***Alterity and Self-Presentation via the Web:
Dialogical and Narrative Aspects of Identity Construction***

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*Abstract*

*Personal homepages of two alterity groups--disabled persons (N = 8) and gay men (N = 12)--were systematically examined. A subset of page authors (N = 8) also responded to questions about the history of and meanings associated with creating these sites on the Internet. Ethnographic and content analyses found diverse iconographies and a broad palette of shared constructional elements (N = 40) by which authors fashion their online identities. Review of site contents and author responses isolated convergent themes regarding identity online. Striking parallels were noted between these results and broad aspects of the dialogical self proposed by Hermans (1996).*

This paper brings together three significant contemporary issues in the social sciences-- ***alterity*** in personal identity***, personal home page construction*** on the Internet, and ***the dialogical self*** in psychological theory--and describes an exploratory qualitative analysis of their interaction. I argue that the very recent emergence of the World Wide Web and, particularly the personal homepage as a communications medium may significantly affect the contemporary identity construction of individuals belonging to populations at the margin of mainstream society, for example, persons with physical impairments or gay men. Web authors deploy a broad palette of common elements and address highly relevant common themes in building personal homepages online. Further, the forms by which web authors fashion their online identities and the motivations for doing so appear highly consistent with the social-psychological model of the self as dialogical. Thus, the study of homepage construction may serve to validate certain aspects of the theory of the dialogical self as well as provide better understanding of the identity of individuals among populations outside the social mainstream.

**Alterity**

Critiques of dominant culture within the industrialized, predominantly Euro-American world point to varying degrees of Otherness or **alterity** in the identity of individuals who share characteristics of marginalized, often oppressed groups. Such "Others" stand isolated both socially and, at times, physically from the majority population and are frequently denied a voice in the wider culture. Difference from the majority population expresses itself in multiple ways, e.g., socioeconomic or educational attainment, race or ethnicity, health or disability status, sexual orientation, and religious belief (Gamson, 1995; Kitchin, 1998; Sampson, 1993). Understanding the identity development of such individuals who do not share characteristics of the majority population in the West has become a difficult challenge to mainstream psychology which faces increasing pressure to demonstrate the sociocultural adequacy of its descriptive and predictive scientific claims (Guthrie, 1997; Minton, 1997; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon 1999; Strickland, 2000; Sue, 1999).

Responding to critics, the social sciences including psychology have extended their research agenda to comprehend more sensitively and authentically the lives and identities of various minority populations (Sue, Bingham, Porché-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999; Weber, 1998). Thematically, many researchers have adopted discursive and social constructivist tenets as necessary correctives to the essentialist and decontextualized perspectives of earlier analysts

(Gergen, 1985; Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, and Misra, 1996; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Howard, 1991). Methodologically, investigators have employed qualitative as well as traditional quantitative approaches by which minority populations might "tell their stories" in a more richly contexualized manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Tappan, 1997). Indeed, the emergence in some Western universities of distinctive academic programs focused upon minority group populations -- women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, disability studies, Latino or African-American Studies -- signals a maturation in efforts to understand various Others.

Research has shown that the two groups which serve as examples of alterity in this study -- **persons with physical impairments** and **gay men** -- form particularly complex and dynamic populations (Linton, 1998: Plummer, 1992; Siegel & Lowe 1994). Physical impairment and the notion of disability have begun to elicit intensive theoretical and research efforts from multiple perspectives (Davis, 1997). Stage models of identity development for disabled individuals parallel similar approaches to identity growth across various minority groups (Gill, 1997; Gilson, Tusler, & Gill, 1997; Linton, 1998). Many researchers champion phenomenological study of the experience of disability from the perspective of disabled persons themselves (Linton, 1998). Some disability analysts eschew stage theories in favor of strongly socio-political understandings of disability status (Corker & French, 1999; Marks, 1999). A well-developed body of work in this later tradition is represented in the *social model of disability* arising primarily from advocates in the United Kingdom (Barnes, 1999). Within the social model of disability, " 'impairment' [is a] biological condition, and 'disability,' society's failure to address the needs of people with perceived physical impairments" (Barnes, 1999, p. 578). The current investigation generally accepts this distinction and understands these two terms according to the social disability model.

Informed by a burgeoning attention to human sexuality generally (D'Emilio & Freeman, 1997; Longmore, 1998; Weis, 1998), social science research into homosexuality has achieved an increasingly nuanced understanding of issues such as patterns in identity development (Cass, 1984, 1996; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995) and the socio-cultural and historical matrices within which such development occurs (Chauncey, 1994; D'Emilio, 1992; Loughery, 1998; Textor, 1999). Indeed, the very meaning of the term "gay" has occasioned fierce debate, e.g., confrontations over essentialism and social constructionism in the origin of sexual orientation (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998) and the wider challenge of queer theory to the heterosexual-homosexual distinction itself (Gamson, 2000; Katz, 1996). For both disabled individuals and gays, researchers continue to document significant levels of social isolation and discrimination within both Western and non-Western settings. Again and again, commentators note that members of both subaltern populations have traditionally lived in cultural worlds which give them relatively little visibility and often block access to communications media regularly available to the "able bodied" & heterosexuals (Gamson, 1995; Herek, 1990; Linton, 1998).

### *The Internet*

"As a photographer--that was my main profession--when I picked up a 35 mm camera in the 1950s, nobody had a 35 mm camera. Now everybody has such cameras, but now they have a means to publish what they do...It reminds me of what somebody said about Gutenberg and publishing and what it did for lay authors and how there was an explosion, a flood of people who wanted to say something...there was an incredible Renaissance of thought because of that medium. I see the same thing with the Internet."

-- Michael, web author, in an interview, June, 2000

Jack: Well there's not much I'm gonna forget about that conversation, it was a
      first for me.
Ethan: (surprised) It was your first time talking to another gay kid?
Jack: Yeah, well, unless you count the Internet.
Ethan: (laughs) I- I don't.

--Dawson's Creek (Episode #311, January 12, 2000)

The past decade brought a pivotal shift in the means by which individuals communicate with each other. Some suggest the change is comparable in its effects to those introduced by the printing press or the telephone. During the 1990s the Internet (Net) and the World Wide Web (WWW) in particular emerged as a popular medium of communication capable of reaching across continents and national boundaries (Berners-Lee, 1999). The recency of this medium is pronounced: although the precursor to the Internet, the US military- & research-based ARPANET,

was assembled in 1969, the actual idea for the WWW itself was first advanced publicly by Berners-Lee and his colleagues only in 1989 and the first practical web browser, NCSA Mosaic, appeared just seven years ago in 1993 (Jordan, 1999). To a large extent, the explosive growth of the overall Internet reflects the pervasive spread of the WWW together with its distinctive characteristics: virtually unlimited numbers of individual multimedia pages employing hypertextual links and easily modifiable and extensible in reasonably short periods of time by individual or corporate authors (Chandler, 1998).

   As the Internet moves toward an almost universal presence at least within the developed world, the nature of that presence and of the Internet itself has been the subject of broad discussion and characterization. The US politician, Al Gore, employed the metaphorical term **information superhighway** repeatedly in the early 1990s. He suggested a parallel between the role of the Internet in an emerging knowledge-based economy at the century's end and the extensive federal highway system developed for the commercial goods economy of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (Gore, 1993, 1994). While commentators often cite the highway metaphor, Stefik (1996) argues that there are at least four other widely-used metaphors to represent the Net: a **digital library** which publishes and archives the community's memory, an **electronic marketplace** for the selling of goods and services, **electronic mail** as a medium of communications, and **multiple digital worlds** which function as "gateways to experience." Underlying these metaphors, Stefik (1996) suggests, are the classical archetypal figures of humans as, respectively, *knowers* (Prometheus); *traders*, *bargainers*, and "*tricksters*"; *communicators;* and, *wanderers* (Odysseus).

   Absent from Stefik's (1996) review is a particularly apt construct which Nardi and O'Day (1999) have more recently suggested: the Internet as one among other **information ecologies**, "a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment. In information ecologies, the spotlight is ... on human activities that are served by technology" (Nardi & O'Day, 1999, p. 50). Such an ecology comprises "a complex *system* of parts and relationships. It exhibits *diversity* and experiences continual evolution. Different parts of an ecology *coevolve*, changing together according to the relationships in the system. Several *keystone species* necessary to the survival of the ecology are present. Information ecologies have a sense of locality" (Nardi & O'Day, 1999, p. 50; italics in the original). Erickson (1999) has proposed a similar notion by which to understand text-based conversations via a computer-mediated communication (CMC) system: digital conversations represent particular forms of a situated *genre* and the "CMC system as a whole ... may be viewed as an ecology of conversational genres." Applied to the Internet, the ecological concept captures the variegation and interdependence of its components and the continual dynamic change which marks its functioning. Further, the idea of the Net as a human-generated ecology is deeply suggestive of the classical philosophical archetype of the human person as the *political animal* (politikon zôion) inherently joined and contributing to the social life of the community (koinônia or polis).

   For many disabled and gay individuals, the social invisibility discussed previously may be dissipating. Commentators have begun to note the development of distinctive voices of alterity in cyberspace--the presence of individuals whose identity had previously been mostly hidden from public notice "in real life" (Chandler, 1998; Hevern, 1999; Lillie, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Weinrich, 1997). The dialogue above between two gay teenage characters in the popular US television program, *Dawson's Creek*, hints at a wider cultural appreciation of the emerging role of the Net in the lives of Others. But, when many early investigators began to study the relationship between personal or social identity and use of the Net, they tended to look at patterns of social interaction and self-presentation by generic or typical users within both synchronous (e.g., Multi-User Dungeons, Dimensions or Domains [MUDs] and Internet Relay Chat [IRC] channels) and asynchronous (e.g., Usenet and Listserv Discussion Groups) Net environments (Curtis, 1996; Danet, 1998; Jordan, 1999; Markham, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). Attention to expressions of alterity on the Net has often been submerged by a concern to describe a more general user.

   Limited research efforts have indicated that use of the Net by members of alterity groups involves issues of socialization, identity development, and overall well-being. For example, Borchert (1998) reviews the potential of both the Net generally and the WWW in particular to bridge the social, educational, and vocational isolation of individuals with physical disabilities, but cautions that significant policy issues relating to universal Internet availability and social rights of communication must first be addressed. Similarly, Mitra (1997) has noted the important informational and social roles played by the Net via self-help groups among disabled participants and the increasing availability of information regarding disability to general audiences. In a literature survey of CMC and disability status, Fox (2000) details a variety of benefits (and some

disadvantages) associated with such computer use; she particularly highlights the availability of resources on the WWW for people with disabilities, the advantages of CMC over face-to-face communications, and the use of self-help/mutual aid groups found online. Note that Fox (2000) makes no mention of the role of personal homepages. An especially pointed caution was raised by Davison, Pennebaker, and Dickerson (2000) about the use of the Net by individuals with physical illness: "Internet forums represent a new hybrid for participants in which size is large but quality is largely unknown. People suffering from illness benefit from social support. If Internet use is a substitute for actual emotional support, then patients may be engaging in shallow forms of exchange when more substantial ties could be built face-to-face, to the peril of both psychosocial and physical well-being." Again, no mention was made by these authors of the WWW as a venue for physically-impaired or physically-ill persons.

In a forceful report, Weinrich (1997) argues that "the gay community has taken to the Internet as if the two had originally been designed for each other" (p. 58). Summarizing a set of interviews with gay Internet users and others, he attributes this phenomenon to a range of factors: for example, high proportions of gay men (and lesbians) in the computer industry, the nearness of Silicon Valley to the gay-affirming San Francisco, the potential for gay participants to form a social majority in various virtual communities, and the attraction of computers for socially-isolated gay adolescents. Shaw (1997) details his participant-observer study of twelve gay men using the #gaysex channel of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a text-based, synchronous mode of Internet communication. He explains the ways in which gay men find their way onto this IRC channel -- mostly by world of mouth -- and the centrality of encountering other gay men initially in a virtual context and, afterwards for many, in real life. He found the text produced by these gay users "replete with *homosexual desire* and *homosexual need*" (emphasis in the original) and concludes that "the uniqueness of #gaysex lies in the fact that it presents an opportunity for gay men, who often go through life hiding this most vital aspect of their identity, to try on this real identity" (p. 144).

Among multiple online formats, the WWW personal homepage appears to have received relatively little research attention despite its growing importance among majority as well as alternative communities. Analysts have only recently begun to characterize the structure and role of personal homepages. For example, Erickson (1995) suggests that the WWW functions as "social hypertext" and judges that "[p]ersonal pages and the world wide web are not being used to 'publish information;' they are being used to construct identity--useful information is just a side effect. A personal page is a carefully constructed portrayal of a person." Daniel Chandler (1998) offers a detailed analysis of the generic personal homepage: as an asynchronous medium of  personal presentation and (potentially) mass communication, web pages of individuals share many characteristics of textually-based media such as letters and diaries as well as more broadly circulated media such as magazine advertising. Unlike many media, though, web pages can be constantly and easily revised, a characteristic particularly appropriate to the self-presentation of a dynamically changing personal identity. Chandler (1998) makes use of Levi-Strauss's notion of **bricolage** in describing what authors ("bricoleurs") do with their personal web pages: "adopting and adapting borrowed material from the public domain of the Web in the process of fashioning personal and public identities." In an extension of genre theory to personal web pages, Chandler (1998) further details a set of common themes, formulaic structures, and technical features of such pages--a "palette of conventional paradigmatic elements" by which authors build a virtual identity online.

### The Self

An appreciation of the role of the personal homepage in the identity construction of web authors challenges researchers to deploy an adequate theory of that self whose identity is under construction. Yet, many analysts of the Net have approached this task as representatives of scholarly disciplines which do not regularly examine the self or do so with limited appreciation of previous psychological findings (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Further, interest in the nature of the self online has focused almost exclusively on self-presentation within varying types of virtual communities such as MUDs or discussion lists (e.g., Turkle, 1995, 1997). For example, Turkle's (1995) influential study argues that online participants in MUDs and similar communities engage in extensive role playing within the safety of an anonymous virtual reality and often adopt or "try on" a broad variety of alternative selves in such environments. A specific form of such role playing which has attracted voluminous scholarly attention has been "gender bending" within such text-based virtual communities--the appropriation of an alternative gender identity and its performance across time within that community (see Danet, 1998, for an extensive review of this

phenomenon). As Jordan (1999) explains "people are capable of creating different identities online to offline that are stable and seem to have a life of their own" (p. 67).

Markham's (1998) ethnographic analysis of users of MUDs, MOOs (multi-user object-oriented domains), and IRC argues for three distinctive levels of self-involvement within virtual communities. These forms of engagement, she claims, mirror how the self processes experience more generally: participants employ the Net as (1) an information *tool*, as (2) a virtual *place* in which to explore and meet other people, or as (3) a *way of being* (Markham, 1998). Markham also noted the importance for users directly to control the nature and extent of self-presentation online and the relatively disembodied manner in which selves function within primarily text-based environments. Both Turkle (1995) and Markham (1998) express a certain pessimism about the potential of the Internet to offer a satisfactory alternative to life experience off-line: "The Internet is…beguiling in that it makes us believe we have found something good enough. It is a Band-Aid for some, a prosthetic for others. But as good as it feels, as real as it is--cybersex, a virtual massage, living through language, controlling the self--I believe these pleasures cannot suffice in a world that must still be lived through the body in the physical dimension" (Markham, 1998, p. 229).

Apart from these findings, no general approach to the self within the context of the Internet seems to dominate the scholarly discourse of the last decade. The way lies clear, then, to suggest that cyber-research might profitably consider contemporary but relatively unexplored psychological approaches to the self. Certain themes have emerged from past Net research which echo various components in current personality theory (Figueroa-Sarriera, 1999; Holmes, 1997): multiplicity of personae or voices in self-presentation, identity as a dynamic construction, the problem of embodiment, the socio-cultural background of Net users, and the ubiquity of personal story and histories in cyberspace. These factors and others descriptive of online activity appear congruent prima facie with a number of dynamic postmodern understandings of the self (e.g., see Baumeister, 1997; McAdams, 1997; Rosenberg, 1997).

In a series of papers (Hermans, 1992, 1996; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992; Hermans, Rijks, & Kempen, 1993), Hermans and his colleagues have proposed a comprehensive theory of the self which seems capable of  addressing many aspects of individuals found in Internet-based research. The concept of the **dialogical self** builds upon a century of research findings and social and psychological theorizing, e.g., James's "I-Me" distinction; Mead's social self; dramaturgical, role, schema, and systems theories; contemporary narrative approaches to the self; social constructionism; and, literary theories especially Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and the polyphonic novel (Hermans, 1996). The most comprehensive definition for the dialogical self holds that:

> "In line with the polyphonic metaphor and its implication of spatialized dialogue, *Hermans et al. (1992)* conceptualized the self in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous *I* positions in an imaginal landscape. In this conception, the *I* has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The *I* fluctuates among different and even opposed positions and has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each of them has a story to tell about his or her own experiences from his or her own stance. As different voices, these characters exchange information about their respective *Me's*, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self." (Hermans, 1996)

Common attributes of the dialogical self which seem to be particularly relevant to this analysis include seeing the self as (a)

1. **Spatially organized**: the self occupies and moves about an imaginary space (Hermans et al., 1992)

2. **Narratively structured (temporally organized)**: the self as a narrator moves through and accounts for experience in time by means of stories (Hermans, 1996)

3. **Motivated Storyteller**: the self expresses motivation in the telling of stories (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

4. **Embodied**: the self is grounded in the physical world rather than disembodied or functioning as a purely rationalistic or Cartesian mind (Hermans et al., 1992).

5. **Social** and **Multivoiced**: "other people occupy positions in the multivoiced self" (Hermans et al., 1992) where multivocality describes a relative autonomy for the voices occupying those positions: " A position is like another person in the self, with his or her own voiced or voiceable perspective. This implies that each position is endowed with the agentlike qualities of the *I* and functions as an original center of organization in the self" (Hermans, 1996).

Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) elaborate the notion of motivation by pointing to the role of valuation in the theory of the dialogical self. Always positioned in specific spatio-temporal contexts, oriented to the future, and engaged in processes of ongoing self-reflection, individuals consistently generate **valuations**, "any unit of meaning that has a positive (pleasant), negative (unpleasant), or ambivalent (both pleasant and unpleasant) value in the eyes of the self-reflecting individual" (p. 15). According to valuation theory, two basic motives underlie all such valuations: the **S-motive** (Self) which concerns *self-enhancement* and the **O-motive** (Other) which seeks *contact and union with the other* (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

In sum, the self conceived as dialogical displays a number of distinctive characteristics which, if they are valid, should be manifest in the behavior of individuals across multiple contexts. The current investigation seeks to explore and detail the congruence between the constructive work of web page authoring and this understanding of the self. In doing so, I hope to identify both commonalities and divergences in the online expression of identity by individuals from the distinctive sociocultural communities under review.

## Method

**Participants**. Individuals with physical impairments and gay men formed the subjects of this research. Though disability may arise from many sources, this study focuses upon web pages authored by individuals with one of three forms of physical impairment: traumatic brain injury (TBI), acquired brain injury (ABI), or spinal cord injury (SCI). The difference between TBI and ABI is the manner of the injury: TBI is normally acquired by a forceful blow to the central nervous system (CNS) while ABI, a more generic term, is usually applied to injury resulting from non-traumatic causes, especially through bacterial and viral infection or the expression of a genetically-caused deterioration in the CNS. Among the eight participants in the disability group, four experienced TBI, three SCI, and one ABI. Six are male and two female. Authors in the other group include 12 males: eleven describe themselves as exclusively or predominantly "gay," "homosexual," or "queer" and one identifies himself as consistently "bisexual" with a ratio of 60:40 in his attraction to men versus women <http://members.tripod.com/icezone/ponderings/ponder1.htm>. Based upon site-reported data and estimates, participants ranged in age from 20 to 58 (the mean age was 32.0 years [$\underline{SD}$ = 11.4 years]). The two groups showed distinctive age differences: the mean age of gay site authors was 25.1 years ($\underline{SD}$ = 5.2 years) while that of disability site authors was 42.3 years ($\underline{SD}$ = 10.5 years).

**Data Collection**. The data reported here were generated through qualitative data collection and analysis procedures in two stages (Creswell, 1998, Wolcott, 1994).

**Stage 1**. In the first stage--a form of digital ethnography--I examined the WWW homepages of twenty individuals across the two groupings during 14 months, March, 1999 - May, 2000 (see Table 1 next page). In most cases I employed the "Save as Web Archive" function of the web

**Table 1**
***Sites & URLs***

*Disability Sites*[a]
  **Bruce's Brain Injury Homepage**      <http://homepages.go.com/~wbrjr/wbrjr.html>
  **Jim Lubin's Homepage**  <http://www.eskimo.com/~jlubin>
  **Mark for Life**      <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/markrobinson29/>
  **New Beginnings: Survivors of Brain Injury** <http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/Spa/4095/>
  **News From the Edge: J. Michael Kanouff**   <http://from-the-edge.net/>
  **Rob's Place of Rest and Peace**        <http://www.dnc.net/users/rlmiller/>
  **Spinalcord.com: Werkin' Fer the Cure**        <http://www.spinalcordcam.com/>

**TBI Social Network**          <http://www.angelfire.com/ca/kktbisocialnetwork/>

*Gay Sites*[b]

**The A3 Experience** (The Brat Prince) <http://207.168.107.51/triplea/>[c]
**Bryan's Place on the Web**       <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Chelsea/6553/>
**Chaos in Austin & Fotojournal** <http://www.chaosinaustin.com/>
**The Ice Zone V2**  <http://members.tripod.com/icezone/>
**Inside: Patrick's Daily Journal** <http://www.spies.com/~xingcat/inside.html>
**Justin's Life** & **Justin's Koool Page**    <http://www.koool.com/>
**The Living Contradiction**          <http://www.desidono.com/>[c]
**Thatboy**    <http://www.btinternet.com/~thatboy/>
**Tyboi's Page: The College Years**       <http://members.xoom.com/tnsonline/index.html>
**Jase Paul Wells Homepage**       <http://www.jasewells.com/index.html>
**The Wild Rover's Home on the Web**  <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Village/1588/>
**Zup's Realm of Stuff**     <http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Dungeon/5048/>

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Notes. [a] Authors of these sites have experienced traumatic brain injury (TBI), acquired brain injury (ABI), or spinal cord injury (SCI).

[b] Authors of these sites describe themselves as gay with the exception of *The Ice Zone*'s author who describes himself as "bisexual" with a "60:40" ratio of attraction of men to women.

[c] Site is no longer active or available online as of 16 June 2000.

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browser, Microsoft® Internet Explorer® 4.5 Macintosh Edition, in order to preserve the materials for later analysis.

These sites were chosen from among pages which were listed at an online resource site I maintain entitled *The Personal Documentary Center* <http://home.earthlink.net/~hevern/index.html> and described in an earlier paper (Hevern, 1999). Thus, this sample does not represent a random selection from these populations and I do not argue that my results should generalize to either population. Rather, as an exploratory study of web page authors -- a group generally ignored in past research -- I sought to achieve a preliminary foothold toward understanding such authoring and its psychological implications. I systematically examined these homepages to identify general and specific format or presentation elements by which authors constructed their pages. This analysis extended the earlier findings of Chandler (1998) previously cited. Through content analysis, I also identified recurrent themes which were voiced by these authors. During this time, I had no direct contact with them via letter, phone, or email.

***Stage 2***. In the second stage, I contacted all web page authors via email and invited them to discuss with me the role of the Internet and their web page activities in their lives. More specifically, I offered to interview these authors in one of three formats: direct telephone contact, email, or IRC. Ten authors (seven gay and three physically-disabled) responded affirmatively to the invitation and one gay author declined to participate because of "lack of time." Each respondent was presented with five general questions:

1. What led you originally to put together a personal home page on the Web?

2. What about now? What does it still mean to you to have a personal home page?

3. According to your web page, you describe yourself as having a physically disability (or, as gay). What are your thoughts about how having a physical disability (or, being gay) may have influenced or been influenced by your home page or the Internet in general?

4. What do you foresee will happen with your home page and your use of the Net in the next year or two? If you have any, what might be your on-line plans and what do expect to achieve by them?

5. How do you think your "real life" and your "on-line life" compare? Are they similar or not?

Five gay and three disabled authors completed responses to these questions. One disabled author did so via a telephone interview while the remaining seven participants used email. Two gay authors failed to complete responses to the questions which they originally agreed to answer.

All respondents were willing to allow their first name or already-used web pseudonym to be used to identify them.

**Ethical Concerns**. The ethical implications of research within cyberspace have only recently begun to receive attention (Frankel & Siang, 1999; King, 1996; Libutti, 1999). Indeed, the Office for Protection from Research Risks of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has not yet issued guidelines to help researchers and institutional review boards (IRBs) sort through the ethical requirements of Net-based research (Frankel & Siang, 1999) and an appropriate method by which to secure informed consent is not immediately evident (Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999). At Le Moyne College, research involving human subjects is exempt from review by our IRB if it involves "… the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available" (IV. A. 2 of the local school guidelines, *Institutional Review Board Policies & Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects*, June, 1996). Gathering materials from publicly-posted web pages may be compared to the work of an historian in consulting similarly available autobiographies or memoirs of authors who make their personal stories available in printed form to the general public. Thus, I judged it unnecessary to obtain consent from web page authors in connection with the first stage of this research. However, for the second stage, I explained the nature of my research in an emailing to each potential participant and offered to identify respondents only by pseudonym. These procedures were judged adequate by the Le Moyne College IRB in allowing participants to give informed consent for researcher-solicited data as well as to maintain anonymity and privacy.

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**Results**

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*Constructing the Personal Web Page: Formal Aspects*. Analysis of the web pages in this study revealed a striking complexity to the ways by which individuals deploy textual, graphic, and other elements to create a personal presence in cyberspace. Review of web page content suggested that the materials found there may be distinguished most broadly under two general (and, somewhat, overlapping) categories: *iconography* and *constructional elements*. **Iconography** refers to the general "look and feel" of a web site. More specifically, this notion involves *the design and design elements of a site as a whole including the color schemes, background images, and technical features which create an overall impression in the mind of the browser*. Some pages are relatively unsophisticated, designed with plain backgrounds, and coded in straightforward hypertext markup language. Yet, other pages demonstrate very advanced levels of graphical design and technical sophistication. For example, the *Jase Pittman Wells Homepage* is a visually stunning *tour de force* by an experienced computer designer. Similarly, *The Ice Zone V2* incorporates Macromedia's Flash, a visual and sound technology, to create an striking welcome to the site and its major focus, an ongoing web fictional story, "Storm Front". The materials posted at *Chaos in Austin & Fotojournal* by another professional web page designer powerfully combine both visual (multiple-level montage photography) and technical elements (Macromedia Flash, Javascript "rollovers") in a way that serves to maintain high levels of anticipation in a browser who explores this site.

It is noticeable that the most developed iconography within this sample is found at sites by gay authors. Though the research literature is ambivalent about the relationship between artistic inclination and gay identity (Demb, 1992), it is reasonable to suppose that the high iconographic level serves identity construction motives of their creators. For some it may affirm the personal expertise which was required for the site's composition. For others, there may be personal meanings attached to the iconographic scheme itself. The author of *Justin's Life*, for example, comments specifically on the use of antique photographs of young adult men in the background of his site's pages: "My life is like their lives, only mine's taking place several decades later. In the newness of our 'now' society, we hardly ever realize that our lives have commonalities with those who lived long ago. Believe it or not, we are not the first guys to ever be gay…They represent me, and I represent them, even though our lives never crossed and our time here on earth probably didn't overlap. That's amazing…" <http://www.justinslife.com/99jun.html#June11> Beyond specific motivations, high levels of iconography clearly represent a significant commitment of personal time and creativity by the page's developer which an audience browsing that site could hardly fail to recognize.

The second general category of web page content involves **constructional elements** which are defined generically as *relatively discrete or bounded forms or devices which communicate with or convey information to web page browsers*. Employing genre theory, Chandler (1998) uses the term "formulaic structure" to designate similar components of personal homepages. But, the current

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analysis discovered that the scope and number of separate formulaic items is far broader than Chandler (1998) reports. Forty constructional elements were isolated from the sample pages and were classified within four taxonomic subcategories (Table 2, next page):

1. **Textual** ($N$ = 21) -- elements which are primarily text-based but may include visual images or other elements in a supplementary relationship to the text;

2. **Graphical** ($N$ = 9) -- elements which are primarily visual in nature though they may be accompanied by textual comments;

3. **Auditory** ($N$ = 2) -- elements which primarily employ sound; and,

4. **Interactive** ($N$ = 8) -- elements of diverse form which primarily are meant to encourage contact between the web author and browsers, or among browsers themselves.

The placement of some items within a specific subcategory may be debatable and no claim is made that this listing of 40 items is exhaustive. Very likely there are further elements already employed by other web page authors and new elements will be added as the ecology of the Web evolves. Indeed, one element in the current list, **Erotic Writing**, was absent from any of the pages in this study, but initially reported because it appears within at least one personal homepage at *The Personal Documentary Center* web site. It was included to discover whether it might appear among any of the pages reviewed for this study.

Specific constructional elements need some comment. These authors frequently chose to highlight aspects of either gay identity or physical disability more sharply than other elements in their personal histories. Thus, on most gay and all disability sites, authors narrated either a **Coming Ou**t or **Disability or Illness Story** regardless of whatever other autobiographical data were included. This is not surprising in the context of research showing the importance of such narratives to gay men (Gonsiorek, 1995; Vargo, 1998) and disabled persons (Frank, 1995; Gill, 1997). **Autobiographical statements** themselves took many different forms, e.g., brief statements of identifying data, personal goal statements, brief personal histories and descriptions of interests such as the Boy Scouts or role-playing games, affirmations of religious belief, and, in the case of *The A3 Experience*, a somewhat unflattering personality description by a friend accompanied by the web author's commentary. **Editorial Writings** were broad in topical concern, but tended to complement the author's personal identity closely: for example, political and social commentaries by an academically-talented upper-division college student (*Bryan's Place on the Web*), movie and television reviews by an aspiring author (*The Ice Zone V2*), an essay on what it means to be gay by someone who believes strongly in supporting other gay men (*Justin's Koool Page*), and a description of surviving the accident and ongoing treatment for traumatic brain injury by someone who reaches out to other TBI survivors  (*New Beginnings*). In contrast, **Informational (Nonfiction) Writings** illustrated varying levels of technical expertise, for example, the Safe Sex/HIV Information subpage at *The Wild Rover's Home on the Web* or the details of "what it is like to be a C-4 quad" at *Spinalcordcam.Com*.

Table 3 details the distribution of constructional elements across web sites as well as a breakdown by their authors' alterity status. These data point to a striking diversity in the elements used by web authors--an average of 10.2 elements per site (11.4 elements at gay sites and 8.4 elements at disability sites) and a resulting complexity to many sites. Two differences between gay and disability pages demand some notice. First, a difference in the prevalence of *Online Journals or Diaries* is an artifact produced by the non-random sampling used in this report. *The Personal Documentary Center* web resource from which these sites were drawn was originally assembled to illustrate specific types of autobiographical data sources online (Hevern, 1999) and that resource's collection of gay and lesbian sites includes a disproportionate percentage with journals or diaries. A majority of these gay sites included **Erotic or Sensual Images** which were absent from disability sites. These images involve a broad set of subjects: personal photographs of the author and friends in various clothed or unclothed states (*The A3 Experience*), favorite celebrities or advertising models (*Tyboi's Page: The College Years*), sensual romantic images of other males (*Bryan's Place on the Web*), and sexually-explicit photographs (*Jase Paul Wells Homepage, The Living Contradiction*). Web authors with sexually-oriented materials generally place these images on separate sub-pages with warnings about the type of content browsers will encounter if they move onto these pages.

**Table 2**
*Web Page Constructional Elements*

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Textual*** | *Elements which are primarily text-based but may include visual images or other elements in a supplementary relationship to the text.* |
| **Autobiographical Statements** | Materials (other than the distinctive autobiographical elements described below) by which web authors describe themselves and their personal histories. |
| **Coming Out Story** | Personal narrative by which author describes the development of a consciousness of same-sex attraction and how that author acknowledged and acted upon that consciousness with self and others. |
| **CV (Curriculum Vitae) or Resumé** | Systematic presentation of author's education and work experiences. |
| **Disability or Illness Story** | A narrative detailing how the individual became ill or acquired the physical limitation at the core of the disability, the immediate aftermath, and the longer-term experiences of rehabilitation or adaptation. |
| **Editorial Writing** | Statements of opinion about topics of public interest, e.g., legislation. |
| **Erotic Writing** | Fictional writing which is primarily descriptive of romantic relationships or sexual experiences. |
| **Fiction/Fantasy Writing** | Fictional writing, often involving science fiction as a genre, which is primarily non-erotic in content. |
| **Informational (Nonfiction) Writing** | Writings which seek to impart professional or paraprofessional information to other browsers but which do not serve as exemplars in support of the author's career aspirations. |
| **Life Writing** | Writings, especially essays, which discuss some aspect of the author's personal life but not as a part of an ongoing journal or diary. |
| **Links: Family & Friends** | Hyptertext links to sites (or email addresses of) family members and friends. |
| **Links: Favorites** | Hypertext links to sites reflective of the author's preferred activities and interests, e.g., entertainment, avocations, etc. |
| **Links: Journals & Diaries** | Hypertext links to journals or diaries of other web page authors. Sometimes annotated and headed "what I am reading" |
| **Links: Organizations & Resources** | Hypertext links to professional/service organizations or informational/topical resources |
| **Links: Personal Homepages** | Hypertext links to the home pages of others where the focus is not upon a journal or a personal narrative. Sometimes accompanied by photographs of the other authors. |
| **Links: Personal Narratives** | Hypertext links to sites where others who share similar traits or experiences tell their own stories |
| **Online Journal or Diary** | An ongoing commentary about what the author experiences or thinks about in daily life and written at more or less regular intervals. |
| **Personal Preference Inventories** | Lists of author's preferences (likes and dislikes), e.g., favorite movies, foods |
| **Poetry** | Verse. |
| **Professional Writing/Presentation** | Writings or other textual copy which emphasize the author's professional or paraprofessional expertise. These may include multimedia and serve as exemplars for possible employment. |
| **Recognition: Newspaper, Magazine, or Online Article** | A copy of or link to an article in a newspaper, magazine, or online citation for which the web page author was the subject of the writing by someone else. |
| **Travelogue/Journey Story** | Extensive description (more than a couple of sentences) of experiences and places visited during travel. |

Table 2 Continued

***Graphical***        *Elements which are primarily visual in nature though they may be accompanied by textual comments*

| **Awards & Recognitions** | Banners and small graphic images which represent awards or recognitions by other web authors or organizations for the quality of the work at the homepage. |
|---|---|
| **Home Page Banner** | Small graphic image which identifies the homepage of the web author. |
| **Images: Erotic or Sensual** | Photographs or other portrayals of individuals which display either erotic content or emphasize the physical display of the human body. |
| **Images : Non-Erotic** | Photographs or other portrayals which are non-erotic in content |
| **Links: Web Rings** | Graphical icon of and hypertextual links to a webring, i.e., a voluntary collaborative association of WWW sites with a common theme or focus. |
| **Personal Photographs: Self, Family, Friends, & Pets** | Photographs of the web author, members of the author's family of origin, friends of the author "in real life," and pets. |
| **Photographs: Internet Friends** | Photographic images of individuals whom the web author knows primarily from contact via the Internet, e.g., other web pages, IRC, ICQ, or email. |
| **Portfolio (Graphic Design)** | Collection of materials created by the web author which are principally graphic in nature. Sometimes oriented toward employment but may be included as a matter of personal pride. |
| **Web Cam** | System by which camera(s) capture images in the personal (usually home) environment of the web author which are transmitted to web browsers in real time. |

***Auditory***        *Elements which primarily employ sound*

| **Recorded Sounds** | Recorded materials such as songs, television soundtracks, etc. which may be of varying lengths, but do not include the author's own voice |
|---|---|
| **Sound: Personal Statements** | Recorded greetings or other statement by the web's author |

***Interactive***        *Elements of diverse forms which are meant primarily to encourage contact between the web author and browsers or among browsers themselves.*

| **Chat Room/Message Board** | Facility by which web browsers can leave messages for and engage in conversations with other browsers and the web author either synchronously (chat rooms) or asynchronously (message board). |
|---|---|
| **Contact Addresses** | Listing of addresses or means by which browsers might contact the web author. These may include email, ICQ numbers, chat rooms & handles, postal addresses, and telephone or FAX numbers. |
| **Guestbook** | Facility by which visitors to a web site can leave messages and personal data for the web author by filling out a form. These messages are usually available to other browsers to read through. Personal data may include name, email address, and personal homepage URL. |
| **Mailing List** | Facility by which web browsers can subscribe to an email-based distribution list in order to obtain information from the web author's site, e.g., regarding site updates, additions to the site. |
| **Online Survey or Poll** | Facility by which browsers may vote or respond to questions posed by the web author. |
| **Q & A Board** | Web author requests questions from browsers and answers them publicly in a separate subpage of the site. |
| **Repository for Others' Writing** | Materials produced by others which the web author hosts on site. |
| **Topical PSAs (Public Service Announcements)** | A graphical banner or iconic element which serves to highlight a problem or position endorsed by the web-site creator. Normally these PSAs serve as hypertext buttons directing browsers to other sites. |

**Table 3**
*Distribution of Constructional Elements across Web Sites*

| Elements | Gay Sites | Disability Sites | Combined |
|---|---|---|---|
| | N = 12 | N = 8 | N = 20 |
| **Textual** | | | |
| Autobiographical Statements | 11 | 2 | 13 |
| Online Journal or Diary | 11 | 1 | 12 |
| Links: Family & Friends | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| Personal Preference Inventories | 8 | 1 | 9 |
| Coming Out Story | 8 | | 8 |
| Disability or Illness Story | | 8 | 8 |
| Links: Organizations & Resources | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Links: Journals & Diaries | 6 | | 6 |
| Editorial Writing | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Links: Favorites | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Links: Personal Homepages | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| CV or Resumé | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Informational (Nonfiction) Writing | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Poetry | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Professional Writing-Presentation | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Recognition: Newspaper, Magazine…Article | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Fiction/Fantasy Writing | 1 | | 1 |
| Life Writing | 1 | | 1 |
| Links: Personal Narratives | | 1 | 1 |
| Travelogue/Journey Story | 1 | | 1 |
| Erotic Writing | | | 0 |
| **Graphical** | | | |
| Personal Photographs: Self, Family, … | 9 | 6 | 15 |
| Links: Web Rings | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| Images: Erotic or Sensual | 7 | | 7 |
| Home Page Banner | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Photographs: Internet Friends | 3 | | 3 |
| Web Cam | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Awards & Recognitions | | 2 | 2 |
| Images: Non-Erotic | | 1 | 1 |
| Portfolio (Graphic Design) | 1 | | 1 |
| **Auditory** | | | |
| Recorded Sounds | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Sound: Personal Statements | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Interactive** | | | |
| Contact Addresses | 12 | 8 | 20 |
| Guestbook | 7 | 4 | 11 |
| Repository for Others' Writings | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Mailing List | 4 | | 4 |
| Chat Room/Message Board | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Online Surveys-Polls | 2 | | 2 |
| Topical PSAs | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Q & A Board | 1 | | 1 |
| Number of Elements per Site:    *Mean* | 11.4 | 8.4 | |
| *SD* | 3.7 | 3.7 | |

The diversity of constructional elements permits authors to share a virtually endless inventory of personal materials with browsers on the Net. As the capabilities of the WWW expand almost relentlessly, authors face few limits on what they can offer as aspects of their self-presentation: the homepage can distribute visual images (either static photographs or moving image displays via web cams or "streaming video" technologies) as easily as textually descriptive materials.

Though the forms of web page construction cannot currently communicate some aspects of embodied life (e.g., sensory experiences of smell, taste or touch) the presence of auditory and complex visual media on these web pages moves them beyond simple text-based environments. Increasingly authors' past and present lives are embodied online in multiple sensory formats.

The formal complexity illustrated here points to the issue of **spatial representation** within individual web pages as well as the WWW more generally. Individual sites normally contain a collection of multiple sub-pages connected via hypertext links in complex horizontal and vertical hierarchies. In some instances, the sheer size of the online materials is vast, for example, three of the downloaded web sites in this analysis involved 7.4 megabytes (Mb; *The A3 Experience*), 7.1 Mb (*The Living Contradiction*), and 6.2 Mb (*Inside: Patrick's Daily Journal*). From another perspective, some web sites require complex online organization for many years of posted materials, for example, *Justin's Life* contains hundreds of entries in an online journal published since January 23, 1995. Web authors generally create order by using a base or "home" page from which browsers move to examine or experience the various elements comprising the overall site on other pages. These sites also ranged upward in complexity to the point where five page authors spread their online self-presentation across multiple computer servers. *Chaos in Austin & Fotojournal*, *Justin's Life & Justin's Koool Page*, *Jase Paul Wells Homepage*, *Jim Lubin's Homepage*, and *New Beginnings: Survivors of Brain Injury* demonstrate the phenomenon of a collectivity of related personal sites which I call a **home page melange**.

Web sites, thus, have a pronounced *spatial organization* albeit one communicated within the confines of a computer screen. The underlying construct governing this hypertextual environment is essentially spatial. "Cyberspace," the term coined first by William Gibson in his fictional 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and subsequently adapted by John Perry Barlow to describe the real computer network of the Internet, resonates with both real and imaginal qualities of space (Jordan, 1999). Between individual computers online space may disappear and cyberspace assume its usual role as an imaginal "in-between-ness" as reported by so many Internet users. Nonetheless, browsers generally employ spatial reasoning analogously as they enter individual web sites.

Detailed examination of these formal constructional elements can be summarized by a number of general conclusions: *first*, authors have an extensive and sophisticated palette of materials by which to construct web pages; *secondly*, a strong narrative or story-telling component is evident among the formal elements employed in personal page development; *thirdly*, constructional elements allow authors to incorporate the presence and voices of others on their personal pages, *fourthly*, site construction inherently imposes spatial considerations in the organization and use of constructional elements and, *finally*, the deployment of so many formal elements and the sometimes high level of site iconography points to effortful commitment by page authors to their assembly and maintenance.

**Constructing the Personal Web Page: Thematic Content and Author Responses.** The content of these sites is broad and various. But, common ideas and topics are evident in the materials author assemble, write, or post online. Many of these ideas were also present in the responses authors gave to the questions I submitted for their review. Additionally, by focusing their attention on the purposes for their web activities in Stage II questions, ideas surfaced which were not initially found from online data. Nine general themes were isolated from these sources:

1. Personal web pages give authors a better sense of self-understanding and personal efficacy. Though these pages may be read by anyone, some authors describe that part of their motivation for crafting a personal homepage involved personal reasons, particularly coming to a better sense of what they feel, think, sense, or desire. At the same time, homepages also give their authors a sense of achievement or personal satisfaction by which to better cope with demands of daily life. Bryan (*Bryan's World on the Net*) expressed this outcome by noting: "the Internet and the ability to publish my journal in an open yet protected atmosphere has been a Godsend to my mental health. (By mental health, I mean a sense of well being, raised self-confidence, and less fear of being found out)." Similarly, Karen K. (*The TBI Social Network*) chided me gently by commenting: "you haven't asked me something that I consider to be a very important question. 'how has your life changed for the better since your disability and in what way has that improvement impacted on your use of the Internet?'"

2. Personal homepages foster social relationships and contact with other people. For most web authors, posting a web page creates an opportunity to meet people online and not

infrequently develop extensive sets of cyber-relationships. These, in turn, may lead to contact off-line. Andy (*Zup's Realm of Stuff*) put it simply, "For me online writing is a tool to interact with other people." He noted further, " [At first] I was content to just be an observer, as I was still not comfortable interacting as a gay person.  What made them [web journals at other sites] attractive was that it was similar to an episodic drama (soap opera, comic book, etc...) in that you had a story told from various points of view which slowly unfolds over time, in a sort of intertwined plotline.  Since the authors of the pages I read all knew each other, there was a lot of actual interaction. Eventually I got up the courage to correspond with some of the journalers by e-mail and chat, and developed some friendships.  I think my personal impetus for online journal writing was the perception that it would lead to greater interaction and participation in the 'journal community'.  I wanted to become part of the story, more or less." Andy highlights a reasonably broad set of interconnections across many online web journals in which authors know each other and make mention of each other's writing in their own diaries. Bryan commented in similar fashion, "If it wasn't for my web page and journal, I would have never had the opportunity to meet some of the most fantastic people. Over time, I have grown very close with a number of fellow page owners and journalers." Several gay authors report meeting other authors in face-to-face situations after they have come to know one another in cyberspace. In more lyrical fashion, Patrick (*Inside: Patrick's Daily Journal*) expressed his belief in the meaning of posting a regular journal online, "People who choose to write accounts of their lives (or, on an even more intrusive scale, have cameras recording their daily lives), I believe, are looking for communication. Once, during a particularly troubling time in my recent past, a good friend of mine said to me, 'I can't offer you any advice, but I'm here to be your witness.' That's probably the essence of why I'm writing this. I think we all sometimes need to know that, no matter how alone we feel, there are witnesses" <http://www.spies.com/~xingcat/why.html>

   Not all web authors hold an equal measure of appreciation for personal contacts made through online sites. Ty (*The Ice Zone V2*) indicated an alternative viewpoint: "I believe you can have acquaintances or friends to an extent on the net but I don't think you can have relationships and I pretty much laugh at anyone who tells me they have one.  I personally think it's lame.  So it probably won't surprise you when I say I don't think you can have a net life.  You just can't. That's lame. A net presence but not a life.  Then again maybe I'm just old fashioned and cynical in that respect."

   3. <u>Personal homepages allow authors to "try on" a new identity</u>. Web pages permit some authors to explore aspects of themselves in ways they have never previously done. This can be seen most clearly in the experience of younger gay authors. For them, such homepages, both in browsing and actual authoring, served as an early public expression of sexual orientation--one in which they might "come out" but exercise significant control over what they revealed about themselves. For example, Rotti *(The Wild Rover's Home on the Web)* described how the reading of two online journals influenced his acceptance of his own sexuality: "The two of them helped me along a great deal: I started reading their pages in early September 97, and in early December 97 I came out to my closest friend, who isn't gay. I had been aware of strong same-sex attractions for about 7-8 years previously but had no idea how to handle them, so I'd denied them. Aaron's [Ed.-*The A3 Experience*] and Troy's pages, as well as my coming to a much more conducive environment here in HI, helped change that."

   In an especially cogent description, Bryan described his first prolonged encounter with the Web: "[I]t wasn't until my junior year in high school that I had my own computer in my room which would allow me to investigate the 'secret world' of which I was fast becoming aware I was a part. Finally, I had some privacy. I laugh about it now, but even when I typed my first *Yahoo* search (which consisted of the words 'gay' & 'high school' & 'teen') I was scared to death that someone was going to know that I typed those words into the search field...I was overwhelmed with what I was to find following that search. I couldn't believe that there was all this stuff out there that I could access. It wasn't just pornography, (which was also interesting :-) ), but there were resource pages, homepages, organizations, and especially journal pages." Later in college, he found that "[i]t was very cool discovering that I could develop a home page that could be as personal or as public as I wanted it to be. The thought that I could control just how personal I wanted it to be was intriguing. My page could be more than just words on paper. Now I could add visual aspects to it. I could give it some life...To cut to the core of the matter: I was looking for some way of having a gay presence in the world and still feel protected from the adverse affects. At the time my pages went up, only a handful of people knew that I was gay, and even fewer really knew what I was feeling inside. Through an on-line presence, I was able to connect with others, but also control how much anyone knew at any given time. It was great because I didn't have to just 'come out' to somebody and risk rejection. I could do things a little at a time and

build levels of trust along the way." In both these examples, the work of other online authors was at least partially responsible for their initiating an experiment with a new identity online.

    4. <u>Web authors fashion a new meaning for experiences and a new sense of the self</u>. Markham (1999) found among some participants of virtual communities a commitment to the Net as a "way of life". In parallel, some online authors here are conscious that they are constructing an altered meaning to their lives in what they do, at least in part, through their web pages. This awareness seems to be most prominent among the disability authors. So, for Karen K., author of the *TBI Social Network*, her online activities have restored meaning to her life in a way which is continuous with her pre-accident work as a counselor and therapist: "It provided me an opportunity to resume my familiar role of helping others from which the TBI had removed me. It helped me to feel useful to others in the tbichat.org  discussion room and to feel special for having come out of my own storm, only to create a wonderful group for us. Do you have any idea how many people sallow in self-pity, spend the rest of their lives crying about what happened to them? Through the Internet I have been challenged to grow, to blossom, to meet others who understand me."

    When Michael (*News From the Edge*) experienced a SCI more than six years ago, he survived but could no longer work as a professional photographer. His career and so many other aspects of his life were lost or radically altered. He eventually turned to the Net and has written extensive reflections and descriptions about his life and his injury. Asked to assess the role of his homepage now and how close to "real life" his writings adhere, Michael told me: "It's one of the primary grounding rods I have. [One] that makes sense for my new condition … [Conspiratorially:] Don't tell anyone. I only put the good things down. And, I do prejudice it toward a life-affirming viewpoint in putting myself in a positive viewpoint. I sugarcoated it a little bit to keep the interest up. And, it's also my ego…part of my survival. I've got to get…to know there's a good reason for all this and that I'm worth it and what I'm doing is meaningful. So not only do I assume it is meaningful, but I assume a meaningful role. And, I do my best to fulfill that. And, that image I put out there is not too far from the truth…I know I've fudged in a few places, a minority of the time. But, I'd have to plead guilty if questioned."

    5. <u>Personal homepages permit authors to reach out to others as helpers, guides, or sources of information</u>. This goal involves both the expression of affective or emotional support and the provision of expert or experience-derived knowledge which would be helpful to others. Disability authors repeatedly sought to provide both types of goals. One author states simply: "I hope the information provided in this page will help you understand Brain Injury more thoroughly. Caretakers as well as survivors may find it useful" (*Bruce's Brain Injury Homepage* <http://homepages.go.com/~wbrjr/wbrjr.html>). Similarly, Jim Lubin, disabled by a rare neurological disorder--transverse myelitis (TM)--is described in a magazine article: "So Lubin views the TM Internet Club as his greatest achievement. 'It's really satisfying," he says. 'I'm able to help a lot of people. That's the same reason I enjoyed my [pre-impairment] job [at Heart Technologies] so much--I felt like I was part of something that was making people better.'" (Dobbs, 1998). Karen S. (*New Beginnings: Survivors of Brain Injury*) concurs in her hopes for her own site: "I felt and I still feel if more people are aware of other Survivors it may be easier to cope, knowing there are 'others' like us dealing with the same or similar conflicts or disabilities we face daily…. If I can help just one person then my web site 'New Beginnings' has exemplified its full use."

    The personal experience of authors often acts as the stimulus for web page activities.  Karen K. narrates: "My founding of this group was precipitated by having been abandoned by my best friend of 6 years shortly after being discharged from the hospital. I also discovered from my 10 months in an outpatient traumatic brain injury rehabilitation program that this kind of abandonment is quite common, thus leaving many survivors feeling all alone and not understood as deeply as they needed to be. I WANTED TO FILL THAT VOID AS BEST I COULD! For me that meant networking with as many other survivors and I could and providing a meeting and activity place for us all. My hope was, and still is, to make available, to those who reach out, hope, encouragement, support, inspiration and friendship." In future additions to his homepage, Michael expects to use his personal knowledge as a resource: "I want another chapter right at the beginning which says 'If You're Here and Don't Want to Be Here, Open Me First.' Someone newly injured or a family member has been newly injured, check in here first. I have a whole spiel about what to be thinking about at this point, what not to allow be shoved down your throat…I have a lot of my experience. My tricks of the trade, emphasizing what I've learned. There's no need to reinvent the wheel."

6. <u>Personal homepage authors seek to advance socio-political goals including attitude changes and legislation</u>. Some authors explicitly seek to affect some type of change in the public sphere through their online activities. These may involve general attitudinal changes, such as greater tolerance or understanding of sexual orientation or disability. So, Tyson [*Tyboi's Page: The College Years*] stated one of his page's goals simply: "I want it [the page] to be something that will make people think, and change their lives as a result of." More elaborately Karen K. described the challenge faced by many who are cognitively impaired by reason of a TBI: "[O]ur disability is INVISIBLE so people can't respond. It is so very difficult for people to understand what I experience and am going through, unless they have been there themselves.  How do people really understand that the SIMPLEST of tasks may feel like taking an algebra test (which math was your worst subject in school) and how exhausting it can be?" Her page seeks to respond to that lack of understanding. Goals, though, are sometimes expressed in explicitly political terms, such the fostering of a specific legislative agenda. For example, the author *of Bruce's Brain Injury Home Page* argues that "The type of thing I am now advocating for is a change in the status quo which will allow those disabled who can work to go back to work without artificial barriers being erected. Unfortunately this change will not come unless we change Title V of *The American's With Disabilities Act*" <http://homepages.go.com/~wbrjr/wbrjr.html>.

However, these types of objectives are not always shared; more explicit political goals are sometimes rejected by web authors. For example, Bryan commented: "Matt [his boyfriend], as well as myself, don't quite go along with (and actually gag at) all the rainbow and pink triangle stuff out there. Nor, do we take a radical attitude with gay politics; that sort of thing has no appeal to us." Similarly, Ty explained that the main character of his online fiction story, *Storm Front*, and he share a similar set of attitudes: "Storm pretty much knows he's bi and he's never really had any of these 'oh am I, aren't I' sorta problems.  That's pretty much how it was for me too.  I try to make it as little of an issue as I can, the last thing I'd ever want is to be defined by my sexuality.  That would just suck.  I want to be defined by who I am, not what I am.  That's a message I try to convey in my story as well. Being Bi, Gay or Straight isn't the issue.  Living is." Of course, though Ty rejects one type of message, he does embrace another which is also oriented toward the promotion of tolerance.

7. <u>Personal homepages create an environment which is more congenial than or supplements the author's off-line world</u>. Chandler (1998) suggests that the personal homepage might be seen as an analogue to "the bedroom walls of young people in the West, with their diverse arrays of graphics and text in the form of posters, postcards, snapshots, sports insignia and so on." This example points to efforts many people make to create personal environments expressive of their interests and tastes. Online web authors also assemble materials which display their interests and what they appreciate. A specific example of such activity is the presence of Erotic or Sensual Images on the web pages of gay men. Authors state their reasons for posting this images variously. For example, the *Jase Pittman Wells Homepage* introduces an image archive on a separate page with this explanation: "See what I think makes a man sexy (on the outside, at least) in my own male art gallery. Yeah, yeah; so maybe it's just another collection of recycled images among the zillions already floating around the net. But I just couldn't resist. If you can't resist, too, then cruise on over to <u>J-Men</u>. (Note: This link is of an adult nature and is intended for mature audiences only.)" <http://www.jasewells.com/fun.html>. And, Bryan's homepage introduction tells browsers simply: "I also have a <u>pics page</u>. It's basically a fun page with pics of guys I have met on the net and some pics of some cuties that crop up here and there on the net."

An intriguing example of a Net-created environment is represented by the serialized fictional story, *Storm Front*, which is now in it's third continuing year of publication on *The Ice Zone V2*. The central plot involves teenage boys and girls who form a closely-knit family of blood and friendship. The central character, Storm Marcus, originally fell in love with a new boy in town, Lucas, and recently reconciled after a bitter separation (both boys have discovered their bisexuality). Storm's brother by quasi-adoption, Mike, has grown more deeply committed to Sarah, Storm's original girlfriend. Storm's younger brother, Dale, has wavered in his sexual identity between straight and bisexual feelings. All of these characters display powerful emotions of romantic love, commitment, anger, fear, and jealousy. The story is almost devoid of explicit descriptions of sexual behavior and the primary adult character, Storm's divorced mother, Dr. June Marcus, expresses strong affirmation of her sons' and their friend's choices. As each story's

chapter is posted online, it receives critiques and discussion by a cadre of participants ("Zoners") on the site's message board. Many comments point to how much readers identify with the characters' feelings and situations. Ty, its author, claims simply: "I just write a story, which really started off for fun. I wrote the first two chapters and then asked my mate Mike to check it out for me, and he was really the catalyst for it going as far as it has. It's hard to class what sort of story it is, a love story or a life story, I'm not sure, you can decide." Yet, the story's themes clearly stand outside the ordinary scripts of mainstream cultural media in its portrayal of a world where romantic love between teenage boys can be told with compassion and acceptance. Coming to *The Ice Zone*, then, puts browsers in a media environment unlikely to be experienced in mainstream channels of communication.

    8. <u>The online self is generally an accurate representation of the offline self</u>. Turkle (1995) details gender switching and other forms of adoptive identities in studies of virtual communities like MUDS, MOOs or IRC. But, the authors of the sites in the current study claim a high degree of congruence between their self-presentation online and offline. Alternatively, they suggest that their online selves are somewhat less developed than in real life but not changed significantly. They reject the notion that they depict themselves in artificial or deceptive ways. For example, Tyson affirmed, "I don't think that my online life and real life are all that different." Andy elaborates, "I think that [my online vs. offline lives] are fairly similar in many respects. I think that those people who know me as gay in 'real life' could read my journal and gain some insight, but they wouldn't be surprised or shocked by anything I've written. I also think that when some of my on-line friends meet me in person in the near future they won't find any incongruities either. I don't live a double life or present myself as something more or different than I am. I try to present myself in a good light, but what you see is what you get." And since Karen K. devotes so much of her energies to work online now, she stated, "'real life' vs. 'on line life' - they are the same. My real life is spent posting responses to survivors crying for help … Additionally, many hours are spent running the TBI SOCIAL NETWORK, almost single-handedly and pretty much at my own expense." Echoing some authors, Karen S nonetheless offers a distinction which preserves the overall integrity of online self-presentation: "With my 'real life' I deal with my disabilities and discomfort in real time. I feel pain and work through the many challenges I face daily. My '"on-line life', I can express through words how I feel with others, and they with me, however experiencing life through a monitor isn't the real actual living experience."

    9. <u>Self-presentation online fulfills developmental needs and may eventually be discarded as an important venue for identity</u>. Is a personal web page forever? Probably not. Identity changes and younger gay web authors, in particular, express an awareness that self-presentation online may also need to change. From his observations over several years of Net use, Andy noted that "as people find long-term, stable personal relationships, they seem to lose the need for the online world as an outlet. The time priority shifts radically." Several authors mentioned a sense of change in their own needs. For example, Rotti explained, "It's taken a backseat to my offline life. It doesn't really mean a lot to me anymore and I haven't updated in a long time... But generally it started losing importance as soon as I felt secure in my identity and acquired a worthwhile offline life." He went on to chart the arc of his Net involvement, "For a while there (summer 98 before I met my now ex-b/f Ricky) my online life was a lot more active and interesting then my offline life. After I met Ricky, that changed radically, and now I strongly prefer real experiences to mediated ones. Experiences on skin level are just something the web can't do." Tyson expressed somewhat greater ambivalence about future work on his personal homepage, "I'm not sure what it all means now. Sometimes, I feel like just chucking it all and deleting the whole thing. I have gotten the gamut of comments. From the good to the tasteless. I have made some really great friends, and have been taken advantage of and had money taken from me. All in the "learning" process of the world wide web. I am keeping my page, but I am slowly moving it to a new direction." It is notable that two pages in the sample have already been taken offline: *The A3 Experience* whose greeting page now simply says, "September 1, 1996 - September 1, 1999/It's been a blast!" Similarly, *The Living Contradiction* seems to have entered a long-term hiatus pending a possible remodeling of the site.

### Discussion

        "Forty-six now and dying by inches, I finally see how our lives align at the core,
        if not in the sorry details. I still shiver with a kind of astonished delight when a
        gay brother or sister tells of that narrow escape from the coffin of the world of
        the closet. *Yes, yes, yes*, goes a voice in my head, *it was just like that for me*.

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When we laugh together then and dance in the giddy circle of freedom, we are children for real at last, because we have finally grown up." (Monette, 1992, p. 2)

The relative absence of research interest by social scientists about personal web pages is baffling. The data uncovered in this investigation point to a vibrant mode of self-presentation which may have broader relevance than many other forms of Internet community. Indeed at the time of its merger with Yahoo! in early 1999, GeoCities, the free personal homepage service, already had 3.5 million page owners registered as members (Junnarkar, 1999) and this company is one of multiple venues--commercial, educational, and free--which host many millions of more personal projects online. Despite this neglect in the literature, individuals continue to turn to personal web page construction in burgeoning numbers and the findings of this study suggest some of the reasons why they do so. In light of identity needs of people within the alterity communities examined here, the significance of personal homepages is even more compelling.

Many gay males have taken to the Net, as Weinrich (1977) maintains, in eager, almost natural fashion. The results of this study expand on his observation that socially-isolated adolescents can find in the Internet a community they lack in daily life. Rotheram-Borus & Fernadez (1995), Dempsey (1994), and many others studying gay adolescents continue to depict how severely isolated real life communities can be for young persons exploring alternative sexual feelings and attractions. Role models are absent, basic information difficult to come by, and many school and family environments either threatening or actively hostile for gay teenagers. As Martin & Hetrick (1988) describe, gay adolescents can find themselves stigmatized on a daily basis. Further, as Brogan (1993-4) reports, even fictional literature for teenagers with a gay focus often convey discouraging messages about the possibilities of growing to a healthy gay adulthood. Unsurprisingly, then, the gay web authors of this report emphasize repeatedly the crucial role that the Net and web pages play in their assumption of a gay identity. The well-known passage from Paul Monette's autobiography which heads this discussion section speaks of the power of the personal narrative to reach across individual differences and affirm the worth and freedom of persons with alternative sexual orientations. Web page browsing and authoring address central identity construction concerns for gay men precisely by the wealth of narrative resources, opportunities for controlled, safe communication, and flexibility of self-presentation offered online. The finding that page authoring for gays may be a phase-specific developmental activity which is gradually abandoned as other resources are found needs to be further explored.

The disabled community faces psychosocial concerns differing from those experienced by gay men. In qualitative studies of survivor narratives, Nochi (1997, 1998a, b) has described the damage TBI survivors experience to their sense of identity and the social strategies they may use to counter society's labeling in order to reestablish a more acceptable sense of self. Nochi (1997) explains that TBI survivors experience a "void" regarding past and present experiences which threatens a personal sense of agency. He argues that rehabilitation specialists must pay greater attention to the narratives of TBI survivors since many "emotional" difficulties in this group are principally problems with the assignment of meaning to injuries as they relate to survivors' current lives. These findings underscore the results of the current study. As Nochi's findings would predict, the experience of injury and its aftermath are usually described on these web pages. Even when the major focus of a page is the sharing of resources, page authors generally tell the story of how they acquired their impairment and of its aftermath. There is a sense in these pages of what Arthur Frank (1995) argues is the ethical imperative of "wounded storytellers" to be witnesses to others. As he notes, "the character who is a communicative body must bear witness; witness requires voice as its medium, and voice finds its responsibility in witnessing. What is witnessed is memory, specifically embodied memory, a memory of experience now written in the tissues" (Frank, 1995, p. 165). In this light, the dedication of so many disabled site authors to a continued engagement online in their personal home pages -- even to the point at which the web becomes a quasi-permanent concern within their lives -- can be better appreciated.

The results of this investigation also provide striking evidence for the utility of the theory of the dialogical self as a means to understand what web authors are doing online. I posited initially that five major elements characterized the dialogical self. The self is *spatially-organized* and the personal web page within the larger context of cyberspace provides an intriguing parallel to this quality. At websites authors construct multi-layered versions of themselves and browsers must employ imaginal resources of spatial reasoning even to navigate through these constructions. Selves are simultaneously *organized in time by narrative* and personal web sites generally offer several narrative views of their authors: in identity-related stories of "coming out" or "becoming injured" as well as autobiographical tales from the past, contemporary journals of the present,

and sometimes speculations about possible future activities in the form of wishes, plans, and other discursive productions. The self is *embodied* and, while web pages cannot now substitute for the human body in its full sensuality, constructional elements continue to expand the repertory of sensory modes by which the self is expressed online.

The dialogical self is strongly *social* and *multivoiced*. These web authors demonstrate multivocality in a number of ways. They may include not just hypertext links to the sites of many others on their pages, but incorporate at the site itself materials such as stories, poems, letters, and messages created by others. More fundamentally, though, these web authors tend to encompass the communications and viewpoints of others throughout their journals, editorial writings, and stories of survival or emerging sexuality. They treat these as expressions they must consider and respond to. The diversity of voices can be striking. Andy details both his emerging gay sexual identity and Catholic allegiance at several points in his journal. The author of *The Living Contradiction* (apropos of his page's title) often comments explicitly on his tendency to adopt mutually-contradictory understandings or make contradictory decisions. And, Bryan struggles periodically to understand the meaning of his parent's responses to his involuntary "coming out" which was instigated by a hostile brother: a painful sense of the rejection he perceives in his mother's behavior and the encouragement and affirmation his father regularly offers despite a continuing unease regarding his son's sexuality.

It is hard to ignore how frequently web authors act as *motivated storytellers* through their sites. The individuals crafting these sites choose to include stories in multiple formats and expend considerable effort to be sure that those stories are told. For example, some web journal keepers have posted many hundreds of entries, Ty at *The Ice Zone* has brought his major fictional work, *Storm Front*, through more than 20 chapters, and 16 of 20 web sites offer either a disability/illness or a coming out story to browsers. Within the theory of the dialogical self *motivation* refers to the dual theme of self-enhancement (S-motive) and contact and union with the other (O-motive; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). The data derived from these sites provide clear evidence that both motives sustain the narrative efforts of these authors while responding as well to the needs of browsers who come to these sites in search of personal insight, support, and possibly friendship.

I would argue, then, that personal homepages on the Web may serve as an important focal point for the study of identity construction and the processes of the self as dialogical. Periodically, critics complain that personal homepages display such poor design, terrible content, or other manner of deficiency that a browser should rightly feel annoyed and the page's author chastised for wasting the browser's time (e.g., Patterson, 1998; Silverio, 1995). Such critics may not recognize that priority in web page construction arises from personal motivations of the self and the browser's perspective, while very important, is only one of many positions the self evaluates. In a fundamental way, web page authors are fashioning quite personal meanings through their online activities rather than just publishing factual information or providing public entertainment.

The Russian-Estonian scholar, Yuri Lotman (1990), introduced the concept of the semiosphere to describe that universal matrix of meanings within which humans live and which makes possible the very use of language. In a way analogous to the biosphere for organic creatures generally, Lotman (1990) claims that the semiosphere represents the "space of culture" (p. 150) or a "semiotic space" (p. 125), populated by human beings and subject to constant dynamic interaction among its inhabitants. Articulating a connection between the biological world and the semantic one, Danish biologist, Jesper Hoffmeyer (1995), extends Lotman's concept even toward non-human life: "The semiosphere poses constraints or boundary conditions to the Umwelts of populations since these are forced to occupy specific *semiotic niches* i.e. they will have to master a set of signs of visual, acoustic, olfactory, tactile and chemical origin in order to survive in the semiosphere." I cite these notions since they help to clarify what may be lacking in the attractive *information ecology* construct of Nardi and O'Day (1999) when applied to the World Wide Web. The ecological qualities of the Net can be attested across a variety of criteria. But, it is precisely the greater importance of meaning rather than information within the elaborate world-wide system of personal web pages which this research and other have begun to explore.  I would propose that a more helpful construct might be to describe the World Wide Web at least as a **human digital ecology**. It manifests the many *ecological* characteristics that Nardi and O'Day (1999) cite, for example, it is a complex system of parts and relationships, diverse, continually evolving, etc. The parts of this system are *digital*, that is, they rely ultimately upon a binary translation of analog information and instructions in order to communicate. But, the system is also a

profoundly *human* one in which the question of meaning and its construction lie at the very center of what takes place in this (semiotic) niche of cyberspace.

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