

Ghosts In Machines: On Being Online

by Lindsay Edmunds

In February, 1993 I started to use two online information services: CompuServe and America Online. My original motive was work-related. (I am a self-employed writer and editor specializing in medicine and education.) Being online would provide access to research resources, enable networking with other writing professionals and facilitate quick and easy communication with non-local clients.

I discovered that being online does indeed enable all of those things. I discovered something else, too: being online is a kick—a kick I hadn't expected.

In the last nine months, I have learned that "cyberspace" is a vast, intricate place, with its own sociology, neighborhoods, turf wars, clubhouses, libraries, pick-up bars, park benches, underground railroads and performance spaces. It is a not a place where I want to be serious; it is a place where I want to jazz around.

Spectral Power

"There is a spectral power in thought that walks alone," the poet Emily Dickinson wrote 124 years ago. "Spectral power" is a grand phrase for most of what being online is about, which is ordinary stuff. (I've never had an online conversation about the power of thought that walks alone, but I've had several about the weather and more than I

can count along the lines of "where can I find/get *x* and how does *y* work?") But Dickinson's statement is true regardless. Online, you are as incorporeal as a ghost.

Being just the sum of your thoughts is disorienting at first (like adapting to weightlessness). Then it is intoxicating. Then it becomes a strange, but intelligible, part of life, with good and bad aspects. Alive in *aggrav* (*aggrav* is science-fiction novelist Vernor Vinge's term for weightlessness), you have no body, no past, and only as much present as you choose to reveal.

The kick is that individual identity survives this translation. In fact, identity may be sharpened and heightened in cyberspace. One of the first pleasures of being online is learning to sort out and respond to other people on the basis of their words alone. Bonds form and break, fights start, affection is poured out, support is given, learning is accomplished. All that in a gray country of fog and spirit.

In one way, what happens online is the same thing that happens via any type of remote communication: television, radio, telephone, fax, books, articles, even the humble handwritten letter. What's different about cyberspace is that it really is a space—a place where thousands or millions of people congregate. You do not need to be a celebrity to speak to a wide audience of strangers; you do not need to be a

spy to eavesdrop on the conversations of others.

Coins on the Table

In the country of words, information rules. We are the information we give away, and the information we ask for. Facts, rumors, and opinions are bartered like goods at a bazaar.

Here are a few "info-coins" that I've gathered in the last several months, in no particular order of importance:

- The composer of "Graceful Ghost Rag," William Bolcom, recorded this haunting piece on a None-such album called *Heliotrope Bouquet*.
- T-cells get their name from the fact that they mature in the thymus gland, a pyramid-shaped organ located near the heart.
- The idea of Norwegians colonizing space is heresy.
- Professional writing skills are a plus if you want to work for the Atlantis Project, a Las Vegas, Nevada-based organization that is creating the new country of Oceania. (Just when I thought all the good jobs were gone....)
- Tom Servo's head is a red gum-ball machine made by Carousel Industries of Des Plaines, IL; the name for it is "executive snack dispenser."

If you hang around long enough, you learn what information is valuable and what is considered junk (something that varies from group to group). More important, you learn what coins you want to put on the table, so to speak. How much you are willing to give in exchange for what you want is a key question online, as it is offline.

Mystery Train

I am taping episodes of Mystery Science Theater 3000 for someone I

met through the AOL MST 3K fan club. Our cyber-friendship enables the last leg of a long journey that starts in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, where MST 3K is produced; proceeds to New York-based Comedy Central; lights out into space, where the broadcast signal is bounced off a satellite; comes back to Earth at Cable TV Montgomery, which sends the transmission into homes in suburban Maryland; zeroes in on my living room, where a six-year-old Zenith VCR translates the signal back onto videotape; and ends with the tapes doggedly making their way via snail mail to a small town in New England—to the home of a guy I don't know except by E-mail.

This connection is ordinary and unremarkable only if I don't think about it too hard.

A Hothouse for Thought

In cyberspace ideas grow fast, and they can grow very strangely. The most freakish, feverish, and colorful of these ideas develop during "flaming"—intense attacks of someone or something. Like the man-eating plant in *The Little Shop of Horrors*, these freaks of thought can rage out of control.

Information itself has a wide range of operating temperatures—from cold facts to blazing opinions. Part of adapting to life online is determining the climate you prefer.

The Wood Where Things Have No Names

Connections can be made online that would be impossible or incredible offline. I have made a few myself. These are drifting, gentle, undemanding friendships based on a common interest.

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice walked through a place called "the wood where things have no names" with her arms around the neck of a fawn. When they came out the woods, the fawn remembered

its name ("I'm a Fawn!") and recognized Alice for what she was—a human child: "A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed."

The anonymity of cyberspace is why there can be an unspoken fear about pushing a connection too far—meeting your cyber-pal face to face, for example. It might be fun. It might be the end of the relationship. When you come down from cyberspace, you have names for *lots* of things.

Holding onto the Air

There are two approaches to talking online. They are extremes, and most people use a combination of both.

The first approach is to decide that anything goes—you say whatever you want to say, to whomever you want to say it. If you want to write a 500-word post, you write one. If you want to rip someone's arms off, metaphorically speaking, you do it. You operate from impulse.

The second approach is based on restraint. You move around cyberspace as you might move around outer space (rather carefully, that is). You weigh and choose your words. You treat feelings and opinions as though they were explosive devices. Your posts are outer-directed rather than focused on self.

In my experience, the most advanced online communicators lean toward the second approach. They never brawl. Most of the time they don't have a huge amount to say, either.

No Rules

There are no rules for cyberspace. You can tell the truth or lie; be yourself or invent yourself. However, I've noticed that the following guidelines apply if you want to develop a good relationship with an individual or group.

- Cut and simplify; boil your

words down to the essential few. In this respect you should think like a poet, although without a poet's highbrow phrasing. Fancy words have a very low flash point in cyberspace and tend to make you look foolish.

Some gifted people can write on and on and stay interesting, even as the online meter ticks. They are the exception, though.

Be yourself. As a ghost, you are transparent. Remember that. You can be seen through, just as you can see through others.

- Stay frosty. Fights start easily online. A delicate touch when choosing words can be a definite asset—unless, of course, a brawl is the point. The power of online words can be deflected, too. Deflection is one of the functions of emoticons :-).

Give the Poet the Last Word

When Emily Dickinson remarked on the spectral power of the mind alone, she referred to books and letters. But if she were alive and online today, she would find the truth of that romantic metaphor written larger than ever, in millions of posts and cross-flying E-mail—outrunning the body, erasing the miles.

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