Cyberspace tends to occupy a growing part of the social realities of a lot of people today. But the anticipations of many that this symbolic world would become a more righteous realm, in which physical markers such as gender, age, body type, race would eventually lose salience as a basis for the evaluative categorization of self/other, are rather questionable as to whether they correspond to what really is happening. This belief or hope was (and for some still is) based on the logic that because bodily features are not obviously discernible in cyberspace, they would cease to be a primary means of structuring interaction. Floating free of corporeal experience, the mind would generate new forms for rendering self and other and for organizing interpersonal communication.

However, these features continue to act as defining factors of the social systems of difference. Cyberspace, until now, has not managed to neutralize gender: on the contrary, it appears to be organized by the patriarchal forms, which exist in Real Life (RL), as one can ascertain by examining online chat rooms and cyber-games.

Moreover, in general, the statistics for women in networking and computer science fields are estimated rather low and this is attributed to the early stereotyping of roles (for example, through toys for boys and girls) and to existing social attitudes in workplaces (Shade, 1993). Furthermore, women are considered not to be very well represented on most computer networks, although there are exclusively women-only mailing lists and computer conferences (Shade, 1993; Smith & Balka, 1991).

So, although mostly male dominated, cyberspace still offers new ground for women to explore and exploit/take advantage of. The major issue for feminists should be how the dominant representations of women in the “real” world are transferred in the virtuality of cyberspace.

As until now, women have never been a defining factor of the social or the cultural order. The female has been presented as the partner and consultant, especially through the dominant images of the mother, the lover and the nurse. Women were, in fact, defined in relation, or even contradiction, to the dominant male. In this sense, the female was described as the “other,” an identity defined by its’ differences against the male.

The “otherness” or “object status” of women permeates the disciplines of linguistics, social and cultural theories, history, law and so on. The challenge for feminist philosophers, as Patricia Wise puts it, has been “how to place the non-present woman in ontology, epistemology and metaphysics; how to theorize, and, ideally, enact, a subjectivity for she who is not a subject in discourse” (Wise, 1997, p. 180).

The capitalistic system brought up the issue of economic control and exploitation of women’s labor and bodies. Women’s emancipation contributed to men’s further autonomy. What’s more, women were also produced as object-extensions of male-produced objects, an expression of consumer marketing, within the realm of a sexual economy. Women remained desirable - with their prosthetic extensions such as appliances and beauty technologies - being represented in male -produced media texts as difficult and puzzling seductive objects. In the English language objects like ships and cars are referred to as “she.” If an apparatus functions well, it is the object of possession of a proud owner, whereas, when it fails to work as expected it becomes “that cow of a thing.” In this sense, women and technologies -with their use-value and the alleged ability to be viewed as objects of ownership - became the prosthetic extensions of men.

On the other hand, computer systems have been validated as an extension of male users’ rationality, invented to serve them and seduce their fantasies of mastery and control. The virtual reality experience and interaction - allowed by computer technologies - are understood within a symbolic space (cyberspace) where the “real” is simulated and reproduced in a spectacular way. Domination and mastery are more likely to be attained in cyberspace exactly because the real body is supposed to be only imaginatively involved. Virtual reality offers a safe place for the real body to be negated and the imagination to be unchained, without any virtual risks, raps and immediate consequences. As Wise (1997) puts it: “the phallocentric virtual subject believes that, because the danger of embodied relational fusion is removed, there is no danger for his unified subjectivity” (ibid., p. 182). Cyberspace offers ground for users to believe that mind and body can be separated and to infuse into a symbolic space, such as cyberspace, users’ RL (real life) fantasies. In this sense, technology becomes a seduction that dissects identity.

When women are transferred in cyberspace, they become a site for the imagination of virtual men who play through the fantasies of embodied men. So, in a Pamela Anderson screen saver advertisement, the logo promises readers that they will become the center of attention in the office by purchasing it. Lara Croft and other metal women-androids are expressions of a phallocentric culture, which produces virtual women-simulacra that gather all the idealizations of a male fantasy, that is embodied, sensate and material women, in contrast with the intellect, rational and disembodied men (regardless of the fact that it is men’s very real and material body that generates these representations of women).

Gender and Body

Gender, as a social construction, is “open” to variations of its meaning and content, stemming from cultural and social conditions. In RL (real life), gender is interpreted by embodied characteristics (physical features, voice, gestures etc.) and is therefore difficult to separate gender as a social institution from gender as a specific body type. Furthermore, the way we tend to define our sex is indissolubly related to the way we interact and view the “other,’’ whether man or woman; a process based on available cultural scripts.
Although we pass through public space as if we are oblivious to gender, it is true that we are unable to interact with someone unless we have categorized him or her, as we tend to define ourselves through defining the “other.” The first categorization we make is that of gender, age and race as these features are the most obvious ones.

These categorizations or social scripts are “written” by the very real body. So, when we meet a new person we reach conclusions about his or her gender judging by his or her performance in relation to culturally constructed gender categories. From early childhood one learns how to perform masculinity or femininity. In this sense, gender is considered to be not only a feature of the flesh but a figment of the mind, as well.

In text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) the body cannot be seen, the physical presence and characteristics are deleted, suggesting in this sense a potential dislocation of the self, since the body is, in our culture, the most natural and indisputable location of the “self.” In cyberspatial interactions, one can observe how gender is reproduced in a purely symbolic space, where disembodied—communication, construction and presentation of the “self” are achieved with no other hermeneutic tools, but speech itself. Furthermore, in “rich media” (such as video-conferencing and other audio or/and video streaming modes of online communication) the situation could not be different: manipulated visual (or/and oral) signs, through deliberate transvestism or artificial morphing (and other possible modes of signal processing), convey a similar desire to free the body from its corporeal cues and natural constraints.

For example, this is how David Bolter and Richard Grusin approach the question whether virtual MUDs (we’ll talk about them in a while) dissolve the ambiguities and the gender opacity of text-based and verbally mediated communication: “Virtual MUDs provide their own forms of spoofing and gender swapping. In the Palace, for example, one can switch between male and female avatars in a matter of seconds. Even when the MUDs may have streaming video, so that players can ‘be themselves,’ it seems likely that players will also have the ability to refashion their own video images in ways that confuse or ignore gender, and some spend huge amounts of time programming and decorating their various personas” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 265).

What’s more, the tendency on cyberspace and in the artificial worlds of VR (virtual reality) is to reproduce gender characteristics and norms used/present in RL (real life). As social beings, people carry, in their unconscious, the conventional and traditional stereotypes regarding gender, sexuality and desirability. This, is the “easy way” especially for someone who is willing to transgender in online communications.

Needless to say that such an enchantment of virtual or cyberspatial disembodiment is related, though disputably, to the old tradition of the Cartesian dualism between body/mind and the corresponding distrust of senses, which result the perspectivalism of an “ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject” claiming to know the world by gazing at it from afar (Jay, 1988, p. 10).

On the one hand, most of virtual reality theorists seem to align with the postmodernist and poststructuralist anti-Cartesianism. For example, the architect and virtual reality enthusiast Markos Novak (1991) writes: “The trajectory of Western thought has been moving from the concrete to the abstract, from the body to the mind; recent thought, however, has been pressing upon us the frailty of that Cartesian distinction. The mind is the property of the body, and lives and dies with it. Everywhere we turn we see signs of this recognition, and cyberspace, in its literal placement of the body in spaces invented by the mind, is located directly upon this blurring boundary, this fault” (Novak, 1991, p. 227).

On the other hand, most of cyberspace enthusiasts would agree with the interface designer Meredith Bricken saying that in a virtual environment: “You can be the mad hatter or you can be the teapot; you can move back and forth to the rhythm of a song. You can be a tiny droplet in the rain or in the river” (Bricken, 1991, p. 372). For this reason, Katherine Hayles (1996) and other postmodern and feminist critics remain very suspicious as to whether virtual reality can completely turn Cartesian rationality upside down in order to approach really embodied knowledge: “Cyberspace, we are often told, is a disembodied medium. ... In a sense, [this is] correct; the body remains in front of the screen rather than within it. In another sense, however, [this is] deeply misleading, for [it] obscure[s] the crucial role that the body plays in constructing cyberspace. In fact, we are never disembodied. ... Far from being left behind when we enter cyberspace, our bodies are no less actively involved in the construction of virtuality than in the construction of real life” (Hayles, 1996, p. 1).

All this discussion about Descartes’ dualism and virtual disembodiment is not irrelevant for gender politics. As a matter of fact, Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine Grontkowski (1996) have associated Cartesian dualism with the privileged primary given to the visual and the corresponding masculinist science. For them, “there is a movement among a number of feminists to sharpen what, until now, had only been a vague sentiment ... that the logic of visual is a male logic. According to one critic [Luce Irigaray], what is absent from the logic ... is a woman’s desire” (Keller & Grontkowski, 1996, p. 187).

Similarly, Katherine Hayles is reluctant to identify “subjectivity with the rational mind that has traditionally been encoded masculine, leaving behind the materiality of the body that has been identified with the feminine” (Hayles, 1996, p. 3). As Nancy Leys Stepan (1986) has shown in her investigations of race and gender, dualities like male/female and mind/body are mutually reinforced and powerfully interacting when they are consistently associated. According to Katherine Hayles: “The dualities line up as follows: mind is superior to body; silicon technology is superior to protein organism; man is superior to woman. Therefore, replace the body born of woman with a computer that can serve as a fitting receptacle for the (male) mind. The privileged terms (mind, computer, male) are linked together in mutually reinforcing connections that seem to make it possible to erase or leave behind the stigmatized terms (body, organism, female)” (Hayles, 1996, p. 4).

Closing this section, we are going to remind Slavoj Žižek’s double trap lurking our conceptualization of virtuality. For Žižek (1996) the risk is twofold: either to underdetermine or to overdetermine virtuality. The way he conceives the underdetermination of virtuality is by pointing to the assertion that virtualization always existed and exists as we were and are dealing with direct, “real” reality, even prior to the advance of computing technologies. For Žižek, “Lacan had already put it in the 1950s apropos of his famous scheme of the ‘virtual image/l’image virtuelle’: the place in the big other from which I see myself in the form in which I find myself likeable ... is by definition virtual. ... When I speak, I always constitute a virtual place of enunciation from which I speak, yet which is never directly ‘me’” (Žižek, 1996, p. 285). From the other side of the same coin, Žižek sees the trap of the overdetermination of virtuality, i.e., the hasty proclamation that “every reality [is] a virtual fiction: one should always bear in mind that the ‘proper’ body remains the unsurpassable anchor limiting the freedom of virtualization. The notion that, in some not too distant future, human subjects will be able to weigh the anchor that attaches them to their bodies and to change into ghost-like entities from one to another virtual body is the fantasms of full virtualization, of the subject finally delivered from [a] pathological stain” (ibid., p. 286).
Male-Female Value Systems in Online Communication

In Susan Herring’s research (1993, 1996) about male-female behavior in online communications, it becomes obvious that women and men appeal to different systems of values both in posting their own behavior and in interpreting that of others. Women tend to be more polite, considerate and supportive, whereas men seem to be more aggressive and adversarial.

Susan Herring (1993) presents results about activity on two academic e-mailing lists (Linguist and Megabyte University or MBU) illustrating that, even in academic CMC, men and women do not participate equally. Rather, she claims, a small minority of men still dominate the discourse and choice of topic, as well as exhibiting a self-promotional and adversarial rhetorical style. Thus, Herring concludes that “because of social conditioning that makes women uncomfortable with direct conflict, women tend to be more intimidated by these practices and to avoid participation as a result” (Herring, 1993).

Males and females tend to adopt different interpretations of what is polite and rude, aggressive and compromising in online communication. Men appear to be negatively polite. Questioned about the values that they appreciate most in online communication, women put before “thoughtfulness,” short, to the “point messages,” “supportive behaviors,” and “helpful advice.” They would like to see “more please and thank you’s” and they seemed bothered by “rude, insensitive remarks” and “unnecessary nastiness” (Herring, 1996, p. 125). In general, women are more considerate, attentive and protective of the participant’s want to be liked, supported and accepted.

Men respondents, on the other hand, value “debate,” “candor” and “freedom from censorship” (ibid., p. 126). They forward the honest and frank expression of one’s thoughts and feelings to the positive face wishes of the addressee; if one disagrees with someone, one should say so directly. As far as debate is concerned, men believe that this element is required to the point of an open confrontation in order to get to the core of things and to “sharpen one’s intellectual skills” or even “to get one’s blood flowing” (ibid., p. 129). Men are more individualists and promote self-interest. They complain about “idiocy and repetitions,” “advertising,” “low content and off-topic posts,” “stupid questions” and “requests by others to do things for them” (ibid., pp. 125-6). However, they do make a distinction between good and bad adversariality (meaning hostility).

Women do not make this kind of distinction; they interpret all kind of adversariality as hostile, unconstructive, rude and provocative. Women use words as “ugly,” “harmful” and “dangerous” to evaluate men’s agonistic behavior and they characterize their own feelings/response to that kind of conduct (men’s) as “offended,” “disabled” and “dismayed” (ibid., p. 130).

Even though men seem more concerned about freedom from imposition, they are responsible for the majority of violations of negative politeness, for sending the longest messages, for copying the most text from the previous messages and respond to them point to point.

In researching gender behavior in seven mailing lists of academic interest, three owned and prevailed by males, three by females and a neutral one, Herring (1996) found out that there are not only individuals who are gendered in their evaluation of online behaviors but electronic forums, as well. In the various lists’ recommendations there are the guidelines referring to the general values adopted by each list. Here again, in the lists that are prevailed by female participants, there are specific instructions which forward positive politeness. Some of them make it clear that adversarial behavior and flaming are not welcome in the lists in any form, while others make it a matter of policy to be respectful rather than agonistic during the discussions.

A different attitude is evident in male-prevailing mailing lists: they all proscribe flaming in ways that authorize public disagreement, they advocate argument, prohibiting personal offenses and attacks only in the case when the party insulted does not have a chance to respond.

The existence of gender prototypes is supported by cases where males or females are immediately excluded from interaction and communication if they fail to prove the authenticity of their sex or if they do not conform to the expected gender pattern. In many cases, these persons will be the subjects of conversation among other users. Jodi O’Brien reports that it is often assumed that any woman who is cruising for sex and who is “hypergendered” is actually a man trying to trick other men into having sex with him (O’Brien, 1999, p. 90).

In order not to be suspected of being male, women have to post/express themselves, mainly in women-only sites, in a “female” manner.

Besides these particular forums, the Usenet guidelines, that is the general “rules” that apply to all Internet users throughout the world, reflect the male rather than the female value system. They applaud anarchy, regarding conflict inevitable. Furthermore, they also discourage appreciative and supportive postings, in the name of reducing mail volume. And if men are comfortable with a status closer to their notions, what about women who adopt a supportive interactional style and avoid conflicts? This could be, partly, the reason why male users dominate the net.

Additionally, the guidelines of major mailing lists that are open to all potential participants, apart from accepting insults and boundless personal criticism, they also give direct instructions for users to avoid expressing their emotions, for example “avoid responding while emotional” or “if a message generates emotion, look again,” promoting instead self-control (Herring, 1996, p. 135). This factor, combined with the fact that most net users are male, leads us to the conclusion not only that there is gender bias in netiquette guidelines, but also that the global net and the norms produced within it are most likely to be male-centered. In fact, according to Judy Wajcman: “It is not surprising that the typical Internet user world-wide remains a young, white, educated male in Western societies, and that a major use of the Internet is to access pornography, designed for a predominately male audience. It is, though, disappointing that these facts go largely unremarked in the literature” (Wajcman, 2000, p. 459).

Quoting the netiquette, “flaming is a longstanding network tradition … and the recipients of flames, sometimes deserve it” (Herring, 1996, p. 136). These guidelines, although specific, do not answer to the question of who really deserves flaming. Moreover they are probable not to appeal to users who come from a cultural environment that repels insults; in this case users are advised “to avoid many hang-outs with the politically incorrect.” Taking under consideration that the positive politeness orientated users are primarily women, the implications are rather clear; as a participant to a male-centered list put it “if you can’t stand the heat, ladies, get out of the kitchen” (ibid., p. 137).

In conclusion we can safely say that gender is quite visible in online communication. In fact, the two genders seem to appeal to two different value systems: men forward individual freedom whereas women prefer gentle interaction. These value systems may justify less noble behaviors: thus, defense of one’s freedom, justifies insults, while politeness may result to flattery or even passivity, as far as women are concerned. Furthermore, they perpetuate ongoing male prevalence/domination in cyberspace, re-enacting social
constitutions unfavorable to women into a new ground, such as cyberspace. In an antagonistic cyber-environment, also, lies the danger of misinterpretations, and of a priori assumptions of hostility, which discourage women from participating.

Even though these findings do not apply universally, it is clear that male and female value-systems are antagonistic and contradictory; as Herring (1996) puts it: “males’ uncensored agonistic expression threatens female positive face and protecting positive face at any cost threatens freedom of expression.”

There are not easy solutions to these problems. For example, if polite behavior became compulsory, those who are adversarial and antagonistic would object in the name of freedom of speech. Women centered chat rooms and lists are open to male intrusion and, therefore, adversarially. If an imposter gets exposed, he can come back featuring as another female. This is why, women-centered lists do not exclude men, but rather allow them to participate if they agree to respect the purposes of the list. However, there are incidents of aggressiveness, often, unintentionally. In cases where men were clearly excluded, these lists became the targets of many men who felt gagged. Another solution could be ignoring the intruders; this means, of course, that one must be very tolerant to abusive and aggressive behavior, furthermore, it is a practice, which has spectacularly failed to work in the case of the Turkish-Armenian dispute (ibid., p. 139).

Gender Games in Cyberspace - the Masks

As discussed earlier, body characteristics such as gender, race, voice, accent, height etc. are either potentially invisible in text-based computer-mediated communication or rather easily manipulated in ‘rich media’ communication. For example, on the Internet, there are games, such as the MUDs, MOOs, and the IRC, where one can play with gender, language, the software and cultural content of all kinds. Many are those who have remarked on the gendered character of these environments (Turkle, 1995, pp. 210-232). Taking into account that these games and chats originate from the 1980s and the early 1990s, periods when the Internet was predominantly male populated, some of the few women who were then participating in them have been reporting cases of male aggression against women or anyone appearing with a female name. It is very indicative what Amy Bruckman, a MUD developer, reports: “Male characters often expect sexual favors in return for technical assistance. A male character once requested a kiss from me after answering a question. A gift always incurs an obligation” (Bruckman, 1996, pp. 444-5).

On the Internet Relay Chat (IRC), the participants use nicknames according to the principles of camouflage and conspicuous marking, that is, one intends to draw attention by choosing a name which hides one’s true identity. Less than one fifth of the participants use nick names which reveal their gender. Many women choose nicknames which reproduce conventional female stereotypes; a female participant is likely to appear to be either a sex kitten, preferring a name such as “Hot Pants” or the sweet, gentle woman, choosing a nickname like “Sugar Cookie” (Danet, 1998, p. 139). However, the vast majority of the participants prefer names that are gender neutral. These people can hide their RL identities over long periods of time. Nevertheless, inspecting whether this person is flirting with males or females can identify one’s true sex.

The masquerade is much more elaborate on theme games such as MUDs. In these games the participant is required to choose a nickname adapted to the general setting of the game. Here, the gender play is more sophisticated than on IRC and the consequences are more serious, as the player, apart from choosing a name, he or she also has to select a certain gender (male, female or neutral) and create a specific persona, a character whose description is available to anyone joining the game.

Although the most common choice is “male,” followed by “female,” many are those who choose a neutral gender such as “person,” “royal,” “neuter,” “either” (ibid., p. 142). In research, conducted by Brenda Danet (ibid.), on two MUD sites, LambdaMOO and MediaMOO, she found that on MediaMOO, a third of the participants chooses a gender-ambiguous nickname, whereas on LambdaMOO, this percentage drops to one fifth. In relation to the “male-female” choice, she concluded, by comparing the fictional identities with the RL ones, that in RL the ratio is 4 men /1 woman, whereas in terms of characters the same ratio is 3/1, that is, a significant proportion of men choose to join MUD as a women.

Similar conclusions to those of Danet were reached by Lynn Cherny (1994) in her study of gender differences in the text-based virtual reality environments, as MUDs and MOOs. Cherny found that indeed there are differences in how men interact versus how women interact: “men use more physically violent imagery during conversation and women are more physically affectionate towards other characters than men are” (Cherny, 1994).

Kathleen Michel (1992) investigated gender differences in KIDCAFE, a networking project that links children around the world. She sought to apply linguist Deborah Tannen’s theories of gender differences in conversation: the “rapport” (cooperative, intimate style) versus “report” (information giving) styles of talk. In general, more women favor the “rapport” style, while more men favor the “report” style (Tannen, 1990). Michel concluded that, although there are different conversational patterns between boys and girls, they are not as discrepant as Tannen would indicate. Moreover, she observed that CMC can have very positive effects for cross-gender communication among school children (Michel, 1992). However, the findings of Kaplan & Farrell (1994) have supported Tannen’s work; in particular, they observed that young women’s messages are quite short and their participation is driven by their desire to keep the conversation going on the desire to achieve consensus on some issues (Kaplan & Farrell, 1994).

J. Michael Jaffe and his group (1995) have investigated whether the use of pseudonyms migrates gender-based differences of CMC patterns. They found that “women tended to mask their gender with their pseudonym choice while males did not,” an observation underscoring “the implicit social pressure that women feel when interacting in mixed-gender situations” (Jaffe et al., 1995).

According to Leslie Regan Shade (1993), “despite the relative anonymity of CMC, though, some women report that they are often harassed and intimidated from posting and participating on conferences via e-mail” (Shade, 1993). Gladys We (1993) too refers to cases of sexual harassment and abuse against women, as, for example, one woman reported to her that “in response to my postings he sent e-mail calling me ‘hairy legged feminazi’ … and did lots of innuendos about the probable deficits of my personal life” (We, 1993).

Ami Bruckman (1996) has conducted research on social interactions and gender swapping in the text-based virtual reality environments of MUDs. She has found that female MUDders are often “besieged with attention,” including unwanted sexual advances, and that male players will often log on as female characters and behave suggestively, further encouraging sexual advances (Bruckman, 1996). Pavel Curtis (1992) has noted that in MUDs the most promiscuous and sexually aggressive women are usually played by men (Curtis, 1992).
Gender Switching

For many, modern technology is challenging traditional notions of gender identity: “in cyberspace the transgendered body is the natural body” says Allucquere Rosanne Stone (1995, p. 180). In fact, there are many well-publicized stories and folklore about people who created entirely new persona online (including gender swapping) and about the reaction that followed the identity disclosure. In 1985 Lindsy Van Gelder reported the case of a man who used the network to play out assumptions about gender roles. In real life he was a prominent New York psychiatrist in his early fifties, called “Alex,” and on the network he presented himself as a female neuropsychologist, “Joan,” who had recently been severely disabled in a car accident. Over the two years that Joan was online, she developed intimate relationships (in some cases online romances) with other women, although never face-to-face, and “she served both as a support for other disabled women and as an inspiring stereotype-smasher to the able-bodied” (Van Gelder, 1991). Eventually it was revealed that Joan was not only not disabled but was Alex, “who was engaged in a bizarre, all-consuming experiment to see what it felt like to be female, and to experience the intimacy of female friendship” (ibid.). The response to this revelation was intense: many betrayed and outraged. Others felt disappointed, regretted the “death” of the virtual friend “Joan,” and wished to continue a friendship with that person, “to relate to the soul, not the sex of the person” (ibid.).

However, this story can be read differently in such a way that one could question the extent to which the cyborg can escape the biological body. As a matter of fact, Ruth Oldenziel (1994) notes that, although initially the electronic gender-masking may appear as subverting gender distinctions, it ultimately, when revealed, reinforces and reproduces these distinctions. Similarly, Judy Wajcman argues that from the fact that “many more men adopt a female persona than vice versa” it follows that “this may be another way for men to assert their domination over female bodies” (Wajcman, 2000, p. 459).

In any case, the fact remains that in cyberspace we could pass through as anyone we ever wanted to be. This is one of the most spectacular novelties emerging from the new technologies, that the possibility to travel in cyberspace taking up any identity/persona one ever wanted to have, defying all physical boundaries set by real life, with no other limitation but one’s fantasy.

Even though in RL (real life) multiple identity is considered to be a mental pathological disorder, it is remarkable that many people are trying it in typed encounters on the Internet. For example, in Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet Sherry Turkle celebrates the potential for people “to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones” (Turkle, 1995, p. 12). The mask, the anonymity and the playful potentiality -qualities provided by the textual nature of the medium - frees people in ways that enable them to improvise, to explore previously hidden aspects of their personalities and experiment by adopting all kinds of different personae. This “costume ball” challenges our beliefs about gender issues, to the extent, some believe, that eventually it will destabilize the ways gender is socially constructed.

When posting as men, women do so in order to avoid sexual harassment or even to be taken seriously, especially in business transactions. Assuming that these women transgender successfully, they are likely to be performing in ways associated with male assertiveness. On the other hand, men post as women out of curiosity, in seek of the attention that female-presenting individuals typically receive, or in order to be treated with politeness, supportiveness and sexual headway.

Although usual, many of those who have cross-gendered or have considered of doing so have reported that they characterized this action as a deceiving one. When one uses gender ambiguous names, one finds others asking further information in order to specify one’s gender. There are also sites that involve gender authenticity procedures. Gender vigilance is quite common in women-only chat lines, in date and romance sites. It seems that what really concerns computer systems users, is not the actual deed of transgendering but the motives of such an act.

So, a question of intentions and, therefore, morality comes forward. Socialization is constructed and stabilized through negotiations and consensus. Fixed social meanings and positions maintain stability. A person who constantly alters his or hers attitude is considered to be not only unstable but, by doing so, he or she repositions the other, the partner, as well. Gender switching puts in question one’s anticipation for fixed positions that others can depend on, rather than alters gender institutions.

Many are those who hope to an erosion of the traditional gender lines -described above - as a result of the gender switching process. This is rather wishful thinking as all participants and their online characters are based on certain social scripts, on shared classification schemes. When entering a chat room - for example - one may be oblivious of one’s true identity and becomes someone completely different and new - nevertheless continues to use these collective categories of classification. This is our social grammar, our referents, which enable us to interact in a meaningful way, to connect and bond. So, even when the “real” body is not there, the mind is still connected both with the body and its’ social connotations.

Furthermore, the fact that male users outbalance female users in online communications combined with men’s adversarial and aggressive behavior implies that perpetuation/reproduction of male dominant patterns of communication is bound to happen.

Conclusions

In strategizing the possibilities of political action in order to reverse the climate described above, feminists appear to depend more than on technological education and emancipation in order to recoup the existing absences and shortages. And the expectations for sudden changes of the collective imaginary and social practices are just wishful thinking.

Home-based work, using information technologies, may appear to be a solution for women who are dissatisfied with deteriorating working conditions. Nevertheless, the promises for a more comfortable working environment, such as home, and free management of time, may result to further entrapment.

Furthermore, women can advantage from their experience in participating in logocentric discourses, where they have had to read both from the male and the female viewpoint. It is true that feminists have achieved particularly sophisticated expressions, constantly facing ambiguity and contestation. Cyberspace is, in particular, a fertile ground for exploration and development of a diversity of assertion and literacy. In this sense, feminists/women could enter cyberspace being experienced in the discursive practices of polyvocality and multiple literacies, in order to undermine the patriarchal hegemonies. What is more, women can benefit from the breakdown of clean distinctions between organisms and machines, as in the case of cyborgs, where human and mechanic/machine.
APPENDIX: Greeks on the Internet

In fact, besides digital corporal transfigurations and morphings, the cyberspatial experience of virtual reality is pursuing to develop some liberating problematics in contrast to certain traditional dichotomies and fixed boundaries. At least this is what Donna Haraway, a socialist-feminist historian of biology, is trying to establish by grounding on cyborgs a “rhetorical strategy” and a “political method” (Haraway, 1991, p. 149) through her writings and other social interventions she has been doing since the middle of the 1980s. Haraway argues that a cyborg is not just a “hybrid of machine and organism” but also a “creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (ibid., p. 149). Therefore, she pledges that the cyborg metaphor is offering to feminism a paradigm capable to contribute into women’s liberation from their bonds.

In her well-known, called “Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985), Haraway writes that “any objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly; no ‘natural’ architectures constrain system design. The financial districts in all the world’s cities, as well as the export-processing and free-trade zones, proclaim this elementary fast of ‘late capitalism’” (p. 81). In an overall account, Haraway believes that at least three distinct oppositions are violated and transgressed by the symbolic metaphor of cyborgs: human/animal, human/machine and physical/nonphysical. Contrarily to the first ‘engineered’ cyborgs by the work of Clynes and Kline in outer space research, which were appearing as ‘supermen’ possessing a huge strength and ability to survive in hostile extraterrestrial environments, Haraway’s cyborg emerges as an everyday creature in the world of late capitalism. But this creature is “oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence” in the sense that it is “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (ibid., pp. 150-1). In these multiple senses, Haraway suggests that the cyborg could become “our ontology” and it could give “us our politics” (ibid., p. 150). The reason is because she thinks that its subversive substance could effectively circumvent its military/industrial origin in such a way that it might lead the political struggles of social and gender liberation.

Thus, cyberspace may join otherwise alienated individuals or even communities and, of course, there is no intention to underestimate the value of constructive exchange of opinions through which a counter cultural network of support and solidarity can emerge. However, this does not seem enough to alter political and social institutions unfavorable to women. And while it could be useful to acknowledge that there are feminine needs and ways in relation to technology, such policies would even more enhance the notions of differences between men and women.

At this point it might be appropriate to discuss whether and the extent to which the Internet can be a site for the creation of new feminist communities and new forms of political organizations. During the last decade, we have been witnessing the emergence of networked forms of new political actors activated in the Internet in order to constitute a ‘virtual-imagined transnational community.’ Next to a large number of environmentalist, feminist and indigenous rights movements, NGOs and other organizations, such is the example of the project Women on the Net (WoN), set up originally by the Society for International Development (SID) with UNESCO funding (Harcourt, 1999).

Now the issue becomes, how effective can ‘activism at a distance’ be and under what conditions? The experience of networked movements shows that online linked activism can be hardly sustained alone and in order to foster it must be based on a further link, that between cyberactivism and face-to-face activism in physical space, i.e., an involvement in what Arturo Escobar calls ‘place-based’ political practice (Escobar, 1999). In the words of Escobar: “We might give each woman of the world or each ecology group a computer and an Internet account, and the world might remain the same. This means that the relationship between cybertcure and political change - and between cyberactivism and place-based practice - is to be politically constructed” (ibid., pp. 46-7). So, activism at a distance has to balance the two contradictory trends of globalization simultaneously producing both fragmentation and integration. As Ribiero puts it: “in another paradoxical operation of cyberspace, it enlarges the public sphere and political action through the virtual world and reduces them in the real one” (Ribiero, 1998, p. 345).

Moreover, at a microsociological scale, gender is rigidly dichotomized and at the same time fluid; sex is both a natural fact and a mental figment. In other words, mind and body are presented as two different, yet inseparable parts of our existence. To this point, we have examined the roles and rules, with which the two opposite sexes live by; accordingly, these constructions can be applied in order to bend sex within a single body unit, reinforcing, the way, the distinction between real and fictional. Present and emerging online gender practices are taking place according to imaginary conceptions of sex and sexuality, creating, within a symbolic space, a site for gender-stretching. Perhaps, the issue in question, may not, after all, be gender itself, but, rather, the right and the limits of multiplicity, thus, multiple personae within a single body.

When we enter cyberspace, we use the available and already given cultural and social alphabet in order to “read” the new territory, to give meaning to it and adopt into the novel environment. Therefore, what will emerge or what already has done so, will be the continuation of the present forms and practices of interaction, of identifying self and other. And presently, we authorize only to one single body-self to be original and authentic. Thus, in cyberspace, we will continue to reproduce the traditional categories of gender. Therefore, multiplicity appears to be problematic, as it is in the real world, except, of course, for the case of virtual games, where fantasy and fiction justify multiplicity and gender switching. Virtual culture is a world of images with no necessary physical reality behind it; the representations represent only themselves and the copies do not have originals. This culture is introducing us to a brave new world, where the body intersects with technology in ways that are changing our ideas about social relations, the forms of human relations and our perceptions of a “meaningful” interpersonal communication.

Furthermore, exactly because cyberspace is a “dismembered” realm, no social changes are likely to emerge, rather than a reaffirmation, and re-enacting of the constituted representations and values. And the ones who are to re-assert the cultural practices of interaction are the ones who do interact, in the electronic media, that is, white middle-class males. The occasional cross-genderings are unlikely to alter the conventional social stereotypes, because one experiences what one expects to experience. Engraved social institutions, such as gender, are more powerful than any game and amusing masquerade.

As Susan Herring puts it “the myth that gender is not detectable or neutral on computer networks must be put to rest; this myth not only misrepresents reality, but also further perpetuates the uncritical tolerance of practices that discourage women from using computer networks” (Herring, 1996, p. 121).
Here we present some of the results of an online survey on the Internet uses by Greeks. This survey was automatically conducted (by a cgi-bin script) and the responding Internet users were providing their answers in a form, which was immediately processed (by the script) and presenting the results in a web page. The URL of this online survey is http://hyperion.math.upatras.gr/survey/grinet.html and the page is written in Greek. In 6 months (from 1 August 1999 until 31 January 2000) 514 people responded to the survey. Among them 410 (79.77%) identified themselves as male and 104 (20.23%) as female. Their answers to some of the questions are given in the following table, where he percentages are relative (i.e., separately with respect to the total number of male and female respondents):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>E-mails</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Received per Week</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>17.33%</td>
<td>18.45%</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>17.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-50</td>
<td>41.83%</td>
<td>47.57%</td>
<td>11-50</td>
<td>41.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 50</td>
<td>26.96%</td>
<td>15.53%</td>
<td>&gt; 50</td>
<td>26.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Place of Connection</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>16.87%</td>
<td>16.50%</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>38.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office</td>
<td>19.80%</td>
<td>34.95%</td>
<td>11-50</td>
<td>47.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>63.33%</td>
<td>48.54%</td>
<td>51-99</td>
<td>8.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of Connection</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>96.32%</td>
<td>93.27%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>53.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>3.68%</td>
<td>6.73%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>46.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Possession of Web Pages</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mails Sent per Week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>16.87%</td>
<td>16.50%</td>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>38.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office</td>
<td>19.80%</td>
<td>34.95%</td>
<td>11-50</td>
<td>47.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>63.33%</td>
<td>48.54%</td>
<td>51-99</td>
<td>8.56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we see, the bulk of females have entered the Internet after 1995, a rather high percentage of them are connected through work and a rather low percentage of them are connected from home. On the contrary, the bulk of males appear to have entered the Internet before 1997 and they also have the luxury of using it both at home and work. There are no significant differences between males and females in the frequency of their connections and the number of e-mails they are receiving and sending (something which can be understood from the fact that the respondents of the survey are already Internet users and, so, presumably at a rather high social and financial status). But males clearly dominate in the possession of web pages. Thus, it is obvious in the above statistics that the Greek Internet users are following the main social patterns, which are reproducing the existing gender inequalities on cyberspace too.

**References**


---

Department of Mathematics, University of Patras, Greece, & Visiting Professor, Department of Communication & Mass Media, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. E-mail: mboudour@upatras.gr - WWW: http://www.math.upatras.gr/~mboudour

Department of Communication & Mass Media, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. E-mail: edrakou@x-treme.gr

cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World. Cyberspace is a place that researchers, and cyberfeminists, have claimed to feature some of these characteristics of Halberstam’s queer practices; the possibilities for deconstruction, new performances and use of different bodies. Gender-Switching in Cyberspace. A hardcopy version of this article appeared as: Suler, J.R. (2004). Do boys and girls just wanna have fun? In Gender Communication (by A. Kunkel). Kendall/Hunt Publishing. Brad first met Natalie on a MOO. We try to figure out if blogs are gendered or not. We transfer the boundaries of gender which we created in a real society to cyberspace and as we are forced to ground our Identity to our gender and our body in the real world the domesticated Internet controlled by the same power structures as in reality, cut our opportunities to create something new. Perhaps is Cyberfeminism a good way to get the experimentally aspect of the Internet back and to get a more non-gendermarked Cyberspace. This entry was posted in cyberfeminism.