

# Circulation of Technology, Circulation of Desire

## Cybersex and the “Sadian Collective Intellectual”

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**Abstract:** Cybersex represents a particular, distinctive form of sexuality. Computer mediation enables the *hic et nunc* to be suspended thanks to processes such as deindividuation, self-disclosure and visual anonymity. These characteristics allow individuals to develop fantasies that recall the worlds explored by Sade’s universes in much the same way, i.e. through narrative practices. The article addresses these questions by presenting data coming from an ethnographic empirical research based on online sexual activities. Borrowing from the works of Akim Bay and Pierre Levy, the article introduces the concept of “Sadian collective intellectual” in order to interpret the evolution of extreme sexual interactions over the Internet. On the basis of this empirical data, the article argues that the use of technological platforms such as chat rooms amplifies the circulation of extreme sexual imaginaries and leads to the formation of micro-communities around them. Internet also enables the construction and circulation of symbolic material to be used in exploring and activating “extreme” desire. By means of this circulation, the boundaries between real and virtual are reshaped by those who define themselves as “amoral”, “perverted”, “evil”, the protagonists of narrations of rape, incest and violence. As in the relationship between Sade and the objects of his compositions, desire and pleasure can only exist in the absence of the other party.

**Keywords:** cybersex; chat rooms; Sade; collective intellectual; temporary libertine zones.

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Yes, I am a libertine, that I admit. I have conceived everything that can be conceived in that area, but I have certainly not practiced everything I have conceived and certainly never shall. I am a libertine, but I am neither a criminal nor a murderer.

*Marquis De Sade, Letter to his wife, February 20, 1791*

I write some stories in this group, and I do not go out and rape, torture or murder people in real life. I write about women getting raped, but I would never rape a woman, I AM a woman...

*ShadowMist, alt.sex.stories posting, May 18, 1995*

## **I. Online Sexual Activities and Digital Media Circulation**

Online sexual activities (OSA; Shaughnessy et al. 2011; Byers and Shaughnessy 2014) have seen a rapid growth and a capillary diffusion in the last two decades, thanks to the technological innovations that have shaped and changed their uses. Over time, various different means have emerged in succession, from the bulletin board systems (BBS) and newsgroups of the 1990s to the social networks and role-playing games since the turn of this century. The passage from one communication environment to another has engendered important novelties, making the asynchronous written texts used by the BBS evolve into the synchronous video images of chat services that rely on the use of webcams and microphones. The individual and collective consequences of such changes have attracted the attention of researchers, particularly as regards the most widespread forms of OSA, pornography and cybersex, which have been the object of a sizable body of studies in the last 15 years (Griffin-Shelley 2003; Döring 2009; Short et al. 2012; Stern and Handel 2001; Owens et al. 2012; Manning 2006).

Our interest in these technological developments focuses not on their psychological fallout or the social alarm they have aroused (on these issues, see Cooper et al. 2000; Schneider 2000; Young 2008 for instance), but on the ways in which production processes, sexual content, and modes of use have circulated from one communication setting to another. We hypothesize that, if we analyze these passages, we will find a core set of characteristics that remain constant, albeit adapted to the specific features of each medium, old or new.

We shall consider a particular type of cybersex that involves the collective production of stories of “extreme” sex, developed mainly in chat rooms, Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs) such as *Second Life*, or Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) like *Sociolotron*. The stories refer to actions and situations that are “extreme” not just because they are unusual (bondage, dominance and sadomasochism [BDSM], fetishism, transgenderism), but also and primarily because they go beyond the boundaries of what is considered ethically and socially acceptable (rape, kidnapping, snuff). The radical obscenity of the

stories being told is such that it is otherwise only expressed in written form, fictional movies or cartoons – and some of their violent features can be seen in “real TV” or hard rock too, as Attwood (2014) pointed out.

Even restricting the field in this way, the extreme texts to which we refer focus exclusively on sexual settings and episodes intended for the purpose of sexual arousal. They may contain descriptions of events and circumstances on a level of intensity almost unknown to other communication media. If the writers are normal individuals describing their most secret and violent fantasies (as happens with the web 2.0), the impact is often even stronger than could be achieved by horror or splatter films. Chat services, blogs, MUVES, and so on also sometimes enable roles to be interpreted in the first person, thus transforming the story into a genuine performance in which participants become protagonists.

We shall see that, even when the help of avatars is enlisted (as in *Second Life*), the verbal exchange remains the fundamental, essential means for moving within these worlds (Waskul and Martin 2010). The written text is consequently the only tool that enables someone to venture into scandalous, excessive scenarios that would be impossible to reproduce in any other way. This is the prerequisite that makes extreme erotic stories irreplaceable in certain niche markets, even now that the market has been saturated with photographs and videos showing every aspect of sex that can possibly be depicted or imagined.

The history of obscene writings goes back a long way (Hunt 1993; Darnton 1996), but the prototype that possibly summarizes and symbolizes its content and its destiny over centuries of censorship is the work of the Marquis De Sade. The constant core features of the material circulating between the various media whenever such “extreme” situations are described that they verge on the limits of representability can all be found in Sade’s models, and not only inasmuch as concerns their orgiastic content and excesses. Certain rhetorical tools must be used in order to speak about the “unspeakable”, tools devised for printed books that the web subsequently simplified and made accessible to anyone.

It is surprising to see just how closely the content of BBS and newsgroups resemble the topics described by Sade, although there is no mention of these latter-day authors having wittingly followed his example, or even read his works. It is also surprising to find that BBS, newsgroups, chat services and MUVES reproduce the same conditions of segregation and isolation in which Sade places his libertine characters. So, based on these similarities, the idea that a “Sadian collective intellectual” exists all across the web and the various modern communication media is not intended as a metaphor, but alludes to the fact that, in order to speak publicly and collectively of certain topics, there are preliminary conditions to be met that have remained unchanged since Sade’s time.

The term “Sadian collective intellectual”, introduced here for the first time, is inspired by Lévy’s concept of *intellectuel collectif* (1994) – translated into English in 1999 as *collective intellect*: something that “pro-

notes the construction of intelligent communities in which our social and cognitive potential can be mutually developed and enhanced” (Levy 1999, 17). Leaving aside the utopian approach that animated Lévy’s interpretation, the concept is nonetheless useful for describing the process of participation by means of which several thousand people have contributed collectively over time to spreading a body of narrative content resembling Sade’s models using various digital platforms.

The aim of the article is to show that the set of narrative artifices invented by Sade in his novels (such as isolation, secrecy, unrealistic imagery, disinhibition) remained somewhat constant in new media sexual interaction and have recirculate from the printed media to latter incarnations in digital world. To do this, we begin by identifying the original features of Sade’s work that came to be reiterated in the various passages from one technological medium to another. Then we take a look at the developments of platforms for extreme sexual activities (from the BBS to *Second Life*) and how this evolution contributed to the circulation of sexually “extreme” messages and content. We then present an empirical study on the uses made today of chat rooms in the IRC network where Sade-style conversations are still being held without the support of the latest technologies. Finally, in conclusion we discuss both platforms’ evolution and ethnographic original data in order to address the process of circulation of extreme sexual representations across different media technologies and platforms along the time.

## 2. The Structure of the Sadian Text

To understand how the “Sadian collective intellectual” takes shape in the various stages of Internet’s evolution, we need to see which elements of Sade’s works have subsequently circulated - virtually unchanged - in the “extreme” stories told on the web by means of the various platforms available. As mentioned earlier, this is a question of identifying a homology not of content, but of production processes and modes of consumption.

There are two main characteristics of Sade’s writings that we should consider.

1. The first concerns the enormous lack of realism in the situations he describes: the story he tells is deliberately *excessive*, not only because the content is extreme (orgies, crimes, abductions), but also because of the obvious lack of realism in its staging. Sade’s novels do not aim to be “realistic”, because comparing his portrayals with the real world would defeat the main object for which they were written (and for which they are often still read today), which was to arouse the reader’s sexual imagination with infinitely exaggerated, and consequently “excessive” scenarios, wholly out of proportion with reality. The separation between the story and real life goes so far as to make the scenes of “extreme sex” essentially absurd and

abstract, since most of them would be logically and physically impossible to put into practice. "(...) if some group conceived the desire to realize literally one of the orgies Sade describes (...) the scene would quickly be seen to be utterly unreal (...) all surpass human nature" (Barthes 1989, 136). What drives Sade's narrative is the imagination, with its own particular "language".

2. The second characteristic lies in the need to provide a secret, separate place where Sade's heroes can create their own, entirely artificial world, untouched by the laws and constraints governing ordinary daily life. This element originates from a narrative pretext that is a constant feature of Sade's novels, the prototype of which is the castle in Silling where the libertines take refuge "hermetically isolated from the world by a series of obstacles" (id.), in *The 120 Days of Sodom*; this is the model for every other *locus clausus* where the adventures of Sade's characters take place. Their isolation is necessary for reasons of security (to avoid being discovered, unmasked, and persecuted) and also to create a symbolic environment where scenarios and fantasies unrestrained by any moral, social or legal limitations can be imagined and enacted. The reign of the libertines must be one of unquestioned, self-sufficient dominion, where everything conceivable is allowed, approved and practicable.

These conditions are reiterated in instances of social segregation known and analyzed long before the birth of the web. In the words of Goffman (1990, 102): "Finally, there are back places, where persons of the individual's kind stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it". The separation that generates half-hidden communities, where individuals who share certain characteristics seek each other out and come together, is not only a literary invention. Goffman foresees the modern proliferation of digital "back places" provided for the benefit not only of individuals who are stigmatized, but also of stigmatizing individuals interacting with one another, who find a safe place where they can nurture their extreme erotic fantasies. What Sade's castle and Goffman's back places have in common is their function: both provide an "other world" where people can withdraw, a place where the rules governing normal daily life are suspended and cast aside, and "abnormal" behavior and actions are acceptable.

The way in which these separate spaces can be imagined and managed in the web has been theorized by Hakim Bey (1985) through the concept of *temporary autonomous zones*. The idea of such zones as a virtual territory where there is no hierarchy, no social control, that is essentially a figment of the imagination of a group of individuals and destined to a brief and intense existence, is in itself rather extreme and might seem far removed from Sade's proposals and Goffman's descriptive goals. But on closer inspection, it appears to complete Sade's isolationism by adding the provisional and precarious traits of the rooms that can be opened and closed in chat services or meeting places in *Second Life*. This is a concept

well suited to the object of our analysis - so much so that we might, with some license and approximation, describe the Sadian back places of the web as *temporary libertine zones*, where it is allowable to imagine actions and situations that would be impossible in any other setting involving the mutual exchange of messages.

These *Temporary libertine zones* serve as containers for known effects (already described in the literature) because they create the conditions of anonymity, secrecy, and release from the rules of daily life that define their autonomy. An opportunity for *self-disclosure* (Qian and Scott 2007) and *visual anonymity* (Joinson 2001) thus triggers the deployment of various *online disinhibition effects* (Suler 2004), which lay the subjective foundations for these virtual back spaces to become established, ignoring taboos and social norms: “Due to its mediated nature and the opportunities it offers for anonymity, cybersex helps to lower inhibitions and also encourages particularly open communication. Sexual inclinations and preferences otherwise concealed in the real world due to the fear of rejection can be acted out on the Internet” (Döring 2009, 1095).

Having thus delineated the field of our analysis, we can proceed with a detailed description of the steps that lead to the creation of *temporary libertine zones* along the lines of Sade’s writings, but in the setting of the new media. Beginning with the newsgroups, we then going on to look at the MUVES, and conclude with an empirical analysis of the usage of the old chat services, that some users have yet to abandon in favor of the social networks or WhatsApp.

### 3. Step One: From Elite Literary Writings to Anyone’s Writings

The asynchronous computer-mediated communication born with the BBS was used for sexual purposes (Wysocki 1998) right from the start, but it was with the rise of Usenet that various newsgroups formed and were organized by topic, leading to a specialization and rationalization of their content. Among the latter, one of the most popular in the 1990s was *alt.sex* (*alternative sex*), a discussion group on sexual topics that included various subgroups (*alt.sex.pictures*, *alt.sex.stories*, *alt.sex.blondes*, *alt.sex.bondage*, and so on).

The *alt.sex.stories* newsgroup was officially established in 1992 for the purpose of collecting “stories” of sexual content written mainly by non-professionals: common people who put their own fantasies into writing. The idea was an instant success, also thanks to the extreme freedom of speech granted to the various authors.

Sproull and Faraj (1997) reported that *alt.sex stories* had 120,000 readers in 1993, and a volume of 338 messages exchanged every day. Most of the content, however, was not concerned with representing con-

sensual and conventional sexual intercourse. As Jekyll (2006) put it: “Stories include romances, sexual interludes, and loving, marital sex, but they also include homosexuality, adultery, and such hot-button themes such as sodomy, incest, kidnapping, rape, bondage, domination and submission, sadomasochism, torture, scat (feces), watersports (urine), mind-control, bestiality, pedophilia, mutilation, and snuff sometimes in complex combinations”.

As of April 1993, all stories are attributed codes (see Table 1), in the form of acronyms, so that potential readers are aware of what type of sexual situations a story describes. This innovation has also made it easier to produce quantitative analyses on the newsgroup’s content and obtain a picture of the distribution of the various topics.

Table 1 – List of codes used by alt.sex.stories to classify the non-conventional and non-consensual content in the various posts.

Abbreviation	Description
b, g	Boy - Preteen (age 12 or younger), Girl - Preteen (age 12 or younger)
best	Bestiality. Sex with an animal (see also zoo)
blackmail	Forcing sex through threat of exposure
h	A hermaphrodite under 18
inc	Incest
m, f	Boy - Teenager (13 - 17), Girl - Teenager (13 - 17)
mc	Mind control
nc	Non-consensual Sexual Activity
nec	Necrophilia: Sex with a dead person
ped	Pedophilia: Some participants age 12 or below
rape	Brutal non-consensual intercourse
reluc	Starts out as rape, but she loves it.
snuff	Killing for sexual pleasure
tort	Torture Severe non-consensual infliction of pain
va	Verbal abuse. Abusive and dirty language
viol	Violent, not always sad
vore	Eating (literally) someone or something alive
zoo	Zoophilia: Caring and consensual sexual relationship between a human and an animal

As we can see from Table 1, the inventory of paraphilias described by the codes includes the whole repertoire inaugurated by Sade in his *120 Days of Sodom*.

In 1997 Harmon and Boeringer examined a sample of 196 stories and found that 40% of them involved non-consensual relationships. Barron and Kimmel (2000) subsequently studied the levels of violence being represented, showing that *alt.sex.stories* contains quantitatively more violence and places a qualitatively greater emphasis on violence than the pornographic magazines and videos sold by porn shops. So the realism of the visual image is not enough to supersede the evocative power and impact on the imagination of the written word. Proceeding with our own investigation, we grouped the 2,661 files in the historical archives of *alt.sex.stories* (<http://www.asstr.org/>) according to how the authors describing the various activities involved in the stories had classified their content (see figure 1). We thus obtained the data shown in Table 2, where a distinction is drawn between “non-conventional” and “non-consensual” sex. The former includes sexual activities that are bizarre, unusual or inspired by paraphilia, undertaken on the grounds of an agreement between the parties involved. The latter refers to all forms of sexual activity undertaken without the consent, or against the will of one of the parties concerned, which thus implies some direct or indirect form of violence.

Title	Author	Category	Length	Rank
1,000 Kisses	Marlissa	Slave/Master	Medium	940
2 Time Story	Alun	Consensual Sex	Short	850
3 Dogs	Unknown Author	Animal	Short	300
90210 (Chapter 1 Excerpt)	Watkins, Michael	Television Parodies	Short	900
A Baby Pants Prisoner	Unknown Author	Humiliation	Short	100
A Better Insurance Policy	POC	Slave/Master	Medium	700
A Big One For Mom	Mr. Strawberry	Incest: Son/Mom	Short	800
A Big Tit Breast-Play	Unknown Author	Breast Fetish	Short	500
A Blackmailed Wife	The Editor	Slave/Master	ling	700

Fig. 1 – 2.661 files in the historical archives of *alt.sex.stories* (<http://www.asstr.org/>) according to how the authors describing the various activities involved in the stories classified their content.

The proportions of non-consensual, non-conventional and other stories (including those reported as be consensual – see Table 2 on the next page – are roughly the same, with one third each, so the interest of authors and readers taking part in the newsgroup clearly focuses on forms of non-ordinary sexuality, with the non-consensual and violent stories taking the lion’s share (62.2%).



Table 2 – Non-conventional and non-consensual stories.

Category <sup>1</sup>	Non-conventional		Non-consensual	
	N.	%	N.	%
Animal			80	3.0
Bondage	60	2.3		
Breast fetish	14	0.5		
Female domination	25	0.9		
Homosexual/Lesbian	108	4.1		
Humiliation			34	1.3
Incest/Kids/Family			393	14.8
Medical exam	9	0.3		
Other incest	42	1.6		
Mind control			103	3.9
Pregnancy	29	1.1		
Rape			159	6.0
Slave/Master	246	9.2		
Slut wife	37	1.4		
Spanking/Whipping	120	4.5		
Torture/Death			68	2.6
Transgender	53	2.0		
Voyeur/Watching			42	1.6
Weird/Unusual	32	1.2		
Totals	775	29.1	879	33.2
Total Non-conventional + Non-consensual	1654	62.2		
Consensual sex	403	15.1		
Other*	604	22.7		
	2661	100.0		

Source: alt.sex.stories depository, Story list sorted by title, 05/30/98.

Leaving aside the content, the Sadian characteristics on which we focus our interest concern the processes by means of which this content is produced and circulated. In *alt.sex.stories*, the structure adopted for a considerable number of the stories is the same as in Sade's novels. The newsgroup provides an isolated, secure digital environment. In order to join, you need to be familiar with the computer procedures needed to access the site, and you need to be sufficiently "libertine" to enjoy reading or posting stories. After joining the newsgroup, people have the opportunity to conceive of convincing, but wholly unrealistic situations, placing no limitations on their imagination and disregarding any ethical or practical constraints. The web allows them to fully and collectively enjoy the

<sup>1</sup> Codes with at least 5 cases: Action/Adventure, Comics, Erotic Horror, Fantasy, Halloween, Humor, Ideas, Interracial, Masturbation, Non-sexual, Religion, Romance, Science Fiction, Unknown.

disinhibiting experience that was once a privilege of Sade's characters.

It is therefore hardly surprising that, at the start of the 1990s – when forms of visual pornography (in magazines and video cassettes) were already abundantly available – computer-mediated communication provided material in the form of a story that the porn industry was unable to “show” (Torture/Death, Rape, Incest/Kids/Family). Horror and pulp films come closer to this type of content, but often in a rough and ready fictional form that lacks the capacity to involve the viewer emotionally and the evocative effect of written words. The underground market for photographs and videos boasting “real” scenes of violence or pedophilia remains prisoner of a brutal realism that is unable to stimulate the viewer's imagination, violating aesthetic as well as ethical and legal norms, and destroying any opportunity for storytelling (Plummer 1995).

The opening of *Temporary Libertine Zones* enables people not only to voice their most extreme fantasies, but also to act as both author and consumer, become fused in the figure of the *prosumer*. The newsgroup allows for comments on the stories posted, thus giving users a concrete chance to develop a “collective intellectual” that enables the circulation of styles of representation, sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973) and erotic scenarios of Sadian type.

#### **4. Step Two: From Stories to Narratives Acted out in Chat Rooms Interactions**

Chat sites began to operate in the same years when *alt.sex.stories* was proving successful. Though still relatively primitive forms of communication, they were equipped with what the BBS and newsgroups lacked, and that is the synchronicity of the messages being exchanged. Users could now “speak” to each other as if they were on the phone, taking turns as in a normal conversation. This is when the first research on the new phenomenon of Internet used for sexual purposes was conducted. We shall return to this more extensively in the last part of this paper, when we describe the study that we conducted in 2014 on several Internet Relay Chat (IRC) platforms still in activity.

Here we introduce the topic to speak about the resources that synchronous exchanges make possible. Lamb (1998, 131), for instance, discovered that people taking part in a chat under a false identity can be divided into “those who told tales theoretically of their own experience and those who related fantasized sexual experiences with my persona”. Some of those interested in sexual experiences with minors were particularly expert in the biographies of child-actors, who they offer to impersonate in their exchanges of messages with other users. This marks a departure from the inheritance of Sade's novels (which still persisted in *alt.sex.stories*) and a move towards an original elaboration of fantasies

that describe real people (the child-actors), or develop into role-playing games during the course of which the participant “acts out” the child’s part.

The unreal dimension emerges here, as in Sade, because the toy children constructed in the interaction are attributed sexual capabilities or physical attributes that they could not really have: “In the final conversation, the individual began talking like an adult”. This leads to a two-fold fantasticated simulation: participants pretend to be well-known actors, and also attribute inappropriate characteristics to the pretend subject they impersonate, along with a general “lack of knowledge and detail of contemporary teen life: school, clothing, music and vocabulary”. In other words, the representation of the roles is naive, conforming to a mechanism typical of pornography since it concerns not a real individual, but a “simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1994) generated by means of the exchange. As in Sade, this reflects the all-powerful role that the authors wish to have over their victims, but in this case they do not *describe*, they *impersonate*, disregarding all biological and social constraints, in a domain where their imagination reigns uncontrolled.

This change identifies a radicalization of the chat users’ role: they are no longer restricted to “reading”, but are almost bound to be asked to take an active part in producing the erotic scene, in which they become protagonists. The *Temporary Libertine Zone* generated in the chat thus serves as a place for the collective creation of increasingly realistic stories, especially from the point of view of the *prosumer* involved in the production process. Readers of Sade could not possibly have such a role, nor could readers of *alt.sex.stories*, even allowing for the fact that the latter can post messages.

This completes the developmental cycle of the Sadian imagery circulated by means of computers. In conditions of social segregation, in the back places made possible by chat sites, individuals can meet and communicate with one another for the purpose of establishing a place for expressing their most hidden desires, totally detached from the social rules of daily life, a place where they can treat the bodies of their victims in ways that only Sade could describe. A new type of realism comes to the fore: instead of telling stories, this is theatre; participants become involved in the first person, they “act as Sade”, instead of quoting or reading him. The narration is ultimately replaced by the performance.

This changes the meanings and the erotic usage of chat sites and is alarming some observers, who have predicted the birth of new “pathological communities”, triggering much debate among the experts (Quinn e Forsyth 2005; Durkin et al. 2006; Schwartz e Southern 2000). Some emblematic events had already hinted at this evolution<sup>2</sup>, but had prompted

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<sup>2</sup> For instance “in 1995, Jake Baker, a University of Michigan student, was arrested and prosecuted for a story on Usenet about kidnapping, raping, and

discussions mainly of a political and legal order, relating to the limitation of freedom of speech (Bilstad 1996; Faucette 1995).

The styles used to construct the dialogue in chat sites necessarily differ from the stories on *alt.sex.stories*, because they demand the use of short sentences being exchanged in the context of a conversation. Some Sadian characteristics nonetheless remain the same, while others are perfected. In *The 120 Days of Sodom*, the four libertine protagonists pay four female storytellers to “inflare” their senses with obscene stories. Aroused by what happens in the stories, the four men then try to take the same sort of action on their own victims. In chat rooms, modern-day libertines have a similar experience by “enacting” their own fantasies by means of an imaginary interaction with another user who accepts the rules of their game. This begins with the idea of impersonating someone or “constructing” someone as a designated victim of their own desire in a scenario in which they are actors, authors and stage directors at one and the same time.

## 5. Step Three: From Written Words to Avatars

The third step in the circulation of the elements comprising the narration/construction of extreme fantasies in digital environments has to do with virtual worlds where a person can move with the aid of an avatar. These graphic representations of the visitor may have the appearance of human beings or of imaginary creatures. They “visually” stand in for the individual controlling them. Using their avatars, people can take action on themselves or on others, and remarkably convincingly with the current levels of development of the technology. In dedicated digital environments, avatars can perform an extraordinary number of actions, like going shopping, visiting places, holding a meeting, going to university, even getting married, and much more, including flirting and having all kinds of sexual intercourse.

On the topic of *Second Life*, Waskul and Martin (2010) wrote: “straight sex, gay sex, trans sex, incest, orgies, masturbation, furies, sex toys, consensual rape, BDSM, sexual torture, bestiality, water sports, exotic dancing, prostitution, nudism. Any and all possible forms of sexual activity, some of which—not unlike Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*—are fantastically beyond the realm of what can be done in the flesh” (pp. 299–300). We are not very far removed from the sexual activities described in the *alt.sex.stories* codes, and Sade seems to have an important role in *Second Life* too: the success of the erotic games played by its *Residents* was so great that the founder, Linden Labs, decided in 2009 to develop an is-

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murdering a woman with the same name as a UM classmate. The prosecution was ultimately dismissed by a Federal judge” (Jekyll 2006).

land entirely dedicated to “adult” activities called *Zindra*. It seems unnecessary, at this point, to say again that every time the web offers a suitable Sadian environment (isolation, secrecy, unrealistic imagery), this has disinhibiting effects and attracts people inclined to experiment (albeit in a simulation) with extreme sexual deviations.

The aspect of interest to us in the way *Second Life* works lies in that the written word continues to have a leading role, given the poor quality of the avatars and the virtual environments in the world of “cartoon sex” (Waskul and Martin 2010; Boellstorff 2008). Although it allows for a body to be built with made-to-measure sexual traits to match anyone’s desires, by “buying” genitals and sexual capabilities from special shops, the *Zindra* red light district ultimately works like an illustrated chat service, where unrealistic, clumsy images of the self- accompany the written content of instant messages that are needed to describe sensations and emotions, and to give and receive instructions.

It is not only the *Massively Multiplayer Online Games* (MMOGs) created for other purposes - like *Second Life* - that offer the opportunity to create virtual worlds dedicated to sex. Some MMORPGs have already been designed for this type of use, such as *Pangaea*, *Evil Dead*, *F.E.A.R.*, *Phantasmagoria*, *The House of the Dead: Overkill*, *World of Warcraft*. Some contain scenarios in which extreme forms of violence can be perpetrated (torture, mutilation, even cannibalism), while others are used for staging episodes of rape and incest. But the environment that condenses in a single game many of the characteristics only briefly hinted at elsewhere is *Sociolotron*.

“We wanted the player to be able to do things that are also possible in real life, although he would probably never want to do them in reality, because they are evil and would cause punishment outside the content of an adult game. (...) the *Sociolotron* adult game contains sex, politically incorrect behavior, blasphemy, and lots of other things which are not acceptable to many people. This game allows you to bring out your darker side” (<http://www.sociolotron.com>).

This is a perfect Sadian place where the characteristics that we have discussed so far come together in a single virtual environment and are advertised to attract customers (the fee for *Sociolotron* users is in the range of \$8-\$10 a month). “Iron rules” are imposed: it is strictly forbidden to create scenarios or refer in any way to the realms of pedophilia, and it is not permitted to draw any kind an advantage from the game in real life.

The whole course of our analysis thus comes full circle and returns to the starting point. *Sociolotron* is the universe described in Sade’s novels made accessible to anyone willing to pay the entrance fee and take part as a co-author. Within this fictitious world, avatars who cannot be persecuted for their actions dedicate themselves to the experience of abuse, violence and extreme sexuality, just as Sade did with his characters. *Socio-*

*lotron* can be seen as a *Libertine Zone* that is no longer *temporary* like the chat sites, however, because it has become institutionalized, a clearly-defined, specific “place” à la Augé (1995). With time, it has built up its collective story and gives users the chance to develop a dense network of often conflicting relationships: “You can be permanently killed. You can be put away into prison for some weeks! You can even be forced into prostitution or drug abuse” (on the emotional and behavioral effects of the game, see Whitty et al. 2011, Gutiérrez 2014).

We have come a long way from the stories filed on *alt.sex.stories*, however. Although *Sociolotron* has the structure and constraints of a game, with previously-written scene plays that can be interpreted using avatars, the types of behavior suggested and inspired in this environment go well beyond what many players might have ever expected to be able to virtually experience.

## 6. Back to the Past: Revisiting the Chat Sites

At this point, it is useful to conduct a further test our original hypothesis, i.e. that the set of artifices invented by Sade in his novels (isolation, secrecy, unrealistic imagery, disinhibition) are a constant feature of the various modern media described here, from the printed matter to *Sociolotron*. Wherever the conditions are right for these resources to be provided, a more or less temporary *Libertine Zone* is created that is steeped in the spirit of Sade, whatever the technical medium hosting it and enabling it to develop. In other words, the succession of different environments (BBS, chat rooms, MMOGs and MMORPGs) does not necessarily give rise to a hierarchy in which more modern media prompt the decline and disappearance of the older platforms. It may even be that the opposite occurs, that remnants of the past serve precise social functions, one of which is provide a solution for those who lack the skills needed to immerse themselves in *Second Life* or other such virtual worlds.

To test our hypothesis, we conducted an empirical research on several sites in the IRC network during the months of July and August 2014, and on other chat services elsewhere on the web, where users are allowed to chat about whatever they wish. We gave priority to chat rooms that recall Sadian topics in their names, even without any direct reference to BDSM (e.g. *blasphemy*, *extreme sex*, *amoral sex*, *incest*), and to references to Satanism or neo-Nazism with explicit erotic objectives. This approach led us to interact with a number of people and gain an idea of how *Temporary Libertine Zones*, created in the setting of “blind” chats (without using webcams or microphones), are used today. The chats considered were all in the Italian language and explicitly erotic.

## 6.1 Method

We conducted our empirical research in three separate phases.

Phase 1: silent observation of the messages circulating in the public part of the chat sites. Aim: primarily to become familiar with the jargon and the meanings to which users' nicknames allude (some chat sites also include written user profiles) to establish the boundaries within which participants represent themselves and their actions; and, as a secondary goal, to gain an idea of their age, gender and sexual orientation. This part of our survey was conducted over the course of one week, at three different times each day, and for approximately an hour each time<sup>3</sup>.

Phase 2: introducing ourselves in the public part as inexperienced newcomers, asking to be guided/initiated into the use of the chat room. Usually after two or three attempts, we would find somebody willing to act as our "companion" (there seem to be plenty of users of who find pleasure in taking novices under their wing, providing the newcomer is determined). The researchers naturally had to introduce themselves using an identity suited to a novice. Aim: to examine the rituals of the interactions and the classes of the proposed actions; to understand what types of fantasy are described. In this setting, conversations can be struck up in which several individuals spontaneously provide details about the main categories of visitors to the site, the words and sexual situations that are allowable, the ones that trigger negative reactions, and so on.

Phase 3: pooling the information obtained from the various available sources (the public part of chat sites, user profiles, and exchanges with our "guides") to obtain appropriate models and interpret our findings. The three stages of our study were conducted adopting a "virtual ethnography" approach, following the methodological framework suggested by Hine (2000).

## 6.2 Ethical Issues

As Waskul et al. (2000, 382) wrote, while it is true that "it would be unethical to observe on-line participants engaging in cybersex without their knowledge and permission", it is equally true that it would be "unethical to conduct on-line research in such a way as to overtly and knowingly disrupt the context of one's research". Since the privacy of the people with whom we came into contact was never invaded and we have no way of inducing them to behave in any unethical or hazardous way, we believe that here (as on other occasions), we behaved in the best way to safeguard the interests of the individuals with whom we interacted, and to achieve reliable findings. In settings such as the sites that we temporarily

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<sup>3</sup> The chat service allows for several rooms to be kept open at once, and for a user to take part in several public chats simultaneously using the same nickname.

visited, if we had introduced ourselves as researchers we would not have been taken seriously, or we would have been rejected. In both cases, this would have been disruptive and we would have been perceived as trouble-makers with the smooth functioning of the chat site. We consequently feel that, by ensuring the anonymity of the people contacted and underscoring that the chat sites involved are open to the public, our working method was ethically and pragmatically the best solution to adopt in the situation – much the same stance was taken by Shoham (2004) and a similar study was conducted by Lamb (1998).

### 6.3 Main Outcomes

As always happens with chat sites, the first exchanges of messages serve to take stock of one another, to gauge who is on the other end of the line, how much you can “reveal” yourself, and how far you can take the conversation (Mills 1998). In our case, introducing ourselves as novices with no knowledge of how the chat room functioned, but well aware of the types of topic being discussed made it easier for us to induce processes of *disclosure* and *disinhibition*, and gain the trust of the people we chatted with. Our “guides” were initially cautious, but soon became willing to give us a broad idea of the chat site’s uses and customs, and the topics most often discussed in the exchanges.

This enabled us to collect the information we needed, interrupting the conversation when we felt we had achieved our aim, or when the exchange tended to involve us excessively in any fantasizing.

Our analysis of the “blind” chats confirms that Sade’s influence is still very strong when various kinds of *Temporary Libertine Zone* are set up so that the parties involved can feel free to talk to each other about their fantasies. The fundamental ingredients (already mentioned several times) circulated by the various media are always much the same: an isolated “place” is prepared (the chat room) that outsiders and laypeople cannot enter; users are assured of secrecy and anonymity, they access the site with a nickname and revealing only their age, gender<sup>4</sup> and erotic inclinations; users create radical fantasies in their interactions with one another, everyone acting as a co-author of the story; the sense of freedom and disinhibition leads users to imagine extreme situations and construct ad hoc victims, and speak of sacrificial homicide (Satanists), collective persecution (neo-Nazis), profanation (blasphemers), incest, possession and orgasmic exchange of bodies (depraved, amoral); and, finally, the physical-anatomical and social unreality of the protagonists and situations described gives rise to the representation of implausible, pragmatically impossible scenarios.

This picture is largely consistent with what happened in the BBS and

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<sup>4</sup> Users can naturally lie about their age or gender, be it to protect their identity and/or (as in our case) to achieve a particular goal in the course of the interaction.



newsgroups of the 1990s, which naturally leads us wonder why, given the resources available today (from the worlds of virtual reality to role-playing games), people are still using such old platforms as “blind” chats to live an adventure that would essentially seem rather restrictive by comparison with what they can experience elsewhere.

The answer focuses above all on the last of the Sadian traits that we illustrated the earlier. More than anonymity, secrecy or freedom to express erotic urges, the key element that seems to justify the choice of chat sites is the individual’s substantial inadequacy when it comes to using other environments. Although they defined themselves as “Satanists”, “neo-Nazis” or “blasphemers”, many of our respondents said they do not belong to any groups, organizations or communities in the real world with any connection to the roles they attribute to themselves in the chat room, borrowing from what they have heard via the web, at the cinema, or on TV. Even those who identify themselves as “incestuous”, “depraved” or “abnormal” do so without being able to boast any real-life experiences of such behavior. Sometimes they openly admit as much, and sometimes this emerges from the implausibility of their stories, which are often all the more unbelievable – taking on the features of genuine “stories” - the more they are purported to refer to so-called personal life experiences. As Lamb said in 1998, such stories are sometimes *told*, and sometimes *impersonated*, so the theatrical function of the chat rooms remains, and even seems to be one of their most appealing features.

We might also wonder why someone should prefer to speak about a given scenario in minute detail in a chat room if they really have the opportunity to experience it “in the flesh” (as chat users often claim to do in describing their so-called experiences). Asking such a question directly almost always led to the exchange being interrupted because it introduces a heavy dose of realism in a setting where there is a tacit agreement that anything imagined by anyone shall be taken at face value. Taking part in the chat thus becomes the tangible sign of a two-fold limitation: on the one hand, there is the inability to look at one’s own fantasies, and acknowledge them for what they are, instead of presenting them as authentic chapters of a person’s biography; on the other, there is the inability to exploit more refined communication media to enjoy these fantasies in a sophisticated virtual environment. It has to be said that chatting can have an enormous expressive force in inventing situations and circumstances, whereas in *Second Life* or *Sociolotron* - despite the “physical” use of an avatar - it is necessary to comply with constraints dictated by the program. But none of the people we spoke to reported knowing of anybody who used MUVes or MMORPGs in parallel with, or instead of the chat room.

The paraphilias and militancies that we encountered were mainly imaginary, unrelated to any sects or real-life meeting places or organizations, though the speakers referred to imaginary forms of them. Satanists, neo-Nazis, blasphemers, amoralists and perverts interpreted their roles in

their own self-referencing way. During the ethnographic work, we had the impression that they were translating into stories or impersonations a generalized condition of *lurker* (or voyeur of other people's lives), already living in a condition of social, sexual and technological segregation that compounds the isolation permitted by the chat room. Their separation from the real world, of which they seek to impersonate certain roles, parallels their active participation in *Temporary Libertine Zones* where they can be transformed into ferocious torturers of their poor victims or (in rare cases) even have a taste of being victims themselves.

This description amply confirms the quotation from one of Sade's letters under the title of this article: the chat room users who spoke to us are not there because they are unable to actually implement the excesses they describe, but because they can only experience them intensely in the manner permitted by the web. "To put it most simply, the sexual activities are imaginary, but the sexual pleasure is real" (Mills 1998, p. 43).

While it is true that the topics and models in circulation retain the Sade's original pattern virtually unchanged from the point of view of the recipients and the practical usage of the material, the switch from one medium to another, from printed matter to the chat room, radically transforms its meaning. There is much the same difference as between the 18<sup>th</sup>-century aristocratic libertine book-writer and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century loners sitting in front of a computer in their own rooms.

## 7. Conclusion

"Extreme" erotic stories have been circulating in Internet since the *alt.sex.stories*'s start in 1992, evolving over the course of two decades from stories written and exchanged via Usenet to "theatrical" roles enacted in chats or with sophisticated avatars moving in especially-designed virtual environments. During the course of this evolution, the erotic patterns in circulation seem to have remained much the same, with certain common features (isolation, secrecy, unrealistic imagery) that enable their reproduction using the various different formats. The technological advances (from the BBS to *Sociolotron*) have made Sade's orgiastic fantasies accessible to a much larger audience of users also making it easier from them to come into contact and interact with one another. The latest technologies have contributed to this process of circulation in two directions. On the one hand, the result of combining several types of platforms has made the sexual encounters described ever more realistic (with the aid of video cameras and microphones, and/or by developing the physical features of avatars). On the other, the libertine forms of desire can be anchored to media that, in many other respects, have become obsolete (take the case of "blind" chats, which provide the greatest assurance of anonymity and personal protection.) These two paths coexist in the same virtual time and space, but on the basis of our findings, they are now articu-

lated through several different ways and increasingly specialized uses.

In both processes, however, the written word remains the primary means of communication, capable of circulating from one place to another, and from one time to another, persisting, increasingly consolidated, and continuing to serve as the instrument of choice for mobilizing the emotions and fantasies of the writers and readers of stories on *alt.sex*, and of those experimenting with the avatars of *Second Life* or *Sociolotron*. The “Sadian collective intellectual” consists of thousands of individuals, engaging in their erotic practices, who unwittingly take part in collecting and reproducing “extreme” desires and pleasures that remain much the same, in terms of content, even if the form they take changes thanks to modern technology. The process seems to go on without breaking away from the past, apart from the jump from the well-protected secret diffusion of a highly-cultured literary product in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to performances enacted by ordinary people on the web. It is therefore the imagination, aroused by verbal accounts, that closes a centuries-old circle of steps that lead from Sade’s fantasies and his characters in *The 120 Days of Sodom* to modern-day libertines whose virtual environments revive and renew the self-same pleasures.

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