Negotiating Identities in a Randomized Video-chat

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'What is a nice girl like you doing on ChatRoulette, anyway?'

The first time I heard about the randomized video-chat, an acquaintance was boasting on Facebook about having encountered a 'real pedophile' on the site. Soon afterwards, a few other friends started talking about 'going on ChatRoulette' sporadically. As a burgeoning anthropologist with a special interest in the social aspects of cyberspace, my interest was piqued. One night, I covered my webcam with a crumpled napkin and began my journey into the relative unknown.

The internet 'is big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is' (Adams 1995: 63). Much like the universe (in Douglas Adams' trilogy in five parts), the seemingly infinite boundaries and limitless possibilities of this still very much uncharted territory allow for a great deal of speculation and hyperbolic interpretation. Starting with innovations on the technical levels, and following the social repercussions these have on cyber-users, whatever the internet may or may not be, its relevance to the study of sociality and human interaction is readily apparent. Since its recent origins a couple of decades ago, the internet has undergone countless changes and developments. While only ten years ago, talking about it encompassed 'electronic mail (email), the World Wide Web (WWW), Usenet newsgroups, bulletin boards, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Multi-User Domains (MUDs) and many other applications' (Hine 2000: 2), today, no 'respectable' internet user can talk about cyberspace without mentioning Google, Facebook and Twitter. While the names and definitions of products may change, the one easily recognizable common thread is the social aspect. From its very beginning, trite as it may sound, the internet has primarily been about sharing information and connecting people. The different ways through which this can be achieved pave the way to the dizzying pace that characterizes the internet's continuous evolution.

As I shall discuss below, the cyberspace has a peculiar temporality/spatiality, whereby innovations in computer-mediated communication (CMC) are constantly out-dated by newer, user-friendlier applications. The uniqueness of my chosen field-site, ChatRoulette, lies in the fact that it was perceived as the first web application of its kind. Since its outset in December 2009, other 'clones' (similar websites, replicating its core features, but implementing new traits as well) have cropped up online, with various success (Mashable 2010), but ChatRoulette continues to be acknowledged

as the progenitor of a completely new sort of cyber-interaction.

In this paper, I contend that the particular characteristics of the ChatRoulette space support its users' exploration of their multifaceted identities. By attempting to define the new cyber-social medium, describing key ethnographic encounters in a critical fashion, and dealing with the methodological issues that arose along the way, I aim to reveal how the internet in general, and ChatRoulette in particular, allow cybernauts the freedom to perform and play with aspects of their identities that they might not share as freely 'in real life'. In doing so, I also hope to explore how ChatRoulette informs perceptions of time/space, and of online vs offline.

Connecting to a random partner...

The trick to a good definition is that it must be 'flexible and open to refinement' – especially in the world of the 'web', where 'both the field and the phenomenon are changing so rapidly' (Wilson and Peterson 2002) – while, at the same time, offering enough information about the subject to distinguish it from others. In the case of ChatRoulette, my own process of anthropological travelling and arriving in the field was moulded by my expectations of the place. Before deciding to do my project on ChatRoulette, I had been on the website a couple of times, but I still considered myself as an outsider. The few things I knew about it were part of definitions anyone who searched 'ChatRoulette' on Google could find out. One of the few places that attempted neutrality described it as:

> 'A website that pairs random strangers from around the world together for webcam-based conversations. Visitors to the website randomly begin an online chat (video, audio and text) with another visitor. At any point, either user may leave the current chat by initiating another random connection.' (Wikipedia)

Most other blogs and websites embraced their subjectivities; 'Chatroulette is what you'd expect it to be, micro-interactive reality TV with a large heaping of cybersex' (TechCrunch 2010). Unlike with other academic writing, for this project I had to rely heavily on online sources that would surely have failed the 'online rubbish' test. One of the defining features of information online is that it is entirely controlled by 'the people'. This allows relatively any individual the freedom to edit and post information on official-seeming websites, like Wikipedia. Whether or not such user-generated information had any academic base was, however, irrelevant for my analysis. As I was less concerned with the 'objective' truth about ChatRoulette and more with uncovering the stories

people (users or not) had to say about it, Wikipedia and the other academically-unsound websites represented adequate sources for data-gathering. The central goal of anthropological writing '[impossibly attempting] to fuse objective and subjective practices' relies on this very issue of polyvocality, which translates as the dilemma of having several voices telling different stories about the same thing (Clifford in Davies 1999: 221).

Fig. 1: The problem with ChatRoulette.
(Screenshot supplied by informant)

The most common problem with ChatRoulette is the penises (Fig. 1). Everyone knows it; every single person I managed to have a conversation with for more than ten minutes told me so as well. The first thing anyone hears with regards to this new, randomized chat medium is that it is 'weird' and full of 'pedos'. On an average evening, out of twenty connections, over four will feature male or female genitalia (Leavitt and Hwand 2000).[1] In spite of this tiny detail, or perhaps because of it, ChatRoulette's fame has been increasing since its inception at the end of last year. People of all

1 After two days and 201 connections, the survey concluded that only 5-8% of the encounters were with genitalia, a percentage that any user who has spent more than two days on ChatRoulette could dispute. My disbelief at the survey's results stems from the authors' attempt to present a global overview of a social space as wide and irregular as ChatRoulette by spending only two days interviewing users.

ages, from all geographic locations and social backgrounds, are drawn together on this one site by urban cyber-legends of improvising piano players (*PianoChatImprov*), dead men hanging from the ceilings (*Hanging Man visits Chat Roulette*), pets, partying teenagers, and sexual encounters (*Chatroulolz*).

Throughout my engagements, the main question I would ask my informants was concerned with this dilemma; most users do not appreciate the genitalia and will 'next' them almost immediately, i.e. allowing the system to connect them with 'someone else, anybody else' (Casilli 2010). Nevertheless, although displeased with the amount of 'dicks', my informants revealed that they keep coming back to the website, when they are bored or have nothing better to do. Even more ironically, the users' dissatisfaction becomes a way of bonding with others who seem worthy of their time. All the lengthier conversations I had began with both my own and my informants' rants about this seemingly inescapable issue:

> E T H N O G R A P H E R : What do you think of chatroulette so far?
> I N F O R M A N T $_1$: It's a very crazy thing
> I N F O R M A N T $_2$: So many old men asking to see my tits. You know what I do when they ask to see my pussy? I show them my cat
> I N F O R M A N T $_3$: They should make a dick recognition software that could auto block
> E T H N O G R A P H E R : but that would take out all the fun for some people

My questions seemed to elude any clear answers, until halfway through my project. On this occasion, I had convinced a reluctant friend to join me. Olga agreed to it only if she could conceal her face with a neckerchief. We spent most of the evening 'next-ing' nudes, although we did find a few partners we engaged with more happily. At one point, I had once again attempted to extract what I believed to be the key secret behind the appeal of ChatRoulette from our informant, when Olga interjected rather matter-of-factly: 'That's a stupid question, isn't it? What do you mean, why do people show their dicks online? Because they can! There are no rules – they can do whatever they want!'.[2]

This brings me to the crux of the matter: the single most important trait of ChatRoulette is its apparent anarchical organisation. Everything that happens on the website – the manner in which

2 I would like to take a moment to thank Olga for essentially flicking on the light bulb above my head.

people represent themselves and the sort of relationships they engage in with others – is influenced by the way this new social cyberspace is regulated.

> 'The internet has always been defined by (and drawn much of its energy from) the tension between chaos and control—and over the last ten years, web culture has skewed heavily toward control. Our most popular new online tools—Google, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Digg—were designed to help us tame the web's wildness, to tag its outer limits and set up user-friendly taxonomies. ChatRoulette is, in this sense, a blast from the Internet past. It's the anti-Facebook, pure social-media shuffle.' (New York Magazine, 2010)

ChatRoulette is not quite the lawless social threat that concerned citizens make it out to be (FOXNews.com 2010), but it has a peculiar framework of 'do's and don'ts', a limited array of social rules that, much like any other chatroom, shape users' perceptions of and engagement with it.

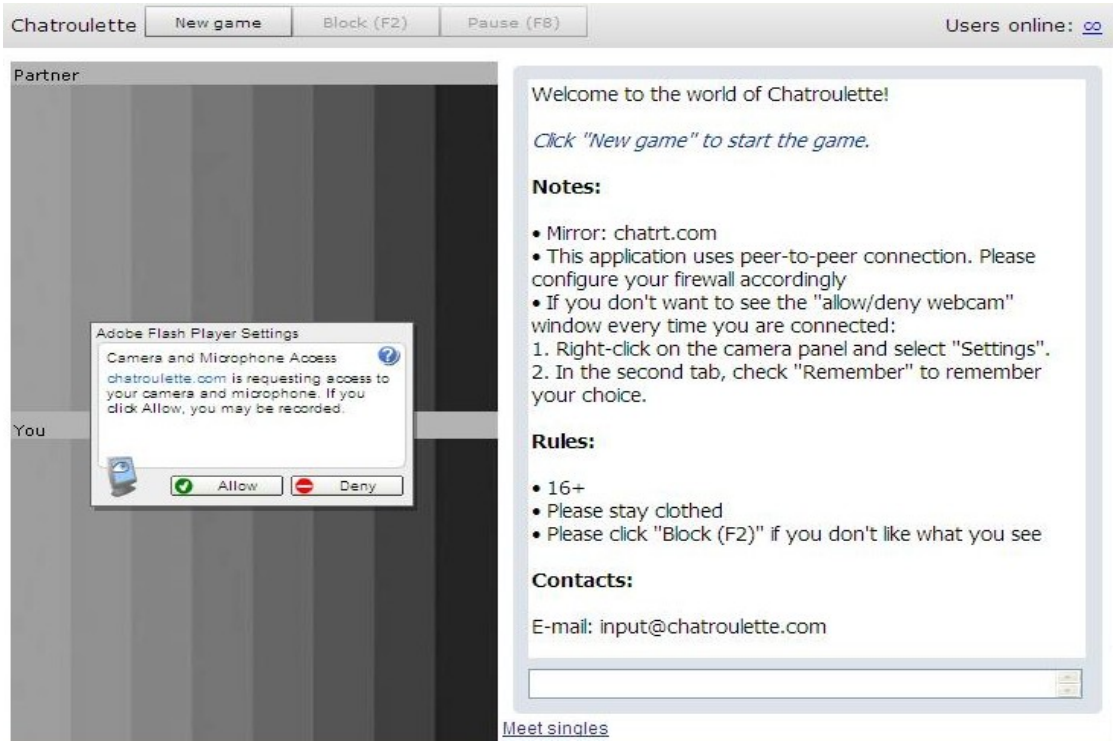

Fig. 2: Welcome to the world of Chatroulette.
(Screenshot by author)

What are the rules of the 'game', as it were, then?

1) ChatRoulette greets users with an inconsistent list of rules that have changed several times since my first encounter (Fig. 2). Participants under 16 and nudity are not allowed. As mentioned above, this rule is openly disregarded. Users also have the option to 'block' or 'report' inappropriate content which, allegedly, entails a temporary ban of the 'inappropriate' user from

the website. Anything else is fair-game, yet, since not even these rules are imposed in any way, it would be more correct to say '*everything* is fair-game'. The website does not require submitting personal details or email addresses and there is no administrator moderating the encounters. This makes it very easy for anyone with internet access (and, optionally, a webcam) to 'play' ChatRoulette. The consequent socially frowned-upon combination of minors and sexuality makes it easy to understand why there has been such backlash against the website (Sync Blog 2010, Kiwi Commons 2010).

2) Control is limited but still present. The moment a user connects to ChatRoulette, their video-feed and text may easily be recorded and, through a series of unfortunate events, become part of the huge public domain of the internet. Participants engage in an almost entomological collecting game; tens of websites have been created to showcase what some consider to be the 'weirdest', 'most embarrassing' or 'awkward' encounters, i.e. Tumblr. A user loses control over their visual image and, subsequently, their chosen identity, when they enter the 'game'. At the same time, they maintain complete control over what they choose to present as themselves[3]. This is a risk some take more lightly than others. The comforting feeling of an unregulated space also stems from the 'next' button. At any point of any engagement, a user is free to 'next' their partner(s) and wait to be connected to another random user. Unlike in a nightclub or when walking down the street (offline situations ChatRoulette has been compared to), the user can skip over an unwanted person at any time, without fear of having to meet them again.

On my first 'official' night of (cyber)fieldwork I met a Danish Computer Studies mature student. We hit it off pretty quickly, possibly because we were both relieved to find someone to actually talk to, as opposed to someone to simply 'next'; we started to commiserate over the disturbing amount of 'dicks'. He mentioned wanting to work on a 'dick recognition software'. I told him about my real reason for being on ChatRoulette – working on an ethnographic project for university – and he accused me of thinking too hard about things. It was late at night, so perhaps I was. We spent a while debating the eternal 'Macs vs PCs' question, before I noticed another head peeking from the corner of his screen. It turned out to be his girlfriend. We waved at each other and grinned in recognition before she disappeared again. At this point in our conversation I started to grow fond of him; up until then, I had been on my guard, because, on this site, 'older men' are associated

3 In my case, I have unethically captured screen-shots of some of my informants, but the stories they told me are stories they *chose* to tell me. I cannot confirm their veracity which, in a way, places them at an advantageous position, whereby they are still in control of their identities.

with dubious connotations. I was not getting any less tired so, around one in the morning, I declared I would be going to bed. We said our polite farewells ('lovely chatting with you!', 'you too', 'have a lovely evening', 'good luck with your project'), and just as I was waving to the webcam, he asked me, 'you know what the beauty of ChatRoulette is?' As soon as I typed back, 'what?', he 'next-ed' me.

While it would be dishonest to deny that a connection had been formed between myself and this informant, the nature of this relationship was unlike most offline ethnographer relationships. The casual sensation ChatRoulette affords most social engagements is an aspect that many users find to be a fault (Museum 2.0 2010). But this stems from a need to distinguish real, serious engagements (belonging to the offline realm), from flimsy, superficial encounters (like those taking place solely online). This in turn is influenced by the different ways in which users conceive time and space.

The identities users perform online in general, and on ChatRoulette in particular, are neither the same as, nor do the directly contradict, their 'original', offline identities. The 'singular notion of an identity, linked to a similarly singular physical body' (Hine 2000: 49) should be regarded as outdated, when dealing with the vastly complex cyberspace. The line between authentic and deceitful, offline and online, is not a straight, clear-cut boundary; on the contrary, it adapts itself to the spatial and temporal 'dislocation' that characterizes the internet (Hine 2000: 65). While Hine deals with 'identity play' specifically in the context of MUDs and RPGs (role-playing games) (Hine 2000: 118), this continues to be as relevant an issue in the realm of text- or video-based chatrooms as well. My personal experience of identity performance is not unlike that of any other young adult who began to use the Internet – unmonitored – before puberty.

Fig. 3: Nobody knows I'm a dog.
(Steiner 1993)

The striking lack of rules apparent on the web allows one to represent oneself as wildly inaccurately as one pleases (Fig. 3). In the case of ChatRoulette, identity play can be as obvious as masking one's webcam with photos of famous people, to literal masks (Fig. 4), or as subtle as 'lying' about one's geographical location, gender or age.

Fig. 4 (left): Political ChatRoulette-ing.
(Screenshot supplied by informant)

In almost all of my encounters, I kept my nationality hidden. While ChatRoulette allows its users to incorporate both audio and video in their engagements, one has the choice to disable either option. Because I had disabled my audio channel, I felt comfortable telling my various partners that I was Scottish, New Zealander, German, or Canadian. With every different nationality, I would present myself under a different name, with a different personal history. I was either a Film student in Australia, visiting a friend in Moscow or an ethnographer in London. The knowledge of my 'deceit' was not a heavy burden on my conscience – the freedom I had in my choices reminded me that the 'personal info' my conversational partner provided me with could very well be made-up as well. Identity was irrelevant. For twenty minutes, I was a Russian student named Marta and I had fun talking about spaceships and Flight of the Concords.[4]

4 My nationality was not the only aspect of my identity that I lied about. The first time I connected to ChatRoulette (my first 'unofficial' night of fieldwork), feeling too self-conscious to show myself online, I covered my webcam with a crumpled napkin. One of my encounters was with a young male, who looked in his mid-teens and who was very interested in finding out my gender. At first, I told him I was a young female researcher but, because he kept insisting I turn on my webcam, I then went back and answered I was, in fact, a middle-aged man. My interest was in his reactions and facial expressions (from amusement to uncertain terror). He said, 'if you're a guy this is really creepy', which was enlightening with regards to how gender and, subsequently, identity are negotiated online.

This casual balance was threatened by one particularly memorable encounter. Once again, I was with my friend Olga and we had just connected to a group of young men. Most of them were lounging bored on a sofa, not really paying attention to the computer screen, while one was typing back to me in English. Their microphone was turned on so I could vaguely make out their language. I suddenly, and somewhat nervously, realized they were speaking my native language. My friend urged me to type back to them in our language, but I hesitated for a few minutes. After I revealed my 'true' nationality to them, the rest of our conversation was marked by a sense of 'collective effervescence' (Shilling and Mellor 1998), with all the members in the group much more involved and enthused. This was my first such experience on ChatRoulette and I remember it fondly. But I regard the brief moment of hesitation as a fitting illustration of the fact that, 'in the disembodied world of the virtual community, identity is also ambiguous' (Donath 1999: 29). By allowing its users relatively freedom over how they represent themselves or engage with one another, ChatRoulette in fact challenges participants to negotiate their 'more or less coherent set of identity performances with reference to a singular body and biography' (Hine 2000: 49).

In the case of another friend who had 'tried out' ChatRoulette before, distorting one's identity was a way of concealing her feelings of shame at using the website – 'I was so afraid I might run into someone I know from St Andrews, so I was wearing huge sunglasses and a crazy hat throughout the whole thing' – as well as exerting some control over the encounter, as explained above.

In conclusion, ChatRoulette, much like any other human product, is a useful epistemological tool, as it helps one theorize any ethnographic topic. The same way 'Azande beliefs about witchcraft, English beliefs about kinship, [and] American understandings of the immune system' can be opened up to enquiry (Hine 2000: 8), so can 'common' beliefs about this new online medium. The relevance of ChatRoulette rests on its revealing the way people relate to one another and to themselves through it. Complicated notions of identity and time/space are challenged when users allow their webcams to connect to ChatRoulette and transmit themselves into the ether of cyberspace. Contrary to the typical mythologizing of the internet, triggered by naïve assumptions that the lack of 'face-to-face erases the prejudices associated with assorted "isms": sexism, racism, and classism' (Wolf 1998: 15), ChatRoulette does not attempt to conceal its own limitations. Its users are well aware of the dangers of engaging with the unknown; it is 'a perfectly instant jolt of the unfiltered internet. The addictive boundlessness of the internet itself is brutally reduced to a

demographic experience' (Simon NYNY on The New York Times 2010). Perhaps, people find this thrilling. The brutal process of 'next-ing' and deciding, after a two-second glance at someone's image, whether one wants to engage or not may be considered depressing and threatening to societal conventions; 'the interactions are private, which means there's no external social pressure to conform. The interactions are anonymous, which means there's no need to be accountable for your actions. And the interactions are fleeting, which promotes shock value and immediate, dramatic actions' (Museum 2.0 2010). Yet, I hope to have proven its constructive effects on social engagements and the portrayal of self.

While I was typing up this project, ChatRoulette stopped working for me. Perhaps it was my internet connection or a global case of server troubleshooting, or perhaps it was just a 'fad', as some naysayers later declared. In spite of the ephemeral nature and constant reinvention of the internet, one thing worth remembering is that websites founded by users of ChatRouletter looking for connection beyond the chatroom continue to flourish (*ChatRoulette Missed Connections*, *Lost You on ChatRoulette*). While it may not be the last or the most memorable of its kind, ChatRoulette has succeeded in offering different interpretations of what it means to interact online. The overwhelming results of blog posts and online articles, some more theoretical and self-aware than others, that come up after a Google search about this phenomenon should be a clear indication of its social relevance.

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