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VIRTUAL SEX

Sex and technology have likely been intertwined since humans recognized that they could use tools on themselves. Yet with the advent of new communication technologies, people have, unsurprisingly, devoted considerable interest to the notion of virtual sex. Despite its seeming simplicity of definition, virtual sex encompasses a wide variety of practices, ranging from simple masturbation with an accompanying fantasy to the use of sex robots. However, when most speak of virtual sex, they are describing the practice of sex mediated through machinery or software. There are three main modes of virtual sex: textual/image-based, mechanical, and interface-driven.

Textual/Image-Based Virtual Sex

It is often said that the largest sexual organ is the human brain. One can stimulate another through the imagination and therefore through words, and when this occurs it is known as cybersex. There have long been Internet chat rooms dedicated to cybersex. In such rooms, individuals describe what they would be doing to the other if he or she were present. There are other types of virtual sex that bridge the textual elements of cybersex with "point of view" (POV) pornography. One such program is VirtualFem, which incorporates artificial intelligence with sexual commands and video. However, compared to textual cybersex with an actual person, the artificial intelligence seems stilted and uninteresting.

Another aspect of virtual sex is a practice referred to as "sexting," or sending sexually explicit texts and images to another individual, generally through cell phones. This has recently been in the media because teenagers have been sending images of themselves to others, making them subject to child pornography laws. Also included in image-based virtual sex are sexual activities that take place between avatars in virtual reality environments such as *Second Life*, which can also incorporate voice-over-IP chat as well as text-based chat.

At its heart, these forms of cybersex retain their roots in the love letters and phone sex lines of

previous generations. What distinguishes cybersex from its predecessors is the ability to participate anonymously with one or more individuals who are likewise seeking similar sexual stimulation. While phone sex lines are generally operated on a pay-per-call basis and the exchange of love letters generally necessitated a relationship, digital cybersex can circumvent these barriers. Moreover, a major draw for practitioners of cybersex is that they need not be who they are in real life. For example, a male can have virtual sex as a female, animal, or mythical creature in the digital realm.

Mechanical Virtual Sex

Another strand of virtual sex focuses on tricking the body into thinking that it is participating in sexual activity through the use of machinery and POV pornography. Some of these programs include the Virtual Sex Machine and Real Touch. However, all of this could just as easily be accomplished using a dildo, vibrator, or synthetic vaginal sleeve while watching POV pornography. Because of the ubiquity of digital cameras and camcorders, POV pornography is hardly novel anymore, and there are countless amateur POV videos online.

While the Virtual Sex Machine and Real Touch rely on the illusion of an active participant in the sexual encounter, other forms of virtual sex take a more strictly mechanical approach. Synthetic sex dolls have a long history, although mainly as gag gifts. However, these have become more sophisticated and expensive, costing thousands of dollars. Some, such as the RealDoll, are equipped for both men and women, while others, such as the CybOrgasMatrix, are only female. These synthetic sex dolls come equipped with functional genitalia and other orifices. There are sex machines geared toward women, which consist of a dildo attached to an oscillating machine that can be controlled by wireless access or remote control. However, both the sex dolls and these sex machines simply offer methods of technologically enhanced masturbation as opposed to true virtual sex.

Interface-Driven Virtual Sex

Despite the previous advancements that fall under the general rubric of virtual sex, those that come closest to embodying the idea of virtual sex are interface-driven models that allow for a more

direct mediation between two (or more) individuals, such as interface-based products like Sinulator and HighJoy. For example, Sinulator allows control of a vibrator that is connected over the Internet to a synthetic vagina, while HighJoy simply allows an individual to control another's vibrator online. The vibrator is given a name, and anyone with that name can connect and control the vibrator. This is often the case with women who perform sexual acts on webcam. There are also simpler remote control vibrators that can be used anywhere (within range) but are not controlled through the Internet. Because the vibrator is connected to the remote control, there is no anonymity involved, as can be the case with the other interface-driven systems.

Like all sexual activities, virtual sex has its advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps chief among the advantages is the fact that such practices carry little or no chance of contracting sexually transmitted diseases or becoming pregnant. Virtual sex also allows individuals to engage in alternative sexual practices, effectively "trying on" a different sexuality, including engaging in sexual behavior as the other sex, homosexuality, and fringe behaviors such as bondage/domination sadomasochism (BDSM). Because many participants view virtual sex as not real, they perceive their participation as harmless pleasure. Moreover, participants are able to engage in high-risk sexual activities, such as fetish play, with less bodily risk. Related to this benefit is the relative ease with which one can find a willing partner or even a community built around such activities. This can be especially useful in finding offline sexual partners who share a particular fetish or affinity for less common sexual practices. Finally, there are reported benefits in communicating about sexuality. Despite the fact that virtual sex is taking place in the online or mechanical plane, practitioners still must learn to articulate their desires, especially in cybersex and interface-driven virtual sex, which, according to some, can be a liberating experience.

A major disadvantage to virtual sex comes when one or both partners in the interaction are married to or otherwise involved with someone else. When the unincluded partner finds out about the virtual liaison, he or she can feel a deep sense of betrayal, despite the fact that no physical contact with the virtual partner has taken place. Such concerns have raised questions about the ethics of virtual sex in the face of cyberinfidelity. This may be especially

problematic if the online sexual behavior becomes compulsive, leading to problems in the primary offline relationship. Related to this issue is the potential for unwanted emotional attachments to form; where one participant may view the activity as harmless fun, the other participant may believe that a relationship is being created.

There are other, more troubling dangers in virtual sex. With the advantage that virtual sex makes it easier to find willing participants in less common sexual practices comes the potential to bring into the open more dangerous and damaging practices, such as bestiality, pedophilia and age play, rape fantasies, virtual child pornography through the use of child-like avatars, and other forms of edge play (sexual acts that push the boundaries of safety). There is also the possibility that one or both of the individuals involved in the virtual sex act may be an underage person. This has been especially problematic in the case of sexting.

Overall, virtual sex has forced people to redefine what falls under the rubric of sex when no physical contact has taken place. It seems clear that in virtual sex, something has taken place, even if it is not sex in the traditional manner. Indeed, the power of virtual sex is that the act takes place mainly in the mind of the individual or individuals involved. Moreover, by mediating the sexual act, virtual sex also calls into question how men and women interact sexually when one can “be” the other, at least in virtual space. One thing seems certain: Because sexuality is such a core aspect of the human experience, as long as technology continues to evolve, people will continue to find new ways to express themselves sexually.

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See also Avatar; Cyberdating; Cyberspace and Cyberculture; Pornification of Everyday Life; Pornography: Gay and Lesbian; Pornography: Heterosexual; Pornography: Internet; Sexuality; Transsexuality; Virtual Community; Virtuality

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VIRTUALITY

At the most basic level, *virtuality* refers to a condition or location outside the real; it is usually understood as the opposite of *reality*. The term has a rich history of usage in media studies scholarship, in the popular press, in traditional and interactive fiction, and in many other contexts. Virtuality may refer to simulations, to processes of imagination, or to any other kind of activity that takes place at least partially outside the physical world. Although it is a term most often associated with new media technologies, the term *virtual* predates digital technologies and has a long history in philosophy and literature, among other fields.

Outside electronic contexts, virtual might refer to something being either “in effect” or “almost” real (as in “Beatlemania is a virtual cult” or “That cubic zirconia ring is virtually as beautiful as a diamond ring”). It may also refer to something being created mentally (“I can imagine myself virtually sitting on a park bench”). However, the term *virtuality* almost always refers to simulation of reality through the use of digital technologies. Common examples of virtuality would include video games (especially titles that employ virtual reality), Web-based communities, online libraries, online storefronts, or online classrooms.

Scholarship on virtuality in digital contexts is wide-ranging in that it covers instances of virtuality as they occur in practice, the philosophy of virtuality, the technologies that make virtuality possible, and the effects of virtuality on real-world experiences and interactions. Across this scholarship certain trends have emerged that, collectively, create a better