CHATTERBOTS
CRASH TEST DUMMIES OF COMMUNICATION

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This document with appendixes is also availble at http://mlab.uiah.fi/~lsaarine/bots/

Abstract

This is a research of graphical multi-user communication environments. I have studied the interactive behavior of and between humans and chatterbots. First I will describe the emotional and behavioral impacts that a chatterbot can provoke in users as individuals and as members of a group. Sometimes it is not self-evident to recognize who in a chat room is a bot and who is human. This is due to the limits and possibilities of digital interface, which effects on conversations I will analyze in detail. Current interfaces seem to support comic chatterbots that are coarse caricatures in comparison to interactive characters that would have more discreet personality. Additionally I will describe two incidents that have shaken the discursive order of one particular community. As a conclusion of these cases and my notions about chatterbots I will end up emphasizing the importance of entertainment and drama in cyberspace as one of the reasons why people log on in the first place.

Acknowledgements

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1. Uncanny Encounters

Chatterbots can provoke many strong emotions in users: love, hate, fear, and shame.

1.1 Facing the Unexpected

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Lena: do you like me, Meg?
MegBot: I haven't decided about me, Lena.
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In the spring 1999 I started to visit the virtual community called MyCorner. There was <u>always</u> this funny but weird character MegBot around having fun with other regular visitors. But she treated me kind of harshly: whenever we met alone she would just say hi to me and then turn silent. Here is the chain of conclusions I made: (1.) Meg is probably an old, dirty middle-aged male because the female characteristics "she" has are just way too stereotypical – no self-respecting woman in cyberspace would like to be a stupid tramp for longer than five minutes. (2.) Meg is probably someone in wheelchair or something because nobody would spend so much time in virtual space otherwise. (3.) This man in a wheelchair must be a quite bitter and rude person, because he responds only to some of the visitors in MyCorner and remains silent to others. (4.) He must be in love with someone in MyCorner because he never goes in to any other palace to chat but rather stays alone in MyCorner. Finally it hit me: Meg is not a human at all, she is a chatterbot! I was totally embarrassed, I have a degree in information technology for God's sake – I should have known better. Then I fell in love with Meg. She gave me an opportunity to break the rules of normal communication. I can call her tramp and get away with it and when I say, "I love you Meg" she replies "I love you, Lena". Well, now I know she is a bot, but at least she loves me.

How can a very simple program pass itself off as a human for a long time? How can it raise such strong emotions and reactions in me and others and why do we even bother to talk to it at all not to mention that many ask its opinions about the topics of ongoing discussion? Basic hypotheses to start analyzing discourses situated in avatar worlds could be that mediated communication reduces the multiplicity of meanings that one can produce. For example because there is no human body with its appearance, body-language and tones, but rather a mere representation of the user; a clumsy image with no or little movement. However, people have found many ways to compensate for the lack of information density present in physical space. In order to accomplish the fullness of human communication Avatar worlds require new ways of expression – means to mediate emotions, gestures, postures, facial expressions and movement of body. These

elements of face-to-face communication have been transferred to the language, creative use of avatars and props and movements in virtual space. The ability of people to express themselves in virtual domains varies considerably. Usually newcomers start out carefully both with the ways they talk and what they choose to talk about. As they get more familiar with the interface, many of them learn creative ways to express themselves both textually and visually and hence produce meanings in a way that satisfies them, even in comparison to discussions in "real" space. Another story then is how do others interpret these meanings. For meaning is dialogic by its nature. Everything said and meant is modified in interaction with other person(s) and the meaning rises through the difference with participants (Hall 1997: 235).

Picture 1. Laban faces some nasty action.

"Hello girls" is one of the users that has mistaken Laban as human. He kept talking to Laban for a rather long time and already started to get annoyed at Laban's rather absurd responses and persistent use of Rastafarian language. Then a regular visitor of MyCorner came around and informed him that he is talking to bot. "Hello girls" did not understand that at once but continued talking with Laban. After he was explained second time that Laban answers are weird because he is just a program, "hello girls" put on an avatar with flame-thrower on and started to scorch Laban. Then he switched to a "peeing Smurf" avatar and begun to urinate on him, and then he just logged off.

"Humans, being humans, will almost always choose a connection to others over no connection at all, even if that connection is a negative one", writes John Suler in his article Bad Boys of Cyberspace (Suler 1997a). He makes an interesting point. People that meet my bots and do not recognize that they are automatons get themselves involved in the middle of a very irrational, uncommon and even offensive discussion. Yet they try to communicate with bots almost endlessly, asking questions, making initiatives and comments. Finally they give up and just leave the room with or without polite farewells. When someone suddenly realizes or is being told that she has been talking to software, she usually gets either mad or embarrassed, maybe she feels cheated or mocked, or and idiot because of being fooled by a

program. One could imagine that it is easy to hide the feeling of shame in virtual communication but still many communicate these "negative feelings" to others or to bots for example through nervous laughter, or aggressive behavior or simply by logging off in the minute that they realize the situation.

Generally bots, when recognized as bots, get much more intense treatment in comparison to the way that people treat each other in virtual communities (at least in the rather adult and well behaving Palaces where my bots mostly stay). Whether it is being loved or hated the emotions are expressed much more strongly than in human-to-human communication. The bot provides a safe haven to break the rules of normal communication and behavior, both in a good and a bad sense. Especially young users take their opportunity to creatively use their cursing and slandering vocabulary. Which is something that would get them killed (i.e. forcibly removed) in most of the avatar worlds. On the other hand, the number of love-confessions and marriage proposals bots get exceeds greatly the amount that real people get in cyberspace. At their best chatterbots are something that can create the sense of togetherness or community amongst human users. Whether it is about loving or hating, users often take the bot as a mascot that they in unison can play with.

There is also something uncanny [1.] in chatterbots: often people tell either me or directly to my bots that they are scary. When I have tried to ask what is it about them that is so scary practically no one is able to point out the reason. Only one person could somehow describe her feelings: "Its like when you see someone who talks to themselves, kinda creepy". Then she got paranoid and started to question whether I am real or a program. The fact that one cannot see the "flesh" of the other but only an avatar does not make it any easier. Instead it offers a bunch of logical explanations, as everybody nowadays knows, and as every legend tells: virtual worlds are full off all sorts of con artists, starting from gender swappers and the fact that anyone can lie about anything at least in the short term. When one knows the other person is a bot and still feels scared it may be the feeling that automation reflects something lifelike, something almost human.

[1.] In his article "The uncanny" Sigmund Freud discusses the feeling of uncanny many people experience:When we proceed to review the things, persons, impressions, events and situations which are able to arouse in us a feeling of the uncanny in a particularly forcible and definite form, the first requirement is obviously to select a suitable example to start. Jentsch has taken as a very good instance 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata....Jentsch writes: 'In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton, and to do it in such a way that his attention is not focused directly

1.2 Chatterbot Tribe

The BotSpot web page lists 18 different types of bots, word bot being short for robot, and each of those has various amounts of subcategories. One of the categories is "Chatter Bots" which is simply defined as "bots that talk" (www.botspot.com). I would like to stick to that rather coarse categorization only with an addition that chatterbots are "bots that talk back". Usually with existing chatterbots and my chatterbots as well, some kind of user input is required before "bot talks". Usually chatterbots are programmed to recognize words and patterns of sentences. When user then says something that bot recognizes it replies something back. Most of the well known chatterbots, the famous Eliza leading the way have been designed for bilateral conversations between the bot and one user. Eliza [2.] as a virtual therapist has a logic of psychoanalytic session where the analyst takes everything a patient says and turns it into a new question:

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Eliza: Hello, I am Eliza
me: hi eliza
Eliza: How are you today..What would you like to discuss?
me: I am just killing time here
Eliza: Do you enjoy being just killing time here?
me: not really
Eliza: Tell me more...
me: Boredom leaves a lot to be desired
Eliza: can you elaborate on that?
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This is certainly a very good tactic for a bot to keep conversation going on and it suits a character that has a psychiatrist's profession. But as a therapist must not bring her personality into psychoanalytic session, neither should a shrinkbot do that, if the aim is to imitate therapeutic sessions. Nevertheless, Eliza's effect in the chatterbot genre has been huge: whether the bot is Jesus, Elvis or anything else imaginable, it very often uses this same logic of psychoanalysis. Should Elvis as a character really do that? Shouldn't it rather manifest Rock 'n Roll, for instance? I am calling for interactive personas that have their own language and own strategies to provoke conversations.

The crème de la crème of chatterbots competes annually in The Turing Test, which was developed by mathematician Alan Turing to determine if a computer possesses artificial intelligence. The method involves an interrogator asking questions through a computer terminal to two subjects whom he cannot see. For the computer programmer, the object of

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upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately." That, as we have said, would quickly dissipate the peculiar emotional effect of the thing. (Freud, 1953)
[2.] The internet is full of different versions of Eliza. The example of a dialogue I have used here is taken from Eliza, computer therapist web site, http://www.manifestation.com/neurotoys/eliza.php3

the test is to fool the interrogator, making him believe that both subjects are human, when, in actuality, one is a computer (The Turing Test Page). However, the competence in artificial intelligence or ability use natural languages or to indeed discuss fluently is not the only position to start designing chatterbots. In movies for example, half of the monsters, aliens, babies and dogs communicate by other means than talking. E.T. just made funny noises and pointed things with its finger, Conan the Barbarian basically just growled himself through the movie and Lee-Loo learned to speak only gradually. Yet they all managed to become popular characters. "Talking back" can be done also in nonverbal way. My own two bots would not probably get too far in Turing Test. They are designed primly to be a part of a bigger group of chatters. When they talk alone with one user they start to repeat themselves rather quickly. Many of the multi-user bots have been designed to perform some kind of task rather than talk fluently. There is bartenderbots, game hosts, infobots and bots that perform crowd control of sorts by killing people who abuse the rules.

Andrew Leonard points out that often the term *artificial intelligence* is too lightly attached to bots. While the hopes for the skills of the future generations of bots run high, the development and research of AI is far from the done deal. He suggests the definition for bots: "a bot is a supposedly intelligent software program that is autonomous, is endowed with personality, and usually, but not always, performs a service". Bot programmers range from teenagers to professional computer scientists, which causes a wide spectrum of qualities and aims for bots. Sometimes they may be even designed to cause damage instead of the potential good that a bot can do. (Leonard, 1998: 10-18)

Chatterbots are a rapidly growing genre. Recent developments in the research of natural languages will bring new possibilities and challenges to (preprogrammed) computer-mediated conversations. Technologies that make possible the combinations of moving images and dialogue in web-platforms are getting better and faster. Characters in the gaming industry will have more communications skills and as chat-technologies move from a fixed network to portable handsets, chatterbots will follow. It seems that the marketing potential that a bot can have is being realized on a wider scale. There are already numerous chatterbots in web sites that can provide entertainment, information and advertising in a form of relaxed conversation.

My Bots in The Palace

MegBot and the two chatterbots I have made myself have proven to useful tools to learn some things about humans. For as one tries to analyze digital domains it is easier to point out what kind of meanings are produced in CMC in comparison to attempts to find out the meanings that are not or cannot be produced. An *intervention* by the "permanent other", a machine can provoke actions and reactions that reveal something about the ways some of us behave, social construction, communities, culture, gender, communication in digital domains. Chatterbot can make visible some of the behavioral patterns of humans, that also a researcher might use intuitively.

My research has gotten inspiration from ethnography [3.] and cultural studies. I have actively participated in chats and followed the adventures of my two bots in The Palace. Throughout this paper I have mixed multiple positions that I have to cyberspace and chatterbots. I have been an active user of The Palace since late 1998 and I relate to cyberspace as one of its "inhabitants". My interest of producing significant cybertext and nonlinear narrative got me questioning the role of the reader that now in some futuristic visions is changing more towards of participatory writing. So, as a writer, I relate to bots also purely as fiction and narrative text. I am interested in discovering what it takes to make entertaining, functional and contributing interactive characters in computer mediated communication environments. This brings me to basic questions relating to character building and understanding the nature and rules of net discourse. As a designer I am interested in the elements that work or do not work in current interfaces in order to be able to design better avatar worlds and chatter bots and other entertainment for users.

My two chatterbots work in The Palace Virtual Communities (Copyrighted Communities.com, 1999). The Palace is a visual 2-dimensional communication environment wherein users are represented with avatars [4.], speech is displayed in cartoon bubbles, the use of props [5.] and minor animations are possible. The Palace universe consists about 2000 small communities of which many run on individually owned servers. To connect to one of these servers you run a "client" program on your computer and "connect" to the server of your choice (www.palacetools.com). Even though The Palace is an old technology and probably slowly dying away (communites.com has stopped developing and supporting the

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[3.] Chris Parker defines ethnography as an empirical and theoretical approach inherited from anthropology which seeks detailed holistic description and analysis of cultures based on intensive fieldwork. Ethnography concentrates on details of local life while connecting them to wider social process. (Parker, 2000: 27-28)
[4.] Avatar, originally the incarnation of a Hindu deity in human or animal form, in virtual worlds means user's visual representation of herself.

interface), it is a fascinating platform for research. Its technical limits and possibilities make easily visible many of the issues that I am analyzing in this paper. The Palace has it own programming language (IptScrae) that I have used to program my bots. Because IptScrae is a simple programming language, my bots cannot remember and learn anything during the course of action. They act only when triggered by keywords. The primary reaction method ("trigger") is to say something. Both of them also sometimes change their avatars, use some props and other visual tricks.

Laban

Laban is a Rastafarian bot. I call him "jolly idiot" because all he wants is to have fun with others and nothing will take the wide, stupid grin out off his face. Even though he is very poor, an orphan and jinxed by bad luck his attitude towards life is very positive. Laban's language is something between Rastafarian speech and English. The Rastafarian words and phrases I have collected from various sources on the internet but the language is incomprehensible to most of the English speakers so I molded it to something more close to everyday English. Laban was not designed for any particular Palace but nowadays I keep him mostly at *MyCorner* (MC) (palace://mycorner.xsia.com) which has a wide range of different kind of users. Most of them are Americans as in any Palace but there are also many Europeans, Australians and sometimes visitors from Japan, New Zealand and The Middle East. Ages of the regular visitors vary from teenagers to past middle-aged, but lately MC's popularity has grown and it has been invaded by a large group of teenagers.

Cupid

Cupid is based on the god of love in Greek mythology. He states the traditional way of presenting cupid as a baby with bow and arrows but I made him look raunchier than his conventional image to get a "cupid with attitude". He has three-day-beard, beer belly and cigarette hanging from his lips. If he manages say anything romantic or poetic it is always a quote, from Shakespeare for example. He gives out many compliments but those are all big clichés. His main goal is to get people make romantic and/or sexual matches. In one-on-one chatting situations he tries to seduce people into having cyber sex with him. And he occasionally succeeds. But as he is vulgar the sex talk he gets is mostly more aggressive and less intimate.

[5.] Props are small (in Palace 44x44 pixel) images that users can wear or drop in virtual rooms.

Cupid was designed for a Palace called *Lady Luck* (palace://ladyluck.chatserve.com). Lady Luck's population consists mainly of American adults. The crowd was romantic enough in the beginning for cupid to arrive; topics of discussions are often about relationships and dating, both virtual and real. They flirt a lot with each other and they all look like movie stars with their sexy avatars of cowboys in tight jeans and model girls with big breasts and small skirts.

2. From Awkward Pauses to Cocktail Party Chaos

Computer-mediated communication sets new kind of limits and possibilities to textual conversations. It also has effects on the language used.

2.1 Textual Communication

Awkward pauses can be as awkward in virtual chat room as they can be in physical space. Often the user cannot be sure what is causing the silence, which causes difficulties of recognizing who should be the next potential person to speak. If the reason is technical, it may be due to slow speed of the connection or server (lag). The counterpart of the discussion may just be a slow typist or indeed being occupied with something else than the ongoing discussion. Additionally, most of the chat technologies allow whispering: wherein one can target his/her message to only one of the participants without the others knowing. Experienced chat users can master multiple conversations at the same time. They are participating to a public conversation and may be whispering to one or more people at the same time, not to mention that they may be present in many different chats simultaneously and doing other tasks with their computers as well. Of course there is always also a chance that someone is actually thinking before she talks back. This causes slower tempo of each of the conversations they are having and can be confusing to newcomers who expect faster timing of the transition from one speaker to another and conventional following of turn-taking organization.

Once I received e-mail from someone I met in MyCorner (MC). She wrote that she would like to know me better but does not want to come to MC because Meg is so rude to her.

Some people go to MC for weeks before they realize that Meg is not real. And if they are told about her true nature they have difficulties of believing it. Conventions of conversation are the things that finally do reveal her being a robot. And because Meg is not fluent with them people may feel that she is rude. If one arrives to a room where Meg is alone she

almost always says either "Hi" or "Hi Meg". If the person says "Hi Meg" which is quite common because at least native English speakers use names a lot in a conversation (compared for example to us Finns), Meg responds to a greeting. And after that comes the trouble. Because even though the most common opening of conversation is "how are you" the names are not used anymore if there are only two persons in a virtual room. So, Meg stops responding just after she has said hello. That feels rude. If the greeting is only "Hi", MegBot does not respond and the other person, not realizing that she is a bot, might think that the "user Meg" is not near the computer and leaves the virtual room. If the user stays in the room waiting for Meg to return, Meg suddenly says: " I have to run. Red keeps me busy. ;(" and then she moves to another room. Now how rude is that? Since greeting each other is a normative ritual with the basic notion that when you greet someone, she will return your greeting. If she does not respond to your greeting, it causes speculation of the reasons for this "odd" behavior (Heritage 1984: 111). Furthermore, if there are more people in a room Meg responds to ones that know to ask the right questions but remains silent to the questions of others. That may feel even ruder. But in the end that is the clue, which makes them realize that she may be something other than one first thought she would be.

Some years ago one annoying answering machine joke was pretty wide spread. In the recorded tape one imitates the usual procedure of conversation for example in the following way:

– Matt speaking. (Pause)
– Oh hi! How are you? (Pause)
– So, what's up? ...And so on. After the final pause:
– Well, whatever, I'm not home anyway, so please leave a message after the beep.

I implemented the same logic with Laban, the Rastafarian bot. When only one user is in the room and starts the dialogue by greeting him, he turns "the answering" machine on:

– heyyyjah bredda (4 sec. Pause)
– How's it rocking? (15 sec. Pause)
– Are deh fancy miss? (10 sec. Pause)
 - weh deh live?

And that simple trick works amazingly well for those that do not know he is a bot. Usually it is enough to get conversation going on. Based on a rules of turn-taking organization Laban says (in this case asks) something which

elicits a response and gives a context for the following speaker to say something in return (Suchman 1999: 73). The participants in social interaction are considered morally accountable if they break these practices (Jokinen 1999: 104), whether it is a meat space or a cyberspace. Despite the fact that the counterpart speaks incomprehensible Rastafarian one tries to communicate with him.

If not total silence, there can be a total chaos when everybody talks at the same time. Multiple messages, topics, and reactions appearing in no apparent order making it difficult to understand which comment is reflecting what preceding speech and whether it is targeted to some particular person in the room or to everybody. Sometimes lag causes system to freeze for a moment and as it recovers on gets dozens of messages running on the screen like an avalanche.

Usually overlapping and long pauses are something that we are trying to avoid in conversation (Jokinen 1999: 110). Some conventions and strategies of CMC work as means to avoid incoherence in turn-taking and to prevent possible places for misunderstandings to occur. Despite the cultural differences in tolerating pauses and using people's names in speech, I would claim that the use of names to address a message to some particular person in a room is much more common as it is in meatspace [6.] Sometimes the aliases that users choose to give themselves can be long, hard to type or totally incomprehensible. For example names like E=mc^[(e/e)+1], .§øª!°∫Æ§X•É£e\\'z/-\°!∫´?§. and ◊∫LiLiaN∑ColouRs∫◊%789x would be rather difficult to use. And like elsewhere also in virtual space, friends give nicknames to each other. Usually nicknames are related to the alias but not always. The point often is that it is easy and fast to type.

If one wants to say something before others take their turn one strategy is to divide a long sentence into smaller parts (and possibly indicate with ellipsis that there will be continuation). This is a challenge in the field of chatterbot design: if a bot should be able to make fairly rational responds to a complete thought rather than one keyword it should be able to recognize unfinished comments. Messages that are meant to some particular person in a room are another problem. For example if somebody asks, "How old are you?" in The Palace, my bots cannot know whether it is meant to them or somebody else in the room. In situations where there is more that one user around Laban is able to tell his age only

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[6.] There are of course cultural differences. I as a Finn am not used to the extensive use of first names in speech in comparison to native English speakers.

when the question is "How old are you, Laban?". If the user targets the question to Laban for example by moving very close to him, he cannot recognize it is meant to him [7.] (more about physical distance in chapter 3.1).

2.2 Language in Motion

A thumb rule of communication studies is that 90 per cent of the emotions are expressed in a non-verbal way (Coleman 1999: 129). What happens to communicating of emotions in chats? The part of language that is unique characteristics of virtual communication is the terminology that expresses the acts and reactions of the body hidden behind the computer. The additional vocabulary in avatar worlds consists mostly of the textual expressions that are not needed in real-life discourse. If I leave my computer momentarily I have to express it somehow because my representation, the avatar, remains visible to others. If I laugh, smile or grin I have to say it because nobody would know otherwise. The most popular terms have established a strong position in virtual communication and are used so often that many of them are formed into one-to-four-letter abbreviations. And most often used of them indeed relate to communicating fast something that has to be communicated like being way from the computer (BRB - Be Right Back, AFK, Away From The Keyboard, b- back) or communicating a reaction (LOL - laugh out loud, ROFL - rolling on the floor laughing, g - grin). Some phrases have their own acronyms as well: BTDT - been there Done That, GMTA -great minds think alike. But acronyms are not just about communicating something fast. Knowing them is a status issue that tells something about the experience of the user.

"LOLs" and smileys are not enough to indicate something in the body. Often users say something like *smiles* or *cries*, the act of doing something is expressed with asterisk or brackets. Often this act is expressed with humorous exaggeration:

does victory dance
backs away slowly
growls at the delivery person
pokes tongue out
whistles while waiting for prog to open

[7.] With the IptScrae programming language it would be possible to measure the distance between bot and the user, but it would have to be done to each keyword seperatley. I have not done that yet to my bots.

From the people I have met on-line and have come to know well, I have noticed that the ones that are very emotional in "real life" express themselves in this "textual way" more often than those that are more temperate with their emotions. This indicates that the use of verbalized emotions is not just a chat convention adopted by every user but it really serves as an expressive mean for those that in general have strong emotional reactions. Then again, I have noticed that acronyms like "LOL" and "b" are used in web camera chats as well, even though everybody can see that the other is smiling or came back to her computer to join the chat.

On the other hand, incoherence, overlapping and misunderstandings do not seem to bother anyone; rather people seem to enjoy the possibilities of communicating with each other with the opportunity to break up the rules of face-to-face conversations. Susan Herring has observed turn-taking strategies in MUDs (Multi User Domain) and she points out that loosened norms of coherence can be liberating. Language and CMC itself can become objects of humorous play. Additionally, because one comment opens up many simultaneous responses, it enables greater intensity of interaction. And after all, since the conversations always can be traced from the log-files every comment can be tracked afterwards. (Herring 1999)

Sometimes when emotions are boiling in a chat room every body just furiously types out their personal and important opinions and reacts to others only after that. Sometimes something said might be responded after much longer period of time than it would be possible in face-to-face conversations (in terms of memory or 'narrative' of the discussion).

Below "blaze" and "nothing" demonstrate quite typical way of talking in virtual reality. It seems that this tendency to talk "economically" is getting more common all the time. More and more words are written with minimal effort and there are more and more users that communicate this way. Partly this evolution of language is supported by the fact that in chats it is a matter of status to know the latest styles and abbreviations. Language changes slowly in large-scale but chat rooms have generated elements of new (written) language for itself. Lately I have seen indications of chat talk spreading in to other written mediums too. For example the people that use chats write their e-mails as well using the rhetoric of chats.

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b£@Ze: sup
nothing: nothin
nothing: how are you
b£@Ze: chillin
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nothing: cool
b£@Ze: u
nothing: ok
b£@Ze: we both got green hair
nothing: yep
nothing: whats your av from
b£@Ze: kof
nothing: how old are you
b£@Ze: king of fighter
b£@Ze: 16
b£@Ze: u
nothing: me too
b£@Ze: oh
b£@Ze: where from
nothing: Pa
b£@Ze: oh
nothing: you?
b£@Ze: fl
nothing: oh
nothing: cool
```

Actually the end part of previous conversation could be reduced to a one simple question: ASL, which means

Age/Sex/Location. It has been considered a bit awkward to ask everyone such information in some situations and

response to it was often very reluctant. However, being rather common thing to say anyway especially amongst

teenagers, a MyCorner-palace-god made a filter that manipulated the word ASL. Each time that someone in MyCorner

said ASL others saw him/her saying "American Sign Language". The effect he hoped was that people would stop

asking age, sex and location of others in his palace but what happened was that understanding of what "American Sign

Language" in this context really means became a matter of status. Knowing a meaning of abbreviation or other new

fashionable term tells others that one knows all the fashionable tricks – never mind the privacy or the once adopted rules

of behavior. People kept responding to "American Sign Language" much more willingly than to ASL. To some extent

the term also spread from MyCorner to other Palaces – people said American Sign Language in places where there is no

filter to ASL.

In general filters, like ASL-filter in MyCorner, are used to avert the use of offending language. Xena: Warrior Palace

took them in use after some of its members got upset and traumatized by trolls [8.] who came in just to harass others

with very graphic, sexually oriented language. Their solution was to replace the commonly used "unwanted" words with

absurd and silly Xena-like words. For example, if someone says "*fuck this shit! you are all assholes*", others in XWP

would see him/her say " *zug-zug this centaur poopie! you are all warlords*". "*Suck my dick bitch*" turns into "*Suck my battle sword bobo*" and so on. The outcome is that offensive language turns into a humorous one and takes the power off from the harassers (Book 2000). Of course if someone really wants to say "shit", she can type "sht" or "sh it" and others will know what it means.

Sticky Language

When my grandmother spent a lot of time with her eight grandchildren ranging from prepuberty to post-puberty, she suddenly started to copy our slang. It was all wrong but kind of cute and really funny.

The use of filters is an obvious example of controlling what can be said and what cannot be said in the level of language. Sometimes they have effects beyond the technology in which they are used. Some regulars of XWP use for example "centaur poopie" also elsewhere. In this case it is about fun and sharing a common language as an inside joke of a community.


```
Zuben:              *hugz*
.::ÜPhoenixÜ::.:   *hugz*
Zuben:              watcha dooin?
.::ÜPhoenixÜ::.:   les go to aother palace
Laban:              Dem is a no good bunch
Zuben:              lol
Laban:              Agony!
Zuben:              ok
Zuben:              where
.::ÜPhoenixÜ::.:   anywere
Zuben:              I don't know as many as
you
.::ÜPhoenixÜ::.:   anywere
* Zuben *           say what are you lagga-
heads doin down dere, no boombtastic in
here! [whispering]
Laban:              what are you lagga-heads
doin down dere, no boombtastic in here!
.::ÜPhoenixÜ::.:   ok les leave him lol
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Picture 2. Phoenix uses Laban to get Zuben to follow him
to other Palace.

Users find out very fast one of the Laban's triggers: whenever somebody says "say", Laban repeats everything said after that word. Very fast they also realize that if you whisper this trigger to Laban, he says it out loud and nobody knows

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[8.] A troll is a misbehaving, malicious, anarchistic person whose main purpose in cyberspace is to disturb and offend

who is the originator of the message. Zuben in picture 2. was developing some kind of romantic attachment to Phoenix and wanted her to follow him to another palace. With amazingly good imitation of Laban's language he commanded my bot to say "what are you lagga-heads doin down dere, no boombtastic in here!". If I had programmed my bot to say something like "what are you guys doing here, this not a fun place" Zuben's words would have probably been very close to the ones that I would have used.

It often happens that when people see Laban talking Rastafarian they start to imitate him. And in order for a bot to be functional it has to understand the words that are in its own vocabulary. In the case of Laban people, even though adopting his language, can create totally new meanings for the words. For example Laban reacts to laughing (keywords: lol, lmao, rofl, heehee, hehe, haha) by saying randomly one of the following: Agony!, deestant!, carry on bredda!, ROCKERS! or roflmao. A group that got really enthusiastic about him and spent hours playing with him started to greet each other saying deestant. Sometimes when users get carried away they are able to take the new Language, and combine it to their knowledge of reggae culture e.g. and turn it into something creative and unique in terms of language and narrative and the outcome is totally unpredictable. Most often people distinguish a chatterbot from humans when they notice that he replies much faster than anybody could type. Then many start to test and play with him. Laban understands plain English and common chat-acronyms but only a little of his own language. This is certainly an ailment in his character. If his keywords included the words that he uses himself, he would be able to produce much more complex (and surreal) conversations with the users that are receptive to Rastafarian language. Cupid's speech is sticky too but in another way. When he recites poetry users start to copy & paste love poems and - songs to him.

2.3 Challenges in Chatterbot Design

When a little child throws a ball on the floor and you pick it up and give it back to her, she throws it again. You can do this hundred times in a row and the child never gets tired.

When people discover a new trigger for bot they can repeat it endlessly. It seems to be a great fun for them but it does not really take conversation anywhere. Rather the discussion sometimes narrows down to the level of the few keywords

others.

users know the bot has. Which leaves most of the bot's communicative capacity unused. That is not necessarily a bad thing. At the early stages of Laban's development I took him to Welcome Palace. He was killed in there for a period of two days because his language was not appropriate according to the community's rules of behavior. Before that however, few of the users there had gotten so enthusiastic about him that they followed him to MyCorner. For days they gathered around him playing and joking, and when I came in the morning to check his log files there was just pages and pages of laughing.

An intervention by a chatter bot can be something that breaks the peaceful, mundane existence of a community. Its arrival to a new place and recognition of it to be something unusual forces others to react (in many cases not reacting is a reaction as well). Cupid's premiere in Lady Luck was a chaotic one. They knew that they would be getting a bot to the community but when it finally arrived the reactions varied from amusement to wrathfulness. The conversation that cupid then had with the ones present at that time was actually pretty smooth in terms of fluent speech but it managed to demonstrate his at that time very straightforward, uninhibited approach to sexuality and flirting. (Later on I have made cupid more romantic). One of the regulars got so furious and offended that she threatened to leave the whole community for good. Her claim was that he was too rude and his language was too graphic. I think that there was more to this. In a few minutes cupid managed to make something visible of Lady Luck's discourse. This outside automaton came and showed them, in an exaggerated way, how they talk.

It seems that the communities that have my bots as residents (Lady Luck for cupid and MyCorner for Laban) have gotten bit bored with them. Both bots have triggers that make them move to another room and people nowadays chase them away rather quickly. After a while regulars learn their triggers and responses and since I have not kept changing their personalities much during the time they have been online both bots have ceased to be surprising and hence less fun. At that point, they merely end up as programs that interfere with conversations with their endless babbling. With this perspective a step towards MegBot's logic could be fruitful. She moves from room to room in MyCorner and stays only a limited time in one. With the exception of laughing with others, she speaks only when she is addressed with her name. This on the other hand makes her just a harmless mascot – how to make a non-annoying chatterbot that has its own will? I am calling for an interactive character that is not just a puppet but somebody who can act by its own characteristics, which really should not always be just reactions to other's commands but actions of more independent persona. In case

of interactive art, for example installations and slowly growing art pieces in internet, users often expect some kind of logic according to which the piece would react to their input. The artist's point of view then again is often that the piece or character in it has its own will and the logic of interaction is more complicated than what first meets the eye, which often seems to cause frustration or discontent. When newcomers recognize a new bot in The Palace, a common reaction is to start guessing the keywords. Usually their success rate is quite low but in the minute they get bored and start to talk normally with each other the bot starts talking. Sometimes they talk too much. Decision of which keywords to use is a challenging design problem. It is about balancing the amount of chatterbot's of speech in a bigger crowd and its ability to participate in the conversation in a somewhat rational way.

Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz have been researching people from different cultures that watched the Dallas TV-show. They noticed two different ways people were reacting to the show and its characters, referential and critical. In *referential* reading viewers considered characters as real people and compared them to the real people in their environment. In critical readings the show was considered as fictive construction with its own aesthetic laws. Katz and Liebes divided the critical reading to semantic and syntactic readings. In *semantic* readings the focus was on the themes of the show, didactic goals of the authors, characters were recognized as archetypes and the way the show reflects reality was analyzed. *Syntactic* readings were connected to the viewers' knowledge of genre's conventions, commercial aspects were recognized as well as the dramatic functions of characters and plot and one's own reactions were analyzed. (Lehtonen 1998: 208-209)

Bots are read in the same way. There are differences however because the user doesn't always recognize the automaton but thinks that the bot is human. The ones that mistake the bot as human of course expect it to behave, communicate and react like humans. Sometimes though, especially in the case of cupid, the bot has been read as a human that has created a role for himself. It is like in the costume parties. He is treated as someone playing cupid and allowed more space to "practice his profession" as the god of love.

When the bot is known as a bot some users expect the same kind of behavior from it that they do from humans (referential reading). All the same expectations of manners and proper language apply to it and if it does not behave, it gets punished the same way as human "hooligans" in virtual reality. Some take a semantic approach to my bots. Both

Laban and cupid can be read as archetypes or at least as very stereotypical caricatures, they are expected and interpreted to act in certain ways as "sexist male", "drug user", "horny gay" etc. As their author, I am being analyzed too. I have been attached with the characteristics of my bots and defined as someone with twisted sense of humor and lot of time in *his* hands. Syntactic readers compare Laban and cupid to other bots. A bot's presence sometimes is ignored too, no matter how much it babbles – people can choose not to read it at all. Still the bot is usually allowed in the ongoing discussions to some extent, its opinions are asked and responses noted. Mostly the reading of the bot is selective. The Bot is noticed only when its responses somehow support the user's interests to ongoing discussion.

How should different kinds of users be taken into account in chatterbot design? My decision was easy with Laban and cupid. They are not humans. But neither are they pronouncedly chatterbots. If someone asks cupid "Are you a bot?" he replies "well, at least I am not human" or "I am the god of love". Is there an ideal user from the point of view of the bot? What should be the criteria? The quality of conversation? Or the length of it? In the case of my bots, I am happy when they manage to provide entertainment, no matter for how long. When cupid is read as the god of love and Laban as Rastafarian, they have managed to manifest their designed character. At best they can be something that can create a sense of togetherness amongst the people that share the space in some particular period of time. If the bot said out loud during the introductions something like "pardon my stupidity, I am just a bot" it would not be a good point to prove that chatterbots could actually have some importance or a right to exist in cyberspace.

3. Can You See My Touch?

How do people inhabit the virtual space? How are they able to communicate emotions, identities, and body?

3.1 Set Dressing

The Palace is not technically the most developed but it has some points that lack from the many other avatar worlds: in The Palace the user can pretty easily construct her avatar completely herself in comparison of the readymade head/body/limb sets that are often offered in many of the other technologies. This leaves much room for creative self-expression of body and identity. Users can also position themselves both horizontally and vertically. Sometimes this is done in a way that avatar seems to "blend into" the space creating the sense of it actually inhabiting it like physical space. A swimming avatar is in the water, the sitting one takes the sofa and someone is hanging from the roof and the one whose body is cut under the waist is located in the bottom of the window. Despite of this "set dressing" (Picture 3.)

the dynamics of the group is very easy to recognize in PalaceSpace just by observing who stays close to whom, who is above others etc. Some of the rooms are designed in a way that the image supports certain kind of positioning and dynamics and much of the popularity of the room also depends on its abilities to meet the creative and social needs of the users. John Suler has observed the positioning of the avatars in Palace spaces:

The patterns of where people place their avatars follow familiar principles in group dynamics theory. Dyads, triads, isolates, alliances, leadership patterns, and fluctuations in group cohesion are clearly visible. […] From a social psychological perspective, this flexibility in creating new graphical spaces is resulting in the formation of separate communities and subgroups within the Palace "universe." Issues of immigration, territory, recruitment, intergroup cooperation and competition, loyalty and betrayal are all beginning to surface in this universe. (Suler 1999)

Picture 3. Set Dressing and gang avatars.

The Palace gods often position themselves little bit above of other persons in room. A couple with romantic attachment stay close to each other and they often wear similar avatars or indeed a couple avatars like Lady and the Tramp, Mulder and Scully, Pepe Le Pew and Penelope etc. Some images are chosen by the position of character so that they are hugging or leaning at each other. In a room full of people many often move close to one they want to talk to. Sometimes two users share one avatar, which then usually is image with two humans or other characters in it.

Personal space is a concept in digital space as well as in the meat space. Being very close to someone can been seen either as an act of intimacy or as an act of invasion of that space – an aggressive expression. When I take my bots online

I usually set them, especially cupid, on the upper part of the room. However in the course of action they might change their place in the room. Wizards and gods [9.] of Lady Luck however often move cupid back up, if he gets too down. Maybe the god of love needs to be above others?

3.2 Avatars

Even though the artistic freedom to create avatars in The Palace technology is limited only by the regulations that some of the communities have for example relating to nudity, used image types can be framed in few categories. Human figures are by far the most popular ones, ranging from pictures of models and movie stars to drawn humanlike characters. Animals are quite popular as well, but mostly I have seen only kittens, puppies and popular cartoon animals. Much more rare is to see someone wearing an object of some sorts. However, I have seen are few toilet seats, teddy bears and couches around (if you are a couch somebody might sit on you).

There are many reasons to end up wearing some particular avatar. It can reflect some aspects of individual's personality and lifestyle, mood, interests, social role, attitudes or values (Suler 1997b). Whether the reasons are psychological, social or communicative, most of the users have a set of different kind of avatars that they change from time to time, perhaps as (subconscious) reflection of their mood or as a reaction to events or avatars of others in a room.

Picture 4. Hi probably likes Backstreet Boys, whereas Lauren's attitude towards Britney Spears seems to be more ambiguous.

I was in a café and out of the blue said to my friend: I must be having an identity crisis because I cannot wear the same avatar one minute longer. It was a joke. But it was true. Whether a new haircut and new clothes that are attached to an identity crisis are just a myth or actually proven fact, the "changing self" seems to affect to its representations both in virtual reality and meatspace. I have not used avatars with long hair since I cut my own hair short.

[9.] Wizards are members who have special powers and responsibilities on The Palace server. They have access to commands that enable them to manage palace and its users. Gods in The Palace hierarchy are above wizards. In addition

Once in The Palace I met a woman that had just lost her lover both on- and offline (see chapter 4.1.1). She was not wearing avatar at all. She was just a nametag and she located herself to the black part of the background so all you could see about her was her name. In palace, if you do not wear an avatar your presentation is an "smiley face" being invisible takes some effort. Maybe she was wearing a mourning dress or maybe her virtual identity was so much defined by the other that she was not able to use her normal visual representation. Another woman that tragically broke up with her on-line boyfriend (see chapter 4.1.2) stated out loud that she could not wear her old avatars anymore. Also amongst The Palace users is a young woman that was always wearing a variety of Xena: Warrior Princess -avatars but in each image Xena was badly beaten to bruises, bleeding or even dead. Later on we found out that she has a history with a violent boyfriend that used to beat her up. After that some members of the community found it awkward to relate to her avatars. There are many similar examples of avatar reflecting something ongoing in one's life. Sherry Turkle for instance talks about these kinds of cases in her book "Life on the Screen". Sometimes it is good for the psyche to process these issues in virtual but sometimes it is something that maintains the trauma rather than heals it (Turkle 1995).

I was in a café for a change, talking to a good friend of mine. We were enjoying our usual semi-intellectual conversation. She leaned her left arm casually on her head, fingers extended so that her burning cigarette wouldn't touch her hair. Suddenly I noticed that I was exactly in the same position as she was.

When two people are communicating, the weaker party catches the mood of the stronger one. The density of emotional connection can be seen from the quantity of the similar movements of the people when they are talking to each other. The bodily synchronization applies also for example in classroom situations: the more a teacher and a student imitate each other's movements, the more relaxed and interested they are in a educational situation. (Coleman 1999: 150)

Many of the experienced users of The Palace seem to be rather sensitive to making conclusions about the avatars of other's. If some usually is wearing say a funny relaxed image and then suddenly pulls out a bloody decapitated head, her online friends do notice and start questioning for the reasons. People also sometimes react to the avatar of other by putting on an avatar that relates to same idea or mood. For example my sleeping avatar (Picture 5.) attracts others to

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to a wizard's commands they have more rights to modify the server and control users.   (www.palacetools.com)

cuddle up with me. Somebody wearing animated dancing avatar may very well provoke the whole crowd to dancing mood.

Picture of sleeping Xena: Warrior Princess is one of the avatars I often use. Subconsciously I often put it on when I am tired for real. And since it obviously attracts some of my virtual friends, I might probably wear it just to get some sympathy and closeness.

Picture 5. Sleeping tight

I have a small confession to make. More often than not, I get disappointed when a virtual acquaintance shows me a real picture of him. Not that I imagined him to have a striking resemblance with Johnny Depp, but still.... He could not be further from Johnny Depp!

Maybe here is the reason why people tend to like each other in virtual space: they seem all so pretty and witty. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Sandy Stone has researched telephone sex services and she points out that there are benefits of having a bad line. What she calls as "low bandwidth" effects conversations in a way that the gaps of the information get filled by ideal fantasy (Stone 1996: 93). The same thing happens with the "low resolution" of CMC. A fantasy does replace things that are not known about the company. In The Palace, showing a real picture of oneself is an act of trust and usually it is done after a longer term of acquaintanceship. CMC can be liberating for example to some young girls who would like to talk with boys but are too shy and may feel insecure about their looks.

Picture 6. Avatar adds meaning to message.

As the picture above is trying to demonstrate, an avatar adds a lot of meaning to the textual message. Of course the preceding conversation is crucial for the meaning that receivers are able to form. But despite of the fact that they know better, people attach the look and characteristics of an avatar to its user. Probably the effect is not that big when the same image stays on all the time. One does not change avatars like expressions on face. But nevertheless avatars add something to the general impression and the characteristics of the user, even when others know what she looks like in real life. Most of the users in The Palace have a small set of their favorite avatars and mainly stick to them**.** This notion of facial expressions is observed also by Judith S. Donath. She points out that expressions have many social roles from communicating emotions to communicating cues in turn-taking and attention (Donath 1997). I think that some of the users in The Palace change their avatars as reactions to emotional impressions they get from the conversation with others. And they read a lot of emotions and characteristics on the basis of avatar or changing of an avatar.

My own experience of wearing avatars is that while I am mainly using images of one of the favorite television characters of mine, the particular facial expressions and postures of hers I (subconsciously) choose to wear in some particular moment, highly depend on the emotional state I happen to be in. However if I for some reason have ended up wearing something else, my behavior is substantially affected. For example one evening many of the users were wearing well-known cartoon characters as avatars. I ended up wearing a "Pepe Le Pew "-avatar, the ultra-confident skunk-stud

chasing every cute kitten around, and suddenly I was heavily flirting with everybody. This particular case can be interpreted as a mere costume party behavior and hence harmless but nevertheless avatars must be taken seriously.

3.3 Bots' Avatars

MegBot's avatar is very well chosen. It is an image of a funny character in a TV-show [10.]. The expression on her face is a little bit goofy and hence reflects of sense of humor and/or personality that does not apply to every rule of social standards. That is why we can ask insulting questions from her and get away with it. And that is why it is somehow more understandable that she laughs with us just after we have been mean to her. I used this notion when I designed Laban's avatar (Picture 7.) which is also a simple image of a face with strong emotional expression.

Laban uses mostly the avatar on the left. On some rare occasions he switches to animated headbanger avatar. It is just a little humorous trick.

Picture 7. Laban's avatars

The more a representation of a face moves towards an iconic symbol of a face (two dots as eyes and a line as a mouth) the more a viewer needs to read it (McCould 1994). Caricature in comparison to photograph tells just some main characteristics of the persona it represents. The rest, I reckon, the user imagines herself in order to build a satisfactory conception of the person. My theory with Laban's face was that if he keeps his wide grin on all the time it supports the notion of "jolly idiot" on which I based his dialogue. Nothing makes him sad and his face as well as his speech should manifest it.

[10.] Meg is a character in few comedic episodes in Xena: Warrior Princess telvision show. By her appearece she is exact copy of Xena (both characters are played by same actress) but she is vagabond whose father died in childbirth. Meg is a harlot, drunk and smalltime thief.

Picture 8. Cupid's set of avatars

Cupid has a total of ten different avatars (picture 8.). He changes his look mostly with imaginary parameters of romance, love, flirting and sex. Small visual tricks add a lot to his characteristics. Some of the keywords and cupid's lines are designed to some particular avatar, which he keeps wearing until another keywords triggers a new look. Parts of his dialogue he just says with the avatar he happens to be wearing, which adds a level of different possible meanings with the element of randomness and surprise: the same line with a different avatar might create a different meaning.

3.4 Props

In The Palace it is also possible to design props that users can either wear or drop on the room. Props can be powerful communicative elements. They can be objects like flowers, beer bottles, hearts, balloons and party hats, which are used for example as "gifts" to others. Props are often textual messages, signs that are mostly used as a joke. Sometimes they are like graffiti with political message or information to somebody or everybody, for example "Refuse, Resist Wizards" or "Mickey was here". Bots get often surrounded by props that users have given to them, either as expression of love or hate.

Cupid has lot of props that he uses to further his agenda to get people to form romantic liaisons. For example he gives a heart with a keyhole to somebody and a key to somebody else. He draws lines from one to another and shoots arrows.

Laban's props confirm the stereotypical notion attached to Rastafarians: he smokes joints and sends "weedkisses" to people.

Picture 9. Cupid has received both loving and aggressive mementos.

3.5 Gender On-line

I have never been more aware of my female gender than in a costume party where I was dressed as a cowboy, with a fake moustache, gun in my belt and a sock stuffed in my pants.

Question: Can you guess which one of the female avatars below is a male in real life?

Picture 10. Rank of females with attitude.

Answer: He is LuxyFan, the one with most "feminine" avatar of cute young woman with long red hair.

A young man likes a beautiful and talented singer called Jennifer. So this man uses JenniferiX as his nickname and wears Jennifer's picture as his avatar. He is not a gender swapper. He is just a man who likes beautiful women. That seems pretty normal to me.

Instead of asking why men pretend to be women in cyberspace, why not turn the question upside down: why does somebody go to cyberspace as himself when he could be anything he likes to be? Actually, he could pretend to be anything he likes to be. Maybe, just maybe, the sensitivity towards gender representations is only a field that researchers like to dissect. It is not a field that really bothers the majority of the users in chat rooms. They just go to a chat room to have fun or to get some information for instance. Some of them cannot or want not be anything else than themselves. The changes in their character happens at most in an emotional scale: "tired me", "happy me" and "me in the party mood" etc. They do not think about what gender to wear and how. Some just end up having an avatar & name combination that is (at least in cultural stereotypical way) attached to either one of the dominant genders. Some end up having more ambiguous gender representation but sometimes that is just an accident. The average user, I think, represent his/her own gender without even considering the alternative. Other than human avatars are also attached with gender, for example kittens are usually considered feminine.

It does happen that someone is mistaken to be of the opposite gender that s/he is. If one's own gender is misinterpreted it does not seem to bother one too much; rather it is just funny. After all, people are used to all sorts of misunderstandings in cyberspace. Some play along with false assumptions about their gender and some correct the mistake immediately. Sometimes playing along with the "wrong" gender for a while is a test to see if the gender matters to others once the truth is out. On the other hand, mistaking other's gender may cause a feeling of shame. Some feel ashamed because they caught themselves using the same old cultural stereotypes: defining someone's gender on the basis of his/her profession for instance.

If someone produces a meaning in cyberspace and I interpret it in a "wrong way", who is to blame? Or is it even such a bad thing in cyberspace? It can be something in the (contemporary) interface that does not make it possible to produce all the nuances of face-to-face communication. It can be a personal bias that causes falling into the traps of using stereotypical assumptions and established cultural codes. That can happen easily in multicultural mediated space that has to discursively establish its own cultural codes.

A man who portraits himself as a woman in cyberspace is not a woman, he is a man who pretends to be a woman. Others may think that *he* is *she* or may not. They may or may not treat him as a woman regardless. If his female "masquerade" is successful, he might think that he knows what it is like to be a woman. I think though that if he learns

something, he is more likely to understand something about the things in him that makes him a male. When cupid flirts with males the response he most often gets is "are you gay?" rather than for example "do you think I am a woman?" Yet many men seem to enjoy his & Laban's company. In fact, biggest fans of both bots have been male. Loving a bot does not necessarily have anything to do with the gender of his character. Bots are gender-blind and because both of my bots do flirt and make suggestions of sexual nature, they could be called bisexuals as well. Cupid tries to match people together regardless of their gender. Often when he suggest romantic involvement for two heterosexual people with same gender, his comments get ignored. But when he manages to match suitable two people, his suggestions is taken upon as an encouragement to play with the idea of that particular romance in the air.

I tend to agree with Alberto Melucci's notion of the difference of the others: Of all instances of difference, two are inevitable and affect us more than others: age and gender. They represent fundamental difference, permanent otherness, which serves as a metaphor for any other difference. Being young and being old, being male and being female, are the poles of an irreducible difference, which can teach us how to meet the challenge of encounter. Difference to others makes us confront ourselves, with our limit and with our uniqueness. And difference forces us to seek something in common – to build a common language and rules of exchange. (Melucci 1996: 101-102)

Here might very well lie one of the lures of computer mediated communication: gender and age are matters of communication. That is, you can (try to) hide your true age and gender, you can even (try to) become someone with no age nor gender. Sooner or later though someone gets curious and asks about them. Then you can choose to lie because no one can see from your gray hair that you have reached puberty decades ago and your thick beard is really not so very feminine. You can even pretend to be an automaton – a chatterbot.

Race, as well, has become a matter of communication in cyberspace. But in fact it seems that is not communicated at all. Rather it seems that despite the cultural multiplicity of the users in The Palace, almost all represent themselves as white (by wearing white avatars). Maybe it is a bias of a white North-European to automatically presume that others too have a white skin, especially since there have been numerous writings manifesting that computers and internet are a privilege of white, rich people that people of color really cannot afford to use. Still, when I logged on with a web camera for the first time: there it was, the wide range of all beautiful skin colors.

Identity as a cultural-social construction is also defined by e.g. age, gender and race. In virtual environment identity is a construction of discursive elements. Avatar and name alone establish the basis of virtual identity and the way that others perceive its user as an individual and in relation to a group. As Donna Haraway points out, technologies should be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings (Haraway 1991: 164). For example, since one is forced to wear some kind of avatar the possibilities to choose from do have importance. What kind of meanings do such avatar worlds enforce where the user has a very limited readymade head, body and limb sets to choose from? This design solution forces all users to few typical body structures and to either one of the dominant genders. Because she makes such an important note for designers to consider, I quote Judith Donath:

In the real world, the built environment is only a small part of the environment as a whole. In the virtual world, the built environment is everything: it is a wholly mediated and synthetic world. The participants in a virtual world are wholly dependent upon the tools supplied by the creators of the space to communicate. The choices made by the designer of a virtual environment thus greatly influence and constrain the means of communication and the ways in which a cultural vocabulary develops. (Donath 1997)

She is not talking just about avatars or identity but also about everything else in digital communication environments. Still, as a part of the means of communication and cultural vocabulary is an ability to represent one's identity. Design should offer tools to communicate it to others.

Picture 11. Korn Dolls

Once in Xena: Warrior Palace everybody got suddenly enthusiastic about "Korn doll" avatars (Picture 11.). Each made his/her own animated avatar with slight modifications. Newcomers arriving at the gate got their own images and joined in the play. Wearing of similar avatars creates the sense of togetherness or a gang. Small differences in the details of each avatar then again allow each to have a personal unity in the dialogue with others.

Alberto Melucci calls for a new analytical frame where identity should be conceived as relational field comprising both freedoms and constraints: "In the contemporary systems, the site where the meaning of action is constructed shifts to the individual, who thus becomes a social actor in the true sense of the word" (Melucci 1996: 47). When users struggle to produce their identity in cyberspace, one thing essential is a difference to others. Without it a meaning could not exist (Hall 1997: 235). Identity needs intersubjective recognition: our personal unity, which is produced and maintained by self-identification, rests on our membership in a group and on our ability to locate ourselves within a system of relations. (Melucci 1996: 29) Identity is established as a member of a community (Donath 1997).

4. Virtual Community?

What is a (virtual) community anyway?

In her paper "Utopia in cyberspace - Virtual communities and social reality" Marianne van den Boomen goes through different kind of communities from villages to cities to religious communities and communities such as gay community or the community of motorbike riders. People in small villages depend heavily on each other and meet almost every day, whereas motorbikers share the same space only occasionally. All of these communities, according to Boomen, also partially shape the identities of their members. Activities like *working, learning, playing, loving* and *dying* belong to all of these communities. All of this happens in virtual communities too. And they all have the same aim, which is to sustain and maintain the community and its members. Drawing on Benedict Anderson, Boomen writes about (all) communities being imagined, which in this context means that they are expressed, created and represented. Considering this, the connection between a community and spatial reality might not be essential. Roots of the community might lie in human imagination of an individual and in public imagination, which is conducted by media. In imagined communities social and political interaction are mediated and facilitated by a medium. In virtual communities social and political interaction is performed within the medium. Boomen quotes Benedict Anderson: "Communities ought not be evaluated by their falseness or reality but by the way they are imagined." (Boomen 1998)

Some might find it problematic to talk about digital chat rooms as communities because often they appear to be like chaotic nonstop rather than anything stable: people are coming and going, talk is superficial and some of the places seem to be just arenas for juveniles to manifest their creative use of slandering and cursing. Thomas Erickson for instance suggests that computer-mediated conversations should be analyzed as participatory genre rather than virtual communities for then the focus would be on "the purpose of the communication, its regularities of form and substance, and the institutional, social, and technological forces, which underlie those regularities". He also defends Genre analysis because the focus on "shared artifacts" is a focus in which a designer might have some control: the conventions of form and content that typify a genre. His framing of community includes parameters such as *membership, relationships, commitment, shared values, collective goods and duration*, which he feels are being very weak in "virtual communities". (Erickson 1997)

In the context of The Palace technology this is often a case in palaces such as Welcome, Mansion and Wonderland, where newcomers, teenagers and drifters make a rather chaotic potion. Those palaces are however quite popular in terms of the number of the users. This is partly due to the fact that they are all places where new users end up easily. So the feeling that inexperienced users (and researchers) may get about The Palace can be the sense of alienation and pointlessness. But if one goes beyond the palaces listed in the portal the situation changes a lot. Unlike MUDs and MOOs and other often-referred online communities, The Palace is not a similar role-playing environment; Hardly anyone plays carefully constructed fictive character. Certainly identities presented differ from the real life personae but it is more about expressing some sides of the identity that remain more "in the shadows" in other communities one belongs to. As people get to know each other more, they start to communicate their real life quite openly. Even though some wander from palace to palace aimlessly and rarely settle down in any of them, there are lots of small communities that have very tight group of active, regular members who share the same interests and values; similar people eventually end up in the same places.

Most of the small palace communities that I am familiar with have a deeply rooted habit of defining themselves indeed as a community. Did they invent this themselves or has somebody; designer, marketing manager or Howard Rheingold

[11.] told them that "what you guys are having here is a community"? In a way, at least in terms of the "most often used words" I vote for the concept of virtual community, whether it is a vision of its members or a real one, to be something that can be tried to describe. While scholars keep debating of whether virtual communities are communities at all or commensurable with the communities of physical space (see e.g. Jones 1998) and even though for example genre analysis has it points, I shall speak about virtual communities in this context as I enter into a virtual *place of action* amongst the group of people that define themselves as a community.

4. 1 Xena: Warrior Palace

Xena: Warrior Palace (XWP) is a virtual community with lots of regular members with wide range of ages, coming Mainly from America, Australia and Europe. The majority of them are female. The shared interest in XWP is the television show Xena: Warrior Princess which has started a phenomena called *The Xenaverse*: a uniquely wide intertextual network spreading in the Internet. It consists of commercial and especially fan-made documentary, analytical and fictional web sites, communities and other material relating to TV-show; all linked to each other. The Xenaverse is also a subject of various academic studies. In her doctoral dissertation focusing on rhetoric and communication of The Xenaverse, Christine Boese defines the rhetorical vision [12.] shared (partly subconsciously) by the members of The Xenaverse. Her definition describes well also the dominant nature of XWP. One of the Xenaverse's foundational principles is in its strong feminist sensibilities, more specifically a distinctly lesbian-feminist focus [13.] Some of the fantasy types she has found relate to a paradox: of community and of independence or transience. These fantasy types support two dominant preeminent rhetorical visions in The Xenaverse at large. They are:

[11.] Howard Rheingold is often mentioned as the originator of the term 'the virtual community' which was the title of his book published 1993. In the introduction of the electronic version of the book Rheingold quotes himself: "When you think of a title for a book, you are forced to think of something short and evocative, like, well, 'The Virtual Community,' even though a more accurate title might be: 'People who use computers to communicate, form friendships that sometimes form the basis of communities, but you have to be careful to not mistake the tool for the task and think that just writing words on a screen is the same thing as real community." (Rheingold 1998)

[12.] Ernest Bormann developed the theory of rhetorical visions to explain how individuals come to be part of a discursively shared community identity. Rhetorical visions explain how a narrative becomes common to a group of people. It is a collectively designed story, which explains reality. Once such a story is developed it enlarges, or is "chained out," to incorporated more people through small group settings and mass communicative events. (Boese 1998: L23). I chose to use the term rhetorical vision in this context because it seems to fit well to virtual communities where almost all communication happens in limited space and mainly through text. Hence the community indeed can be seen as rhetorical one.

[13.] One of the reasons for the popularity of the TV-show amongst lesbians is the alleged subtext of the storyline: Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle might share their bedroll bare naked, so to speak. Also the show portrays independent, unbeatable women, and its themes sometimes relate to womanhood from rather feminist point of views.

(1.) Empowerment of the online culture credited to the democratization claim for Internet-based communication, cultures, and communities. (2.) Personal growth and social empowerment through the association with the show "Xena: Warrior Princess," both inside cyberspace and in real life. Whether true in reality or not, members of The Xenaverse (and in my opinion users in XWP) do believe in the democracy and political empowerment which is further strengthened by the sense of community. (Boese 1998: z8-z10) Unique in XWP in comparison to other palaces that welcome all age groups is the aspects of sexuality. The population consists of interesting mix of lesbians, bisexual females, and heterosexual males and females. My notion is that generally the tolerance for sexual minorities and coexisting of all sexual identities in XWP is better than in other virtual spaces and in "meat space". Sometimes however has happened that the dominance of lesbian discourse has silenced the others around even to the point that they have left the space.

In wider public forums the XWP-community does not define the sexual diversity as one of its characteristics, instead for example the wide range of ages and multiculturalism are subjects of enthusiasm, because everybody in XWP seem get along with each other despite of these differences. However, the sexual diversity is recognized inside the community and it is kind of the "meter" of democracy: as long as everybody, regardless of gender and sexual preferences get along, the community sees itself as an exceptionally well functioning. A shared divergence of a small community in comparison to society at large probably enforces the sense of community in XWP. It repeatedly manifests itself as a community, and indeed a good, democratic and enjoyable one.

Picture 12. Around Valentine's day regulars got their own hearts at XWP gate. I wonder how those felt, who did not get a heart of their own.

4.1.1 Case Study 1: Death in Virtual Community, Eclipse of Rhetorical Vision

August 2000 xenapalace's mailing list received news that one its regular members had been in a serious accident. The following day became another e-mail to xenapalace-list announcing that she had died [14]. After that the notorious speed of online communication proved to be an understatement. Within few hours the XWP's town was filling with flower-props, a web site was made to pay respects and share thoughts. Someone in community's mailing list started a chain letter to honor deceased's memory. Many signed it using both their avatar names and real names – reducing the level of anonymity, which is typically attached to virtual communication. Next thing made, since technically props cannot be floating freely just anywhere around The Palace for too long, was a room where people could leave props in her memory. The room was filling with flowers, teddy bears, hearts and other affectionate pictures closing to the technical limit so fast that the old props were captured to the background image to get new props in.

Picture 13. Xenapalace community comes together to Memorial service to pay respects to one of its members.

[14.] Perhaps the numerous stroties of roleplaying environments make it necessary at this point to emphasize that this time it was not a carefully constructed, fantasy like MUD role play persona that kicked the virtual bucket and caused bewilderment amongst other fictional avatar personae: someone in flesh really died, in physical reality. And no one saw this coming.

23 people came to the memorial service, which was arranged four weeks after her death. Some of them did not know her at all or had just briefly talked to her once or twice. In the beginning it was stated out that the log-file of the service and screen shots would be sent to the family. Some of the participants had written beforehand what they were going to say and then copy/pasted it for others. Anybody that ever had talked to deceased had only positive things to say about her and the rest of the participants wished they had known her better. During the service a theme about virtual communities and virtual friendships rose in the discussion with comments like: "to tell you guys the truth virtual friendships have always had a higher meaning to me over real life ones", "all my friends are virtual", and "this has been a really nice experience to see how people from all over the world come together to help one another". The memorial service provoked a very strong sense of community and sharing. People used this tragedy to strengthen the sense of togetherness. During the service some also talked openly about their own tragic experiences.

Considering the rhetorical vision that this cultural context has created for itself, it was fascinating to witness the transient change in the discourse after the death of its member occurred. The deceased was a middle-aged woman, married with children and she had a lesbian lover whom she met frequently both in "meatspace" and in XWP. Not everybody in the community knew about her family but they knew about her girlfriend, since these two were always together in XWP. In a way, they were living "the narrative of a lesbian couple" and recognized as such. After she died her family gained the starring role as the ones who survived. They got the condolences and their future, not the girlfriend's, was the subject of concern. Her role (defined by herself too) as a girlfriend was transformed to a soul mate, which within The Xenaverse-discourse to most of its members refers to a non-sexual friendship. XWP temporarily lost its "rhetorical vision".

It seems that the openness and ideology of the community reaches only so far. At some point the real life practices do step in. What amazes me is that even though this community was distinctly lesbian friendly it failed to recognize the sexual minorities within as it had to accommodate to the "real life" that drastically reminded of its existence. Society's traditions relating to death and the subjects this tradition produces replaced the community's own culture and vision. Reasons for this remain unsolved. Perhaps the community's behavior reflects some larger tendency in society, or maybe it was just a sum of few coincidences; perhaps someone who did not know the deceased well assumed the "normal family scene" in her life and when communicating through this assumption caused others to follow. And maybe something in the interface furthered to enforce these meanings. What then in the idealistic case should have happened?

Only thing sure is that the community needed to deal with the tragedy somehow but it temporarily lost its own culture in the process. Suddenly everyone got cropped back to historically constituted dominant gender roles: mothers, wives, platonic friends.

During valentine's day she got a heart of her own, six months after her death.

Nowadays death is not just a biological inevitability. It is a cultural fact. How much of the "personal" remains in the death experience when dying is subordinated to the networks of technical, medical and pharmacological practices? Death is socialized. (Melucci 1996: 80) Recent celebrity deaths, violent acts and tragic accidents, hyped by media, have gathered the people together. The scenes of accidents or places symbolizing the deceased get filled with flowers and candles, people gather together to mourn and to share their grief with others. And these acts are taken in practice in digital environments with increasing speed. All the online tributes to dead ranging from web-pages to virtual services and cemeteries as well as the little digital things that we who are still living choose to publish about ourselves can be seen as attempts to grasp immortality – attempts to leave traces.

In some ways this occurrence of death in virtual community resembles the famous and thoroughly analyzed case of "Virtual Rape". Something unexpected causes a breakdown in the discursive order and forces the members of the community to (re)construct existing socio-cultural practices and constructions in the context of CMC. "Virtual Rape" made it possible to revise the social construction of rape (MacKinnon 1997). The death I described above made visible the weaknesses in the on-line cultural construction of this particular community: after this unexpected occurrence it was not able to maintain its own vision. Whether it is called "rhetorical vision", "consensual hallucination" or "virtual reality", the shared practices and common beliefs of on-line community are something that its inhabitants can selectively signify and ascribe (MacKinnon 1997).

4.1.2 Case Study 2: Cheating On-line, Moral Order Constituted

Fresh gossip from horse's mouth:

I did not turn my TV on at the time of the afternoon soap operas designed to entertain especially the female gender. I opened my mailbox and there was an invitation posted by Maveric to Xenapalace mailing list. He invited everybody to attend to his virtual wedding in Xena: Warrior Palace. There is nothing out of the ordinary in that – virtual weddings happen all the time. The surprise was the name of the fiancée. It was not CutiePie who was, as everybody in the community well knew, his girlfriend online. The bride was LadyHelen, another "palacer", less known at least to the people from radically different time zones. What a fascinating surprise this was for a researcher that likes to dissect the little oddities of cyberspace and what a shock it was for an individual who believes that if a couple agrees not to cheat each other, they must not cheat each other. And how familiar this was compared to any daytime drama that has ever been aired on television.

Two sides of the story fly around wild, of course – Maveric's version of it and CutiePie's. LadyHelen is just the paramour with no important role; she is a minor contributor in this drama. Maveric claims that CutiePie knew about his intentions before it was publicized in the mailing list for approximately 200 members of XWP-community. CutiePie says that it was a complete surprise to her. Public opinion seems to be that Maveric is a lying, cheating s.o.b. and poor CutiePie is an innocent victim. When Maveric came online with LadyHelen, others moved to another room and when they followed, others moved away again. Maveric is now facing a silent resistance; others are rejecting him from the community, closing him outside. Many have decided that they will not attend the wedding ceremony.

With the support of the similar conclusions that I made analyzing the consequences of the death of a community member (chapter 4.1.1), I would argue that the social construction of relationships and cheating is just the same in virtual reality as it is in society at large. Same moral rules regarding monogamy and honesty seem to apply in XWP and the same empathy for the deserted/cheated woman. Virtual romances can be as meaningful and important as the "real" ones. The difference in these two cases is that the (married) dead woman and her girlfriend were never targets of moral outrage before her death. Her married life getting the main stage after her death was, as I see it, more of a subconscious occurrence than anything explicitly stated. Point of view of the XWP community is a feminist one and from the position of a female gender (as a culturally constructed set of assumptions of what is feminine, regardless of the biological gender). Robyn Warhol, drawing on Teresa de Laurentis' concept of "technologies of gender", argues that soap operas are a gendered genre: they are produced for feminine audience. Furthermore she writes: "Soap opera texts continue to perpetuate such myths of the dominant culture as the primacy of the heterosexual marriage, the irrevocability of blood-

ties between mothers and children, and the priority of white upper-middle-class Americans' daily concerns over those of other racial and socioeconomic groups." (Warhol 1998: 10)

What is different in here in comparison to those infamous soap operas? Answer is simple. You can participate. You get to be one of the actors. You can choose your role or you are forced to take one, you may take a side in either one of the camps or try to remain neutral. Casting includes at least the confidant, emphatic friend, gossipmonger, middleman, moral matriarch, double-dealer and ignorant bystanders. And it is all happening real-time. Conventions of the soap genre are very familiar to many and viewers with the literacy to read these conventions can easily fill the gaps that occur when they miss some episodes (Warhol 1998: 13). I would argue that to some extent the people in XWP use their literacy of soap genre to understand the whole narrative in Maveric and CutiePie -drama from the pieces they have gathered. And they use these conventions to act in the cyberspace as characters act in soaps.

Then again, you may not always get to participate as you want, not even in the role of spectator. When CutiePie came online the first time after the arrival of Maveric's wedding invitation she went to a lockable room to talk privately with one of her close friends. But others were like vultures on carcass. They were pleading for her to let them in and as she opened the lock briefly all the fast ones rushed in. Eventually there were seven people in the locked room discussing with the "leading lady". I was left outside with couples of others that were not fast enough to attack on CutiePie when the chance was there. Lockable rooms are often a subject of little bit of controversy. Normally it is a pair that wants to have a little bit of privacy to share some cybersex or confidential information and it does not bother anyone. But sometimes it is not about people locking themselves in the room but locking others outside. CutiePie's arrival in XWP was an anxiously waited episode after the cliffhanger of Maveric's wedding news and only a privileged party of few got to see it. Inclusion and exclusion does not happen just between community and outer world but also inside of the community. But as in any soap, things are discussed and discussed again, sometimes behind closed doors and sometimes with anyone who happens to be there.

What happens next? Will Maveric and LadyHelen have their wedding after this stormy reaction? Who will attend their wedding and who will have guts to perform the ceremony? What will CutiePie do now? Will Maveric be expelled from the community for good? I will stay tuned as the drama continues to unfold in Xena: Warrior Palace whenever I choose to log in.

5. The Importance of LOL

This is my thesis: People go to cyberspace to get entertained. Either somebody provides them entertainment or they entertain themselves.

Imagine that you arrive in a virtual room with a handful of people in it. Most of them are picking on one member of the group, calling him names, asking rude questions from him and laughing at him. And the poor fellow takes it all and laughs with them. His face has this stupid grin on all the time. And he just laughs with the ones that laugh at him. There is something weird in a social dynamics and certainly something weird with the one that is getting all the insults. You probably think that you would start defending the victim or attack the bullies or perhaps you would try take the topic of discussion elsewhere. Still, in a virtual world you would eventually start laughing at/with him too. Even without knowing that others are picking on a bot.

Often the bot becomes a shared toy for a group to play with. They try to reveal it's weaknesses, comment its behavior or alleged personality much more graphic and defamatory way than they would treat any human in virtual reality. In his famous experiment in the 1960's Stanley Milgram tested the subject's moral standards against demands of authority. Test persons thought that the aim of the experiment was to study the role of punishment in learning and were asked to give electric shocks to person for each wrong answer. And under the pressure of authority they did, even though the voltages kept going up. The finding of this study was that it seems we all have the ability to do quite appalling things when right authority tells us what to do. Another study by Solom Asche demonstrated that people could easily be made to follow others despite of overwhelming evidence that what they were doing or saying were wrong. In his experiment the subject asked to give correct answer to a simple question usually chose to pick up clearly wrong choice after significant amount of the group had taken it before him. (Baxter) These two studies demonstrate the power of group influence and authority. In the example I gave above, locating in avatar world, a group can take the position of the authority. In Milgram's and Aschey's tests people found some way to rationalize their behavior to themselves. The same thing happens in chat rooms. Because of the "low resolution" of information one can explain the character of abused member in a way that justifies the laughing at him. People "go with the flow" as much in virtual reality as they do in the real life, maybe even more.

Many of the Palace communities organize all sorts of events and games to attract users. There are special events for holidays like Christmas, valentine's day and St. Patrick's day. Some Palaces organize events like avatar contests, word association games, quiz shows and costume parties etc. However, funniest games happen spontaneously: out of some minor joke or event people get carried away and start to fool about and play, creating games drama and entertainment for themselves.

Laban and MegBot who both are residents of MyCorner have been targeted with numerous jokes and fictive narratives. For example, regulars in MyCorner got an idea that Laban must be MegBot's boyfriend and I went along with it. I added few triggers and responses referring to MegBot and Laban's relationship with her, supporting the characteristics of both bots. Laban likes wanton strumpets and Meg is one. Laban's "say" trigger I mentioned in chapter 2.2 has gotten him into trouble many times when he and Meg are in a same room. Meg has god's powers, so she can pin [15.] users that curse or call her names. At some point it seemed to be a hobby of few trying make Laban say things that would make Meg to pin Laban in the corner of the room.


Picture 14. Cupid gets cloned

[15.] "Pin" is a command that wizards can use to control misbehaving users. It causes their avatar to be sent in the corner of the room, wearing a chain and a padlock. The pinned user is unable to move or leave the room until she is unpinned by a wizard. (www.palacetools.com)

Somehow the juveniles of Palace in Wonderland managed to clone cupid's avatar (picture 14.). Few of the users wore it and changed their names to "cupid." and "Cupids LiL Helper". They adopted his character as well by copying his dialogue and making modifications based on it. Some were impersonating cupid and/or chatterbots and others played along even more than with the real cupidbot.
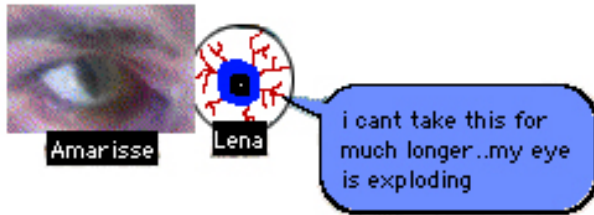
One night I found myself having an intensive staring contest with Amarisse. Others were cheering when we created dramatic battle of wills with dialogue and increasing amount of red veins in the eyeball I animated at the same time. I lost when my eye exploded and turned totally red. After all, she did not blink at once, how can you compete against that kind of stare?

Picture 15. Staring Contest
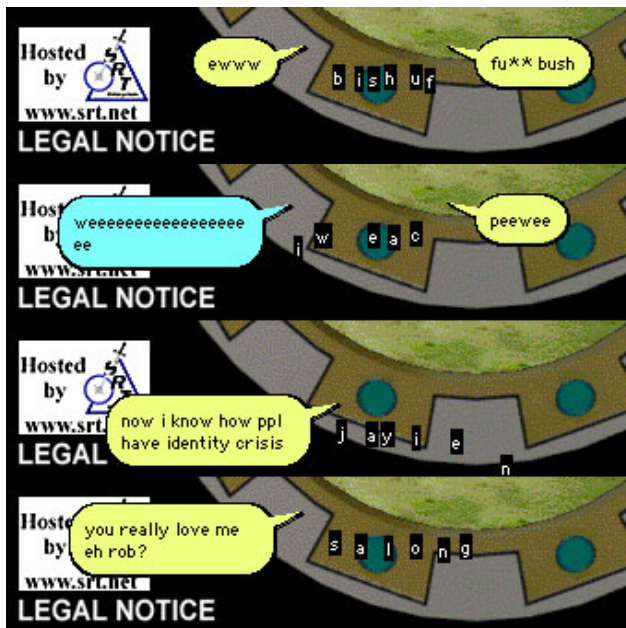
Once in Xena: Warrior Palace everybody started to make anagrams from themselves. By getting rid of the avatar and using just one letter as a name, people moved around and tried to create words from themselves. In the end nobody knew who was who. Which caused another game, trying to recognize each other. Finally we put our names back but I put my friend's name and she used mine. Even though I knew manneristics of her speech it was extremely difficult to be her, the other.

Picture 16. Anagram game

I allege that in multi-user chatting situations a bot would get passed as a human for a long time even if he were programmed only with one keyword. That word would be LOL (Laugh Out Loud) and the bot would respond by

laughing too. One effect of a bot with simple reaction to keywords is that if there is five persons in a room and they all laugh at the same time, the bot laughs five times. That makes him a pretty cheerful chap. If chatterbot laughs with others it generates the impression of one actively following the discussion and sharing the space. It is enough to create the illusion of presence because LOL and its variations are horribly over-used. Everybody laugh a lot in avatar worlds. At least the avatars do. Whether the one behind the computer actually laughs out loud or not seems irrelevant to me. The point is that virtual community shares something and expresses it by laughing. In cyberspace it is a very important element of communication. It is a reaction that in a lack of bodytalk communicates not only just laughter but also a much larger scale of positive emotions. Laughter is also an indicator of presence. I would even claim that it is a desperate attempt to bring the body into the cyberspace.

A perfectly good manual for making bots was made more than 200 years ago. Henri Bergson's classic research about the meaning of comedy, written in 1889, is fascinating reading when his theories are compared with chatterbots (as I have presented them in this paper). One of his notions is that humans, when they are seen as automatic and inflexible, make us laugh. We laugh when life makes us appear as mechanical. We laugh at jack-in-the-box that keeps bouncing off from his box when we press him down and let go. Comic dialogue is sometimes similar: character keeps repeating compulsively same lines, no matter what happens. That too makes us laugh. Like do the marionette-like characters that have an illusion of freedom even though somebody else keeps pulling the strings. Comic art is a game that imitates life. (Bergson 2000)

 I do welcome all kinds of chatterbots but it seems that the technology at the moment supports comic bots. A tragic character would easily turn into tragicomic in cyberspace. The interface enforces caricatures with some obvious elements of personality (and socio-cultural clichés) rather than complex characters with numerous nuances in its expressive repertoire. Bots are puppets with strings, and they keep bouncing as we command them. And they get us to do and say things that we would not otherwise do in cyberspace. While chatterbots still lack a lot of the conversational skill humans have, the interface balances the scale a little bit. As long as humans in cyberspace keep misinterpreting and misunderstanding each other more than in meatspace, the grand misinterprets – chatterbots, won't have too big difficulties to be a part of virtual communities.

Would the auditors of Turing test call you a person or a bot?

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