

IN THE

**SHADOWS
OF THE NET**

“This is the book we've all been waiting for on cybersex. It explains what computer sex is all about and how to get help if it becomes a problem. The personal stories are excellent for assisting clients in relating to this issue.”

—Joseph M. Amico, M.Div., C.A.S., C.S.A.

President, National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity

“The authors provide a simple, effective guide for self-evaluation and recovery if cybersex is causing problems.”

—Pia Mello

Author, *Facing Codependence* and *Facing Love Addiction*

Coauthor, *Breaking Free*

“A much needed resource for professional and lay audiences. An important and timely book about a contemporary problem that is escalating and causing enormous personal, family, and professional distress. The authors are to be commended for clearly articulating how the problem behavior develops and presenting methods for therapeutically addressing it.”

—Christine A. Courtois, Ph.D.

Author, *Healing the Incest Wound* and *Recollections of Sexual Abuse*

Clinical director of the CENTER: Posttraumatic Disorders Program

Psychiatric Institute of Washington

“Once again, Patrick Carnes, with the help of David Delmonico and Elizabeth Griffin, pushing the frontier of our knowledge of trauma and emptiness, manifesting in addiction. Cybersex addiction is the latest of a myriad of sexual behaviors in our culture where courtship so often goes awry. The authors' gentle approach to the newest compulsive use and their families is realistic, thorough, knowledgeable, practical, and helpful to all who read it, including those whose Internet use is not a problem. Since sexuality is so very powerful an issue, we must learn to use it wisely, safely, and with discretion, lest it destroy us. *In the Shadows of the Net* gives us a way to approach it with integrity.”

Medical director of the STAR (Sexual Trauma and Recovery) Program

**IN THE
SHADOWS
OF THE NET**

*Breaking Free of
Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior*

Second Edition

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www.hazelden.org

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Second edition 2007

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carnes, Patrick, 1944–

In the shadows of the net: breaking free of compulsive online sexual behavior / Patrick
Carnes, David L. Delmonico, Elizabeth Griffin; with Joseph M. Moriarity. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Rev. ed of: In the shadows of the net. C2001.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59285-478-3 (softcover)

E-book ISBN: 978-1-59285-786-9

1. Sex addiction. 2. Computer sex. I. Delmonico, David L. II. Griffin, Elizabeth,
1958– III. In the shadows of the net. IV. Title.

RC560.S43I52 2007

616.85'83—dc22

20070141

11 10 09 08 07 6 5 4 3 2 1

Authors' note

Every story in this book is true; however, each has been edited for clarity. Names, locations,
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Cover design by Theresa Gedig

Interior design by Elizabeth Cleveland

Typesetting by Prism Publishing Center

Contents

List of Illustrations

Preface

1

The Shadow Side of the Net

2

Do I Have a Problem with Cybersex?

3

Understanding Problematic Sexual Behavior on the Internet

4

What Turns You On? The Arousal Template

5

Courtship Gone Awry

6

Boundaries

7

Taking That First Step

8

Changing the Way You Live

9

Preventing Relapse: Maintaining the Changes You've Made

10

Family Dynamics and Cybersex

11

The Web Frontier

Appendix

Notes

About the Authors

Illustrations

Figures

- 1.1 CyberHex
- 3.1 Cybersex User Categories
- 3.2 The Addictive System
- 5.1 Courtship Disorder and the Ten Compulsive Types
- 7.1 The Loss of the Cybersex Relationship
- 8.1 Hermes' Web
- 8.2 Internet Health Plan

Preface

Since 2001, when this book first was published, the issue of cybersex has taken many new twists and turns. Some we imagined and predicted, others caught us completely by surprise. One aspect that was most surprising was how widespread the issue has become and how many professionals are faced with cybersex issues in their office. We expected that counselors, psychologists, social workers, and law enforcement personnel would need to become more aware of cybersex issues. We didn't, however, imagine we would be consulting with human resource managers, divorce attorneys, and people from the religious community about compulsive online sexual behavior.

Regardless of whether we saw the changes coming or not, we realized it was time to create a new edition of this book for the millions of people struggling with their problematic online sexual behavior. For those of you who read the first edition, you will find updated statistics, new thoughts, and a couple new exercises that address problematic cybersex issues. For those who are reading this book for the first time, you will learn how to determine if you or your loved one has a significant problem with online sex, and the steps you can take to address these issues.

It is our hope that this book continues to be a useful resource for both the professional community as well as individuals (and their families) who struggle with cybersex behavior. Just as it was when the first edition of this book was published, it is impossible to predict the nature and course of cybersex over the coming years. All we really know is that cybersex will continue to change the way we relate to others, and for some it will present a lifelong battle for which we hope to bring a small amount of hope and relief.

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The Shadow Side of the Net

THE INTERNET. This worldwide phenomenon has created a communication and information network unlike anything previously seen. Even inventions such as radio and television have not been as far-reaching as or had the impact of the Internet. There are an estimated 32 million active users of the Internet spread over at least 120 different countries throughout the world.¹ Whatever we want—information, goods, connections—we can find it or do whenever we want via the Internet. Yes, everything ... even sex. We can have sex on the Internet whenever we want with exactly the kind of person we want.

Sometimes that creates a problem. The opportunity is too enticing, alluring, fulfilling, immediate, and powerful. So much is available. There are so many options, ones we've only dreamed of—or have yet to dream of! So much opportunity and stimulation is available that it's difficult to control. And hard to stop. For some it is seemingly impossible to stop.

No, the Internet isn't all sunshine and progress. There is the shadow side to the Net. For some people, the pull of cybersex can be so powerful that, like alcohol or other drugs, it's hard to put down and control. The shadowy world of cybersex is overtaking and overwhelming far too many people, undermining careers and upending relationships. And the problem is growing. Worse, it is becoming clear that for some, cybersex becomes compulsive or an addictive disorder. No one could have forecast that cybersex would have had such an impact.

KEVIN'S STORY

Kevin, a married thirty-seven-year-old manufacturing company executive with two children, gives his account of what it's like to be hooked on cybersex:

It is 3:30 A.M. and I'm still online. Pornographic images of women stream onto my computer screen. Earlier tonight, after putting my two kids to bed, I watched the evening news with my wife, Jeneen. Since my wife was tired after a long day of work, she soon went to bed. Though I, too, was exhausted, primarily from too many late nights on the computer, I, as usual, told her I was still not tired and would stay up late and read for a while.

Once I was sure that Jeneen was asleep, I turned off the bedroom light and headed for the den and the family computer. "OK, tonight I'm just going to stay online for an hour," I promised myself. "It'll be midnight when I'm done, and that's enough."

time. I really just can't stay up half the night again. Today at work I actually caught myself nodding off during Alan's important sales plan presentation. I haven't been able to really focus lately, either."

Once I sat down, I arranged my chair and the screen so that if Jeneen should awaken and come in, I'd have a moment to switch the screen view over to a work-related document. I'm more careful now, since a few months ago my wife surprised me and saw the photo of a naked woman I was viewing.

I talked myself out of that embarrassing situation with the excuse that while trying to finish a work project, I'd opened an e-mail from one of my colleagues. In it was a link to a site that the guy had said I would find interesting. It was a porn site and I told my wife that I'd never seen anything like it and was just looking at it out of curiosity.

I remember only too well how I'd felt at that moment. Heart pounding in my chest. My mouth instantly parched. Feelings of fear, shock, embarrassment, and panic coursing through my body as, in those very, very long moments, I searched for a plausible explanation. I didn't ever want to go through that again. Besides, I knew there would be no good excuse if my wife caught me again.

I'd actually sworn off porn sites after that night. I deleted the bookmarks and told myself that it wasn't worth it. I realized that I loved my wife and children and didn't want to jeopardize these relationships over some nude photos.

That promise was broken in less than a week. After a particularly hard day at work, I told myself that I deserved a reward. I'd take just thirty minutes to masturbate, and then I'd go off to bed with Jeneen.

For several evenings, I kept to this thirty-minute ritual. Feeling more confident now with my control over my Internet usage, I decided to give myself an hour each evening. A few weeks passed, and before I knew it, I was online for hours on end again each evening—until two, three, even four o'clock in the morning. I just didn't know where the time was going. What felt like an hour just suddenly turned into three or four. I was searching for just the right woman, just the right look to masturbate to before going to bed. At times, I felt like this Internet thing was spiraling out of control.

I felt extreme anticipation and excitement when I first went online in the evening, the concentration and thrill increasing as I searched various Web sites and found new ones. But after I masturbated, I felt awful. I had so many harsh feelings and was angry for wasting so much time. I felt ashamed and guilty that I had done this again. And worst of all, I felt helpless and full of despair because I realized I didn't know how or when I would be able to stop. Exhausted and beaten down, I quietly slipped into bed, wondering how I was going to make it at work again on just three hours of sleep.

CAN YOU RELATE TO KEVIN'S STORY?

Kevin isn't alone in his problems with sex and the Internet. Countless others, men and women alike, also find themselves in what seems to be a futile struggle with online sexual behavior. Of the estimated 322 million individuals who actively use the Internet, an estimated 41 million adults admit to regularly visiting pornographic Web sites. Pornography accounts for an estimated 4.2 million Web sites generating a hefty \$2.5 billion annually.² Many people struggle alone and in silence, too embarrassed or guilt-ridden to seek help, not knowing where they can find help, believing that no one else would really understand anyway. Just like Kevin, they experience a roller coaster of emotions each day. Perhaps you are in a similar predicament. Have you ever done any of the following?

- kept sexual activity on the Internet a secret from family members
- carried out sexual activities on the Net at work

- frequently found yourself erasing your computer history files in an effort to conceal your activity on the Net
- felt ashamed at the thought that someone you love might discover your Internet use
- found that your time on the Net takes away from or prevents you from doing other tasks and activities
- found yourself in a kind of online trance or time warp during which hours just slipped by
- frequently visited chat rooms that are focused on sexual conversation
- looked forward to your sexual activities on the Net and felt frustrated and anxious if you couldn't get on it when you planned
- found yourself masturbating while on the Net
- recognized the people in the interactive online video while they recognized your screen name when you signed on
- had sexual chat room friends who became more important than the family and friends in your life
- regularly visited porn sites
- downloaded pornography from a newsgroup
- had favorite porn sites
- visited fetish porn sites
- taken part in the CuSeeMe sexual video rooms
- viewed child pornography online

Discovering the Net's potential for sexual activity may have at first felt very exciting. After all, a new world was opening up for you, ready for exploration. It may have seemed like a harmless one in which to play, to fulfill fantasies, to occasionally find sexual gratification. You may have felt like a dream come true. But eventually you may have found, as Kevin did, that there was a downside—a very powerful one that seemed difficult, if not impossible, to control. Even as resolutions are made to limit or stop using the Net for sex, they are rendered hollow by the echoes of previous vows and promises. “How could this be happening to me?” you may wonder. Again, you are not alone in these feelings. The power and attraction of the Internet in general, and its use for sexual activity in particular, have entered and permeated our culture subtly and with blinding speed.

A DIFFERENT WORLD

It's almost impossible to imagine it now, but only ten short years ago, most of us knew little, if anything, about this mysterious creation for communication called the Internet. Today, however, its burgeoning growth and wide accessibility are altering patterns of social communication, business activity, and interpersonal relationships. Internet users spend an average of ten hours per week online. This includes both adult men and women. Teenagers often spend far more time online than adults: an estimated fifteen to twenty hours per week. This demographic is second only to computer professionals for their average amount of time spent online per week.³

Given the dramatic pace at which this remarkable and powerful technology has entered our lives, few of us are aware that the Internet has profoundly changed many aspects of our lives. Telephones, computers, and television, once separate technologies, are merging. Our schools, work environments, and even our social lives are becoming more and more centered around computers. Ten years ago, you probably could not have imagined doing your holiday shopping online, sending an RSVP to a wedding invitation via e-mail, being able to send letters and photos in seconds to a friend on the other side of the world, or “chatting” online with five, fifty, or five hundred people simultaneously. That these activities now seem commonplace indicates just how quickly we adapt to and take for granted technologies that a few years ago lived only in the realm of science fiction.

While it's not difficult to recognize technological changes, anticipating how pervasive and profound an effect they will have is a far greater challenge. Numerous authors, including Lynn White in a classic book on the Middle Ages, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, and Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock*, have argued that new technological developments can actually create changes in human thinking patterns and in how we see the world—changes that are known as paradigm shifts.⁴ Who would have imagined when the Wright brothers discovered how to build an airplane that only seventy-five years later, national and international flight would be commonplace? That a world without electricity, telephone, radio, and television—almost unimaginable today—is testimony to the profound effect these technologies have had on the human race in less than a century. Our world is absolutely dependent on them. Yet at the time of their discovery, these inventions seemed little more than oddities developed by eccentric inventors.

What effect has the Internet had on society since it came into use by the general public?

the early 1990s? It's difficult to know now, but the speed at which it has penetrated our culture is an indication of its power. As you know, sexuality is one important aspect of our lives that is being dramatically affected by the Internet. Mention "cybersex" and the response you'll receive will be, more often than not, a chuckle and a lewd comment. Such reactions do not, however, come from anyone who is familiar with the reality of sex and the Internet. Access to the Internet, and more specifically sex on the Internet, is on the rise. Access to sex-related online activities by children and teens also appears to be on the rise. Hundreds of thousands of adult-oriented Web sites are readily accessible to online users by simply typing the word "sex" in one of the many search engines available to Internet users. In fact, the word "sex" is one of the most frequently typed words in search engines. (The only words more common than "sex" are "and" and "the.")

The statistics are as remarkable as they are surprising:

- An estimated 72 million unique individuals visit pornography Web sites each year.
- Approximately 25 percent of all search engine requests are pornography related.
- Of all daily e-mails, it is estimated that 2.5 billion contain pornography. This represents 8 percent of all daily e-mails.
- Ten percent of adult Internet users believe they are cybersex addicts.
- The average age of first exposure to online pornography is eleven years old.
- Seventy percent of teenagers report they have seen pornographic images online.
- Twenty percent of all United States adults admit having intentionally visited pornographic Web site.
- Thirty percent of visitors to adult pornography sites are believed to be women.
- The Playboy Web site averages 5 million hits each day.
- An estimated \$320 billion per year is spent by consumers on Internet pornography.

It is easy to categorize online sexual behaviors as either all good or all bad. The Internet, however, is a communications tool that is inherently neither good nor bad. It is, rather, the interaction of the content offered by its creators (those who host Web sites, post to newsgroups, organize chat rooms, and so on) and the ways Internet users of these electronic meeting sites react and respond to these messages, images, and sounds that result in "good" or "bad" outcomes.⁵ Some social scientists have noted the educational potential of the Internet, citing the greater availability of information about sexuality and the potential for

more candid discussions of sexuality online. The Internet can also offer the opportunity for forming online or virtual “communities” in which isolated or disenfranchised people can communicate with one another about sexual topics.

Far more often, however, an increasing and rapidly growing number of people find that using the Internet for sexual purposes is fraught with risks and, at the very least, interferes with many aspects of their lives, including family relationships, work life, and financial security.

Three people share their experiences here. (Please note that while the stories used in this book are true, they have been altered as needed to protect individual anonymity.)

Carl, a parole officer, tells his story:

I had worked for several years as a parole officer and recently I'd been seeing more sex offenders, some of whom had been using the Internet in their crimes. I hadn't really known or thought about the Internet's potential for sexual activity or encounters until I talked with my clients and their caseworkers. Curious about the cybersex scene, I went online a few times at work just to see what sexual content was actually available on the Net. My superiors were aware of my sex activities on the Net and accepted them as necessary for my job. After a few months passed, I was still surfing sex-related sites at work. What's more, the time spent online had been inching up. One day, I'd been online exploring sex-related sites for nearly an hour. My boss noticed and commented to me about it. I reiterated that it was work-related and that I needed to know what my guys were doing. My boss said, “OK,” but suggested that maybe I was spending a bit too much time doing this, I'd best watch myself more closely, and I'd better make sure none of my other responsibilities were being neglected.

Jake, a wealthy twenty-five-year-old single man, narrowly escaped being arrested:

I seemed to have it all: a well-off family, hot new car, and nice apartment. But I had never really taken charge of my life. Supported by my parents, I was unemployed, spoiled, a heavy drinker, and lacked ambition. However, I did have one area of expertise—computers. My computer knowledge developed as a young adult while being holed up in my bedroom at home in punishment for my many transgressions. I had spent endless hours on the computer during this time and was truly skilled at programming, games, and surfing the Net.

I discovered chat rooms fairly quickly, and eventually I decided that I wanted to set up sex with a young girl. Soon, I was regularly in online conversations with a particular fifteen-year-old girl. Thanks to my superior computer skills, however, I discovered that there was another older guy who was also trying to arrange to have sex with this girl. I e-mailed this man and asked him how it was going with her. By maintaining regular communications with him, I eventually discovered that the girl had finally agreed to meet him to have sex.

I discovered that the two had arranged to meet at a restaurant in town. Since I knew the time and place and was curious

see what the two looked like, I decided to anonymously observe the rendezvous, but not participate. By this time, I had given up my frequent online conversations with this girl.

On the appointed evening, I was sitting in my car in a parking lot adjacent to the restaurant where I expected to have a great view of the action. Soon, the other man showed up—and seemingly out of nowhere three police squad cars and a half dozen FBI agents appeared. Before the man knew what had happened, he'd been arrested, handcuffed, and dumped in the back of a police car.

My heart was in my mouth, pounding like a jackhammer. I could hardly breathe. I couldn't move a muscle. I'd heard guys being busted for trying to hook up with teen girls for sex, but I thought I was clever enough to avoid such a trap. Now I knew how close I had come to being in the back of that squad car on the way to jail. I realized I had a problem, and I sought help the very next day.

Marcy, a middle-aged social worker, with a history of relationship infidelity:

I had been married thirteen years—and unfaithful the whole time. In fact, when I married, I was actually having an affair with one of the groomsmen in my wedding party. My husband never had a clue about what was going on. Finally, I started going to counseling, as my behavior began to bother me. Very soon into therapy, my therapist told me, “I think you have a problem with sex addiction.” My response, however, was that the real problem was a “problematic marriage.”

At this time, I discovered the Internet—more specifically, chat rooms. My husband regularly went to bed around 9:30-10:00 P.M. That's when I would get on the computer and head straight into one of my favorite chat rooms, where I would converse with various men. These “chats” became increasingly sexual and seductive, and eventually I was staying up very late, until three or four in the morning. I realized that my Internet use was getting out of hand, and each night I promised myself that I'd be in bed by eleven. But I just couldn't meet that goal. Despite my efforts at control, I became even more infatuated with my online life. The conversations became more and more sexual and tantalizing. Eventually, I became more and more daring. I began giving out my phone number to men I'd met online. They would call me and then together we would have phone sex. All the while, my husband was asleep in an adjacent room.

Finally, I encountered a guy who seemed irresistible, and crossing yet another boundary, I arranged an in-person meeting for sex with the guy, who lived in Dallas. We agreed to meet at a Dallas hotel. We had sex, and then I was attacked, beaten unconscious, and left for dead. I awoke days later in a hospital with no clue as to where I was, how I'd gotten there, or how much time had passed. The hospital staff had no way to identify me, since my purse had been stolen along with all my identification and money. And my husband? He knew nothing about what had happened. Since I was not at the hotel I claimed to be staying at, he was frantic with worry and had called the police to file a missing person report.

When I was finally able to use a phone at the hospital, my first call was to my therapist. I said, “OK, you're right. I have a problem. I need help.”

WHAT IS CYBERSEX?

Internet sex can be accessed and experienced in many different ways. Each has the potential to cause users problems and to lead them into risky or dangerous situations. In the following section, we outline these new avenues of sex to give you an idea of the breadth of the cybersex world.

The term “cybersex” has become a catchall to address a variety of sex-related behaviors when using your computer. They fall into several general categories:

1. ACCESSING ONLINE PORNOGRAPHY AND AUDIO, VIDEO, AND TEXT STORIES

The kind of pornography available on the Internet varies widely, just as it does in the non-cyber-world, ranging from photographs of models posing in bathing suits or lingerie to young children being sexually abused. It can be found in various forms, including photos and audio, video, and text stories. Its variety and ease of access, however, is much greater than offline access since many of the sexual content and activity laws that exist in the United States are difficult to enforce or don't apply in other countries (which can be easily accessed via the Internet).

Pornographic materials can be found on personal and commercial Web pages, with access just a mouse click away. Pornographic pictures, video, audio, and text can also be exchanged via e-mail and discussion or newsgroups. These forums allow participants to use their e-mail to post stories, ideas, photographs, or software related to the topic of the group. These messages can then be stored for other group participants to read or retrieve. Literal thousands of sex-related newsgroups exist on the Net and, as such, accommodate the highest volume of traffic of all newsgroups—so much so that they are often excluded from Internet statistics because of their extremely high usage.

Video- and photo-sharing Web sites have recently become a common area for exchanging online pornographic material. Many amateurs use this venue to post pornographic pictures and videos of themselves online. It is also an area where users can find videos and photos that meet their particular arousal interests.

2. REAL TIME WITH A FANTASY PARTNER

The second form of cybersex takes place in what is known as “real time”—though time may be the only aspect of the interaction that is real. Real-time chatting can be likened to a computerized version of citizens band (CB) radio. Internet chat rooms resemble CB channels in that they offer varying numbers of people the opportunity to listen to and discuss specific topics. The number of CB radio channels is relatively small and is limited to available broadcast frequencies. At any one time on the Internet, however, there are typically about ten to twenty thousand “channels” available to “join.” In addition, while Federal Communications Commission (FCC) laws limit the types of communication that can take place over the airwaves, most of these laws do not apply to international cyberspace.

After reviewing the chat room topic areas, it is not difficult to understand how one may engage in sexual conversation with others online. Advanced technology has also provided

ways to exchange images and files online during a live conversation. In addition, “virtual locations” exist in which you can engage in online chatting with others. You may, for example, start in the virtual “dining area” and talk with someone over “virtual coffee” and later be invited to a “virtual bedroom” where “one thing often leads to another.”

Current technology also allows for the exchange of voice and video images via the Internet. By simply providing a credit card number, you can take advantage of live video cameras that capture and transmit images of males or females engaged in everything from everyday activities to explicit sexual acts. Though a fee is common, some of these sites can be accessed for free. Some live video sites accept requests for specific sexual behaviors from online users, thus enabling an individual to create and fulfill personal fantasies. Thanks to live video feed technology, it is even possible to chat online while viewing pornography. Such virtual video booths are steadily growing in number and allow cybersex users to have nearly complete control over the “object” at the other end of the phone line, even though the “object” happens to be a human being. For a relatively small fee, you can also link to X-rated video feeds without any interaction or, with CuSeeMe software and camera, watch others masturbate or engage in other sexual activities while they watch you do the same.

Special sex toys for both men and women can now be connected to the Internet and allow remote control of the devices during chat sessions. Each partner has the ability to manipulate the other partner's sex toy. These new sex toys seek to add another dimension to the online cybersex encounter.

3. OTHER CYBERSEX VENUES

Internet users have recently begun using several new online technologies such as social networking sites, Internet-based dating services, and portable Internet devices for cybersex purposes.

Social networking sites (such as MySpace) allow users to post individualized Web pages about themselves, post photos of themselves and others, and interact with their group of online “friends.” Such Web sites have become extremely popular with both adults and teens. Like all Internet-related venues, there are many entertaining and enjoyable ways people can use these resources to meet and communicate with others, and share information about themselves with people they know or would like to meet. However, these same characteristics that attract users to social networking sites also present vulnerabilities for their users. Many teens lack the ability to make good judgments about risky behaviors and

when and what is appropriate to share with others online. As a result, online sex offenders flock to these areas to meet both adults and teens for possible exploitation.

Internet-based dating services and online personal ads help Internet users meet new people either online or in the real world. Many people use these services to meet others in the hope of intimate and romantic relationships, while others simply use them to find sex partners.

Originally, accessing the Internet was possible only through the use of a desktop or laptop computer. These days there are many portable devices such as cell phones, Blackberries, and gaming systems that can access the Internet through a wireless connection. Many of these portable devices can access the same types of cybersex discussed in the previous paragraph and in some cases, they provide additional ways to engage in cybersex behavior. For example, the pornography industry publishes material that can be downloaded directly onto a cell phone—an extremely lucrative business. “Podnography” refers to pornography specifically designed to be downloaded onto iPods and similar video/music devices. Many gaming systems that connect to the Internet allow for “chat sessions” during games. Many times this chat conversation can turn sexual and lead to further cybersex behavior with a gaming partner.

4. MULTIMEDIA SOFTWARE

The final category of cybersex does not take place online at all. With the invention of more sophisticated multimedia systems, people can play X-rated movies, engage in sexual games, or view the latest issues of erotica magazines on a desktop or laptop computer. Compact disc read-only memory (CD-ROM) technology allows companies to release software titles with sound and video clips. Such multimedia productions can also include erotic information. Studies estimate that erotica CD-ROMs account for 20 percent of all CD-ROM business, with sales in 1994 reported at \$260 million. Others report that the CD-ROM market has helped turn X-rated cyberspace into a billion-dollar-plus business.

WHY CYBERSEX?

With all the different forms of media available in our culture, what is it that attracts people to the Internet to engage in sexual activities in such a high-tech fashion? David Delmonico, Elizabeth Griffin, and Joe Moriarity developed a model called the CyberHex for understanding the reasons why the Internet is so attractive and powerful for individuals.⁶ The CyberHex was named because it contains six components (a hexagon) that combine to create

a “hex-like” or trance state for online users. The CyberHex components include integration, imposing, isolating, interactive, inexpensive, and intoxicating.

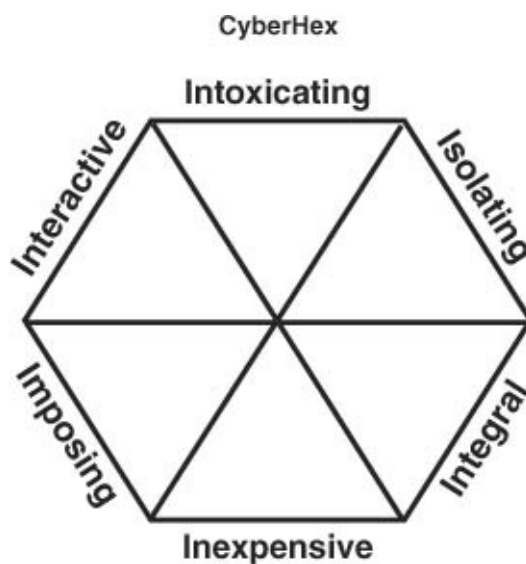


Figure 1.1

INTEGRAL

In just a few short years, the Internet has become an integral part of most people's personal and work lives. On the Internet we can acquire a home mortgage, shop for groceries, trade on the stock market, check the weather anywhere in the world, e-mail friends or business colleagues, create and conduct business, do research for school assignments, and so much more. The prices of computers and Internet access continue to fall and are within the budget for many families. What's more, the Internet is available publicly in a variety of settings (public libraries, coffee houses, and college campuses, for example) and has simply become a way of life. Such integration allows convenience, but it also makes avoidance of the Internet difficult. The more the Internet becomes a part of our lives, the more indispensable—“integral”—it becomes. The option not to use it becomes less viable.

Without the Internet, access to various forms of sex-related materials and sexual experiences has limitations. Most strip clubs and X-rated theaters are not open twenty-four hours a day. Buying a porn magazine requires walking or driving to a store that sells them, and most stores aren't open all the time either. Another limitation is distance/location. Stores, theaters, strip clubs, and areas where prostitutes ply their trade cannot be conveniently found in every neighborhood of every city, suburb, or rural community, thus requiring those who wish access to them to have time and transportation. The Internet changed all of this. It offers incredibly broad and easy access to sex of all kinds. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, anyone with the use of a computer with an Internet connection—be it at work

a cybercafé, the public library, a school, a university, or at home—can choose from literally millions of sex-related Web sites offering whatever type of sexual experience is desired.

IMPOSING

While related to the integral aspect of the Internet, this “imposing” attribute suggests that the Internet is not simply available for use on an everyday basis for a variety of reasons, but that its use is becoming more and more often a necessity. Because of the extent to which the Internet is being integrated into our lives, its use is, in a sense, being externally imposed on us by society. Ironically, while the interactive nature of the Internet offers us control over what we access, this imposing factor suggests a loss of control in that we have fewer options to decline using the Net. To understand the difference between “integral” and “imposing” let's compare the telephone and the Internet. The telephone has long played an integral role in our lives, but it has never been imposing in the sense we're speaking of with the Net. People don't habitually spend three, five, or eight hours at a time on the phone, three or more times a week—though this is not an uncommon occurrence for far too many people with the Internet.

In addition, the very breadth of the Internet's content is, in and of itself, formidable and imposing. While choice may be good in many circumstances, having too much from which to choose can be overwhelming. Think of the Internet as a Thanksgiving dinner. There are so many enticing “dishes” and “desserts” from which to choose that you want to sample every one. You know that if you do, however, you'll feel awful afterward. It's so hard to say no and despite our best efforts at control, we often overindulge. The Internet offers us so many enticing opportunities that it's difficult to decline. Soon, some people find themselves overindulging to the detriment of their health, families, relationships, and work. And still stopping seems impossible.

ISOLATING

Perhaps the most powerful component of cybersex is isolation. The Internet allows for the aforementioned intoxication to occur quickly and privately. It provides a perfect opportunity to separate yourself from others and to engage in whatever fantasy you prefer without risk of sexually transmitted infections or the distraction of reality. Previous methods of obtaining pornography involved (at a minimum) a trip to an adult bookstore or corner market. Now those same images can be obtained with the click of a mouse button and appear on the screen with absolutely no contact with the outside world, which allows the user to remain

anonymous. Separated from the outside world, users can create the justifications and rationalizations needed to convince themselves and others that their behavior is both victimless and harmless.

While on the Internet, people have no physical contact with others. Time spent on the Net is time not spent in “real time” interacting with those who are important in our lives. A fast growing complaint of men and women in couple relationships is that Net use has taken their partner away from them. The complaining partner is less and less a physical part of the using partner's life because the using partner spends so much time at the computer on the Net.

This CyberHex attribute also points to the paradoxical nature of the Internet: it separates and isolates us from others and the world as never before, while at the same time, it connects us to the world as never before.

INTERACTIVE

Unlike other forms of media, the Internet is truly interactive. Shout or cajole as we might at the faces on our television screen or at the writer of a magazine or newspaper editorial, those people cannot respond. The Internet, however, lets us interact with others and form a pseudo-intimacy with others from around the world. We guide our browsers to the location of people, and information of our choice. Some interactive sex sites allow viewers to choose the person they want to interact with and the activity that will take place. With the right equipment and software, conversations can be in real time. The Internet gives us a sense of control over what we see and receive as well as a sense of an interactive community where we belong.

INEXPENSIVE

For anyone on a budget, cybersex provides a low-cost alternative means to a sexual high. Hard-core pornography magazines run fifteen to fifty dollars each. However, for the cost of Internet access, anyone can find hundreds of photographs, stories, chat channels, and more. In addition, the user can choose to retrieve and view only the information that is of interest. There's no need, for example, to purchase an entire magazine full of mostly unwanted advertisements and articles.

Online sex: what you want, when you want it, at low cost, minus the “messiness and hassles” of a person-to-person relationship, and with anonymity. It should not be surprising that online sexual activities are exploding along with the number of people accessing and using them.

Some may believe that comparing the Internet to a drug is absurd. Individuals who use the Internet for cybersex, however, often report feeling euphoria while preparing for or engaging in cybersex. It is this “rush” that lures individuals back to cybersex after they have sworn off such behavior. The combination of all the prior facets of the CyberHex creates a powerful force that many cybersex compulsives compare to drug addicts' seduction by their substance.

The Internet also provides immediate access to a staggeringly immense information base. Live in Nebraska and want to read a German newspaper? No need to go to a bookstore to buy one (assuming you could find a bookstore that carried them). You need only jump online, and with a few clicks of the mouse, you are reading *die Zeitung*. It's even possible to log on to NASA's Web site at any time and access live video footage from space. No matter what our interest may be, we can easily and quickly find information about it on the Net. The immediate access plays directly into our society's demand to have desires gratified instantly. We want to get what we want immediately, and everything that's available on the Internet can be reached very quickly—not just information, but communication via instant messaging, chat rooms, and e-mail.

The Internet's ease of use further adds to its seductive and intoxicating nature. Surfing the Net requires only a computer and Internet access; one can find access at home, at work, at libraries, in cybercafés, and at the homes of friends and neighbors. Need a Net “fix”? Access can be quickly at hand.

Take this inherently intoxicating nature of the Net and add to it access to sex—an obviously powerful force in people's lives—and its draw is even stronger. Having the easy and immediate access the Net provides to whatever kind of sexual experiences, information, pictures, and videos you want is enormously alluring. Once online, hours can slip by unnoticed, almost as though one is in an intoxicating trance.

In addition, cybersex provides a perfect opportunity for people to develop sexual fantasies and objectify others without the fear of rejection. In fact, the CD-ROM versions of adult sexual material often let the user choose the ideal partner and ideal situation—one step beyond noninteractive magazines. The computer user may choose a partner's gender, age, hair, skin, body type, and eye color, as well as whatever sexual scenario he or she wants to engage in. Some sexual CD-ROM titles are disguised in the form of a game. Perhaps a sexual mystery must be solved or an adventure taken in which users have to solve puzzles or find

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