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Cyberspace as potential space: Considering the web as a playground to cyber-flirt

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Abstract

This article compares traditional offline flirting with cyber-flirting. We begin by providing a definition of offline flirting, which we follow up with our own elaboration of cyber-flirting. The article then draws from psychoanalytic theory, in particular Winnicott's object-relations theory, to propose that cyber-flirting can be a form of play. While this is not an empirical study, we do attempt to present a theoretical framework for the conception of cyberspace. In presenting this framework, we draw from past qualitative and quantitative studies on Internet relationships. We emphasise the problems with past researchers' obsessive attention to the absence of the body online, and suggest that new theorising on Internet relationships needs to consider how the body is re-constructed. We propose that cyberspace can be what Winnicott would describe as a "*potential space*" for play, and this particularly applies to online spaces, such as MUDs, MOOs and Chat Rooms. In addition, we suggest that cyber-flirting may promote psychological growth, but it may also become a destructive and exploitative behaviour directed towards 'others'. We conclude this paper by pointing out the therapeutic implications of considering cyber-flirting as a form of play. It is intended that this paper may assist our conceptualisation of this under researched area of cyber-interactions.

Cyberspace as potential space: Considering the web as a playground to cyber-flirt

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and every participates…. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom…. Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order… it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms.
(Bakhtin — cited in Green, 2001, p.159)

Introduction - What does it mean to "flirt"? [1]

This is an article that addresses the little researched area of cyber-flirting, which we contend is both similar and different to what we might otherwise dub normal ('offline') flirting. Before comparing and distinguishing these two types of behaviour that we call flirting, it is instructive to lay a foundation through describing what traditionally we would take as (offline) flirting behaviour.

Theorists have defined flirting in a number of different ways. For example, Downey and Vitulli (1987) have argued that flirtation can be defined in two ways:

> One implies an existing casual relationship where one or both persons are engaged in maintaining some suggestion or expectation of intimacy without intentions of increasing its level or allowing some type of "consummation" ... but another common meaning seems to refer simply to the initial actions one takes to convey a message of interest or attraction. (p. 899)

In contrast to this definition, Feinberg (1996) contended that flirting involves teasing and communication. She proposed that flirting is a short cut to intimacy, arguing that: "Flirting transmits a hidden message the same as other types of teasing. The underlying communication is to find out how intimate a person wants to become or if she wants to become intimate at all" (p. 40).

While the aim of flirtation for some might be solely to indicate sexual attraction to another, this is not its only motivation. Rather, it has been suggested that there are three main reasons for why people flirt: (1) to signal sexual interest; (2) to test the grounds to see if others still find them attractive; and/or (3) to simply pass the time of day (Feinberg, 1996).

Simmel (1984) has written extensively on flirting, and proposes that:

> the distinctiveness of the flirt lies in the fact that she awakens delight and desire by means of unique antithesis and synthesis: through the alternation or simultaneity of accommodation and denial; by a symbolic, allusive assent and dissent, acting "as if from a remote distance"; or a platonically expressed, though placing having and not-having in a state of polar tension even as she seems to make them felt concurrently (p. 134).

Similarly, Ben-Ze've (2002) has defined flirting as:

> not necessarily a prelude to sexual interaction; it is rather a subtle, sexual communication. Flirting may involve gentle physical contact, but typically it does not involve sexual penetration".

Ben-Ze've also quite rightly, in our view, points out that although flirting can eventuate into sexual relationships, if it does it ceases to be flirting.

In 1978 Givens developed a five-stage model on courting which highlights some of the important non-verbal and paralinguistic cues involved in flirting behaviour (the first three stages relate to flirting). The first stage in this model is *the attention phase*, where individuals typically use primping, object caressing, and casting quick glances at and then away from each other. In the second phase, *the recognition phase*, flirting behaviour consists of head cocking, pouting, primping, eyebrow flashing and smiling. Givens suggested that *interaction* does not occur until the third stage, where conversation is initiated. During this stage, participants appear highly animated, displaying laughing or giggling. To quote Givens (1978):

> Speaking, or more broadly, linguistic-like contact – which would include American Sign Language, writing, using mutually unintelligible languages, and so on -- appears to be essential if courtship is to proceed. However, the speech topic itself seems to be quite irrelevant to the formation of the bond.

The final two stages in his model are *sexual arousal* and *resolution*.

Highlighted in Givens' work is the notion that flirting behaviour consists mainly of non-verbal signals. Researchers such as Feinberg, (1996), Koeppel, Montagne-Miller, O'Hair, and Cody (1993) and Moore (1985) have also identified a repertoire of facial expressions and gestures. What becomes obvious from reading these researchers' work, is the critical role the body plays in flirtation. They collectively argue that using the body in isolation of verbal cues allows one to convey sexual interest without the high risk of possible humiliation, shame or possible

rejection, and contend that the body can signal attraction in more subtle ways than the spoken word.

The research literature on flirting behaviour has identified some basic 'codes', or behaviours, that are often displayed/enacted in combination (see, for example Moore, 1985). These basic codes include: *kinetics*, such as smiling, tossing the hair, exposing one's neck; *oculesics* (e.g., demure glances, short darting glances); *physical appearance* (taking that special care to look one's best); *olfactics* (e.g., wearing perfume, after-shave); *vocalics* (e.g., animated speech); *proxemics* (e.g., leaning towards the other); and, *haptics* (e.g., primping, object caress). These basic codes would, no doubt, resonate with our general day-to-day observations of ourselves and others. Having given a general overview of what might be familiar to us all as constituting flirting behaviour, how is cyber-flirting different and yet the same? It is to this question that we now turn our attention.

Defining cyber-flirting

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;…

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Keats (Ode on a Grecian Urn)

Cyber-flirting may share similar motivations to offline flirtation, however the means by which people flirt and the trajectories of these relationships can in some ways be quite different. Ben-Ze'ev (2002), for example, has distinguished between an online relationship that is intended to find an actual romantic or sexual partner and one that is intended to be an exclusive online romantic or sexual relationship. He argues that online-only romantic relationships are a new type of social relationship. One of the unique aspects of these relationships is the greater value placed on conversations. Levine (2000) supports this notion, stressing the importance that some individuals place on spelling and grammar in their online interactions. This fundamentally challenges Givens' (1978) work on traditional flirting, suggesting that

we need to think about flirting in new ways. Moreover, it should be noted that Givens' (1978) and Moore's (1985) work is based on western middle-class assumptions.

While we agree that online flirtation is a unique interaction and needs to be considered separately from offline flirtation, we nonetheless wish to point out that the body still plays an important role in these interactions. Obviously, the non-verbal cues presented earlier to define offline flirting are typically not physically present, as there is not a physically present body to convey these signals. However, this does not mean that these cues do not exist. Rather, the body needs to be thought of as being represented through the textual exchanges that occur online. While spelling and grammar may indeed be important for some, it is proposed here that the well-structured sentence itself is not the 'turn on', but rather the meaning conveyed within the sentence. For example, one's physical appearance can be described, whereas oculesics can be represented through emoticons (drawings made from grammatical symbols, such as, :) representing a smile).

In the past, it is our argument that writers have tended to over-state the absence of the body online. For example, in respect to Internet romantic relationships one writer has commented that "some Internet lovers come to the conclusion that they love each other before they even meet or without ever meeting…" (Gwinnell, 1998, p. 89). The implication here is that bodies can only meet offline. To give a further example, McRae (1996) has defined cybersex or virtual sex as "a generic term for erotic interaction between individuals whose bodies may never touch…" (p. 243). Again this writer is focusing on the lack of bodies online.

While this view of cyberspace as being a place where there is no body might be considered conceptually useful, it is still a very narrow construction of how we should conceive of cyberspace and the activity that occurs there. In a somewhat contrasting view, we suggest that the reconstruction of the body is imperative to the success of many interpersonal interactions over the Internet. In many cases online interpersonal interactions involve more than a meeting of minds, especially in respect to flirting on the Internet. Whitty and Gavin (2001; see also Whitty, 2002a) have carried out empirical research with Internet users and the following quote from an interview conducted with a 22 year old man illustrates the point that online interactions are more than merely a meeting of the minds:

"They all think I'm a six foot tall tanned lifesaver. I tell them certain things that are true, but other things are bullshit. I mean, I can get away with it so why not. What they don't know won't hurt them. I will admit that I am pretty sly when it comes to smooth talking certain ladies on the net ...". (Whitty & Gavin, 2001, p. 629)

Clearly, this individual appears to believe that success in flirting with women depends on how he describes his physical body – whether this is his real body or a re-constructed body.

Online people do describe what their bodies look like and feel like. This is exemplified in the following extract in an email sent from an individual to their Internet lover:

"Very quietly, because the night is so very quiet a hundred miles from all other humans, of the lake. We lean up against each other for warmth, I have my arm around you to hold you close. The sense of waiting becomes almost intolerable…. We reach out to touch the reflections and out hands meet in the sparkling water. Breathless from the transformation of night to day, I turn to you and our lips meet…". (Gwinnell, 1998, p. 59)

Moreover, when bodies are not constructed within the text, individuals will often construct their own image of the person with whom they are conversing. This is illustrated in the following extract of an email:

"I have been waiting to ask you this for a while now – would you mind telling me what you look like? It is hard to just write to a faceless someone, and I have to say I have made up a picture in my mind of what you look like". (Gwinnell, 1988, p. 66)

This extract highlights that even when a physical body is not presented, a physical image can fill in this gap. Hence, we cannot subscribe to Ben-Ze'ev's (2002) view that:

Physical appearance has hardly any role in the generation of such love; the ongoing someone is something we should learn and invest effort in, then online communication seems to be a good way to do it, as physical features do not blur the profound characteristics of the person with whom we would like to have a loving relationship.

In light of empirical evidence described above, this is perhaps a little too utopian and idealistic understanding of the nature of Internet relationships.

Cyber-flirting can also be said to have much in common with what we might describe as 'courtly love', where:

> the male lover presents himself as engrossed in a yearning desire for the love of an exceedingly beautiful and perfect woman whose strange emotional aloofness and high social status make her appear hopelessly distant. But the frustrated and sorrowful lover cannot overcome his fascination and renders faithful "love service" to this "high-minded" and exacting lady who reciprocates in a surprising manner: She does not grant him the amorous "reward" which he craves, but she gives him what immeasurably increases his "worth": She rewards him with approval and reassurance. (Moller, 1959, p. 137)

Courtly love is said to have its origins in the twelfth century and was a luxury of the aristocrats (Askew, 1965). Andreas Capellanus in his book *The Art of Courtly Love* attempted to systematically record the rules of Courtly Love (Capellanus, 1941/1960). He described these relationships as idealised relationships that could not exist within the context of a "real life" marriage. Courtly lovers apparently spent a great deal of time talking to each other, mostly about love, the nature of love and the progress of love. The courtly lovers could not physically act out their passions, and if made public this love rarely endured. Finding it to be extremely oppressive to women, it may be of little surprise that feminist theorists are completely 'opposed' to courtly love (Hoffman Baruch, 1991). While we would not like to have courtly love replicated online, there are some similar aspects between courtly love and cyber-flirting that ought to be highlighted. For instance, cyber-flirting is unlike a real life marriage while it remains solely online. Conversations can abound about love online, but in a real physical sense cannot be consummated. Online relationships can also seem hopelessly distant, as with courtly love.

Turkle (1996) has also suggested that romantic relationships developed in online settings can be a means to understanding a deeper truth about oneself. This is reflected in her description of an online relationship developed by two individuals in a multi-user dimension or domains (MUDs) environment:

> They are able to have conversations about love quite different from those that would be possible if they followed the courtly conventions that constrain communications between men and women. In this way, the play suggests that donning a mask, adopting a persona, is a step toward reaching a deeper truth about

the real, a position many MUDders take regarding their experiences as virtual selves. (p. 216)

Psychodynamically, it is this interesting parallel with *play* that we find, compelling in trying to better come to terms with the nature of cyber-flirting. It is to the psychodynamics related to play to which we now turn our attention.

Cyber-flirting: Transformational play

Play is immensely exciting. It is exciting not primarily because the instincts are involved, be it understood! The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable. (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p.47)

In considering cyber-flirting as a form of play[2], we would like to draw from a psychoanalytic perspective — in particular, that of Winnicott's object-relations theory. A psychodynamic[3] view of play emphasises the importance of the ephemeral quality of illusion in play (Modell, 1990). Carr (in press) argues that:

Those who champion a psychoanalytic approach to the understanding of play, insist that play is all about illusion and that such illusion can only be sustained provided play can be kept within a frame of its own — a frame which seeks to separate it from ordinary life.

Modell (1990) has also stressed the importance of considering play as separate from ordinary life. Play can be separated from ordinary life, in a number of ways:

Playing takes place in a certain space and has certain limitations regarding the duration of time, as in games that are "played out" within a certain limit of time. Yet playing may have its own quality of timelessness. Playing is also separated from ordinary life by the "rules of the game": all play has its rules that pertain to the temporary world in which playing takes places. Rules are in effect a means of containing a space in which illusions can flourish. (p. 27)

Winnicott focused on the importance of play, especially during childhood, and characterised play as follows:

> (1) Play is essentially creative. (2) Playing is always exciting because it deals with the existence of a precarious borderline between the subject and that which can be objectively perceived. (3) Playing takes place in the potential space between the baby and the mother-figure…(4) Playing develops in this potential space according to the opportunity that the baby has to experience separation without separation. (Winnicott 1964/1991 p.146)

Although Winnicott did write in detail about the importance of play during childhood, he also believed that play is as an important activity during adulthood (1971/1997). He stated that: "Whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well..." (p. 40). In line with Freud's view on play (see for example Freud, 1908/1985, p. 132), Winnicott argued that "play transcended the serious and non-serious oppositional binary" (Carr, 2001, p. 544).

Winnicott was very interested in what he called the *potential space* — a space between the mother and the infant. He contrasted this "potential space (a) with the inner world (which is related to the psychosomatic partnership) and (b) with actual, or external reality" (1971/1997, p.41). Winnicott understood 'potential spaces' to be an area of intermediate experiencing that is between inner and outer worlds, "between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived" (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 100). Winnicott (1971/1997) argued that the potential space is:

> the hypothetical area that exists (but cannot exist) between the baby and the object (mother of part of mother) during the phase of the repudiation of the object as not-me, that is, at the end of being merged in with the object. (p. 107)

Winnicott noticed, for example, how an infant would suck and hug a doll or blanket. He suggested that the doll or blanket didn't represent a doll or blanket as such, but is rather an as-if object. The infant makes use of the illusion that although this is not the breast, treating it as such will allow an appreciation of what is "me" and what is "not-me" (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 41). Although referred to as a transitional object, "it is not the object, of course that is transitional" (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 14). The object is the initial manifestation of a different positioning of the infant in the world: the doll or blanket thus connects to subjective experience, but is in the objective world.

While the notions of transitional objects and potential space are raised within a context of an infant, Winnicott (1971/1997) insists, however, they are not simply confined to the experience of infants', but are something that "throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (p. 24). We come to rely upon our own resources to experience culture to expand our understanding of the world. In his expanded views on mental health and creativity, Winnicott argues that a person who lives in a realm of subjective omnipotence, with no bridge to objective reality, is self-absorbed and autistic. A person who lived only in the realm of objective reality, with no roots in subjective omnipotence, was viewed by Winnicott as superficially adjusted, but lacking passion and originality. As Mitchell and Black (1995) nicely summarise, it was "precisely the ambiguity of the transitional realm that rooted experience in deep and spontaneous sources within the self and, at the same time, connected self-expression with a world of other subjectivities" (p. 128). This realm provides relief "from the strain of relating inner and outer reality … that no human is free from" (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 24). The tension and strain between inner and outer worlds is not eliminated, but is bound in this space. Culture and cultural activity, in this context, is an expression of the "inter-play between separateness and union" (Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 24).

The potential space is not pure fantasy, nor is it pure reality. "In the absence of potential space, there is only fantasy; within potential space imagination can develop" (Ogden, 1985, p. 133). Winnicott believed that given a 'good enough' environment, the interplay of the inner world and external reality promotes the development of self and facilitates growth. It is a space where we can develop psychologically, to integrate love and hate and to create, destroy and re-create ourselves (see Winnicott, 1971/1997, p. 41).

In line with Winnicott's object-relations theory and, specifically, his conception of potential space and how transitional objects allow us to position ourselves in the world, Turkle (1996) suggests that "the computer can be similarly experienced as an object on the border between self and not-self … People are able to see themselves in the computer. The machine can seem a second self …" (p. 30). Stone (1995) takes a similar view, arguing that:

> I am interested in prosthetic communication for what it shows of the "real" world
> that might otherwise go unnoticed. And I am interested because of the potential of

cyberspace for emergent behavior, for new social forms that arise in a circumstance in which body, meet, place, and even space mean something quite different from our accustomed understanding… . I want to see how groups of friends evolve when their meeting room exists in a purely symbolic space. (p. 37).

Further, Faber (1984) adds that machines and keyboard are part of a technology that have transitional implications and potential. In Faber's words:

Technology's transitional implications are revealed most arrestingly through analysis of the machine that resides at the centre of the current industrial and political order, namely the computer: it offers itself to its manipulator as a powerful little world, a powerful little universe, a kind of microcosm, that can be totally mastered, totally controlled, in such a way as to offset, at the unconscious level, early narcissistic would experienced in the failure to master, to control, the primary caregiver or 'object'. (p. 267)

We would like to extend on these theorists' work to explore the possibilities of cyberspace as potential space (see also Whitty, 2003). Some theorists have suggested that cyberspace is a place where people are liberated to be whoever they want to be (e.g., Turkle, 1996). Cyberspace, like Winnicott's potential space, is perhaps a space somewhere outside the individual, but is still not the external world. The participants and their transitional objects: the computers, monitors, keyboards, mice, software, modems, text, cables, telephone lines, and so forth; all occupy this potential space — a space between the 'real individuals' and the 'fantasy individuals'.

Thus one might contend that flirting is a type of play that can occur in this potential space — cyberspace. Cyber-flirting, although akin in some ways with offline flirting, is characterised here as a *unique activity* that is a form of play. Of course it can be argued, with justification, that offline flirting is also a form of play. That said, cyberspace seems to offer more opportunities for the type of play Winnicott describes to occur. Similarly, cyberspace offers opportunities for this play to be transformational.

We express this view given that offline flirting requires that another be physically present; this creates a space where rejection is more possible and probably more damaging to one's self concept. The Internet, in contrast, gives to many the appearance of a safer environment; a safer space to play and experiment at flirting. "The friendly and safer atmosphere surrounding the formation of online relationships increase the likelihood that people will choose to begin their relationship in this way"

(Ben-Ze've, 2002). Moreover, rejection is less likely to cause distress when you can disconnect at any time, and the chances are remarkably decreased as to the likelihood of ever having a chance meeting with your cyber-playmate.

In contrast to offline flirtation, cyber-flirting requires more imagination and fantasy. As Ben-Ze'ev (2002) maintains: "The role of imagination in generating emotions in cyberspace is even greater than in actual-space. The factual information we have about an online partner is more limited than our knowledge of an actual partner, and our imagination must fill in the gap". While offline flirtation could be also seen as type of play (e.g., the married man or woman who flirts at a party in order to be reassured they are still attractive, but with no intention of taking things further), we would contend that cyberspace creates more opportunities for the type of play that Winnicott describes. This type of play requires that one sustains an illusion, and we propose that this is easier to maintain in an online environment.

Some writers have suggested that honesty is a critical factor in the success of cyber-flirting. Rabin (1999) makes this claim, stating that nearly everyone she speaks to seeks out honest people to flirt with. Unfortunately, this assertion is unsubstantiated with empirical evidence and not supported with a solid theoretical argument. In contrast to this claim, empirical research has found that lying is often expected and can provide a space to experiment with one's identity (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). For example, this 29 year old male stated in a previous study that:

"You also lose the ability to be able to judge people's honesty effectively. It's a lot easier to do that in person, um, but there's a certain advantage to it. You lose your inhibitions, your insecurities. You can talk a lot more easily to people. It's a bit of an even cut of pros and cons". (Whitty & Gavin, 2001, p. 629)

As illustrated in this quote, this space between reality and fantasy has its benefits. Online participants can inhabit any body they desire, whether that is a youthful body, attractive body, or even the opposite sex. Moreover, the participant can invent how their fantasy partner looks like, feels like, and feels about them. Participants can fantasise that they are attracted to others, and in turn, others are attracted to them. Therefore, while one cannot be certain about the honesty of the other participants, this honesty can work to one's advantage. As illustrated in the following extract from an interview with a 17 year old male:

"You can never be sure that anyone you talk to on the Net is telling the truth so there's very little trust. That can work both ways because you're free to be

whatever you like, which means your not intimidated by what people think".
(Whitty & Gavin, 2001, p. 629)

This extract demonstrates a paradox — that 'trust can cut both ways'. In other words, while participants are unable to trust whether another is presenting them with the empirical truth, this space is nonetheless an environment they can trust to be safe to experiment with different aspects of his self. Trust is an important aspect in Winnicott's theory. According to him, a potential space is a safe space where experimentation can take place. As we noted earlier, in this space an individual can experiment with what is 'me' and what is 'not-me' through transitional objects. Winnicott (1971/1997) asserted that "when we witness an infant's employment of a transitional object, the first not-me possession, we are witnessing both the child's first use of a symbol and the first experience of play" (p. 96).

Recently, Christopher Bollas (1987; 1992) has extended Winnicott's work with a suggestion that the *transitional objects, like all objects, themselves leave a trace within us*. Bollas (1992, p. 59) argues that "as we encounter the object world … we are substantially metamorphosed by the structure of objects; internally transformed by objects that leave their trace within us". Some objects seem to have much more inner meaning for us and unlock unconscious thought processes and affective states. In a sense, Bollas argues, these objects are "transformational" and may act like "psychic keys" (see also Carr, in press). The object themselves, in acting as psychic keys, appear to enable past unconscious experiences to be released to inform present behaviour. In respect to online interactions, we would suggest that the transitional objects such as, the computers, monitors, keyboards, mice, modems, and so forth "leave a trace" within us. Once we log on, it is as if we must acknowledge "the rules" of the game of cyber-flirting. Playing at love online, is restrained by certain rules; some of these rules have been imposed from people's understandings of offline flirting, however many new rules have evolved in order for online interactions to take place.

Given the paucity of empirical data available on cyber-flirting, we could not do justice to an in-depth discussion of these rules. However, it is worthwhile giving some thought to what these rules might entail. For example, do the same gender rules that have been established offline in respect to flirtatious behaviour also apply online? Moreover, given the greater opportunity to interact with individuals from a plethora of

different cultures online, what happens when cultures collide – what delineates cyber-flirting in these circumstances? For example, do emoticons represent the same meanings to people from all cultures? Indeed, does cyber-encountering have a different language and culture of its own that transcends existing geographical and cultural boundaries in a way that is very distinctive?

It has been observed that some relationships that begin on the Internet often extend beyond it (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). It might therefore be argued that the 'game is over' once the couple decides to introduce more social cues to the interaction. This is not to say that cyber-interactions are not intimate, but rather the illusion of the body that was constructed through the text becomes deconstructed once more is known about the 'actual' body. Just as with courtly love – the magic possibly leaves the relationship once it moves beyond this space.

Ben-Ze'ev (2002) argues that:

Flirting is conducted within a tacit borderline, and a kind of game takes place in which participants move closer to the borderline — and sometimes even step across it — and then move back to a comfortable distance within it. Flirting is like an inactive volcano that can become active any moment. In online affairs, crossing the line between innocent flirting and overt sexual interaction, and hence activating the volcano, is greatly facilitated as the stimulation is high and the typical warning signals that alert people to infidelity — e.g., nonverbal signs of discomfort or shame — are not apparent in cyberspace.

Ben-Ze'ev suggests that cyber-sex is different to cyber-flirting. However, what is difficult to establish is where does the border between cyber-flirting and cyber-sex exists. Is there a linear relationship? In respect to the cyber-flirter's partner is cyber-flirting also seen as an act of betrayal? Research to date has revealed that there are separate components that we need to consider in respect to Internet infidelity, these being sexual, emotional and pornography (Whitty, 2002b). We might need to consider these dimensions in future research in respect to how far our play can go online without creating conflict in our offline relationships.

Arising from the conceptual framework that we are advancing in this article, future research might also consider what happens when we lose our Internet transitional objects.

With the transitional object, the infant can play with the illusion of his own omnipotence (lessening the loss of the environment-mother with generative and phasic delusions of self-and-other creation); he can entertain the idea of the object being got rid of, yet surviving his ruthlessness; and he can find in this transitional experience the freedom of metaphor. (Bollas, 1987, p.15)

Bollas' (1987) assertion has certain implications for cyber-flirting. Winnicott discussed the ramifications of taking a (transitional) transformational object away from a child or altering this object in some way (e.g., washing the child's blanket). In turn, psychologists might need to be mindful of the implications of losing Internet transitional objects (e.g., deleting the text of past exchanges or losing the object of one's Internet affections).

It is also noteworthy that Bollas (1992) has also contended that:

Were we to study this psychology of generations closely, it would be of interest to contrast the nature of generational potential spaces, to note those objects selected as signature of a generations consciousness, and to analyse the field of such objects as unconscious ideas that may be generative or pathological. (p.266)

He further argues that generational objects weave into historic time. Bollas (1992, p. 267) argues that: "Generations form objects that signify the history of childhoods, that speak to the collective march through time of a vast group expecting and expected to shape history". Although it is too early to tell, in decades to come we might look back over the objects, such as computers, modems, keyboards and so forth, and, in retrospective, see these items are signifying meaning for a particular generation in history. Thus it must be considered that cyberspace might not always provide the potential space for playing at love as described in this paper[4].

Does all cyber-flirting promote psychological growth?

"Just as cyberspace may potentiate, it may also thwart and debilitate" (Civin, 2000, p.40). Civin raises and important issue that warrants further discussion. Earlier we defined potential space as a space that is the gap between fantasy and reality. One might like to consider the question: What impact does cyber-flirting have on an individual if they stray too close to the borders of reality or fantasy?

While Turkle (1996) has found few problems with in the use of cyberspace as potential space, Civin (2000) has emphatically disagreed. He instead proposes that "the transitional and facilitative nature of the use of cyberspace as potential space is much less of a given than Turkle might be suggesting … that no object or process, the cyber system included is essentially transitional" (pp. 38-39). Civin continues this line of argument reminding the reader that Winnicott was not suggesting that all teddy bears and blankets are essentially transitional! Likewise, not all cyber systems will act as transitional objects! Civin adds, that in stark contrast, cyber systems are potentially invasive, so much so that they can foster persecutory anxiety. Civin states, that for some, "the computer system seems a far cry (in all meanings) from the teddy bear or favorite blanket, and the breach between the cyber system and the transitional or potential looms unnegotiably vast" (2000, p. 51).

Civin (2000) presents the reader with case studies to illustrate how the cyber system can foster persecutory anxiety. For example, in his presentation of the online experiences of a person he calls Jeannette, Civin demonstrates how she was eventually forced off the net after she angered someone for sharing software he had sent to her. This rage changed to jealousy and Jeannette found she was being emailed more frequently than she could cope with and, in addition, feared her husband would eventually discover her online relationships.

Although cyberspace offers a potential space where, putatively, gender roles could be transcended — as people play at love, this is does not always eventuate[5]. While Turkle (1996) suggested that this is fairly common, more recent empirical data suggests that experimentation with one's physical appearance online does not occur as frequently as one might expect (e.g., Cooper, Delmonico & Burg, 2000; Roberts & Parks, 2001; Whitty, 2002a).

The deleterious effects that cyber-flirting can have on an individual also needs to be considered. In this article, we have made the claim that cyberspace can provide a safe place to play at love. However, both the media and recent research has revealed that it is not a safe place for everyone, and if too much is revealed about oneself it can become quite a dangerous place. Therefore, it could be said that one person's experience of flirting could turn into another person's experience of harassment (see Yelington, 1996, 1999 for an in-depth discussion on the link between offline flirting and sexual harassment). This is exemplified in a thirteen year old women's experience of a cyber-affair (Tarbox, 2000). Initially this young women, named Katie, welcomed

the attention she received from a much older man online, however, this later became a source of regret. According to Katie, it was a lack of understanding from others that was the impetus behind her going online to seek others who would understand her. Although she was unimpressed by many of the men she encountered online, she still persisted in seeking out someone like-minded. To quote from Katie:

> *"And they all want to know what you look like, especially your body. You can be sure that every time you go on-line someone is going to ask you your breast size. I don't really see why anyone bothers to ask. Everyone lies when they answer.*

> *It didn't take me long to figure out that a lot of the guys in the teen chat rooms were not normal guys. They were animals that wanted to be excited by someone they thought looked like Cindy Crawford with a breast size of 36F.*

> *Despite all of this – despite all of the weirdos and the creepy feeling of being detached from reality – a small part of me believed that there was someone out there on the Web like me"*. (Tarbox, 2000, p. 25-26)

Eventually Katie did meet someone she felt resonated with her sense of self. He claimed to be a 23 year old called Mark, and the two discussed in detail favourite fashions. What she didn't know was that he was older, his name was not Mark and he was a paedophile. Mark remained an online friend, and Katie purports that the two became so close that he eventually replaced her best girlfriend as her closest confidant. About a year from when they first meet online Katie gave in to Mark's constant requests to meet her (she had been careful not to give out her address or last name) and arranged to meet him while she was away in another city with her swimming team and their parents. They met in the hotel where she was staying, and Mark managed to persuade Katie to go back to his hotel room. He did in fact attempt to assault her, however fortunately for Katie, one of her friends had followed her (without her knowing) and called her mother for assistance. While Katie avoided being assaulted, as one might imagine, the ramifications of this event for Katie were psychologically damaging for her.

Cyberstalking is a type of harassment that is increasingly being reported. McGrath and Casey (2002) have defined cyberstalking as "Stalking is the repeated uninvited monitoring and/or intrusion into the life and activities of a victim that is

usually, but not always, undertaken for the purpose of frightening or intimidating the victim or those around the victim…Cyberstalking is merely stalking that uses the Internet for information gathering, monitoring, and/or victim contact" (p. 88-89). One of the earliest, and more extreme, cases of cyberstalking occurred in the late 1990s, when a security guard was rejected by a woman he met in church. His vengeful act included placing adverts on the Internet in her name claiming that she was into "rape fantasy and gang-bang fantasy…the adverts included a detailed physical description, her address and phone number and even instructions on how to bypass her burglar alarm" (Gumbel, 1999). This woman was woken up at night by men pounding on her door yelling they were going to rape her. Another more common example of cyberstalking in the public domain is where ex-lovers put on the web, or send emails to friends of embarrassing and humiliating photos and details about the person they fell out with. Another more famous case is the Mr Bungle affair that occurred in 1992 in Lambda MOO (see Turkle, 1996). In cyberspace a player masqueraded as another player's character by using a MUD programming technique often referred to as a voodoo doll. The Mr Bungle character used the voodoo doll to force another character to perform sexual acts on him – this incident is now commonly referred to as the first rape in cyberspace.

In addition to these case studies, empirical research is finding that online harassment is causing problems, for women in particular, in online settings, including workplace online spaces. For example in Whitty's (2002c) recent Australia-wide study, 17% of participants stated that they had been harassed in emails in their workplace. Whitty and Gavin (2001) found that a number of the women they interviewed (especially the younger women) stated that they had experienced problems with being harassed in chat rooms and were sometimes cyberstalked. For example, one young woman stated: *"Oh yeah. Some people just think it's open slaughter on young girls on the net and come meet me at such and such a place and you're like yeah right I don't think so. You just don't give out too much information. You cover yourself"*. It has also been observed that young women, in particular, are stating that they are needing to lie about details about themselves (e.g., age, looks, where they live) in order to avoid harassment both offline and online (Whitty 2002b).

Therapeutic implications

Despite these negative experiences online and the realisation that not all cyberspace is potential space, we believe that further researcher into cyber-flirting could have some important therapeutic implications. Since Freud, psychoanalytic thinkers have been interested in the psychology of romance. As Lindholm (1988) points out, in Freud's later writings he was interested in the loved one as being a substitute for an unattained ego ideal that we maintain. "When this idea is found, boundaries between the self and other melt … the romantic lover seeks identification with an external object, and *identification* offering a cathartic return to merger with the engulfing other…" (Lindholm, 1988, p. 28; for a similar approach see also Carr & Zanetti, 1999). We suggest that psychoanalytic theories of narcissism and identity could be extended to include cyber-romances.

While we contend that his type of play has significant implications for therapeutic outcomes, we also recognise that the potential for psychopathologies to develop from this activity cannot be discounted. For example recent studies have increasingly focused on cyber-sex as a compulsive disorder (e.g., Cooper, Delmonico & Burg, 2000). Bollas (1987) has described how the search for the idealised lover can be a quest to find a deficiency in the ego. As he states

> Some forms of erotomania may be efforts to establish the other as the transformational object. The search for the perfect crime or the perfect woman is not only a quest for an idealized object. It also constitutes some recognition in the subject of a deficiency in ego experience. The search, even though it serves to split the bad experience from the subject's cognitive knowledge, is nonetheless a semiological act that signifies the person's search for a particular object relation that is associated with ego transformation and repair of the 'basic fault'. (Bollas, 1987, p.18).

To conclude, we trust that this article provides a way forward in our thinking about cyberspace — including its vices, and potential therapeutic benefits it has to offer. Although cyber-flirting is based on elements of physical reality, read through the optic of Winnicott's object-relation theory this illusion must be sustained in this space if one is to 'play at love'.

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[1] The authors would like to publicly acknowledge the very constructive advice given by three anonymous reviewers from the board of HR and Associate Editor Professor Yiannis Gabriel in respect to an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] At this early stage of the discussion on play we acknowledge that other types of play could also be available in cyberspace; however, an in-depth discussion of this kind is beyond the scope of this paper.

[3] The authors of this paper prefer to use the term psychodynamics to that of psychoanalysis, as a less 'treatment' oriented synonym that implies the normality and dynamic nature of psychological processes.

[4] At this point we wish to acknowledge that the way in which we have conceptualised cyberspace is as one generic space. We recognise that there are different spaces on the Internet and, it is most likely, that Winnicott's notions of potential space are more applicable to some of these spaces, rather than all of cyberspace. Spaces such as MUDs and MOOs (multiple-user dungeon, or more commonly understood these days to mean multi-user dimension or domains) which were originally a space where interactive role-playing games could be played, very similar to Dungeons and Dragons. In this space we find people experimenting with and playing with multiple characters (see White, 2001). Chat rooms are another different space where we can see evidence of flirting in some of the screen names people select (e.g., CallMeBaBy; PimpDadE4eva; Winker). Individuals in these rooms have a space where the risk of shame and humiliation are significantly less than interacting with an individual offline, since one can ensure anonymity. Spaces such as newsgroups possibly create less opportunity for individuals to cyber-flirt. Newsgroups are a space on the Internet devoted to the discussion of a specific topic. Unlike chat rooms and MUDs and MOOs, the textual exchanges are typically asynchronous. The type of topic and whether people reveal who they really are can alter the dynamics of such as space.

A full discussion of this aspect of cyberspace is beyond what the word length that this article will allow, but clearly further investigation would appear necessary to understand the psychological processes that may occur because these spaces on the web are of different character.

[5] While a full discussion on gender relations is beyond the scope of this paper, we would like to acknowledge Yelington's (1996, 1999) papers on flirting which have focused on the relations between men and women factory workers in Trinidad. Yelington contends that "While women's flirting may bring them [men] pleasure or buy them time, over time it tends to reinforce the society's gender double standards; men's reputations, on the other hand, are not besmirched, by flirting" (Yelington, 1999, p. 547). A question we propose for future thinking about cyber-flirting is whether these power relations can be transcended online. For instance, cyber-flirting might be more akin to the game of flirting that Osella and Osella (1998) delineate in respect to offline flirtation.