

To speak of online dating these days is to speak of a huge, relatively new social phenomenon. With millions of online dating users in the US alone, (and many more millions of users worldwide), it is now fairly acceptable to make the claim that this phenomenon is altering the way people think about one another, and by extension, how they choose to interact.

For so long attraction and romance were reliant upon the gaze of the other. It's in this moment of mutual recognition and awareness of the other, when eyes lock, that a connection to (or rejection of) the other is established, and this all happens instantaneously. The presentation or performance of self is quickly established through codified sets of behaviors; from a person's attire, to their gestures and patterns of speech. But there is also an immediacy and a kind of set of social contracts involved with these types of P2P (person to person), IRL (in real life) interactions. That is to say, the issue of reciprocity within the beginning stages of a new romantic interest. There exists, though different for each individual, a logical progression of acceptable behaviors for individuals becoming acquainted with one another. Modern courtship is a kind of game which starts with each individual assessing the other using faculties of perception, assumption, and projection, and then after introductions are made, each individual must appropriately communicate their desires, interests, emotional/physical needs, etc. to further assess the sustainability of the budding relationship. The online dating environment however, collapses all of these signs, codes, and temporalities into an open, prescribed network space of individuals who--and the user can at least be sure of this--are also seeking another individual.

From this starting point, the important questions arise: How do individuals choose to present themselves to an unknown audience? How do individuals come to conceptualize this audience? and How do individuals establish a point of reference for their exchanges through the decontextualized medium that is online dating?

There are a multitude of different online dating sites that cater towards specific niche groups and others that perpetuate a very hetero-normative idea of love and romance, and are the first step in answering these questions because they've already done most of the work in grouping up specific types of people. Sites like Eharmony and Match.com are probably some of the first to come to mind for most Americans, being that these are the largest online dating platforms with the most users. Eharmony stands with over 20 million users, and Match.com with 15 million users. These sites market themselves to heterosexual singles seeking long-term relationships and often advertise (via their incessant television ads) the high rate of marriages that occur through the use of their platforms. Then there are sites like JDate (for jewish singles), ChristianMingle (for christian singles), AshleyMadison (for married users to set up discreet affairs), PositiveSingles (for HIV and STD positive singles), Pink Cupid (for lesbian singles), Gay Cupid (for gay singles), SugarDaddie (for older, wealthier men seeking younger women who need financial support), SeniorMatch (singles older than 50), and the list literally goes on and on.

OkCupid is one of the most popular online dating sites on the internet today. Sam Yagan, Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of OkCupid, has reported there were 3.5 million active users as of September 2010 (OkTrends). And in February of 2011 OkCupid attracted 1.3 million unique visitors (Site Analytics).

OkCupid has a few distinguishing characteristics. First, it is free. Setting up an account on OkCupid is simple, and requires only an email address. Users can decide later if they would like to upgrade to an “A-List User” which costs little monthly and provides the user with a few more features that help narrow down the pool of potential matches. Second, OkCupid relies on a largely user-created quiz system. The quiz system unique to OkCupid functions to rate users’ profiles in relation to one another against three criteria presented to the user as a percentage. The three categories are: “Match %,” “Friend %,” and “Enemy %.” Therefore, the quiz system provides the OkCupid user with the freedom to assess for themselves another individual’s profile that may or may not be listed with a high “Match %” or “Enemy %.” Furthermore, it promotes a more active community of users who must visit other profiles to answer new quiz questions that are listed on that user’s profile because they’ve already answered them, and thereby have more accurate match ratings with more users. Third, OkCupid has a “Visitors” section that allows users to see who has been checking out their profile. Finally, OkCupid, using the statistics gathered from its many thousands of users, has a blog entitled OkTrends that presents funny infographics illustrating patterns of behavior among its users. Yagan says OkTrends helps OkCupid “gain credibility as a smart and thoughtful site.” (Brillson)

The most fundamental aspect of all online dating sites is the personal profile. This is the site where users upload their information, pictures, taste preferences, and description of what they are looking for within a partner. Naturally, it is with the hope that it will attract similar individuals to initiate conversation. OkCupid’s user profiles consist of essentially 12 fields in which to enter text. These fields are labeled:

- 1) “My self-summary”
- 2) “What I’m doing with my life”
- 3) “I’m really good at”
- 4) “The first things people usually notices about me”
- 5) “Favorite books, movies, shows, music, and food”
- 6) “The six things I could never do without”
- 7) “I spend a lot of time thinking about”
- 8) “On a typical Friday night I am”
- 9) “The most private thing I’m willing to admit”
- 10) “I’m looking for”

11) “You should message me if”

12) “My Details”

Within this structure, OkCupid users are inclined to follow the instructions provided. Instead of delving right into their description of their ideal partner or relationship, they can assume a casual voice, and nonchalantly rattle off their favorite bands and movies, among other things. This aspect of OkCupid, I’d argue, lends the whole experience a certain lightness that to a younger generation already so familiar with social networking sites can appreciate. It is perhaps why OkCupid is so popular among the 18-34 demographic. [Brillson] Yagan has also spoken about OkCupid in relation to Facebook saying: “Facebook is not a good way to meet new people, but it is a great tool to keep in touch with those you already know. We, on the other hand, are a great tool for meeting new people, but not great at keeping tabs on real life friends.” He continues: “I hope that OKCupid can take people to Facebook level. First you are OKCupid friends, then after a few meetings or dates, you can reveal your true identity.” (Brillson)

According to a study conducted by Nicole Ellison, Rebecca Heino, and Jennifer Gibbs entitled “Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment,” users of online dating sites experience less cues from the other, have greater control over self-presentation strategies, and curb their desires for self-promotion due to the future possibility of face-to-face interaction and so strive for accurate self-presentation. They also found in their study that users of online dating sites were acutely aware of deceptive self-presentation practices online and thus “adopted various strategies to demonstrate the credibility of their identity claims, recursively applying the same techniques they employed to uncover representational ruses in others.” (Ellison, Heino, Gibbs) It seems to me however, that their study was too focused on the “goal-oriented” nature of the online dating environment, giving little significance to the medium’s potential for social play and experimentation with fantastical, or idealized versions of the self, or at the very least, the opportunity to interact in novel ways given the constraints of the online dating environment. In their work, they briefly describe how users of online dating sites will envision an ideal self while writing their profile, but go no further than describing this as a strategy for constructing the profile and “portraying personal qualities they intended to develop or enhance.” (Ellison, Heino, Gibbs) It is as if the users here described are using their online dating profile for multiple goals; finding a partner, and self-improvement. The question at the core of their study is thus: “How do online dating participants manage their online presentation of self in order to accomplish the goal of finding a romantic partner?”

The question I would like to raise, however, is: What about those who aren’t using this as a strategy to meet a specific goal, but as a set of rules for the game of online dating?

Within Gonzalo Frasca's essay "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology," Frasca discusses Roger Caillois categorization of games into their various objectives and goals. Caillois makes two main distinctions between game types: Ludus and Paidia. Ludus, meaning "game," is a category of games that "incorporate rules that define a winner and a loser," where the category of paidia, meaning "play," does not. Good examples of ludus games include chess, soccer, and poker. Paidia games are often more open-ended, and though they have rules that dictate behaviors of players, there is never a clear objective dictated by the structure of the game itself. Paidia games include construction kits, make-believe games, and kinetic play. Paidia games are thus heavily reliant upon the imagination of players. (Frasca 8) This is where the overlap between paidia games and online dating becomes apparent.

Due to the removal of face to face interaction within online dating, users are left only with a set of limited cues so that they can begin imagining the other. Therefore, within this realm, the symbolic is subordinated to the imaginary. Jodi Dean, following Slavoj Zizek, says three things threaten virtuality through computer-mediated-communication (CMC): 1) the loss of the "performative efficacy" of words, 2) the "dissolution of the boundaries between fantasy and reality," and 3) the threat to meaning itself. What Dean (and Zizek) call the "performative efficacy" of words has to do with the power of words to embody physical actions or responses. Put simply, a conversation taking place IRL necessitates the immediate response from the other. Online, however, "visitors to cyberspace can simply 'unhook' themselves. Since exit is an option with nearly no cost, subjects lose the incentive for their word to be their bond." (Dean 15) Her second point speaks to the incessant process of filling-in the gaps a subject must enact while engaging with the "textual screen." Because of the great lack of physical cues from the other, what Dean calls "constitutive desire" cannot be fully realized, and thus a subject must envision the other through a process of "filling-in" the gaps with his/her own imagination. This problematic detail of CMC leaves subjects within the online dating realm in a void of uncertainty in relation to the other, which leads to her third point: the threat to meaning itself. Dean says: "the gap of signification, the minimal difference that makes some item or answer significant, that makes it 'feel right' or 'the one' dissipates. But instead of eliminating the space of doubt, the filling-in occasions the loss of the possibility of feeling convinced, of the sense that an answer can be or is 'right' rather than just another opinion." (Dean 16)

Dominic Pettman suggests in his article, "Love in the Time of Tamagotchi," that people experiment with mediated identities because it allows the "exploration of different behavioral rhythms...the juggling of several romantic interests... the stealing of other people's identities and credit card details... an escape from the restrictive conditions of actual experience...and frees people from the Levinasian ethical imperative;... 'you don't see their faces, so you can talk more honestly'" (Pettman 6).

To return to one of my first assertions: the phenomenon of online dating is changing the way people come to think of one another. More specifically, online dating is altering the way people conceive of love and intimacy. This is what Pettman has chosen as his focus in both his book “Love and Other Technologies” and this article. His goal is to reassess the commonly held assumption that love is an organic, exclusively human thing; that the criteria for finding love shouldn’t be whether or not the other is “human” or “non-human,” but rather if the other is “lovable” or “unlovable.” This astute distinction comes from his in depth analysis of the predominantly Japanese phenomenon of the dating sim, or dating avatar, but can also be extended to the online dating profile. This is because his analysis is an attempt at reconfiguring the discourse around love as an abstract, uniquely human concept, to love as a technology as well as a “code with its own algorithmic parameters” (Pettman 1). He continues: “Love thus becomes a cybernetic imperative of regulating the positive and negative feedback loops of libidinal information. Whether this information is constituted by the image of an actual person, or an avatar of a virtual character, will, I submit, become less of a loaded ethical distinction as the planet becomes increasingly populated by the latter.” (Pettman 10)

Though Pettman’s case is really more focused on a fully virtual avatar wholly codified into being, his argument reaches a very rational conclusion that certainly holds true to online dating. He argues that “all communication is cybernetic, and love is a privileged, semi-flexible, semi-coherent, ingenious, and intricately codified form of communication” (Pettman 14).

Online dating then, upon close inspection, begins to seem like a cybernetic game of intimacy performance heavily embedded in the logic of paidia gaming. This game, that Pettman so adroitly describes as cybernetic, is entirely dependent on the feedback loop of subjective communication. No clear statement on what people can expect or receive from these online dating services can be made with any certitude because one thing is clear: everybody has a different experience with online dating.

OkTrends. 2011. December 10, 2011. <<http://blog.okcupid.com/>>

Site Analytics. "OkCupid.com." Site Analytics. © Copyright to Compete.com - A Kantar Media Company

<http://siteanalytics.compete.com/okcupid.com/>

Brillson, Leila. "The Magic of OkCupid: Algorithms and Sex Appeal Attract the Hipsters." Switched, Huffpost Tech February 2, 2011. December 10, 2011 <<http://www.switched.com/2011/02/02/okcupid-has-got-the-magic-touch/>>

Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11(2), article 2. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/ellison.html>

Frasca, Gonzalo. (2003). Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology. Video/Game/Theory. Edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. Routledge.

Dean, Jodi. (2010). Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive. Polity Press.

Pettman, Dominic. "Love in the Time of Tamagotchi." Theory, Culture, & Society 2009 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore). Vol. 26(2-3): 1-000