design of the experience might take some of the sting out of the reprimand, as well as remind people that one goal of the community is to have some fun.

At the Palace, robot avatars ("bots") can be created to patrol the site, looking for deviant behavior—usually very specific, simple types of troublemaking, such as foul language. Upon detecting such behavior, they can be programmed to warn, gag, and/or kill. Experiments with bots have been attempted at TPI sites—experiments that sometimes go awry. One night a wizard saw "XBot" log on as a wizard. Thinking it was a colleague using a creative name, he said hello, but received no reply. XBot sat quietly for several minutes, then left saying "I am late for an appointment." A short while later it returned and repeated the cycle. That same evening XBot killed another wizard for saying "Bite me," which did not exactly impress the booted wizard. Realizing now what XBot was, the wizards on duty were a bit annoyed that they were not warned ahead of time about a bot running loose. The next day, the wizard responsible for creating XBot apologized, explaining that he had been testing it and accidentally fell asleep while it was still active.

The advantage of using such automated police is that they can lend a helping hand to wizards during busy hours, or patrol the site when wizards are not on-line. Theoretically, bots also can solve the problem of wizards being inconsistent or too emotionally involved in their work. The big disadvantage is that bots have no judgment or reason. Because deviant behavior and the various interventions for them often are subtle, complex, and very dependent on the meaning of the particular situation, bots would regularly end up punishing well-intentioned people while letting genuine snerts walk all over them. In fact, they would probably end up as play things for mischievous users. People also tend to be skeptical, uneasy, even "weirded out" when bots are present. Allowing automated police to patrol the site does not enhance the feeling of a friendly community, a HUMAN/E place, where people socialize with

people. All of these criticisms apply to automated interventions in general. For these reasons, TPI discourages their use.

FORMAL TRAINING OF OVERSEERS

Because deviant behavior is complex, remedial interventions require the human touch. The role of assessing problems and intervening should be assigned to a specific group of people—essentially a "police force" that also educates and socializes users. A training program is probably the single, most effective method for ensuring quality and consistency in how all overseers perform their job. It not only provides an opportunity for them to share ideas and experiences, but also for the development of camaraderie and group spirit. A comprehensive program might involve periodic training sessions, role plays, on-site supervised experience, a mentor system, discussions of log excerpts from in vivo encounters with problematic users, the ongoing development of flexible but standardized interventions, and a training manual.[20] One especially important issue is how this role as the overseer will affect the quality of life of the person as a member of the community. It gives the person power, authority, and status, which presents obvious advantages, but also places them into the position as a target for all kinds of transference reactions.

CONCLUSION: STICKS AND STONES

Worst-case scenarios with snerts probably would include their attempts to crash your system, ruin your reputation through impostoring, or luring you into a scam. But these scenarios are rather uncommon. For the experienced computer user, the community member who is well known among on-line friends, and the generally savvy individual, each of these respective scenarios probably is not even much of a threat. In a very large majority of cases, the most a snert can do to you is toss unpleasant words or images at you, or interrupt your ability to speak to friends. The inclination to feel insulted, frustrated, or indignant reflects the tendency to invest a lot of emotion in one's on-line world. Cyberspace becomes an intimate extension of one's mind and personality dynamics. Understanding one's projections and transferences that become activated by cyberspace may be the best antidote for dealing with snerts. The Greek philosopher Epictetus said that people are not disturbed by things that happen to them, but by the views they take of those things. In other words, sticks and stones can break your bones, but the snerts of virtual reality can rarely hurt you . . . unless you let them.

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