

Bots are Hot!

The death of the Web

James Cameron
on the future of movies

April 1996

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Sherry Turkle knows what role-playing in cyberspace really means

SEX, LIES, & AVATARS



\$4.95 / Canada 5.95

For **Sherry Turkle**,
author of the provocative
Life on the Screen
– the first serious look
at the multiple personalities
we live in cyberspace –
we are experiencing that historical,
liminal moment
when the old has begun to die
and the new has not yet arrived.

SEX, LIES, and AVATARS

In other words, a period
of tension, extreme reaction,
great opportunity – and,
above all, exhilaration.

A profile,
by Pamela McCorduck.

Images by Jill Greenberg

www.wired.com/4.04/turkle



C. P. Snow's famous phrase delineating "the two cultures" – science and the humanities – got it wrong from the outset. In the house of the human mind, there are many mansions, many cultures. The British physicist and novelist presented his two-cultures idea to great acclaim in a 1959 book. Who then could have foreseen that Snow got it wrong because he was a modernist?

A generation later, it takes a postmodernist to guide us through the many mansions Snow failed to imagine. That postmodernist may well be Sherry Turkle, the cyberspace explorer and professor of the sociology of science at MIT. No matter that Turkle calls herself not a postmodernist but "a modern woman telling a postmodern tale." Her postmodern tale is about computing – the technology, she says, that brings postmodernism down to earth.

Turkle is author of three seminal books – *Psychoanalytic Politics*, *The Second Self*, and her most recent, *Life on the Screen* – each a measured, meticulous, and ultimately mind-reordering exploration of the ways people think about themselves and their worlds in these postmodern times. What is real? What is virtual? What is living? What is nonliving? Of the many selves I am, who is the real me?

Since modernism, concerned with form and essences – with abstractions – assumes that beneath any surface exists a timeless and placeless truth, modernists like Snow believed that at some essential level, science and the humanities might connect – if only they were properly scolded.

For postmodernists like Turkle, no unitary truth resides anywhere. There is only local knowledge, contingent and provisional. And it will have to do, since it's all we have. The surface is what matters, to be explored by navigation, not by opening up the hood and peering inside. (Sound like the World Wide Web? Like your favorite electronic game?) Postmodernism celebrates this time, this place; and it celebrates adaptability, contingency, diversity, flexibility, sophistication, and relationships – with the self and with the community. Modernism coexists with postmodernism, which makes sense if you think of modernism as the spirit of the Tofflerian Second Wave (all those railroads and smokestacks that we still use and need) and postmodernism as the spirit of the Third Wave.

So Newtonian physics is modern, but quantum mechanics is postmodern. Biology is mainly postmodern, and so, maybe, are the national and global economies. Modernist birthday parties had cakes, candles, presents, and games; the main game at postmodern birthday parties is watching and commenting on the videos just shot. A modernist always wore a tie with a jacket; a postmodernist throws a well-tailored jacket over a T-shirt. Modernist Walter Cronkite could end his newscast with "That's the way it is." Dan Rather must end more tentatively with "That's part of our world tonight."

Mainframes were modernist, but computing slipped into postmodernism when people got *personal* computers. Computing continues its postmodern odyssey through the Internet to the most dramatic extreme: the creation of online communities containing online personae. With its screen surfaces, its learning by doing instead of learning the rules first, its hypertext (no one

pathway through the text is the correct way or the best way), computing now is as postmodernist as it gets. It's characterized, as Turkle puts it, by "the precedence of surface over depth, of simulation over the real, of play over seriousness." For philosophers who have lamented the lack of objects to represent the postmodern condition, computing now offers the information of the Internet and the connections of the World Wide Web; the windows, icons, and layers of personal computing; the creatures in a *SimLife* game; the simulations of the quantum world routinely used in introductory physics courses.

Computing also offers pluralism, different things for different people. In *Life on the Screen*, Turkle returns to one of the people she interviewed for *The Second Self*. "Computers have changed, times have changed, Rafe has changed," she writes. "But I could also write: Times have changed; Rafe has changed; computers have changed. In fact, there are six possible sequences. All are simultaneously true. There is no simple, causal chain." Postmodernism. Right in front of you. Your laptop embodies new ways of thinking, carries you to them (or them to you), and opens you to them.

Mainframes
but computing slipped
when people got

Alongside Turkle's claim that computing is what brings postmodernism down to earth, we can put what Jay David Bolter, author of *Turing's Man* and *Writing Space*, once mischievously remarked: that the computer has transformed the knotty difficulties of postmodern theory into the trivially obvious.

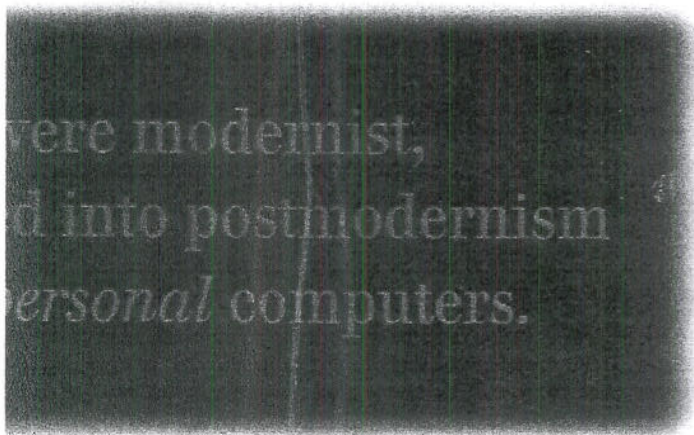
The arc of Turkle's career looks, on the surface, puzzling. Her first book, on French postmodern psychoanalytic theory, appears oddly remote from the second and third books about people and computing. When it was published in 1978, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud's French Revolution* seemed a report of the most arcane and academic of squabbles among a coterie of Parisian psychoanalysts in the 1970s. In fact, Turkle was introducing us to thinkers who, 10 or 15 years later, would become household names (at least in households that worried about the life of the mind).

The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit, published in 1984, was a broad-reaching study of the role of the computer as employed by its early users to think about themselves and their

minds. It was published just as the personal computer was becoming a consumer item in the American home.

But *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, published last winter and excerpted in this magazine last January ("Who Am We?" *Wired* 4.01), reaches well beyond the computer culture. Its provocative message is that what is important – and explicit – in the computer culture foreshadows what will be important – and perhaps one day explicit – in the larger culture. It's as if the Internet is to the larger culture what the 1913 New York City Armory Show was to art: yes, artists had been breaking the old rules for years, but it took the Armory Show to announce to a stunned American public that the old art was over once and for all. *Life on the Screen* has something of the same message for the larger culture and appears when the number of online subscribers is rising exponentially.

"In terms of technologies that have really changed people's deepest conceptions of self, we've had a long run with print," Turkle says. "Print has been a transparent medium for expressing a unitary self. Our cultural memory really doesn't go back to the time we felt we were inhabited by divinities, so we treat the



sense of unitary self we've adapted from print as natural. But we're in the beginning of a profound shake-up of that sense of what a self is and what you take responsibility for and what you don't. Computers are central to this. I'm not saying that other technologies haven't changed us, I'm just saying that when you can embody your ideas in a machine that you can then go up and talk to – this is new. When you can have an instantiation of your body on a computer – this is new."

Each of Turkle's books seems to arrive just in time, as the phenomenon it studies is coming into wide public attention. But bear in mind that the painstaking fieldwork – the hundreds of interviews, the careful observations – has taken years to accomplish. With impeccable instinct, Turkle's been there ahead of us.

Hyperfiction novelist and Vassar College professor Michael Joyce observes: "Perhaps the single most underreported aspect of

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our time is that the most compelling and serious discourse about new technologies and cultural change proceeds from women. These range from conceptualizations of human nature, embodiment, and gender by Kate Hayles, Sandy Stone, and Donna Haraway to new and decentered visions of work, place, body, and art by Shoshana Zuboff, Brenda Laurel, Carolyn Guyer, Pattie Maes, Jane Yellowlees Douglas, Esther Dyson, and others. It wouldn't be accurate or at all in the spirit of this fundamental and wide-ranging polylog to say that it proceeds from (or God help us, depends upon) the consistent witness and vision of Sherry Turkle in all these areas. Her voice is like the harmonic core of Zap Mama, within which other voices merge, blur, and differentiate themselves in a multiplicity of impinging surfaces and joyful particularities."

Turkle herself puts it this way: "I'm interested in how the virtual impinges on what we've always called the real, and how the real impinges on the virtual. That means I want to see people in the flesh. That's not a slip – I mean it. I'm still playing with that border because I think that's where we are."

"She's doing the deep work," says cyberspace guru Mitch Kapor, who recently devoted his column in the journal *Tricycle* to Sherry Turkle. "She's the leading anthropologist of cyberspace. Her findings – that identity isn't fixed but variable and fluid – are very postmodern. And those findings are based on what's actually happening, not on philosophical speculations."

If each of Turkle's books leads us on a clear-eyed journey of our times, each also leads us less obviously on a journey of Sherry Turkle's soul. "I'm drawn to – I love – the liminal moment," she says. "I first heard that phrase from the anthropologist Victor Turner when I was his student at the University of Chicago. It means a moment when things are betwixt and between, when old structures have broken down and new ones have not yet been created. Historically, these times of change are the times of greatest cultural creativity; everything is infused with new meanings."

When Turner had talked about liminality, he'd understood it as a transitional state. But living with flux, Turkle writes in *Life on the Screen*, may no longer be temporary. We are dwellers on a threshold, poised in the liminal moment, "a moment of passage when new cultural symbols and meanings can emerge. Liminal moments are times of tension, extreme reactions, and great opportunity." These moments shimmer with new possibilities. They are painful, tough, full of hard choices – and they provoke anxiety. But they can be exhilarating.

Turkle somehow manages to present each liminal culture she studies without judgment on the one hand or hard-sell on the other. Especially regarding computer technology, Turkle's books are neither tedious jeremiads about paradise lost nor rosy visions of paradise to come. They are about how we think about it now.

When I ask Sherry Turkle how she does this, I expect an answer about the scientific method, the necessity for detachment instead of partisanship. But no. She leans forward, disclosing something close to her heart. "If your culture is going through a liminal moment, don't hide it," she begins. "Celebrate it. Under-

stand it for what it is. Victor Turner taught me to rejoice in the liminal moment.”

We’ve met to talk in her Back Bay house in Boston, a house aglow with light and lightness – enormous windows that invite the sunshine in; sumptuous pearl-tinted silks covering well-proportioned furniture in French period style. Everywhere, on table-tops and walls, are family pictures. Even the painting over the fireplace is a kind of family picture, though in this case, it doesn’t depict Turkle’s own kin. It’s a portrait of the author Ann Beattie, sitting in a chair and surrounded by panels representing her stories. It was painted by Beattie’s husband, Lincoln Perry.

“That’s how I feel about myself, sitting in the middle of all my stories,” Turkle says. “That’s how we all are, in the center of our many stories.”

The postmodern situation: our many stories. We are multiple. We tell our many stories many ways.

Consider the small but persistent dissonance between the confident narrator of these books – indeed, the energetic, humorous, and frank woman I’ve been talking with for hours, a delicate-boned but in no sense fragile woman who moves with authority and grace – and the dust-jacket photos of her. If the narrative voice of *Psychoanalytic Politics* is somewhat stiffer than it will be in subsequent books, her intellectual poise is imperturbable. So it’s a surprise to turn that volume over and find a French *gamine* – tentative, if not quite timid, under the camera’s probe. What could she possibly have been afraid of? This young woman, then 30 was already remarkably accomplished: a clinical psychologist, a faculty member at MIT, newly married to Seymour Papert, an MIT colleague and leader in computing and child psychology.

In *The Second Self*, the editorial “we” of her first book has given way to a firm “I,” and the findings are reported with empathy for her subjects, yet the author’s portrait – a more mature and sophisticated face now of great beauty – is still painfully, pointedly guarded.

On the dust jacket of *Life on the Screen*, in which the authorial voice seems self-confident enough to be almost confessional (at least by academic standards), the author’s portrait is an ambiguous chiaroscuro glimpse of a woman, now 47, set to flee into the shadows at any moment.

I don’t want to make too much of this: any writer has had times when, in a hurry, she’s had to take what wouldn’t have been her first choice in self-representation. But still. If these books are diaries, just what tale is being told? The woman sitting across from me is strong-minded and direct, overflowing with good humor, lacking any hint of the timidity of the photos. I ask her about the dissonance. Her answer: There are multiple stories. Multiple selves.

She is, after all, as postmodern as the stories she tells.

The end of her sophomore year at Radcliffe College was the first time Turkle went abroad, spending the summer hitchhiking throughout Europe. A year later, her mother died and Turkle was distraught. The death caused a temporary estrangement between her and her stepfather, and – grieving, feeling as if she’d lost all her family at once – Turkle dropped out of college and went back to France, where she spent

18 months and earned her room and board by cleaning house.

She carried with her a letter of introduction from Laurence Wylie, a professor and former American cultural attaché in Paris. The letter admitted her to exclusive seminars by leading French intellectuals that were offered to wealthy American juniors abroad. As bored young *débutantes* beside her buffed their nails, Sherry Turkle listened spellbound to philosophers and critics like Roland Barthes, Jean-Louis Ferrer, and Michel Foucault. Since the seminars had something of a finishing-school flavor, Turkle was also invited to formal dinners every so often at Maxim’s; she laughs now about descending from her garret in her Radcliffe prom dress, utterly confounding the family she worked for, who regarded her dismissively as only the cleaning woman, *la portugaise*. “I played it to the hilt,” she says. “I know they thought that I was being kept by some extraordinarily perverse creature.”

Debs and deconstructionists weren’t the only people Turkle met during her Parisian exile. Her friends were students and political activists. In *Life on the Screen*, she describes a shy, English-speaking Sherry, who, to her astonishment, is replaced in Paris by a much more assertive and self-confident French-speaking Sherry. This self-transformation was happening inside *language*, what she would later learn psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the construction materials of the mind. And it was language – slippery, ambiguous, elusive, potent – that would be the construction materials of the Internet, too. Many years later, this self-transformation growing out of language would illuminate for her how personae can willfully or unconsciously change from context to context, an idea that would come to preoccupy her.

Turkle had chosen a dramatic moment: May and June 1968, when student revolts crossed the Atlantic to hit Europe, and especially Paris, with extraordinary impact. In the US, students had certainly had their sympathizers outside the university. But in France an entire nation – factories, hospitals, theaters, trade unions – halted and joined the protest against the traditional powers, Right and Left. Turkle would describe the spirit of that moment not just as “utopian, expressive, festive” but as a *fête* of words: slogans, speeches, manifestos, poems. Language.

Yet as she herself would write, judged by the traditional criteria of revolution, the events in May were a failure. No governments fell, no political parties even moved toward reform. Come mid-June, buildings were cleaned up, posters removed, and summertime Paris was handed over as usual to the tourists. Had any of those millions of words spoken, declaimed, and shouted across barriers of class and generations mattered in the least?

They had.

French intellectual life had suddenly, remarkably, turned inward. The revolution had become less a struggle for a new form of government than a struggle to find a new form of the self. And as French intellectual life turned inward, it embraced Freudian psychoanalysis, of all things.

France’s deep skepticism toward Freud had long been at odds with the United States’ all-too-ardent welcome. The French had originally declared Freudianism no more than a derivative of native talent (French contemporaries of Freud, Pierre Janet, or Jean-Martin Charcot) or just plain silly. The French seemed 158 ►



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◀ 110 to admire instead the rational, the deliberate, and the active as opposed to the irrational, the unconscious, and the passive. The French strongly resisted Freud; for his part, Freud declared France's intellectual resistance to his ideas as a sure sign of how right he was and predicted that the last and decisive battle for psychoanalysis would be fought on French soil.

At the same time the French were taking up Freudianism after spring 1968, the American infatuation with it was petering out. Young Americans disillusioned with politics after the '60s were also going private – but it was the quasi-privacy of the human potential movement, of encounter groups, Esalen, and of consciousness-raising.

In short, Freudianism was all but dead in the place it had once been most popular, the United States. If it didn't revive in

transitions. But Lacan's seminars are much more than free associations," Turkle wrote in *Psychoanalytic Politics*, eventually published in 1978. "In these meticulously prepared presentations, we also hear Lacan speak with the voice of the analyst, interpreting his own discourse as did the early Freud of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Unlike the early Freud, though, the line between the interpretation and the material is not always drawn. Interpretation is embedded in the discourse itself, often couched in wordplay and literary device."

The study of Lacan and his followers had not been the first project Turkle proposed to her dissertation committee. She was frankly worried that the committee would find the topic too weird, and instead she offered a more conventional possibility. The Harvard committee members nodded, clearly not impressed. Then one of them said casually: "What did you do last summer?" Enthusiastically, she

Ecrits, especially in translation, and stumble through gnomic pronouncements, labored wordplay, private free associations, puzzles, and *aperçus*. Most of his interpreters – and they're legion – only make it worse. Understanding Lacan in his full complexity requires a deep acquaintance with the work of Freud; a familiarity with existential philosophy, French literature, structural linguistics, and anthropology; not to mention the ability to pick up fine distinctions between French and German renderings of psychoanalytic concepts and an acquaintance with Hegel and his French commentators.

Even many of his French followers could not claim to understand Lacan's words: it was sufficient to them that they found his words "good to think with," evocative. Still more followers, including a depressing number of American academics, approached Lacan by assimilating the Lacanian slogans: they understood on the level of anecdote, recipe, and cliché. Toads, not words, flew from their mouths, convincing you that Lacan was just one more European windmeister giving mouth-to-mouth to academic disciplines – psychoanalysis, literary criticism, even history – that were showing all the signs of flat-lining.

Other Americans criticized Lacan's style as the opposite of American clarity and frankness. But for the French, this was exactly the point: there is nothing clear or frank about the unconscious. In France, Lacan's ideas migrated from the hothouse French salons to popular culture: the lovelorn columns, the rhetoric of political parties, the training programs for teachers, the advertising slogans. Americans still regard him ambivalently.

To read *Psychoanalytic Politics* is to permit Turkle to be our cryptanalyst, turning into plaintext the coded messages of Lacan but also the utterances of French existentialists, deconstructionists, post-structuralists, and all the other sibilant schools of thought that flowed out of post-war France – schools that were soon to recast (some would say pollute) American academic discourse.

The ideas inside all Lacan's persiflage were provocative and engaging. Lacan celebrated language, believing that 160 ▶

In *Psychoanalytic Politics*, Turkle is our cryptanalyst, turning to plaintext the coded messages of Lacan.

France, then Freudianism was nowhere.

What struck Turkle about her French friends was that they weren't leaving politics to go into psychoanalysis; they believed they were bringing their politics into psychoanalysis – that it was all one thing.

This was the strange state of affairs Turkle chose to chronicle during the early 1970s. (After her year and a half in France, she had reentered Radcliffe, graduating in 1970. From there she went for a year's study at the University of Chicago, then returned to Harvard to pursue her PhD in sociology and psychology.)

All French roads to Freudianism led to the person of Jacques Lacan, "the French Freud," who, virtually up until his death in 1981, conducted a biweekly seminar in Paris. There, followers, friends, and enemies alike watched mesmerized as *le maitre* spoke. It was a "discourse like the flow of language of a person in analysis, dense with associations and unexpected

told them about Lacan and the others, the strange world that was shaping up in post-1968 France. They were interested. Her most passionate ideas, often ahead of their time, weren't always to be so welcomed.

A few months later, says Turkle, "after immersing myself in Lacan's writing, I met with Professor Laurence Wylie and told him how much trouble I was having with Lacan's ideas, how much I felt I didn't really understand, how I was having trouble finding anybody who did understand. Wylie said, 'Fine. Use this opportunity to talk about superficial knowledge, about why all these people have Lacan's books on their coffee tables, and what it means to them.' Then he gave me the best advice of all: ask Lacan. And I did. Things became far more clear."

Lacan's influence on French intellectual culture, French popular culture, and then on Americans in lit-crit cannot be overstated. To understand that influence is perhaps more difficult. Read the master's

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◀ 158 the unconscious is structured as a language, and linguistics is the cornerstone of psychoanalytic science. Language, the relationship of words to each other, is the structure that forms society *and* the self. There is no “natural” self (an idea shared by the existentialists), and therefore no way to think of society as somehow coming afterward to thwart the self’s nature. Indeed, in Lacan’s view, you can hardly speak of “the self”: as an individual, you are not your own center (you are decentered) but are inhabited by the society you live in through your use of language.

Thus Freudianism, French style, is less focused on the pathological (or, for that matter, the biological) than on the deepest and widest-ranging search for the self, talked into existence by language. Moreover, the boundaries are permeable: Lacan presented himself as analyst and

geon, who cycled through many selves in the course of constructing a self (or at least a persona), and all this happened solely in text. People use the Internet as “a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we consciously construct ourselves,” Turkle writes. Players in a MUD are authors too, hundreds of them at a time. “When each player can create many characters and participate in many games, the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit.” Simultaneously, she would note that in our public discourse, we are redescribing our politics, our economics, in computing terms: distributed, parallel, and emergent organizations.

What in other contexts has seemed like the gibberish of postmodernism – decentering (oh, you mean multiple users), intertextuality (oh, hypertext), fragmentation (oh, me in the Parenting conference,

Turkle was told, at the age of 5, to give up her legal name, Sherry Zimmerman, and to take her stepfather’s name. Milton Turkle adopted her when she was 13, but until then she negotiated between two identities: she was enrolled in school as Sherry Zimmerman, but for social occasions, in the Girl Scouts, and to younger half-siblings, she was Sherry Turkle.)

“I was looking for a language to help me sort through things on a personal level,” Turkle continues. “Later, in the United States, I would enter analysis, indeed I would receive analytic training. My French friends were finding Freud for personal reasons, perhaps, but also in a quasi-religious, quasi-ideological way. Their interest in Freud picked up on all that political energy that had lost its outlet. I turned my research about psychoanalysis into a study of the sociology of scientific knowledge, studying how ideas come into people’s lives. But the story I told was allied to a voyage I was taking in my personal life. This had been a lived experience, and I found a way in my work to stay close to this material.”

But: “We are multiple. There was more to me than a wounded, bereaved young woman.”

There was also French-speaking Sherry. Timidities and insecurities had grown up over a joyous part of her, a part laid down early in life by deeply supportive, good mothering – from her mother, an aunt, and her grandparents. (She speaks of this good mothering with the same gratitude she speaks of the good mentoring she got at Harvard, intent on passing it on to her exuberant 4-year-old, Rebecca, whose miniature desk sits close by her mother’s in the study.)

Turkle discovered that joy and self-confidence were hers (if submerged) and could be recovered. For some people, the process of finding those hidden aspects of the self is analysis, she says, and for some people it can be a relationship that is profoundly curative; it can be an experience with art; or it can be – as it was with “French Sherry” – immersing oneself in a different culture and language. It can be, as Turkle was to discover later, the creation of MUD personae: to try out and – if necessary – fail with grace and impunity.

“In France during the late 1960s, I

Freudianism, French style, focuses less on the pathological than on the self, talked into existence by language.

analysand simultaneously, often declining to distinguish between material and its interpretation.

Turkle’s study of Lacan and his followers was preparing her for a future she couldn’t anticipate: a future represented by computing. Computing would offer her endless moments of sweet epiphany, when theories that had seemed right but abstract were suddenly right and manifest.

Constructing the self with language and the notion of permeable boundaries? There it was on the screen. You could almost substitute *computing* for the terms of Lacan’s manifesto (despite some interest in cybernetics, Lacan himself had no familiarity with the machines): computing is constructed as a set of languages; language (the relationship of terms to each other) is the structure that forms computing; the boundaries between data and execution are blurred; and so forth.

On another level, Turkle would observe individuals in a MUD, a multi-user dun-

me in the Eros conference), blurring (oh, object-oriented languages) – is rendered clear at last.

How would Lacan, who never, so far as Turkle knows, had anything to do with computers, feel about computing now? “I think he’d have been very excited by the idea of this new space for the weaving of the symbolic order, as he called it. The Web is a very Lacanian idea – chains, knots, weaving, tissues of meaning, people building meaning out of linking and association, not linearly but associatively – these are all his metaphors.”

In yet another part of Turkle’s life, much of her fascination with Lacan’s ideas was personal. The French embrace of psychoanalysis coincided with Turkle’s own immersion in it. She was herself troubled.

“My mother had died, I’d broken with my stepfather, I’d never known my biological father,” she says. (After her mother’s first marriage to her father dissolved,

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didn't have any way to talk about that sense of having other strengths to draw on. I just knew that when I was in France - hey!" she shouts merrily, her hands flying up, "I felt in touch with another aspect of my self. And I saw my job as bringing that through into English-speaking Sherry.

"The book on France told the story both of my time in France and what happened in France - what happened to me, what happened with the politics, as well as the theory of how people use objects and ideas to work with things in their lives. It was autobiographical in that sense."

But there was something more important. "Yes, I hung out with Lacan and his group; I was excited by all the ideas. I'd later lecture on them, write a book about them.

"But I did not *live* these ideas until I had experiences on the Internet. Then they became far more real to me."

In 1984, Turkle published the results of her next topic of research, the psychological impact of the personal computer, then newly entered into our lives. "When I went to MIT and came upon students who talked about their minds as machines, I became intrigued by the way in which they were using this computer language to talk about their minds, including their emotions, whereas I used a psychoanalytic one. Computers were now becoming a metaphor for such issues. I sensed that I was living through a transition. I was partly in the psychoanalytic world and partly in the computer world: the two were often at cross purposes, often not. *The Second Self* was Diary Number Two for me."

In this groundbreaking book, she suggested that the PC is no simple "tool" but instead an evocative object, helping us to redefine who and what we are, where we stand in the world of artifact.

Turkle underscores the continuity between the two books in the introduction to *The Second Self*: "What seemed like a shift of interest to many of my friends and colleagues felt to me like the pursuit of the same goal: to understand how ideas move out from a sophisticated technical world into the culture as a whole and, once

there, how they shape the way people think about themselves."

Few phenomena of our time offer ideas as seductive, malleable, and engaging as the computer for thinking about ourselves. Early on, Turkle sensed the migration of those ideas from computing to the wider world. She understood that she was in a special milieu, that everybody didn't share the point of view of the Tech Square locals, but instinct told her that, in time, they might.

For *The Second Self*, she interviewed children and adults - children revealing themselves as unself-conscious philosophers who use the computer to think about notions of alive versus not-alive; about ethics ("it's cheating, because it wins all the time"); and about the blurred divisions between thought and feeling. As children grow into adolescence, however, their relationship to the machine changes: interaction with the computer becomes a kind of laboratory for them, a safe place to

"The Web is a very Lacanian idea - chains, knots, weaving, tissues of meaning, building meaning out of linking and association."

test their emerging adulthood or to escape from a confusing, contradictory real world that seems to make impossible demands on them.

In her research and in her book, Turkle proposed what struck many as a sensitive and long-overdue description of two different styles of mastery: "hard" and "soft." "Hard mastery is the imposition of will over the machine through the implementation of a plan," she writes. "A program is the instrument of premeditated control." Hard mastery is comparable to having one's say: the clarity and control and mastery of the planner, the engineer, even the scientist. In contrast, soft mastery is more interactive, more like the give-and-take of a conversationalist, a negotiator, an artist: try this; stand back; wait for a response; try something else.

She compared hard and soft mastery with the distinction French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss once made between the Western scientist and the non-West-

ern, preliterate *bricoleur*. A bricoleur is a jack-of-all-trades, a potterer, with overtones of unexpected strokes. The idea of bricolage has been adopted by literary critics to describe a style of arranging and rearranging elements, working through new combinations, to lead to new and unexpected results. Some people compute with a plan; some people compute by the seat of their pants - they improvise.

Just as she had in *Psychoanalytic Politics*, Turkle examined in *The Second Self* a handful of subcultures: How were the ideas of computation being appropriated and assimilated by personal computer owners, hackers, workers in artificial intelligence? What was the "cosmology" of these groups - the beliefs that made them coherent communities? She offered three categories to describe how people she interviewed and studied related to the computer - metaphysics, mastery, and identity. Contrary to many social critics of the '80s, she concluded: "Computers are

not good or bad; they are powerful. If the reader is surprised by the intensity of the range of responses I report, this is only to the good if it leads to a critical reexamination of what each of us takes for granted about 'The Computer' and to an attitude of healthy skepticism toward any who propose simple scenarios about the 'impact of the computer on society.'"

The computer as a safe space to construct, test, and transform yourself; the computer as a safe space to escape from an unforgiving world or prepare yourself to deal with it; the computer that responds equally well to different intellectual styles - hard or soft; the computer as a cultural site, with borders both sharp and permeable; metaphysics, mastery, and identity. All these themes reemerge and become central in *Life on the Screen*.

Some 25 years after she first became aware of the French literary and psychological theorists, Sherry Turkle 162 ▶

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◀ 161 sits before a computer screen, both participating in and observing a MUD – that theater of text alone. It's the enactment, the very instantiation, of a society built out of language, as hypothesized years before by Jacques Lacan. It is life on the screen, a phrase so pregnant with meaning that you could spend half an hour decoding it. Everything fits.

What's the culture under study this time? The culture of simulation. This time, we are not alone with the second self but together in cyberspace with many others – some of whom are our own avatars, aspects of ourselves. The permeable borders are between the virtual and the real, the living and the not-living. Identity? We're inventing ourselves – our multiple selves – as we go along. And not just *our selves*; we're constructing the world, too, from fantasy rooms to rules of social interaction. The MUD – the whole

nonprofits. I'm interested in making cyberlife and real life more permeable with each other. I also spend enormous amounts of time on email. I much prefer it to the phone for the life I live now. Don't get me wrong, I love conversation – but voicemail makes me feel guilty because I can seldom return messages until after people no longer need whatever they wanted from me. With email, I can help, answer, be brief, or not." Email doesn't mean she talks less to people; it means she talks less to answering machines.

When did she see her first computer? "In 1967, when I was a sophomore at Radcliffe," she laughs. "I went out with somebody at MIT whose idea of a date was to take me to view MIT's computer. It was a huge thing in a large, refrigerated room. I did *not* find it an evocative object. There was no second date."

But today she regularly visits MUDs and other online sites she'd rather not name; clearly what interests her cannot be neatly

understand what they were about, and tried to write about my understandings so that the worlds I studied could come alive for others."

But this "soft" technique – intuitive, sensuous, as much poetry as science – ran contrary to 1980s academic dogma, especially for those disciplines that were eager to claim their legitimacy as science. The dogma held that real science could only be done in particular ways, a model of interlocking theory and experiment whose primary example was physics. The closer you came to working in that paradigm, the better science you performed, and the truer a scientist you were.

At MIT, Professor Turkle – pursuing a cross-disciplinary dream, an aberrant form of soft mastery – was denied tenure in late 1984. No one seemed quite willing to say why. Worries had been expressed about quantification, and somebody had suggested that committees and councils that rule on tenure might find it helpful if she made an exact count of the number of tapes she'd accumulated of interviews for *The Second Self*. After all, that was something you could get your mind around, impress a committee with.

At the same time she was being evicted from her professional home, her personal home was dissolving: her marriage to Seymour Papert had ended. (They are colleagues and friends to this day.) Her situation was eerily reminiscent of that painful moment when she was 20, when she had lost her mother, become estranged from her stepfather, and been shut out of her college all at once. Perhaps it echoed back even further, to her childhood.

Now here she was, somehow declared illegitimate in the profession she had poured herself into; her identities as a professional and as a wife were being stripped from her. For its part, MIT was simply not used to the idea of engineers and scientists being studied for what they believed instead of for the work they accomplished. The tenure denial suggested a clash of cultures as much as anything.

Turkle responded by going straight to the MIT provost's office. "I remember the provost gesturing for me to sit in a deep upholstered couch, and I said, No, I don't want to be comfortable during this 164 ▶

In the culture of simulation, we aren't alone with the self but with many others – some of whom are our own avatars.

Internet – is the wholesale creation of a culture, and we're doing it all with language.

Sherry Turkle sits in front of a computer screen yet another time. She wants to show me a little joke on her homepage. It's 3:50 in the afternoon, and the MIT host is beyond sluggish and into paralysis. Death on the screen. She hisses with exasperation at the frozen screen: "Why doesn't Nick ever write about this?" Negroponte, that is.

Is she a geek? She laughs at the question. "Ten years ago, people who were very involved with computers were geeks – it was pejorative. Now we're coming into a phase of the hacker as hunk. It has to do with the cultural associations computers have: now it's not surprising that people like me, who are interested in people, in politics, in the world at large, are also into computers.

"I spend a lot of time trying to bring together online groups to build sites for

divided into the personal versus the professional. Postmodernism. "But I'm a naturalized citizen of the Net, not a native. I came to it as an adult. In fieldwork, I love working with kids: you get a fresh view of how potent the metaphors are when kids appropriate them. I'm busy looking up the rules, while kids just do it.

"Well, I'm more relaxed now than I used to be, but still."

None of Turkle's work has been sociology by the numbers: factor analysis, scaling, control groups, chi-squares. Instead, Turkle's work is sociology as narrative, story, text, language, though the work is firmly undergirded by sociological method and psychoanalytic theory. You read it as you read the best literature: confronted by the unexpected, you feel a little shock and recognize it at once to be so.

In *The Second Self*, Turkle compared herself to an ethnologist, to one who "lived within worlds new to me, tried to

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◀ 162 conversation. So we sat at his conference table, and I said that among the chief requirements for tenure as I read them are that the candidate has produced two well-received books. He said, Yes. I said, Well, I've produced two influential and well-received books. And we went on from there.

"There was an internal review of the case and I was granted tenure. I'm glad I didn't have to go outside the MIT structure to fight the battle." And then smiling, she adds, "I love MIT. It's an exciting, dynamic place to work, to learn, to teach. But since I study so much of what it's about, you might say that I am at it, but not completely of it ... I am in some ways marginal, liminal."

Loss, illegitimacy, negotiated identities: these themes have recurred through her life. Has she chosen them, or did they just happen? "Trying to live as good a life as

issue concrete. The Internet presents a very common experience and lets you play with it, gives you a language with which to talk about it. I haven't been at all surprised by people's thirst for getting online."

She continues thoughtfully: "The goal of healthy personality development is not to become a One, not to become a unitary core, it's to have a flexible ability to negotiate the many - cycle through multiple identities." She'd experienced it in her own life again and again, found it articulated in Lacan's musings, watched it grow out of the data she's gathered in her own work. Now Turkle proposes it as a thesis for further thinking, future work - a key to living in our postmodern times.

"A lot was done in my mother's generation to keep experiences at home and at work, motherhood and social life - to keep it easy for you to seem to be one person. Around women you couldn't use certain language, for example. And for men too:

I going to be the mom, the colleague? We cycle through these different roles, and we're trained to keep them a little bit separate, but not so separate that you can't negotiate them. My day: I woke up and immediately needed to find a substitute for Rebecca's favorite pink blankie. I improvised with a pink sweater. I went straight from that downstairs to host a breakfast of women trying to help finance pro-choice women political candidates here in New England. Now I'm talking to you as a colleague, and I'll be in a faculty meeting this afternoon dealing with faculty politics."

She points out that she is not talking about multiple personality disorder, which has specific clinical signs. She adds, however, that it's significant that multiple personality disorder has become a paradigmatic illness of our time, almost an epidemic, the way hysteria, growing out of sexual repression, was the paradigmatic illness of Freud's time.

"We need a new language for it," she says. "Role-playing sounds as if it's something we're putting on, playing at. I'm saying these are all bona fide aspects of our self. Good parenting will not teach somebody how to be a One, but teaching someone how to negotiate fluidly and have access to many aspects of the self. You have access to all of them: that's the key, that's what makes it healthy and not pathological. You learn to negotiate, to fit them together in some way. Using language of 'cycling through' rather than 'building a One' is going to be helpful to patients clinically, and help people think about their lives. It's accepting where we are in the culture."

That echoes my own experience online: I am multitudes. So what, I ask, will we now have to say about authenticity?

"In *Life on the Screen*, I worked very hard to establish a stable, coherent authorial voice. And in a way that's at odds with my message about postmodernism. Or is it? I think we're living in both at the same time now. That's what's interesting about our dilemma today. Suppose you come back tomorrow. Will I have another version of all this to tell you? There will be stabilities, but there will be differences in narrative and shading. We are both single and multiple voices. I'm still struggling

"Role-playing sounds as if we're putting on, playing at. I'm saying these are all bona fide aspects of our self."

possible means trying to do the least re-enacting possible," she says. "A psychoanalytic ethic would suggest that you're doing your best when you try to work through the past, learn from it, and grow. That's true of therapy, that's true of MUDding. You try not to just retell your story on a new stage set."

That brings her to the way in which *Life on the Screen* is autobiographical. "Learning to accept the multiplicity of roles and ways of being - in this book I'm trying to find a way to talk about that. Role-playing happens in many places on the Internet - not just on MUDs. It happens on America Online, where they're not wearing swords and shields and using medieval names but people are playing with aspects of themselves there that are just as profound, just as much personae as the ones adopted on MUDs. It's not because of the Internet that we're shaping multiple ways of thinking about identity. The Internet is taking it to a higher power; the Internet makes the

you were boss at work, you were boss at home. When you came home, you weren't supposed to be sensitive and nurturing with your child. People's life experiences encouraged them to think of themselves as a One."

Men's lives, especially, have been socially constructed along unitary lines, which, she speculates, may be why so many of them are having a hard time just now. But women today are trained and have already had experience in negotiating multiple roles. Certainly tens of thousands of women recognized themselves in Mary Catherine Bateson's book *Composing a Life*, a study of the way successful women do not plan but compose their lives improvisationally, shifting from role to role.

"You and I meet - any two women - and there's a kind of complex negotiation of personae. Who will we be? A little bit has to do with our former encounters, not much: am I going to be the authoress, am

Sherry Turkle

with this issue; many others are too. It's central to me."

She suggests that the solution to this dilemma is the psychological job of today, "a difficult job, because people have strong feelings of needing something unitary. You see people's anxiety about online multiplicity coming up in discussions of sexual issues, the place where the body emerges.

"We have only one body, and for the foreseeable future will only have one body. It's the body that brings us back to a sense of oneness, of authenticity. The emphasis on sex in these forums is perhaps an emphasis on authenticity. Are we going to meet with our bodies? If so, who's coming? Is online sex like having an affair? Is it my business because I'm married to you? Or is it like you're reading pornography and it's none of my business? In our new questions about authenticity, we see the beginnings of a cultural conversation that's going to take 50 years.

"We stipulate several selves, but they attach to that immune system called Me. Maybe it's 50 selves, and we learn to cycle through them in a way that feels fluid to us; there's some glue that feels like the essential us, and that glue may be about accountability. Accountability will be essential in cyberspace; you'll see it in all the virtual places in which people are going to try to make money."

We return to the co-evolution of technology and mind.

Computing, Turkle suggests, has begun to present us with a whole new set of metaphors for thinking about the unconscious. Twenty years ago, when computing had seemed more mechanistic - when the Freudian slip had been dismissed as a mere information processing error - the comparison between the unconscious and the computer had been forced and uninteresting. But images of emergence, decentralization, neural networks are much more resonant with the way psychoanalysts are coming to talk about objects and networks and linkings and tissues of association.

To which Turkle adds an important caveat: "We need to be careful. Ultimately, the computer is a machine." ■ ■ ■

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