

Explorations in Media Ecology
Volume 12 Numbers 1 & 2

© 2013 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/eme.12.1-2.7_1

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Telepresence and the ethics of digital cheating

ABSTRACT

This article considers the ethics of sexual telepresence by tracing the history of mechanical and digital sex and exploring the possibilities facilitated by current and emerging technology. My aim is to consider how people have used technology to engage in new forms of sexual expression in order to more clearly delineate exactly what constitutes cheating and the ethical lines surrounding such behaviours. As with non-digital forms of intimacy, it seems clear that there is a range of behaviours that invite different people to draw the lines in different places, ranging from flirtation to erotic talk, to physical contact. But the goal of this article is not merely to consider where the lines may lie, but rather to examine how the medium in which the interaction takes place invites individuals to make particular moral judgments concerning what lines should exist at all concerning both physical and emotional intimacy.

KEYWORDS

cybersex
digital telepresence
ethics
infidelity
intimacy
sexuality

Humans have likely been using tools to achieve sexual pleasure for as long as humans have used tools. Aside from some religious imperatives against masturbation, such actions are seemingly well within the realm of the ethical, especially in regard to whether such actions constitute cheating on one's lover. However, the tools that we have crafted for sexual purposes have, like all tools, evolved considerably from the crude dildos and, of course, hands of times past. As these tools allow one to maintain a greater connection to one's masturbatory fantasy, the ethics become increasingly complicated. For example, pornography has long been a staple of fantasy, but one can now have a synthetic

vagina or penis molded from the body of one's favourite pornographic actress or actor; combining this with point of view (POV) pornography involving the individual can increase the seeming reality of the act in the mind of the viewer. This is complicated still further with the advent of digital technologies that allow for a degree of sexual telepresence previously unavailable.

Although Skype sex may seem to be merely an extension of previous exchanges of erotic letters, photos, and videos, or enhanced phone sex, the fact that two or more individuals can engage in visible synchronous sexual behaviour engaging multiple senses makes this a much more complex interaction. Such interactions have long been a staple of concerns about cybercheating, as those in opposition to such behaviour lament the loss of emotional intimacy and argue that the behaviour can affect the entire family (Goldberg et al. 2008). Indeed, cybersex presents a host of potential clinical implications. For example, some may engage in cybersex as a way of dealing with past trauma or as unhealthy outlets for sexual expression (Cavaglion and Rashty 2010; Ferree 2003; Schwartz and Southern 2000). Cybersex also allows for sex that incorporates illegal acts, such as ageplay that fantasizes about pedophilia (Lunceford 2012). Yet even in these cases, no *physical* contact has taken place between the two. This is changing now with the introduction of teledildonics. Some pornographic websites allow an individual to control a machine that directly interfaces with the body of another using a dildo or a synthetic vagina. Were such an act to take place in physical space, one could reasonably consider the act to be cheating on one's lover even if no physical contact took place, so why is there not the same reaction to engaging in such acts online? This is further complicated by sex dolls that have begun to incorporate artificial intelligence, adding the possibility that as AI becomes more sophisticated, the interactions between humans and machines will become increasingly complex.

This article considers the ethics of sexual telepresence by tracing the history of mechanical and digital sex and exploring the possibilities facilitated by current and emerging technology. My aim is to consider how people have used technology to engage in new forms of sexual expression in order to more clearly delineate exactly what constitutes cheating. As with non-digital forms of intimacy, it seems clear that there is a range of behaviours that invite different people to draw the lines in different places, ranging from flirtation to erotic talk, to physical contact. But the goal of this essay is not merely to consider where the lines may lie, but rather to examine how the medium in which the interaction takes place invites individuals to make particular moral judgments concerning what lines should exist at all concerning both physical and emotional intimacy. After all, there are few hard and fast ethical guidelines, especially in matters of sex. As Valerie Peterson rightly observes,

Eventually, most people face sexual situations for which there are no easy or ready-made answers. At that point, they will have to make decisions for themselves, using their own ethical standards, what factual information they have at hand, and what they know of the culture, the situation, and the persons involved (including themselves).

(2011: 53)

Thus it is with some recognition of the perils of prescribing a particular ethical stance that we begin.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MECHANICAL SEX

Sexual implements have been around for quite some time. In their discussion of phallic objects from the Upper Paleolithic period, Javier Angulo and Marcos García-Díez state that ‘Some believe they constitute dildos or domestic masturbating devices, but they could also have been used in rituals’ (2009: 13). In some cases, artificial sex objects were used in ritualistic ways, such as the defloration of a young woman on the stone phallus of an idol (Howard 1975; Love 1992; Stanley 1995). The use of objects purely for pleasure likewise has a long history. For example, the *Kāmā Sūtra* explains how women ‘use carrots, fruits, and other objects to satisfy their desires’ (Vātsyāyana 1994: 376). Dildos have been incorporated into modern marital therapy, with one group of researchers suggesting the use of a dildo as a means of helping a woman to become orgasmic during penile–vaginal intercourse. They propose that ‘For several practice sessions, the woman by herself experiences the sensations associated with vaginal containment of a dildo or another *safe* phalluslike object’ (Zeiss et al. 1977: 892, original emphasis). Michael Crowe also recommends dildos (trainers) as a treatment for vaginismus (2004, 2007).

As we moved into the industrial age, sex tools likewise became more mechanical. Therapists have employed vibrators as a way to help inorgasmic women (Adkins and Jehu 1985; Lobitz and LoPiccolo 1972; Pines 1968; Spence 1985; Wincze et al. 1978). Indeed, the vibrator has a long and storied history beginning in the late 1800s as a way to treat hysteria. This freed the doctors from the necessity of performing manual genital massage, which they had done since the first century (McCaffrey and Adler 2009; Colson 2010). And then there are specialized devices, such as the ‘clitoral therapy device’ described by Margaret Ramage, which is a ‘small, battery-operated pump [that] fits over the clitoris and is intended to increase clitoral engorgement and subsequent sensitivity and orgasm potential’ (2006: 109). There are other sex machines geared mainly towards women, which consist of a dildo attached to an oscillating machine (often a repurposed reciprocating saw or drill) that can be controlled by wireless access or remote control (Archibald 2005).

Men, of course, have not been left out of this technological masturbatory bounty. There have been sex dolls ranging from the humble inflatable doll (which seems more a gag gift at this point than a true sex aid) to incredibly realistic ‘Real Dolls’, which are fully customizable based on hair and eye colour, body and breast size, and other physical attributes (Real Doll 2013). Real Doll has recently added a line of male dolls as well. There are also sexual toys such as the Fleshlight, which is a synthetic vagina (or anus or non-descript orifice) which can even be molded from the bodies of specific adult film actresses (Fleshlight 2013).

Sex has also been facilitated through technology in other ways; for example, the widespread adoption of the automobile provided opportunities for privacy and mobility. Peter Ling notes that

While legislative inaction and parental trust enabled apparently sex-hungry teenagers to take to America’s roads in the 1920s, the active state suppression of red-light districts pushed prostitutes too, into cars in secluded parking spots. Just as the moralists feared, the automobile had become a brothel on wheels.

(1989: 24)

Technology has also fundamentally altered the relationship between sex and procreation through the use of birth control. Lewis Mumford claimed that ‘temporary sterilization – so-called birth control – was perhaps the most important to the human race of all the scientific and technical advances that were carried to completion during the nineteenth century’ (1963: 260). Peterson likewise argues that birth control functions as a powerful means of controlling not only sexuality, but gender roles and social norms as well. She suggests that birth control ‘won’t make women less human, nor will it make them into men, but it will make them less wedded to biological destiny and more complicated as a sex’ (Peterson 2010: 16).

But this technologizing of sexuality has not, according to some, been completely positive. Mumford describes industrial era sexuality thus: ‘This starvation of the senses, this restriction and depletion of the physical body, created a race of invalids: people who knew only partial health, partial physical strength, partial sexual potency’ (Mumford 1963: 180). He laments that

The secrets of stimulation and sexual pleasure were confined to the specialists in the brothels, and garbled knowledge about the possibilities of intercourse were conveyed by well-meaning amateurs or by quacks whose books on sexology acted as an additional bait, frequently, for their patent medicines.

(Mumford 1963: 180)

As sex has become more technologized, the potential for virtual sex has become more realistic. Indeed, we have arrived at the realm of teledildonics, where one can stimulate another through the Internet using a specialized interface. For example, the RealTouch system employs a mechanical sleeve in which the male inserts his penis while his partner stimulates the phallic transmitter on the other end of the connection (RealTouch 2012). Virtual Sex Machine seems to follow a similar model (Virtual Sex Machine 2010). There are others geared towards stimulating the woman, such as the Simulator, which allowed the male to control the intensity of a vibrator by thrusting his penis into a synthetic vagina on the other end of the virtual circuit. HighJoy is another system that allows an individual to control another’s vibrator online (HighJoy 2010). This seems to be popular with women who perform sexual acts on webcam. This is similar to remote controlled vibrators that can be used anywhere (within range), but presumably these would not be used in acts of cybersex.

INCREASING THE PERCEIVED REALITY OF VIRTUAL SEX

Before considering the nature of virtual sex, we must first come to terms with non-mediated sex. Sex is more than the act of sexual intercourse, or putting tab A into slot B. Georges Bataille observed that ‘the simple sexual act is different from eroticism; the former is found in animal life, whereas human life alone admits of an activity defined perhaps by a ‘diabolical’ aspect, aptly described by the word eroticism’ (1989: 23). This distinction between the erotic and the sexual helps explain why certain interactions are seen as betrayal while others are seen as harmless. For example, when I shake hands with another individual, I have more surface contact with him or her than if I were to kiss him or her on the mouth. Yet one is endowed with a sense of eroticism while shaking hands is generally not seen in this manner.

Cyndi Roller states that ‘Sexual response is as much a function of the brain as it is of the genitals’, observing that ‘behaviors such as eating or sex produce euphorogenic neurotransmitters that activate the pleasure and reward centers in the limbic system’ (Roller 2007: 487; see also Georgiadis and Kringelbach 2012). Beatriz Mileham echoes this sentiment:

Eroticism and sexuality permeate their mind-body systems: they speak to each other in erotic ways, describe their heightened sexual sensations, tease each other with sexual innuendos, reveal their fantasies, and many times share personal problems, wishes, and dreams. Thus, in a very real sense, individuals do share their mind-body systems with each other as they create and experience the other in an involving, engulfing flow of sexual and/or emotional energy.

(2007: 22)

In short, it is difficult to differentiate the physical from the emotional because they are always intertwined. One cannot affect the emotions without affecting the body, and anything that affects the body will elicit a physiological response. What constitutes erotic interactions is not solely a function of physicality, but also constructed rhetorically by individuals, relationship units, and society.

If the defining characteristics of erotic expression are continually under revision as a result of its fluidity, it would seem that defining sex – the physical act – should be simpler. However, defining the limits of sex can be a daunting task, with different people defining sex in different ways (Carpenter 2001; Nicoletti 2005; Woody et al. 2000). Defining cybersex is no less problematic. Mileham notes that ‘despite a decade of exploration, there is no ‘official’ definition of cybersex’ (2007: 13). Krystelle Shaughnessy et al. likewise note considerable variability in defining the term, even as ‘22.5% of participants reported that they “would say [they] had engaged in cybersex”’ (2011: 85). They propose ‘a broad conceptualization that cybersex is a sexual communication between at least two people that is focused on sexual relations and occurs via synchronous Internet modes’ (2011: 86). For the purposes of this essay, I will consider cybersex to be any form of mediated, synchronous, physically distanced erotic interaction in order to go beyond communicative acts and add physical interactions. Such a framework includes interactions ranging from chat sessions to webcam mutual masturbation to interactive teledildonics. Of course not all forms of cybersex are created equal. Lunceford explains that

a session of phone sex or text-based cybersex allows for synchronous erotic expression and participation but does not allow for being in each other’s presence. Teledildonics partially overcomes this limitation in allowing each participant to alter the other’s physical experience in ways that simulate presence.

(2009: 85)

As such, I will consider the differences throughout the remainder of this essay, but for the moment a broad definition will suffice.

People have long traded sexual images of themselves and this has moved into the digital domain as well (Slater 1998). Live sex shows are also nothing new (Manderson 1992), but in the mediated environment it seems that some things have changed. The medium through which it takes place allows for a

sense of intimacy – real or imagined – that cannot take place in a peep show booth or a bar. Ziauddin Sardar argues,

Cybersex promises intimacy without the necessity or even desirability of giving to another. It's a one-way street: in cyberspace you enter the simulacrum of your desires, you feel what she (it?) feels, she is yours but you don't belong to her, while she is your puppet you are totally free.

(1995: 792)

But this is not actually intimacy, but rather the illusion of intimacy. Sardar continues,

The fascination with virtual reality is not simply functional or even aesthetic; it is, for the want of a better word, tantric. In the first instance it is purely carnal; but beyond that virtual reality holds the promise of magical sex leading to mystical rapture. Western society has always considered the body to be little more than a machine, so it is hardly surprising that it is so ready to extend its limitations by merging it with other machines.

(1995: 791)

In cybersex there would seem to be an element of magic in the erotic that goes beyond the animalistic copulation described by Bataille. However, Lunceford suggests that 'When individuals "make love" (as opposed to simply having sex or fucking) they ascribe to the act a spiritual element that transcends biological urges' (2009: 94). The question then becomes, is there a spiritual or mystical element of cybersex or is it merely animalistic masturbation? If it is the former, then there can be no question that the act is a betrayal of intimacy. If it is the latter, this does not excuse it in an ethical sense, but it does invite us to look more closely at why cybersex allows such a reaction when other forms of sexuality do not (or make it more difficult to do so).

So what makes cybersex different? Some have argued that the medium itself facilitates a different kind of connecting. One need not bother with the niceties of getting to know another individual before embarking on a sexual relationship. Nicola Döring notes that 'Internet users can initiate offline sexual contacts far more easily and in a more targeted manner than outside the net. In addition, online sex has developed as new form of sexual encounter' (2009: 1091). M. Tardif and J. A. Spearson-Goulet also argue that in the online world, 'because contacts are easy to make and rudimentary, it is possible to have a relationship centred on sexuality, without long preliminaries' (2009: 179). Because of its distributed, decentralized nature, one is no longer bound by space to find a willing partner. For example, some have even engaged in cybersex at work (Mills et al. 2001). One can more easily seek a particular kind of interaction based on shared interest. When one walks into a cybersex room, it is much more obvious that people are there for erotic interaction than walking into a bar on single's night. The space itself sets the parameters of what will (and should) happen there.

The spaces in which these interactions take place are not really spaces at all, and this is part of the illusion. Although one is interacting with another who may be on the other side of the world, each is physically alone in his or her own separate space. The space is familiar, providing a sense of the mundane and an illusion of secrecy and safety. It is easier to let one's guard

down while sitting in a familiar room with no one watching. One can disconnect from his or her identity by using a handle (sexybabe4u or hunglow69) that provides a sense of perceived anonymity. In short, the body seems to be disconnected from the acts of the body in the virtual realm and some have exulted in this noncorporeality. Howard Rheingold asks,

If technology enables you to experience erotic frissons or deep physical, social, emotional communion with another person with no possibility of pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease, what then of conventional morality, and what of the social rituals and cultural codes that exist solely to enforce that morality? Is disembodiment the ultimate sexual revolution and/or the first step toward abandoning our bodies?

(1999: 207)

My answer to this is 'no', because the body is always part of the interaction. As Lunceford argues,

in cybersex, then, the body is excited by the use of language rather than by the use of the body... thus it may be a misnomer to say that cybersex is even sex. That it may be sexual is not in question, but to put it on the same level of magnitude of intimacy as physical sexual activity seems unreasonable.

(2009: 84)

The physical is always a part of the virtual in that the emotions elicited by the interaction provoke a physiological response. On the other hand, it would be difficult to have an erotic interaction that is physical without emotion, if only a sense of desire and a need to be with the other individual. However, this may not be the case for those who participate in cybersex. In her ethnography of cybersex participants, Feona Attwood found that 'only a minority of men saw cybersex as involving any emotional connection with partners or discussed the relation between their experiences in chat rooms and their offline lives in any detail' (2009: 288).

There is, of course, another explanation for the sentiment that there is no emotional connection. Those participating in cybersex may not have any specific feeling for the individual in question, but they would likely have feelings about the interaction itself or that specific kind of interaction. When one seeks out the services of a prostitute, he or she may not have any feelings for the prostitute, but what is revealed is a desire for anonymous sex, a willingness to pay for sex rather than seek out a potential relationship, and a touch of narcissism. The pleasure is only for the individual engaging in cybersex; they use the other individual because the pleasure of the other is irrelevant. To engage in sex without any emotion at all calls into question the healthiness of such forms of sexual expression. In Abraham Maslow's description of sexuality in self-actualizing people he argues,

We cannot go so far as some who say that any person who is capable of having sexual pleasure where there is no love must be a sick man. But we can certainly go in this direction. It is certainly fair to say that self actualizing men and women tend on the whole not to seek sex for its own sake or to be satisfied with it alone when it comes.

(1963: 148)

Even a one night stand is likely to unearth some emotion in the individuals taking part. But the relative anonymity of the Internet allows for the removal of the individuals from the erotic transaction. Although there are two people taking part in the interaction, the other is only represented in mediated form. As such, there is the illusion that the other person is not actually real. According to Tardif and Spearson-Goulet, 'The Internet has such a strong potential to degrade sexuality and undermine the humanization of interactions, that, it appears to us, it may actually support primitive and dehumanized representations of sexuality' (2009: 180–81).

In some ways the cybersex transaction more closely approximates prostitution, with some approaching an almost identical status – at least emotionally if not physically. One such case is the RealTouch Interactive system where one is stimulated by the other through the interface. When the other individual strokes the phallic controller, the man's apparatus responds accordingly. As RealTouch puts it, 'Your RealTouch senses both the velocity and depth of motion that models perform on their joystick. This is the most realistic live sexual experience the world has ever known and we are proud to call it True Internet Sex!' (RealTouch 2013). For \$75, adult film star Savannah Steele promises '15 Minutes of amazing sex with me, lets [*sic*] start with a little foreplay maybe a nice blowjob, hand job or titty fucking before having you slide your rock hard cock deep inside me, fuck me hard until we both cum!' (RealTouch Interactive 2013b). Each individual sets the price and what is possible for that price. For example, Kitty Wilde offers the following '5 minute quickie' for \$40: 'In this 5 minute show I'll strip and stroke until you cum! My pussy and ass are off limits but I guarantee you'll leave satisfied' (RealTouch Interactive 2013a). In short, the john picks out the woman of his choice, agrees on the price and what is possible in the transaction, engages in the sexual act(s), and leaves the money on the virtual dresser.

In her discussion of prostitution, Martha Nussbaum argues that 'feminists should view prostitutes as (usually) poor working women with few options, not as threats to the intimacy and commitment that many women and men (including, no doubt, many prostitutes) seek' (1999: 297). But her comparison to domestic servitude and other low status jobs in her defense of prostitution is disingenuous. The reality is that prostitution *is* a threat to intimacy in the same way that cybersex is a threat to intimacy – because it siphons off attention and intimacy that is generally promised to the partner. As one female participant in cybersex confessed, 'I have learned that giving any part of myself away to another was taking away that part from my spouse. If I had spent the time and energy on my marriage instead of online, we would have grown together rather than apart' (Schneider 2000: 262).

Cybersex seems to be a special case in infidelity. Monica Whitty found that participants in her study 'did not consider sexual infidelity as having a more serious impact than emotional infidelity. Such a result suggests that cyberaffairs could create problems for an offline relationship for very different reasons than an offline affair might' (2005: 66). Perhaps this is because the medium has changed our perception of the act. Marshall McLuhan noted that the

outering or extension of our bodies and senses in a 'new invention' compels the whole of our bodies to shift into new positions in order to maintain equilibrium. A new 'closure' is effected in all our organs and senses, both private and public, by any new invention.

(1994: 252)

With this in mind, it is possible that the Internet has changed our perceptions of what it means to have sex. This is also tied up in our conceptions of what it means to be embodied. As Elaine Graham puts it, 'Technologies are not so much an extension or appendage to the human body, but are incorporated, assimilated into its very structures. The contours of human bodies are redrawn: they no longer end at the skin' (2002: 4). Cybersex is not only having sex through technology, but also having sex *with* technology. The question is whether one can *make love* with or through technology. Perhaps this is possible within a relationship (in the case of long-distance Skype sex between partners), but still, as Lunceford points out, 'the mediated body is still a pale substitute for the living, breathing body – especially when it comes to interactions of an erotic nature' (2009: 88).

THE ETHICS OF VIRTUAL SEX

We have reached a general sense that cybersex is unethical based on a loss of emotional intimacy and, perhaps, physical acts between one partner and another outside of the relationship. For the remainder of this essay, we will drive the point home by considering the specific ethical dimensions of cybersex. Of course each individual sexual interaction is different, even within a particular partnership, making it difficult to make a blanket statement concerning cybersex in general. Each individual will have different guidelines concerning what is appropriate. But it is possible to at least start with the stories of those who have engaged in such acts. Finally, although Döring observes that 'cybersex is not always initiated based on mutual consent' (2009: 1096), I will limit my discussion to interactions which, at the very least, involve consent of all parties involved. In doing so I will bypass discussion of exactly what constitutes *consent* because consent can be a slippery concept, especially in cybersex interactions. Consent cannot be taken as a given in cybersex; Julian Dibbell, for example, provides a startling example of nonconsensual sexual interactions in cyberspace (1999). There is also the issue of who is legally able to consent, which is blurred by practices such as 'ageplay', in which one person pretends to be younger (generally) or older than he or she is (Kierkegaard 2008; Lunceford 2012). Concerns over cybersex persist even when the individual readily assents to the interaction, but is forbidden by law to do so, as in the case of sexually active adolescents (Leary 2007; Lunceford 2010, 2011; Smith 2008). To fully explore the idea of consent in cybersex is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article. Thus, for our purposes, we will consider cases in which the individuals are willing and legally able to engage in online sexual interactions.

Ethical codes are culturally bound and socially maintained. As Wendell Johnson states, 'We tend to regard as maladjustment any form of sexual behaviour that does not conform to the accepted moral code' (1946: 326). Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann likewise argue that 'sexuality and nutrition are channeled in specific directions socially rather than biologically, a channeling that not only imposes limits upon these activities, but directly affects organismic functions' (1966: 181). I will focus on this from a western perspective with the understanding that other cultures may have different perceptions concerning what is and is not permissible in the marriage relationship.

The idea of what constitutes infidelity is what is at stake here, and this is open to some debate. Indeed, it is this ambiguity of what exactly constitutes

infidelity that allows those who engage in cybersex to rationalize their actions. In their analysis of previous studies of infidelity, Richard McAnulty and Jocelyn Brineman note that defining infidelity in terms of sexual intercourse with someone other than the partner ignored the fact that 'other types of infidelity are apparently more common and often just as troublesome for the parties affected by the transgressions' (2007: 96). McAnulty and Brineman also note that students, who are often the convenience sample in such studies, 'have divergent views of such seemingly basic terms as *having sex* and what constitutes a *sexual partner*' (2007: 96, original emphasis). Defining infidelity differently can be seen in the narratives of those who engage in cybersex. One can see stark contradictions in some of these narratives, such as the woman who states that her husband was 'devastated' when he found out about her extramarital activities in the dominant/submissive subculture, but insists that 'My other relationships truly do not affect my marriage and my children unless he makes an issue of it', even as she explains that she is 'depressed and angry', and that they are consistently sleeping apart and 'have had minimal sexual contact for months' (Schneider 2000: 265). She concludes, 'My relationships are safe, sane, and consensual interactions between intelligent, successful adults who recognize that there is more to sexuality than mainstream Judeo-Christian marital interaction' (2000: 265).

In doing so, she has forgotten a fundamental element of consent, especially in the BDSM and D/s community – that all involved parties must consent. It seems that she has left her husband out of the consent equation. This runs counter to the credo of that community that she cites of 'safe, sane and consensual'. As Gloria Brame et al. explain, 'A partner's limits and preferences are respected' (1993: 5). This would seem to include one's marriage partners as well. Hilton, one member of the subculture, states,

I think it's deceitful to be with someone and have to go secretly outside of the relationship to be satisfied. I see a lot of people coming to the group who are married: Their spouses are either not into it or know nothing about it. I think it's very sad that people do things like that, because the whole purpose is to share and explore our sexuality together.

(Brame et al. 1993: 39)

Charley Ferrer likewise argues that

Many dishonorable married men play in the BDSM community figuring their wives or partners will never learn of it because they don't allocate the same value to BDSM interactions or they do not interact with the slave/submissive sexually thus they do not view their interactions as cheating.

(2012: 60)

Consent is the foundation of sexual ethics. As Peterson argues, 'if you like or love someone, it would be unethical to have sex with that person without that person's consent' (of course it is unethical to have sex with anyone without consent) (Peterson 2011: 37). This framework also seems to include the other partner as well. One can consent to have cybersex with someone who is not the partner, but if the other partner has a reasonable expectation that his or her partner is – or should remain – monogamous, then there needs to be another level of consent in order to maintain the relationship. Peterson argues that

'Despite temptation, ethical marriage requires fidelity' (2011: 30). She excludes open marriages from her ethical framework and goes on to explain that

It is wrong for married people to be sexually intimate with anyone other than their partners (or in the case of polygamy, with anyone outside of the marital unit), because in doing so, a major promise is broken (additionally, partners are potentially exposed to physical and emotional harm).

(2011: 30–31)

Many cybersex participants have convinced themselves that they are not being unfaithful during these acts. As such, there must be some reason why they are engaging in such behaviour. In answer to the question, 'So, why do people have affairs', economists Bruce Elmslie and Edinaldo Tebaldi found that 'people do – to some extent – make a cost-benefit calculation, and that this calculation does have a connection with biological factors as well as socio-economic ones. And men and women do seem to be calculating the net benefits from having an affair differently' (2008: 406). But there seems to be something more than a simple cost-benefit analysis at work in the case of online cybercheating. The potential costs for cheating are great because they transcend the relationship; sanctions are often imposed by society in general and specific individuals who know that particular dyad. As such, the pleasure of the interaction is likely to be outweighed heavily by the potential sanctions imposed on the transgressor. Moreover, the pleasure may not even be there in the interaction. Bill Hancock writes,

Online affairs aren't new. The promise of chat rooms has always been easy anonymity and instantaneous interaction – a potent brew that fosters intimacy with strangers. But scratch the explanation. It's the stories themselves that illustrate how technology taps a needy, often wretched side of humanity. They are stories of people who ignore their young children for hours while they hole themselves up in chat rooms, people who leave their families for lovers they've never met.

(2000: 490)

Mileham notes that 'Internet chat rooms have introduced unprecedented dynamics into marital relationships: never before has it been so easy to enjoy both the stability of marriage and the thrills of the dating scene at the same time' (2007: 12). Yet in doing so the partner who is engaging in cybersex with another individual is not pulling his or her weight in the relationship. Maintaining a relationship can be difficult under the best of circumstances, but, as Mileham explains, in online infidelity 'partners channel sexual and/or emotional energy outwards and keep this part of themselves and their lives outside the spouse's cognizance by sneaking around and searching for opportunities to have a lively or "hot" chat' (2007: 13).

For many individuals, the distinction between cheating and not cheating comes down to the distinction between physical and nonphysical. In Mileham's study of married people who had cybersex with participants who were not their partners,

Eighty three percent of all participants rationalized their chat room behaviors in a particularly uniform way: since there is no physical

contact, online-only liaisons are not a form of infidelity. The common thought process behind this conception was: 'How can this be cheating if I'm not touching anyone?'.
 (2007: 20)

Lunceford illustrates the problem with this kind of thinking with the following scenario:

Consider the case if the spouse were to walk in on the other *in flagrante delicto*, and see the other party on the screen actively participating in the act. Despite the absence of the other party, it is difficult to claim that nothing was *actually* taking place between the two. It is true that no bodily fluids were exchanged and that each penetrated or was penetrated by only synthetic flesh, but still – *something* would have taken place.
 (2009: 85, original emphasis)

In the case of teledildonics, it seems clear that this is a case where the sex is in the same genus, if not same species, as physical sex. Of the five senses, smell and taste are taken out of the interaction, but sight, sound and touch are present and accounted for (smell could be arranged with the exchange of undergarments, but this may require more planning than a casual interaction would allow for). Even in webcam cybersex without teledildonics, there is still a sense of reality that comes from the interaction. One participant described webcam cybersex as 'more real than pornography and less real than reality' (Jones 2008: 470).

Even in the case of textual-based cybersex, the distinction between physical and non-physical falls apart. Döring argues that 'Cybersex is not "disembodied" per se. Sexual stimulation is experienced on a bodily level, and physical attributes and carnal reactions are also symbolically portrayed' (2009: 1095). Concerning cybersex, Dibbell likewise observes,

Amid flurries of even the most cursory described caresses, sighs, and penetrations, the glands do engage, and often as throbbingly as they would in a real-life assignation – sometimes even more so, given the combined power of anonymity and textual suggestiveness to unshackle deep seated fantasies. And if the virtual setting and the interplayer vibe are right, who knows? The heart may engage as well, stirring up passions as strong as many that bind lovers who observe the formality of trysting in the flesh.
 (1999: 458–59)

As anyone who has ever watched an erotic film or listened to a moving piece of music can attest, one need not be physically touched to be physically moved.

In addition to the false dichotomy between physical and non-physical, there is also the potential that these online encounters may move into the offline world. Kristian Daneback et al. found that 'as many as 35% of men and 40% of women' had 'met someone online who they later met offline and had sex with' (2007: 105). However, they also found that 'seeking sex partners online was primarily a singles activity as the majority of the respondents were either singles, divorced, or widowed' (2007: 106). Mileham, on the other hand, notes that 'many times these [online cybersex] exchanges lead to real-life encounters' (2007: 20). Daneback et al. also found cybersex 'not to be primarily a "singles" activity. Rather, the regression analysis showed no significant effects between cybersex and relationship status' (2005: 326). As one cybersex

participant observed, 'Cybersex addiction twists the mind. Slowly or quickly it will cause objectification, fantasy, and the loss of intimacy in real relationships. Because of the progressive nature of the addiction, it will also eventually come out of the cyber area and into "real" life' (Schneider 2000: 257). Even if the meeting between the partner and the outsider never takes place, it is likely that the interactions may influence the individual's relationship. Döring also suggests that

If married persons or individuals with a steady partner secretly engage in cybersex with a third party, this – not infrequently – is registered by the partner as an act of betrayal (online infidelity, cyberinfidelity), and may lead to a crisis or exacerbate existing problems in the relationship.
(2009: 1096)

The fact that the erotic act is not (or may not be) physically consummated does not make it harmless, nor does it mean that others are unlikely to see it as a betrayal of trust. Indeed, the question often arises, if the individual thinks that the behaviour is harmless fun, then why the need for secrecy? Perhaps part of this can be attributed to a difference in what males and females consider important betrayals. Saul Miller and Jon Mane found that 'compared to women, men reported greater distress over sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity' (2009: 289). Ellen Helsper and Monica Whitty also found that 'In 90% of couples both partners were unhappy for the other partner to fall in love with someone else online, and 84% of couples both were unhappy for the other engaging in cybersex' (2010: 920). In short, emotional fidelity is just as important as physical fidelity.

The damage to the uninvolved partner is no less painful for having been inflicted from the virtual realm. As one man reported,

Sometimes she'd ask me to pick her up for lunch and I would get angry, making something up about how I had errands to do, so I could stay home and surf. Our relationship became significantly strained. We'd go months without having sex. My wife said she felt extremely alone during that period.
(Schneider 2000: 256)

It is clear that emotional intimacy can be betrayed without ever touching another. Patrick Carnes writes,

Because the Internet is an electronic medium, patients will delude themselves about the impact of what they are doing. They tell themselves that cybersex is not 'real', it is only electrons, it does not hurt anybody, and that there are no consequences... Addicts believe that having a cybersex affair is not really being unfaithful because it is a virtual experience. Patients frequently cite these reasons as essential factors in the escalation. But there are consequences.
(2001: 70)

The story of one 60-year-old man illustrates this point:

I'd stay on the 'Net until after midnight, doing cybersex and searching for porn sites. I had no time for sex with my wife. Eventually I got

arrested for sending porn to a minor, who was in fact a police officer. I lost my job, articles were in all the papers, and I was on TV. I lost friends. My family distrusts me, some don't ever want to see me. I'm facing a jail sentence.

(Schneider 2000: 257)

The actions of the virtual realm can affect lives in the physical world and behaviours are no less real for having taken place online.

What is damaged in cybersex is the relationship itself. Marnie Ferree suggests that 'healthy sexuality is more about relationship – i.e., intimacy – than it is about body parts', and argues that 'internet sexual activity involves only pseudo-intimacy, not genuine relationship' (2003: 391). In the cybersex interaction, one seeks a form of relationship that is always ephemeral – one can have variety but not connection, intensity but not duration. Such behaviour could have long term effects on both the individual and society as a whole. In her discussion of interactive online sex shows, Döring argues that 'The effects exercised by the easy accessibility of online sex shows on the social perceptions of woman, men, and sexuality also have yet to be explored' (2009: 1094). It is not much of a stretch to suggest that as a cybersex participant becomes more accustomed to the realm of fantasy, reality will be much less inviting.

In addition to the harm that it may do relationships, another ethical problem arises in the way people are dehumanized in cybersex interactions. As Lucas Introna puts it, 'Through the mediation of our categories, we turn actual people into instances of our categories' (2002: 83). Such an act seems to grate against Immanuel Kant's argument that people should 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means' (1994: 36). Using others as anonymous masturbation tools denies their humanity; they are only there for one's own pleasure. Such an act removes the connection that can be forged through interaction with the other person.

Less obvious is the way in which the cybersexing individual uses his or her partner also as a means to an end. The ethical thing to do if one has no desire to be with the individual is to dissolve the union and seek another (or others). However, these individuals maintain the support of the partner even as they disconnect from him or her emotionally and sexually. One man stated,

I had totally turned off my emotions and was unavailable to my family... My sexual relationship was all about using and objectifying my wife. I used sex, any form, to detach from my feelings. She stated on many occasions that after sex she felt empty, unfulfilled, and used.

(Schneider 2000: 260)

Another woman writes, 'Why don't I make some real changes? Maybe because I'm afraid of being alone, without someone to play with. I love the attention, and the men's letters and phone calls. I also crave the sex – what would I do without it?' (Schneider 2000: 261). As such, the cybersex participants are able to hold onto the relationship even as they neglect the partner and reap the benefits of that relationship. They do not have to be alone, they can use the other for physical sex, and they can maintain a façade that all is well, even as the relationship deteriorates.

Cybersex with another individual seems to short circuit the possibility of connection with both the cybersex partner and the primary relationship

partner. As Ferree observes, 'Our sexuality is closely akin to our spirituality – our experience of being intimately aware of ourselves first, and then intimately connected with another' (2003: 391). What is at stake here is love, and virtual sex induces emotion, although perhaps emotions that are not recognized by the partner engaging in cybersex. Mark Schwartz and Stephen Southern suggest that 'in cybersex, the desire to be wanted by another person is an essential element in the fantasy. Being desired is the thrill, the sex through masturbation is secondary' (2000: 128). What is truly desired is connection with another. Barry Komisaruk and Beverly Whipple argue, 'Love can be viewed as stimulation that is desired by the individual. In its most primordial, undifferentiated form, love is sensory stimulation provided by contact' (1998: 928). When the contact is only virtual, the sensory stimulation will always be incomplete. People who engage in cybersex turn away from the real to pursue the fantasy. When this takes place when one is within the bonds of an existing relationship, this constitutes an unethical act. Just as importantly, they seek for that which they can never attain – reality within the hyperreal.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE VISIONS

Mediated sexuality is as old as love letters, Polaroid photographs, and phone sex. However, the potential for making the experience more realistic has rapidly increased and shows little sign of stopping. As such, it seems reasonable to conclude with a brief glimpse into the possible future because new potential ethical issues may emerge on the not so distant horizon. For example, there may come a time when the machinery that one uses for sex is sentient. Ian Yeoman and Michelle Mars consider a future in which robots function as sex workers, arguing that

Robot sex offers a solution to a host of problems associated with the sex trade. Given the rise of incurable STI's, including emergent strains of gonorrhea and HIV/AIDS throughout the world and the problem associated with human trafficking and sex tourism it is likely that we will see an increase in demand for alternative forms of sexual expression.

(2012: 366)

Anna Russell considers the potential legal quandaries of human–humanoid sexual interaction, exploring the potential rights of self-aware humanoid entities with just such potential exploitation in mind (2009). David Levy also asks, 'What about the unethical *treatment* of robots? Should we not in this debate be speaking also on behalf of the robots of the future? I believe we should' (2007: 305, original emphasis). This may not be so farfetched, with advances in artificial intelligence and the creation of realistic sexbots who respond to the user.

With these potential new sexual configurations it is imperative that we first understand the ethical considerations on the human plane – which is still open for debate – before involving the added complexity of the machinery as well. This article should raise a call for alarm because if it is easy for those engaging in cybersex to argue that they are not cheating, how much easier will it be for them to claim that the sentient humanoid is 'just a machine', and therefore of little concern? Humans seem to have an uncanny ability to rationalize their behaviours when it suits their desires and may do so regardless of the potential to emotionally harm – or physically harm, in the case of possible transmission of sexually transmitted diseases to the unaware partner – those with whom

they have intimate relationships. Our ability to behave ethically in intimate relationships and withstand the temptation to transgress may not have kept up with our technological environment, which provides the potential for new avenues of infidelity. Technology will continue to shift the boundaries of what is possible in relationships, but perhaps it is time to reconsider how we treat the living before worrying about how we treat those in a nexus state between living and machine.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Lunceford, B. (2013). 'Telepresence and the ethics of digital cheating'. *Explorations in Media Ecology* 12: 1+2, pp. 7–26, doi: 10.1386/eme.12.1-2.7_1

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