

PLAY, ART AND RITUAL ON IRC

(INTERNET RELAY CHAT)

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This paper is about a form of amateur digital art on IRC, Internet Relay Chat, one of the world's most popular online chat modes.¹ Usually, IRC participants communicate via typed words. In contrast, this group communicates in real time mainly via the display of brilliantly colored visual images created from letters and other typographic symbols on the computer keyboard. Participants gather in a channel (chat room) called *#mirc_rainbow*, or "*rainbow*" for short.² While a dozen or so channels across the many IRC networks have featured this form of

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² # is the symbol marking every IRC channel. "mIRC" is the name of the Windows-based version of the IRC software.

visual communication, it has particularly flourished on *rainbow* on the Undernet.³ This chapter presents an ethnographic study of *rainbow* art and communication as an online form of secular, ritualized play.

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1 is a sequence of interaction that I captured while logged onto *rainbow* in August 2002.⁴ We see that five players have deployed six different images and one line of ready-made text to greet or acknowledge others. The “nick”--IRCese for nickname--of each player appears at the left of each image, together with each of its lines, just as if a person typed ordinary text. All players happen to be “ops,” “operators,” players with administrative responsibilities and privileges, in effect, the group’s inner circle.

(Figure 1)

First, <Steakie>,⁵ a male signage installer from Pennsylvania, greets <tlc->, a male Mississippi carpenter who has just entered the channel, with an image containing nine repetitions of his nick, a hint of the importance of repetition and repetitiveness to an understanding of this art--a topic developed later in this chapter.⁶ Like all other images in Figure 1, <Steakie>’s image had been prepared

³ There are, or have been channels of the same name on other networks too, inspired by, and mimicking this one. This group is the best known and best established.

⁴ Colored versions of illustrations for this chapter will be available at <http://atar.msc.huji.ac.il/~msdanet/cyberpl@y/ritplay.html>.

⁵ All nicks are presented in angle brackets, just as they appear online. Information on the social background of individual players is from online interviews, summer 2002.

⁶ In this chapter, I discuss repetition and repetitiveness only in general terms. Elsewhere, I discuss the applicability of Bruce Kavin’s (1972) notion of “the aesthetics of near-repetition” to this material, and analyze varieties of repetition in detail, as evidence of “striving for closure,” or for good gestalts.

beforehand; it is part of his collection, stored on his computer.⁷ Next, <steve^>, an English oil tanker driver, interjects with a verbal message:

WHOA!!! TLC- IS HERE, GREAT TO SEE YOU TLC-!!!

Like the images, this mini-text had also been pre-scripted, except for the last-minute insertion of the recipient's nick.⁸ <tlc-> now displays an image with the message, "Hello everyone :)", adding a line of improvised text, "hey yall :)."⁹

Then <NikPackn> greets <MistyDawn>, a secretary and accountant in her 30s from Missouri, <tlc->'s real-world wife and fellow op. <NikPackn> is a female nursing administrator from Virginia. <MistyDawn> reciprocates her gesture with yet another image.¹⁰ Then NikPackn acknowledges <tlc->. Finally, using a script that transforms repeated players' nicks into visually attractive images, <steve^> greets <MistyDawn>. With the exception of <tlc->'s improvised line of text, the players have all mobilized ready-made digital files, incorporating the recipient's nick at the last moment before displaying them.

ASCII Art

IRC art is an elaboration of "ASCII art," an earlier form of text-based computer art. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, it was an elite group of programmers, hackers and other mainly male computer professionals who

⁷ <Steakie> had not necessarily created the image himself. While many players are also artists, others who are not artists themselves use artists' creations as "tokens for interaction." The art is created to be shared.

⁸ Note that <steve^>'s line overlaps with <tlc->'s image, a fairly frequent occurrence online, which occurs when two or more players hit the "enter" key at the same time.

⁹ For readers not familiar with this convention, known as a "smiley" or emoticon, the typographic constellation :-)) is to be read as a sideways smile. One sees the "smile" by tilting one's head toward one's left shoulder.

¹⁰ <Nici> and <NikPackn> are the same person: <Nici> is one of several nicks used often by this player. Sometimes she uses <Niki> instead. Here, she has temporarily changed her nick to "Nikpackn," to signal that she is in the midst of packing for a vacation trip, and not necessarily paying full attention to the computer screen.

created this art, by the 1990s people of all walks of life, women and men, young and old, were engaged in creating and collecting it.¹¹ The acronym “ASCII” (pronounced **AS-kee**) stands for “American Standard Code for Information Interchange.” This standard established the basic set of seven-bit typographic characters that may be used in “plain text” across all operating systems, as in email.¹²

Collections of new and old ASCII art abound on the World Wide Web.¹³ ASCII artists continue to congregate in **alt.ascii.art** on Usenet and on the **ASCIART** listserv.¹⁴ ASCII images are almost always displayed in white on black, or black on white. In earlier (DOS) times, they were displayed in phosphorescent amber or green pixels on a black screen.¹⁵ Most ASCII art is created in either “line style” or “solid style” (Figure 2). In line style, typographic characters are used to “draw” the outlines of an object. In solid style, clusters of repeated symbols create filled shapes. Some art combines the two styles.

(Figure 2)

¹¹ For a history of ASCII art, see Danet (2001), chapter 5.

¹² One definition of ASCII code is “A text standard that consists of 128 characters (0-127) covering alphabetical, numerical, punctuation, and a few text control characters;” source, http://www.cknow.com/ckinfo/acro_a/ascii_1.shtml, accessed August 6, 2002. Only 95 characters are actually available for writing.

¹³ See, e.g., Christopher Johnson’s ASCII Art Collection, <http://www.chris.com/ascii/>; The Great ASCII Art Library, <http://www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Marina/4942/ascii.htm>; Lennart Stock’s Amazing ASCII Art Pics, archived at http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.lstock.demon.nl/aap0.html.

¹⁴ The address of this listserv is ASCIART@lsv.uky.edu.

¹⁵ It is possible to “colorize” ASCII art using HTML code. See Joan Stark’s ASCII Art Gallery, Colored Showcase of ASCII Art, <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/>; ASCII Pictures by Allen Mullen, <http://users.inetw.net/~mullen/ascii.htm>; ASCII Art Pictures, <http://www.mltd.com/fun/ascii/>; Meph’s Text Art, <http://studenten.freepage.de/meph/ascii/ascii.htm>.

I chose the images in Figure 2 not only to contrast the two styles, but also in order to anticipate a general substantive point. Early ASCII art often dealt with stereotypically male themes of space travel, sports, war and aggression, epitomized here by the skull and bones.¹⁶ With increased participation in the 1990s of women like Joan Stark, an Ohio housewife and mother and the creator of the image of a girl and puppy in Figure 2, imagery turned softer, more ingratiating, often more stereotypically feminine, even “cute” or sentimental, or both.¹⁷ Imagery of the latter type predominates on *rainbow*.¹⁸

IRC Art

As Figure 1 suggests, surprisingly little verbal communication takes place on *rainbow*. Moreover, interaction is fundamentally the same, whether strangers are greeted, or old-timers greet one another. Recently, players who are acquainted sometimes add bits of text, though images continue to dominate. IRC art began to proliferate after 1995, when the Window-based version of the IRC software enabled use of 16 different colors as well as exotic typographic symbols, extended ASCII characters,¹⁹ to decorate or enhance words, as in Figure 3,²⁰ or,

¹⁶ The artist for the skull and bones image is unknown. A similar image can be viewed at Andreas Freise's ASCII Art Library, <http://www.ascii-art.de/ascii/s/skull.txt>, where it is attributed to Thomas E. Davis. This one appears more sinister, because of the “teeth” and manner of portrayal of the eyes.

¹⁷ I am somewhat overstating my case; early ASCII art also contained much imagery drawn, e.g., from cartoons. For a more nuanced view of the history of ASCII art, see *Cyberpl@y*, chapter 5 (Danet 2001).

¹⁸ Many *rainbow* artists working with figurative images appropriate designs from the Web and adapt them for IRC. The single artist whose work is most often appropriated is Joan Stark.

¹⁹ Extended ASCII characters require eight bits to code them, rather than the seven of plain text. Images are not created with the mIRC software, but either with regular editing programs like Notepad or specially designed programs specific to mIRC.

more often, to create graphically interesting patterns, as in <MistyDawn>'s greeting to <NikPackn> (Figure 1), and in the first image in Figure 4.²¹ Images are created as in knitting and ordinary word-processing: left to right, top to bottom.

(Figures 3, 4)

I call this art an *avant-folk*²² phenomenon because of its striking juxtaposition of fairly advanced technology and skills with naïve aesthetic expression.²³ It has many affinities with traditional crafts and folk art, including weaving, embroidery, and especially quilting. In this form of “quilting in time,” digital “patches” are “sewn” together not in space, but in time. Images may be either abstract (Figure 4) or figurative (Figure 5). Abstract images usually contain elaborate play with typography (first example, Figure 4), or less commonly, are created from blocks of solid color (second example, Figure 4). Figurative ones are mostly “drawn,” but are also occasionally created with solid blocks of color too (Figure 5).

(Figure 5)

The Players and Their Leaders

Rainbow was created in May 1997 as a spin-off of another channel, *#mirc_colors*, or “*colors*” for short. Dissatisfied with the regimented,

²⁰ This practice is a fascinating domestication of hacker practice. Hackers used typographic symbols in eccentric ways to be transgressive, obscure, and elitist. Here, the practice has become merely decorative.

²¹ The same enhancements are available, e.g., in Microsoft Word. For an illustration of how images are created, see Danet (2001), Figure 6.3, p. 253.

²² Walter Cahn called this expression to my attention, in a New York Times article about certain forms of popular music.

²³ “Advanced” is a relative term; this art is “primitive” or “retro,” technologically, compared with the technologies used by most professional digital artists. Nevertheless, it requires computer literacy to create this art, and to participate in a fashion that fully exploits the possibilities.

quarrelsome atmosphere on **colors**, a group of players defected to found **rainbow**. **Colors** went into a decline, and ceased to exist in December 2000. **Rainbow**, on the other hand, has continued to flourish, despite some up's and down's.

The first leader of **rainbow** was <texxy>, the customer service manager in a Texas office supplies store. When he withdrew from **rainbow** activity in 2001, he left a much appreciated legacy of scripts, mini-programs designed to add humorous or playful effects, as well as his program "txplay" for the display of files (images) online.²⁴ The second leader was <patches>, a woman with a B.A. in music, and as her nick hints, an experienced quilter. When she withdrew from IRC in April 2002, <sher^>, the group's most popular, most prolific artist, an Illinois housewife married to a coal miner, took over.

Most of the players are Americans, concentrated in the South, West and Southwest, of moderate education and employed in lower-middle-class and working class occupations; there is a smattering of players from around the world too. Sixty per cent or more are women, though men also play central roles, as senior ops, programmers, etc.²⁵ Except for <sher^>, leaders have had higher educational attainments than most others; under <sher>'s leadership,

²⁴ The players speak of "files," not images. In August 2002, an op called <DukeCupid>, a Filipino computer student, expanded and rewrote "txplay" to create "rbplayer 1.0," an even more sophisticated player than can handle video as well as sound files and images.

²⁵ Because there is quite high turnover in the group, despite a stable core of veteran participants, is difficult to establish a reliable social profile for it. This one comes from Danet (2001), pp. 248-252. Currently, I am updating it through interviews with ops. As of August 19, 2002 and responses from 32 ops, the dominant pattern has apparently not changed, though current data are only about ops, whereas the earlier profile was for all players.

<Angltooch>, a female professional artist with an MFA from Hawaii, often assumes prominent leadership roles.

The Research Question

This chapter attempts to answer the question: what is so fascinating for *rainbow* players that they spend hours and hours in the channel, day after day, even year after year, given that the same things seem to be happening over and over—people endlessly greeting and acknowledging one another, but never talking about much at all? In real world social gatherings—indoor parties and chats at cafes, or an outdoor one like Italy’s famous *passeggiata*²⁶—ritual evening promenade—pairs or small groups of people engage in small talk about *something*.²⁷

One possible explanation is purely aesthetic: the players’ love of color and pattern. There is no doubt that they love to look at images, and sometimes articulate their love of color quite explicitly. Most images are brilliantly colored, and, as we have begun to see, many contain pleasing patterns. There is also something quasi-magical about seeing a stream of images pop up on one’s screen, or making it happen oneself. For *rainbow*’s fourth anniversary, players were invited to send in answers to the question, “What’s your favorite *#mirc_rainbow* experience?” <Steakie> wrote, “My first time I saw a POP UP my eyes exploded...and I knew then and there...chat was gonna have a whole new meaning.” Although the novelty of the art, the brilliance of the colors, and the

²⁶ See Del Negro (2001).

²⁷ For theory and research on small talk, see Beinstein (1975); Coupland (2000); Schneider (1988).

eye-catching patterns may all be captivating, there must come a time when the sheer novelty of the phenomenon has worn off.

Another explanation is that people are bored, unhappy or lonely, and looking for something to fill their time and help them forget their troubles, or that they have health problems or emotional difficulties, and are seeking support. There is some truth in these compensatory explanations too. I know of players who are lonely, who are recovering drug addicts and alcoholics, or who have very serious health problems or handicaps. However, this explanation cannot tell us what the unique attraction of this particular activity is.

A related explanation is that the group and its activities provide a sense of community. Sara Kiesler and Lee Sproull suggest that the electronic community is a new organizational form that can produce both personal and social value. They distinguish among four types of electronic communities: (1) online groups sharing a demographic characteristic, such as SeniorNET; (2) geographically based online communities of local residents like the Blacksburg Electronic Village; (3) communities of interest, such as ***alt.support.arthritis***; and (4) communities of practice that, they suggest, "supply information and interaction among people with a common work [or recreational] system." (Kiesler 2001). ***Rainbow*** is clearly a community of practice, though not a work-related one ("recreational" is my addition). However, seeing the group as a community of practice again fails to explain how community aspects relate to the art itself.

While there is partial truth in the above explanations, we can attain a much deeper understanding of ***rainbow*** art and communication by viewing these

activities as a form of ***playful secular ritual, or ritualized play, that is propelled by, and gives expression to the group's central myths.*** Ritualized play via the art embodies, expresses, and helps constitute a sense of ***communitas*** (Turner 1969; 1974).

Methods. Ethical Aspects

As an ethnographic and interpretive study, this research employs partially conventional and partially innovative methods. Key methods are participant observation²⁸ and semi-structured interviews, as in traditional ethnography, though all interviews were, with one exception, carried out online, via questionnaires, supplemented with occasional private email correspondence and material from the ops' mailing list.

The most innovative method employed is the database of over 5000 images captured,²⁹ mainly while online in the channel. I also analyze complete sets of images prepared for ***potential*** use, both for ordinary communication and for holidays, as well as sets with special themes or functions (e.g., birthdays). In addition, I analyze programs used to create images and to display them. "txplay>," and a newer, revised player called "rbplayer 1.0," released in August 2002, are of more than technical interest because they are constitutive of ***rainbow*** activity.

Some researchers believe that in order to preserve the anonymity of online participants, one should change both pseudonyms and the group's name in

²⁸I participate only moderately. When I arrive in the channel, I greet the group and they greet me, and occasionally others continue to acknowledge me, and I respond to them. In-group members know and accept that I am a researcher writing a book about them.

²⁹I use Paint Shop Pro, a graphics program, to capture images, transforming originally text-based images into graphics images. Channel activity is otherwise too ephemeral to allow for analysis. Logs retain only black and white versions, including all the color codes which are hidden when images are viewed online.

publications.³⁰ I do not follow this practice. Unlike groups centered around sensitive issues such as depression or serious illness, this group is involved in **performance**, and is eager for recognition, even as it treasures its pseudonymity.³¹ The players' use of nicks resembles "handles" among Citizens' Band radio enthusiasts (Kalcik 1985).³² They are eager for people to visit their Website.³³ Therefore, actual online nicks are used here, and I give the actual name of the channel. All these practices are with the complete agreement of the players.³⁴

SECULAR RITUAL

Definitions

Of the dozens of definitions of ritual in the academic literature, I review just two, here. For the anthropologist Roy Rappaport ritual is, "***the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers***" (Rappaport 1999: 23). Although this definition may seem rather opaque, Rappaport unpacks it usefully. I draw primarily on his analysis, below. A somewhat more transparent definition is:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often

³⁰ See Sveningsson (2001) Jankowski (2001); Waern (2001); Bruckman (2002).

³¹ Initially, members of the Ethics Working Committee of the Association of Internet Researchers, of which I am a member, opposed allowing for this approach when performance is at stake. In time, I convinced them to allow for this possibility; see Ess (2002).

³² There are many precedents for the use of a "stage" name. Many Hollywood actors and pop singers adopt pseudonyms. Japanese kabuki performers use pseudonyms handed down from generation to generation (Bowers 1974; Inoura and Kawatake 1981). Graffiti artists adopt "tags" (Cooper and Chalfant 1984; Castleman 1982).

³³ With the change of leadership in June 2002, the players created a new Website, at http://webpages.charter.net/mirc_rainbow/.

³⁴ Similarly, in illustrations I give the nick of the artist where known, and obtain permission to use images from individual artists where possible, or from the group leader.

expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). (Tambiah 1985: 128).

When we think of ritual, we generally think of religious ritual. However, many societies, particularly modern ones, engage in forms of ritual with no component of the supernatural. While Rappaport's own work was mainly directed to religious ritual, he acknowledged that ritual forms occur in other contexts too. The term "secular ritual" has been widely used since publication of the book of the same name by Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (1977). They note that

secular ceremonies are common in industrial societies and are found in all contexts....Meetings, court trials, installations, graduations, and other formal assemblies of many kinds are part of the ordinary fabric of collective social life. (Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 4)

Meanings of the Concept of "Ritual"

The term "ritual" is used in different ways in different academic and professional fields; even within fields there is much disagreement.³⁵ Psychiatrists use it to refer to pathological stereotyped behavior of specific individuals (Erikson 1966; Freud 1907). In sociology and anthropology, "ritual" pertains to social events such as weddings or graduation ceremonies, or to aspects of other kinds of events. Thus, while substantive aspects of Anglo-American trials vary from one to the next, there are recurring ritual aspects to courtroom interaction. For instance, every time the judge enters the courtroom in the Anglo-American legal system, a court official calls out "All rise!" In sociology and anthropology the expression *interaction ritual* is associated most often with Erving Goffman

³⁵ This review summarizes Rappaport (1999: 24-26) and adds the field of communication, not discussed by him. For a review of differing approaches to ritual within anthropology, see Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994), especially Chapter 3.

(1959; 1967), for the ceremonial aspects of everyday face-to-face interaction, notably, the role of greetings and various modes of paying honor to people of high status.³⁶

Among communication scholars, James Carey (1988) is well known for his theory of communication as ritual, as social action, rather than as the mere transfer of information. Even if all communication contains some ritual-like elements, some situations are more ritualized than others. Like sociologists and anthropologists, communication scholars think of ritual communication as spanning certain aspects of everyday conversation, as well as full-fledged ceremonies. For them this includes not only traditional varieties of ceremony among people co-present physically to one another, but also **mediated** ceremony (Rothenbuhler 1999). Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1988; 1992) distinguish three types of mediated ceremonies, Contests (presidential debates, the Olympics), Conquests (Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the landing on the moon), and Coronations (the wedding of Princess Diana of Wales and Prince Charles). We are now poised to begin thinking about ceremony mediated not only in one-way broadcast media, but in interactive media on the Internet. In the present instance the participants are creating their own mediated ritual.

Ethologists use the term ritual to refer to animal display (Grimes 1990; Hinde 1966). Like them, I too focus on display, though not in the narrow sense used by them. I concur with Rappaport that among human beings display can never be

³⁶ See also Goody (1972); Knuf (1990-1991).

limited to the limited types of information that are communicated in, say, the spreading of feathers by a peacock. Human messages are far more complex.

Following Rappaport in focusing on the form of ritual and on its perceptible or obvious elements (Rappaport 1979; 1999: 26-27), I will argue that despite the anomalous lack of direct, unmediated appeal to the senses in synchronous online communication, *rainbow* interaction has many elements that together comprise a ritual form.

Play versus Ritual: Ritualized Play

As Don Handelman (1976) has written, play and ritual are complementary frames of meta-communication, containing many similarities but also important differences. “Play is a way of organizing activity, and not a particular set of activities” (Handelman 1976: 185). Participants change from the social types of ordinary reality to symbolic types.

Taking on symbolic types of “player”, and of a particular type of player, permits actors to “forget” their social selves....Unlike life in the ordinary social order, the reality of play is not negotiable: the self...need not mediate between ego and others in order to define a common definition of the situation....Thus a player need not express a social self different from that of other players, the social self is superfluous. (Handelman 1976: 185)

On *rainbow*, it doesn't much matter which player greets whom, or who they are in real life, as long as greeting and honoring continue. I will elaborate on this idea later in the chapter.

Drawing on earlier work by Bateson (1955; 1972) and Rappaport (1971),³⁷ Handelman suggests that the meta-message of the ritual frame is “This is ritual... ***all messages included within this frame are true***” (Handelman 1976: 188). In

³⁷ Statements about the unquestionability of ritual propositions did not change fundamentally in later publications by Rappaport (1979; 1999).

contrast, the meta-message of play is “This is play...**all messages within this frame are false**” (Handelman 1976: 189). Thus, ritual says “Let us believe;” play says “Let’s pretend; let’s act as if we believe.”

Both play and ritual are **liminal** phenomena. In one definition, Victor Turner, who coined the phrase, drew on van Gennep’s (1960 (1908)) focus on **limen**, Latin for threshold, for the transitional phase in rites of passage. Turner defined liminality as “any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life. It is often a sacred condition or can readily become one” (Turner 1969: 47). In liminal periods or events such as carnivals, hierarchical status differences and ordinary normative constraints are temporarily suspended; all participate as equals, and experience sentiments of **communitas**, heightened awareness of belonging to a group (Turner, 1974: 44). “The social selves of participants are ‘masked’; they become anonymous beings, levelled and stripped of their social insignia” (Handelman 1976: 187).

Play, Ritual, and Liminality Online

In writing about the Internet five to ten years ago, many spoke of cyberspace as liminal, or invoked the metaphor of the frontier or Wild West to describe it. In the introduction to **Cyberpl@y** I myself wrote:

Cyberspace is often anarchic, playful and even carnivalesque, despite the absence of the body, or at least a radical transformation of its role....In Victor Turner’s...terms it is a liminal space, “betwixt and between,” freed from the rules and expectations that normally govern daily life, governed by the subjunctive mode of possibility and experiment. This is so both because in the late 20th century it was new and still relatively uncharted culturally, and because...it frequently masked identity and reduced accountability. (Danet 2001: 8).

Today it no longer makes sense to speak of cyberspace in monolithic fashion.

Nevertheless, many spaces within it **are** liminal, and the masking of identity

through nicknames and identity-disguising email addresses continues to neutralize status differences in varying degrees. Think of the famous *New Yorker* cartoon, “On the Internet no one knows you’re a dog.” Communicating via images as discussed here can have the same effect.

Many studies of play with identity online focus on groups where people pretend to be something other than themselves, for instance to role-play a different gender than one’s own.³⁸ However, it is an empirical question to what extent the regulars of any virtual group can be said to hide behind their pseudonyms. There are cases where the relation between real-world and online identity is complex, and participants do not exactly hide behind their pseudonyms (Jacobson, 1996; Cherny 1999: 63; Pargman 2000).

IRC nicks are similar in function to the “handles” among Citizens’ Band radio enthusiasts.³⁹ Rather than hiding real-world identity, nicks are often an extension of it. Already in *rainbow*’s early years, some players got to know each others’ real names behind the scenes, and used them in private communication. By 2002 ops often used each others’ real first names, in the ops email list and even sometimes on *rainbow*, though nicks continued to be used frequently too. Even as real-world ties developed, *rainbow* continued to serve as a liminal space.

³⁸ See Reid (1994); Curtis (1996); Bruckman (1992); Kendall (2002); Allen (1996); Jacobson (1996); Danet (1998); Dickel (1995); Donath (1999); Slater (2002); Turkle (1995); Van Gelder (1990); Roberts and Parks (1999).

³⁹ See Danet (1998); Danet, Ruedenberg and Rosenbaum-Tamari (1998); Ruedenberg, Danet and Rosenbaum-Tamari (1995); Bechar-Israeli (1995); Kalcik (1985).

Direct Appeal to the Senses versus Simulation

A major set of components of real-world ritual is glaringly absent on *rainbow*, and indeed, on much of the Internet today, perhaps making some readers skeptical of my approach. Barbara Myerhoff noted that

Rituals are conspicuously physiological; witness their behavioral basis, the ... involvement of the entire human sensorium through dramatic presentations employing costumes, masks, colors, textures, odors, foods, beverages, songs, dances, props, settings, and so forth. (Myerhoff 1977: 199)

Writing more recently about the history of constitutive⁴⁰ or performative ritual, I too pointed out that

Oral ritual is extremely rich in communicational components. In addition to verbal formulas, often involving archaic, esoteric or very formal language... we often find special stylized gestures and ceremonial objects...; ceremonial dress and body adornment; special food and drink; decoration of the setting; and other forms of rich appeal to the senses, organized in a manner which conveys complex messages....(Danet 1997:)

Despite the absence of unmediated appeal to the senses, the arresting appeal to the eye of *rainbow* images, increasingly supplemented by short sound clips, is the key component in this form of ritualized play, and is, I suggest, a hint of what is to come in the future: a far richer appeal to all the senses--in as yet unimagined forms of online ritual conducted via future virtual reality technologies.

FEATURES OF *RAINBOW* RITUAL

I now review the basic features of ritual, drawing primarily on Rappaport's (1999) template, and show how they apply to communication on *rainbow*.

⁴⁰ Below, I will distinguish between constitutive and celebratory ritual. Weddings and graduations are constitutive—life-changing--rituals; liturgies and—I will argue—*rainbow* practice—are collective celebratory rituals.

Encoding by Other than Performers

First of all, Rappaport stipulates that “the performers of rituals do not specify all the acts and utterances constituting their own performances” (Rappaport 1999: 32). He means that the participants enact rituals originally created by persons other than them. Major rituals usually have long traditions, e.g., the Catholic Mass. Rappaport acknowledges that new rituals are sometimes created, and that this can be problematic both for the theorist and for the performers. “A ritual which has never been performed before may seem to those present not so much a ritual as a charade” (Rappaport 1999: 32).

On *rainbow* too, the flow of activity expresses and entails much more than meets the eye, and more than any player can explicitly articulate. This will become clearer when I discuss *rainbow* myths or canonical beliefs. No one can say exactly who decided what constitutes *rainbow* activity and what form it should take; it seems to have “always” existed, though “always” is an astonishingly short time, considering that it was only made possible with the advent of Windows 95 and the Windows version of the IRC software!

Rappaport (1999: 32) adds that new rituals are likely to be composed of elements from older ones. This is certainly true for *rainbow* activity. It draws both on the basic constitutive and regulative rules of face-to-face interaction ritual while transforming them, and on another ritualized form, the traditional exchange of paper greeting cards. Like the “packaged sentiments” (Jaffe 1999) or “prefabricated utterances” (Herrnstein-Smith 1978) of greeting cards, the imagery

and short verbal texts in *rainbow* art are also largely pre-fabricated, awaiting display in specific contexts.

Formality: Formulaic Predictability. Repetitiveness

Adherence to form is an aspect of all rituals (Rappaport, 1999: 33; Moore and Myerhoff 1977, Introduction). Echoing the definition of Tambiah cited above, Rappaport writes:

Behavior in ritual tends to be punctilious and repetitive. Ritual sequences are composed of conventional, even stereotyped elements, for instance stylized and often decorous gestures and postures and the arrangements of these elements in time and space are usually more or less fixed. Rituals are... regularly repeated. (Rappaport 1999: 33)

Repetitiveness. Repetitiveness is abundantly present in *rainbow* communication. In addition to repetition of typographic symbols within images and repetition of acts of greeting and honoring, there is extensive repetition over time with minor variations in the thematic content of figurative images--scores of teddy bears, Valentines, cute animals and children, and so on.⁴¹ Another prominent form of repetition is bilateral symmetry, in which the two halves of an image mirror each other, as in Figure 4..

Repetitiveness in the form of images is the visual analog of **parallelism**, a very common feature of verbal communication in both oral and written forms of ritual, "the foregrounding of certain aspects of text or discourse by the introduction of **extra regularities** not called for by the basic rules of language" (Leech 1969: 64; italics added). Parallelism

⁴¹ We have already seen four teddy bear images, in <sher^>'s design for <Angelbear>'s nick (Figure 7), the first image in Figure 12, the second image in Figure 13, and the second image in Figure 14.

is a pervasive device and idiom of formal speaking, chanting, and singing, and of greetings, farewells, petitions, and courtship overtures. Especially throughout the world's oral traditions, it is a "speech form or language stratum reserved for special situations, for the preservation of past wisdom, for the utterance of sacred words, *for determining ritual relations*, for healing, for communication with spirits (Tambiah, 1985: 140, citing Fox, 1975: 127-128; italics added).

Parallelism is evidence of preoccupation with the form of the message.

In earlier work on the elements of secular ritual in the language of legal documents I noted the prominence of one form of parallelism, word pairs, called binomial expressions⁴² by linguists, such as *aid and abet*, *cease and desist*, as a way to heighten the performative power of the document (Danet 1984; Danet and Bogoch 1992). These two-part phrases are usually at least partially redundant in meaning, and contain striking formal regularities of various kinds,⁴³ "thickening" the language, to enhance its performative power. These reflections help us understand why earlier ASCII art was entirely figurative, whereas in IRC art we see the dramatic turn to patterning in images. ASCII art was, and is, created and viewed in solo conditions, whereas IRC art is a social phenomenon.

Repetition within images and repetitiveness across images are related to the social and psychological functions of the display of images in context.

A number of students of ritual have noted that the degree of formality—of formulaic predictability—in social situations varies along a continuum, from least

⁴² Malkiel (1959: 113) defines a binomial as "the sequence of two words pertaining to the same form-class, placed on an identical level of syntactic hierarchy, and ordinarily connected by some kind of lexical link."

⁴³ These include assonance and alliteration, as well as the principle of end-weight (in which the second half of the expression contains more phonetic material or more syllables than the first). I examined these regularities in modern legal Hebrew (Danet 1984) and in Old English wills (Danet and Bogoch, 1992).

formal to most formal. Thus, at the conference on secular ritual organized by Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (1977), participants agreed that

If social behaviors were put on a continuum, with the extreme of prescribed formality at one end and the most open, optative, spontaneous behavior at the other, ... almost any complex social occasion involve[s] both, in various permutations and combinations. (Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 22).

At one end of the continuum are situations with virtually no formality; almost anything may be said in any form and in any order by anyone. Still, even in such situations, initiation and conclusion of interaction involve attention to ceremonial aspects. Entering a social gathering in a room without greeting those present or at least one's host is almost unthinkable, unless the gathering is very large and one is not acquainted with anyone.

Intermediate on the continuum are fairly invariant procedures such as courtroom trials, which nevertheless also involve a good deal of variation in content. As briefly alluded to above, every trial in the Anglo-American legal tradition follows an elaborate formal sequence, though the substance of each trial varies, and can of course be extensive, extending over days and weeks.

Then there are special events such as coronations and weddings, in which invariant aspects clearly predominate, and for which we usually use the term "ritual" for the event itself, and not merely as an adjective to refer to aspects of events (Rappaport 1999: 35; Rothenbuhler 1999: 3-5). Note that we would not ordinarily speak of trials as rituals—this would in effect be claiming that substance did not matter, that trials were a mere sham—show trials.

In full-fledged rituals there is a formulaic sequence to events, as in trials, but the variant elements are much more minor, or nearly absent. Thus, in

coronations and weddings the words of the main formula uttered by participants remain the same; only the person(s) being crowned or married change.⁴⁴ Finally, at the opposite end of the continuum are the most highly invariant extended events, also called rituals. The paradigmatic case is religious liturgy, e.g., the Catholic Mass, with its fully prescribed text.

It is not difficult to place *rainbow* communication along this continuum-- invariant aspects predominate. As I will elaborate below, there is a quite restricted range of communicative acts. What changes is the identities of the players doing the greeting and honoring, and of those being greeted or honored, and the particular images mobilized to perform these acts. Communication is highly formulaic, though rather than words alone constituting the main formulaic element, images combined with minimal texts do so.

Invariance

Even in very formal, fully programmed events such as performances of religious liturgy, there is some choice. Thus, in Jewish synagogue liturgy, the Torah is removed from the Ark at a certain point and carried around for the congregants to touch ceremonially. However, who will be honored by this privilege is not specified. Interaction on *rainbow* is roughly analogous. At any given moment anyone can perform any of the basic communicative acts. Of course people who have behind-the-scenes friendships may be quick to greet one another, as in Figure 1, and perhaps the visual greeting will be

⁴⁴ Sometimes the person marrying the pair may make a speech addressing them and the audience, and its substance may vary considerably. But on the whole, invariant aspects are paramount.

complemented with a few words of personalized typed text, as became more common by 2002. But often an exchange of visual greetings with newcomers will look the same as one between old friends.

Occasionally, an exchange is truly personalized. In Figure 6 an op nicknamed <Nicky> greets <iaaron> with a humorous image of a face sticking its tongue out. <iaaron> responds with an image that insiders would know is originally of <Nicky>'s design. The "hot dog" people are her signature invention. By playing this file <iaaron> honors <Nicky> personally. Similarly, players sometimes greet each other with custom-designed nick files, images incorporating nicks in an oversize "font" in the design. The first two examples in Figure 7 incorporate personalized graphic elements. The design for <angelbear> incorporates a tiny teddy bear within an angel's wings, and the design for <phroggy> includes the head of a frog. When this type of visualization is not possible, the artist decorates the design with pleasing colors and graphic touches, as in the second pair of files, for <giggles> and <kymmy>. The online display of these custom-designed greetings is the exception, not the rule. Mostly, any image can be used to greet anyone,⁴⁵ regardless of whether players have an ongoing private relationship, or whether they are regulars or newcomers.

(Figures 6, 7)

⁴⁵ Some are gender-marked; generally, the players take account of this, displaying gender-appropriate images, though same-sex pairs often exchange visual "Valentines" with no sexual or romantic connotation implied, like schoolchildren.

Concern for face and face-saving is extremely rare. In Figure 8 <JudyUP> plays for <Zep> an image of large red lips, with the text “read my lips—you make me hot.” She then types,

```
<JudyUP> oops  
<JudyUP> oops  
<JudyUP> <-red faced  
...  
<JudyUP> I gotta ckout these popups before I use them
```

<Zep> and another player (playfully nicknamed <n|ck>) chuckle.

(Figure 8)

<JudyUP> is embarrassed about having addressed to <Zep> a file with unusually explicit sexual content. Via the second image, she represents herself as red-faced! The pre-fabricated, embedded text, “STOP Zep! You'RE Making mE BLUSH!!!” is not relevant to this context and cannot be changed--she is blushing because of her own behavior, not his, and chose the image for the red face. With regard to the first image, she did not know what file she had activated. Thus, there is often an element of chance in which image is chosen, undermining seriousness of intent. As for the second image, this time <JudyUP> mobilized one that was on the mark. In hundreds of hours of observation of the channel, I have rarely encountered such indications of embarrassment.

A situation where issues of face might arise is “picture collisions,” the messy overlap of images displayed simultaneously (Figure 9). Here, <redmoon>'s image is interrupted both by smaller images played by <Prudence> and <tlc-> and, secondarily by small bits of typed text by others. This is the visual equivalent of several people talking at once. When this happens in verbal conversations, speakers apologize, yield, or say, “Go ahead,” attending to norms of politeness

governing turntaking. Sometimes when image collisions happen, one person does apologize, but usually in a humorous or playful manner, mobilizing ready-made one-liners such as “I stopped... SORRY... forgive me?... SORRY!... WAAAAAH!” or “COLOR COLLISION! WOW! There was color everywhere!” In short, issues of individual face and face-saving are rarely *relevant* on *rainbow*.

Restricted Repertoire of Communicative Acts

Restricted communicative repertoire is one of the strongest types of evidence for the claim that *rainbow* communication is a form of ritual. A general typology of seven of the most common ones is presented in Figure 10. As we have seen, in initial greetings to newcomers (whether newbies or old-timers arriving that day), typically an abstract or figurative image is displayed, together with the recipient’s nick. The words “hi” or “hello” may have been embedded permanently in the image by the artist. Sometimes the word “hug” or “hugs” appears instead (Figure 11). Explicit inclusion of “hug” indicates that images (including images without the word “hug”) are intended and experienced as virtual hugs, as shows of affection and attention. Invariably, recipients acknowledge greetings reciprocally, usually with an image of the same or similar nature.⁴⁶

(Figures 10, 11)

By far, the most common category is *honorings*, acts of acknowledging, recognizing, bestowing attention upon a given player. All-purpose images can appear both as initial greetings upon the arrival of the recipient, and as honorings

⁴⁶ We saw an instance of this in the exchange of greetings by <NikPackn> and <MistyDawn> in Figure 1.

any time later.⁴⁷ There are many ways of bestowing attention on others, depending on the type of mini-text that has been added. In addition to “all-purpose” greetings without texts other than nicks, there are sentimental--sometimes gushingly sentimental--expressions of love and friendship (first two images, Figure 12), and offers of goods and services, such as a virtual cup of coffee or a beer. Humorous images may contain clever wordplay, as in the latter pair of images in Figure 12.

(Figure 12)

Adapted by <aisa>, a Spanish businesswoman, from a work by Joan Stark, the first image in Figure 12 states baldly, in full view of the others, “I love you”-- a message generally reserved for intimate communication between couples or for paper greeting cards perused in private. The person displaying the image may have no idea who <tishtash> is, let alone what age or gender.

Other categories of communicative acts in Figure 10 are requests for love, attention or friendship from the recipient (Figure 13), invitations of various kinds, generally of a mock nature and often expressed metaphorically (Figure 14), and compliments, images containing verbal messages such as “You’ve beary sweet” or “You’re one sweet cookie.” Requests for love, friendship or attention may be almost embarrassingly explicit, like the first example in Figure 13 (“Please give me loving”), or indirect. Those familiar with the pre-conditions of speech acts will recognize that an utterance such as “I need you” (third example, Figure 13) is an

⁴⁷ A variation is “welcome back” images, which are used to greet people returning to the channel after a short absence.

indirect way of requesting, “Love me!” by stating one of its pre-conditions.⁴⁸

Invitations of the type shown here are closely related to requests; technically non-executable, they are yet another way of asking for attention.

(Figures 13, 14)

The five types of communicative acts that I have just discussed constitute the bulk of all communicative activity on *rainbow*. There are other, less common ones, including “partings”-- images designed to say goodbye, thank-you’s, and images whose verbal message expresses a wish of some kind.

Two additional aspects of interaction online also undermine seriousness of intent. The first has to do with “multiples” —images used to greet several players at once. In these images, from two to 20 or more nicks can be inserted instead of just one (the example in Figure 15 contains 24). Surprisingly, I learned that in some multiples the nicks displayed are *randomly assigned* by the script embedded in the file. Therefore recipients of these greetings are not “being honored” by anyone in the normal sense of the word. The players found this perfectly acceptable.⁴⁹

(Figure 15)

Second, I discovered that for a short period in 2002, a bot nicknamed <eveline> played files in the channel, seemingly greeting others. I confess that I was taken in: I had thought that <eveline> was a person! I asked <sher^> in April 2002 whether players—especially newbies--are taken in too, not realizing that

⁴⁸ See Searle (1976; 1979); Blum-Kulka et al. (1985).

⁴⁹ Memorandum from <patches>, February, 2002.

<eveline> is a bot--a mini-program. <sher^> claimed that this did occasionally happen, but that the “victim” generally laughed when he or she realized that this was so, rather than being upset or feeling cheated.

Soon I discovered that the automated display was often grossly inappropriate. Sometimes the bot greeted itself by nick. One April 2002 session included a Christmas greeting. <eveline> “greeted” by nick a person who was not in the channel at the time. Another file displayed the text “you’re welcome,” when no one had thanked <eveline> for anything. Apparently, no one was bothered by these anomalies, in part, at least, because images were also “art,” available via the display for instant downloading.⁵⁰ But the players also tolerated them because communication was fundamentally so ritualized. The fact that they accepted <eveline> for a time, and that nicks in many multiples were randomly inserted, supports the view that this is a form of ritualized play, and that the players intuitively understood it as such.

Performance

To return to Rappaport’s (1999) paradigm, performance is central to all ritual, both in the case of fleeting greetings addressed to a stranger and in the case of extended rituals like weddings and religious liturgies. ***Talk about the performance of a ritual is not the same as performance of the ritual itself.***

This fundamental insight lies at the heart of speech act theory (Austin 1970a;

⁵⁰ Another function of the bot was to make single images available for instant downloading, though originally, <patches> had instituted it to stimulate channel activity during a quiet period. After her departure in May 2002, <eveline> was no longer activated.

1970b; Searle 1969; 1976; 1979), and is central to Tambiah's (1985) work on ritual. To talk about a performance that has occurred is to talk about the world. In contrast, in the right circumstances, to perform a **constitutive** speech act such as saying "I do" in a wedding ceremony is **to change the world**, to bring about a state of things that did not exist before the words were uttered.⁵¹ Similarly, to perform, or participate in a liturgy is to affirm the canonical beliefs latent in it.

There is an important difference between performance in drama and in ritual. While there are performers in both, in drama there is also an audience. In ritual, on the other hand, all present are part of a **congregation** (Rappaport 1999: 39).

Congregations are usually composed of people who know each other but even if they don't they can make certain assumptions about each other from the mere fact that they are participating together in a liturgical order....They can assume that they stand on common ground and as such as members of a *common community*. This assumption is often reinforced formally by the requirement, or at least expectation, that congregants greet their neighbors in a formulaic manner: "peace be with you," "shabbat shalom", etc. (Rappaport, 1999: 41; italics added).

In the performance of a play the actors are "only acting." In contrast, the acts of those performing a ritual "count" or are consequential for them personally in important ways.

In drama, and in oral genres such as storytelling in traditional cultures, the audience is invited to attend to the quality of the individual's performance:

In this sense of performance, the act of communication is put on display, objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual surroundings, and opened up to scrutiny by an audience. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of communication and gives license to the audience to regard it and the performer with special intensity. Performance makes one communicatively accountable; it assigns to an audience the responsibility of evaluating the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment. (Bauman 1992: 44)

⁵¹ See my essay on the history of constitutive ritual (Danet 1997).

In contrast, in ritual the quality of the individual performance doesn't matter as long as the basic constitutive requirements of the ritual are met. Whether the bride says "I do" loudly or quietly, with or without great emotion, doesn't matter. All that matters is saying the right words in the right circumstances, following the recipe—**doing it right**. Similarly, how one recites the words of prayer in a church or synagogue doesn't matter, as long as one recites them.

This distinction clarifies why it doesn't matter which **rainbow** player greets a newcomer, or which file a player chooses to display. In theory one **could** pay attention to a player's taste in images. The players do compliment one another occasionally (or the artist who had created an image). However, matters of taste are secondary, and such comments are fairly rare. Moreover, the partial element of chance in the file selected undermines attributing taste to the person displaying it.

The pretend nature of drama also contrasts strongly with the serious or "earnest" nature of ritual. Rappaport notes that ritual is in earnest

even when it is playful, entertaining, ludicrous, obscene or blasphemous, or even when, perhaps especially when its actions are highly stylized, as in postures of submission or in the recitation of formulae. (Rappaport 1999: 43).

I see **rainbow** communication as in earnest in this sense, even when the files displayed are at their most playful or humorous, and despite the fact that at the meta-level this is a playful phenomenon. In short, it is, quite simply, **both mock and serious**.

Rainbow activities include not only regular communication but also "shows"—scheduled, pre-planned displays of images in which all (virtually) present except the person displaying them change from "congregants" to "audience." The

difference is made visible in several ways. First of all, whoever is running the show usually changes the channel from “unmoderated” to “moderated.” This means that during the show only the moderator may speak or activate IRC commands. Second, those present are invited to change the background color of the channel window to black, as if to “darken the auditorium.”⁵² Thus, just before the show celebrating *rainbow*’s fourth anniversary, on Friday, May 4, 2001, the person running the show, <sher^>, displayed the following line:

All ops type /remote off please. No talking, No sounds, No popups.

Typing the command **/remote off** makes it impossible to play files in collections. In addition, all are told “no talking, no sounds, no popups”. People are just to sit quietly and watch. The behavior of the audience after the show simulates real life audiences. They “clap”, yell “bravo,” or play a mini-sound file of clapping. Other ways of responding to the performance are shown in Figure 16. Such audience behavior does not occur in regular channel interaction.

(Figure 16)

As a form of “drama”, *rainbow* shows have clear beginnings and ends, whereas spontaneous *rainbow* communication has no clear beginning or end, except for rare cases where someone joins the channel and finds it otherwise empty, or is the last one to leave. This would seem to disqualify regular *rainbow* communication from being classed as a ritual, since real-world events that we call “rituals” do have clear beginnings and ends. For this reason I call *rainbow*

⁵² This is never done in spontaneous channel communication, though individual players are free to change the color of the background in the window if they so desire.

activity a form of ritualized play, rather than playful ritual. Virtual weddings, a fairly frequent occurrence on MOOs and IRC, in contrast, are more properly called playful rituals, since they do have a beginning and an end.⁵³

Symbolic versus Physical Efficacy

In the literature on the anthropology of ritual a distinction is often made between material or physical efficacy of activity, on the one hand, and symbolic efficacy, on the other. When one is dealing with real-world manipulations of bodies, objects, and substances, one may ask: how do participants perceive the material aspects of ritual? Rappaport uses the term “formal” to subsume not only “decorousness, punctiliousness, conformity to form, repetitiveness, regularity, and stylization” but also “not physically efficacious” (Rappaport 1999: 46). Obviously, a non-tangible form of ritual such as *rainbow* communication online cannot be physically efficacious in any direct sense. Whatever the display of images on *rainbow* accomplishes, that accomplishment is necessarily symbolic.⁵⁴

WHAT DOES *RAINBOW* RITUAL COMMUNICATE?

For Rappaport (1999), Handelman (1976), and many other students of ritual, its performance necessarily entails the affirmation of myths or canonical beliefs--beliefs taken by congregants to be unquestionably true, even if not explicitly articulated. Rothenbuhler expands:

⁵³ See Reid (1995); Curtis (1996); Jacobson (1996).

⁵⁴ Perhaps there are physiological responses to participation, but this issue is beyond the domain of this chapter.

Myth is a basic human form of expression. Myth gives voice to, and thus makes public, deep anxieties as well as basic beliefs and values....It is a form for expressing, thereby sharing, and thereby creating the conditions for the resolution of socially originating but personally experienced anxieties. (Rothenbuhler 1999: 92).

In this section I will show that *rainbow* activities are motivated by a set of myths or canonical beliefs.

The Rainbow Motif

I first grasped the importance of canonical beliefs for the players when I encountered two striking images and their accompanying short texts on the group's Website. The first one, the most important, is an image of outstretched arms encircling nine small faces, entirely composed of typographic symbols (Figure 17). It served as the group's logo on the Website as run by <patches>, 1998-2001. Beneath it was the text,

**We love everyone here on #mirc_rainbow!!!
Come join us and enjoy the rainbow of colors :)**

(Figure 17)

Together, image and text announce that both social and aesthetic aspects of channel activity are important. The group aspires to offer instant friendship and unconditional social acceptance to all, as well as an enjoyable aesthetic experience featuring a rainbow of colors. This image was originally designed by Joan Stark, and was adapted for *rainbow* by <diedra>, one of the founders, in May 1997.

The name of the channel is rich in associations, and is a means to further unpack the canonical beliefs motivating participants. For centuries the rainbow

has been a prominent symbol of hope, optimism, and spiritual aspiration in Judaeo-Christian tradition.⁵⁵

In Jewish myth the bow could be a hopeful portent, as in the story of God's covenant with Noah, and in the Judaeo-Christian tradition it could be the symbol of Divine power at the Last Judgment, recorded in Ezekiel (1:28) and the Revelation of St. John (4:3). (Gage 1993: 93).

The art historian John Gage adds that “Christian imagery teems with representations of rainbows” (Gage 1993: 98). Another familiar association is to William Wordsworth’s famous poem

**My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!**

For Philip Fisher (1998, p. 33) , the rainbow is "the central instance of the aesthetics of wonder." We wonder at, and are momentarily transported by the unexpected. A rare, ephemeral phenomenon, the rainbow offers us the pleasures both of color and of regularity of geometric shape—a perfect half-circle. All of Fisher’s points are pertinent. This metaphor points to the players’ longing for experiences that transport them out of humdrum routine, unsatisfying living arrangements, or troublesome life situations.

My speculation that many of these themes were relevant for *rainbow* players was confirmed in interviews with ops in June-July 2002. I asked, “What do you think of when you think about the name of the channel? Why is ‘rainbow’ a good name for the channel?” <Litty>, an Indiana housewife in her 40s, wrote,

⁵⁵ See Boyer (1959); Gage (1997); Lee (2001); Fisher (1998). Positive connotations of the rainbow are not universal. Boyer (1959: 25) notes that “many primitive peoples viewed the rainbow with fear and misgiving.”

“Rainbows always brings [sic] a smile to your face.” Similarly, <kassy>, a disabled former factory worker in her 40s from Kentucky replied, “Rainbows are good things make you smile...” For others, harmony and peacefulness were associations. <MotoTsume>, a male computer technical support person and Web designer from Vancouver, Canada, wrote, “A Rainbow to me is a nice sign that storms are over (so it is a calm place to be and also a little magical).” <swanhazel>, a female in her 30s from Tennessee, explicitly used the terms “harmony” and “peacefulness.”

In recent years the rainbow became a symbol for the gay and lesbian community⁵⁶ and the Afro-American Rainbow/PUSH Coalition.⁵⁷ In both cases, the notion of rainbow symbolizes acceptance of diversity. This secondary connotation is also pertinent in the present context--people of all varieties are welcome in the channel. <Angltooch> wrote,

I live in Hawaii, a multi-ethnic mixture of people and cultures. The same is true for the channel....the many and varied colors that fly by in form of text, peoples [sic], and diversity among those who are there.

<MistyDawn> replied that the name “fits for the people...there are so many different people...from so many different places...with so many different personalities.” Some, like <desiree>, regret that people sometimes think mistakenly that the channel is for gays.

For <patches> yet another association was to *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1956; Rushdie 1992) and especially to the film and its famous song, “Over the

⁵⁶ The rainbow flag design for the gay and lesbian community was created in 1978 by Gilbert Baker of San Francisco. See

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs.cs.cmu.edu/user/scotts/bulgarians/rainbow-flag.html>.

⁵⁷ See <http://www.rainbowpush.org/about/index.html>.

Rainbow.” Below a second motif on the *rainbow* Website in the late 1990s was a multicolored rendering of the name RAINBOW; under it were the words,

Click on above image to step into a world where dreams do come true.

This is an almost exact quotation from the song:

**Somewhere, over the rainbow, way up high,
There’s a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby.
Somewhere, over the rainbow, skies are blue.
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true.**

Within the yearning in Judy Garland’s voice, writes Salman Rushdie:

...is the human dream of *leaving*, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots. At the heart of *The Wizard of Oz* is a great tension between these two dreams...In its most potent emotional moment, this is unarguably a film about the joys of going away, of leaving the greyness and entering the colour, of making a new life in the “place where there isn’t any trouble.” “over the Rainbow” is, or ought to be the anthem of all the world’s migrants, all those who go in search of the place where “the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.” It is a celebration of Escape, a great paean to the Uprooted Self, a hymn—the hymn—to elsewhere. (Rushdie 1992:); cited in Batchelor 2001: 40-41).

Just as Dorothy steps from the gray world of Kansas into the multicolor world of Oz, so many *rainbow* players aspire to “step into” a multicolor world of hope online, leaving behind the gray one of their physical lives.

Canonical Beliefs

Drawing on the above discussion of key images and their accompanying texts, and on observation and analysis over the years, I have compiled a list of beliefs underlying *rainbow* activities (Figure 18). Some are slight restatements of material already presented less formally; others are new.

(Figure 18)

Stated more formally, the central belief underlying *rainbow* activities is

**The real world is an insecure, unsafe, unloving place full of troubles.
Rainbow is a secure, safe, loving place, a trouble-free haven.**

The second and third beliefs hold that all are welcome and all are equal in the group. An important addition is

All participants are loved fully, instantly and unconditionally, even if they do not reveal information about themselves and their real-world lives, and regardless of what information they choose to reveal or is unintentionally revealed.

According to this belief, there are no conditions on being loved. Moreover, the overt expression of this love through welcoming images is available instantly to anyone joining the channel. People may remain as pseudonymous as they like, though some players do eventually reveal personal and demographic information about themselves. These beliefs, in turn, are based on a more basic belief, that it is **possible** to love everyone fully, instantly, and unconditionally. It hardly needs to be pointed out that in the real world we do not love everyone, let alone love them fully, instantly, and unconditionally.

I have also included a belief stating that virtual love and friendship are as valid and as valuable as real-world forms of love and friendship. Such a belief is, of course, not unique to **rainbow**. It may underlie many forms of fairly stable online groups. Another belief is that childhood is a more satisfying, happier, safer and more secure time of life than adulthood. This belief accounts at least in part for the preference for non-aggressive childlike imagery. Finally, I have added the belief that all artists are equally talented and deserving of recognition.

MOCK OR SERIOUS?

In this chapter I have argued that **rainbow** activity is a curious hybrid—both mock and serious, both a form of lighthearted play with typography and visual imagery, **and** an earnest, even poignant pursuit of friendship and **communitas**.

What of these canonical beliefs themselves? Are they mock or serious? There is no simple answer. There is no element of pretense regarding the belief that all are welcome regardless of social, demographic or geographic characteristics. However, it appears that the others involve a degree of pretense, notably the central belief that *rainbow* is a secure, safe haven where all are loved. The guiding meta-message is, “*Let us pretend that this is so,*” or “Let us act *as if* this were so.” But the pretense is in order to enable the earnest pursuit of deeply felt goals and needs—love, attention, social acceptance, togetherness.

In reality acceptance is not, and cannot be totally unconditional, not even on *rainbow*. As in all IRC channels, ops can ban and “kick” (temporarily ban) individuals from the channel for certain kinds of misbehavior. As for the contradiction between the belief that all artists are equally talented and de facto recognition of some as especially talented, the group resolves this contradiction by scheduling shows for individual artists, and then immediately releasing their work for use online by others. More research is needed to explicate how the group reconciles its egalitarianism with the elaborate ops hierarchy that has developed over time.

IMPLICATIONS

This chapter has shown that with some adaptation and supplementary modes of inquiry, ordinary ethnographic methods are appropriate for research about mediated ritual online. Substantively, the chapter has demonstrated that the seemingly unpromising medium of a normally text-based chat mode can support ritual, and that, even with very limited means, ordinary people can create new

forms of long-lasting sociation that do not require face-to-face contact, yet feature key elements of ritual as we have known it in earlier technological eras.

Several factors promote playfulness online, both in general and in this instance. First is “interactivity,”⁵⁸ the dynamic quality of the medium and its extraordinary flexibility and speed. Second is hacker culture. “Playfulness is absolutely central to what hackers do and how they perceive themselves” (Danet 2001: 26). They love to play with symbols and words, with typography and spelling. While *rainbow* people have largely domesticated eccentric typography, often used by hackers in intentionally transgressive ways, as mentioned earlier, they share with them a love of playing with the elements of writing in novel ways, and similarly delight in making programs do more than they were designed to do. The masking of identity also fosters playfulness, whether play with identity, as Sherry Turkle (1995) and others have shown, or play with the elements of communication themselves, as shown in *Cyberpl@y* (Danet 2001) and this chapter.

Rainbow ritual is far more playful than we usually expect of ritual as ordinarily practiced in the developed West. This mixing of serious and playful elements is not unique. Anthropologists have long discussed playful components in certain rituals. Rappaport notes that “clowns have important roles to play in the rituals of the Tewa (Ortiz 1969) and other American Indians, in Sri Lanka

⁵⁸ See Rafaeli and Sudweeks, (1997); Schultz (2000); McMillan and Downs (2000); McMillan (2002).

(Kapferer 1983) and elsewhere” (Rappaport 1999: 33).⁵⁹ Also, virtual weddings on IRC and MOOs mix sometimes hilariously parodic, playful and serious elements in complex ways.⁶⁰ There is also preliminary evidence that experiments with online religious ritual, mainly by non-institutional groups such as Technopagans, mix ludic and serious components too.⁶¹ While no extensive study of this type of ritual has yet been carried out, several authors report hybrid phenomena.⁶² Stephen O’Leary notes that

In discussions of religion on the Internet it is commonly noted that a new more ludic, reflexive, and even irreverent style of religious consciousness may be emerging in conjunction with this technology....This conjunction of reverence and irreverence seems to be in some way characteristic of the spiritual situation of postmodern culture. (O’Leary 1996: 803).

In my research, too, technology converges with cultural trends and needs, producing a hybrid cultural form partially resembling religious forms of emergent virtual *communitas* (Helland 2000).

How exactly does *rainbow* art constitute and realize the longing for *communitas*? My answer to this question has only been hinted at here, and requires detailed analysis of the visual form of images. Do *rainbow* regulars succeed in realizing their poignant aspirations? If the art itself is so ephemeral,

⁵⁹ See also Handelman (1981).

⁶⁰ See the references in footnote 53, especially Jacobson (1996).

⁶¹ See Thee Church Ov Moo, <http://victoria.tc.ca/~half-mad//moo/>; The Temple of Duality, <http://www.silverstormlavenderdawn.homestead.com/cyberritual.html>; Online Wiccan Rituals, <http://www.angelfire.com/folk/wiccasinovess/>; Thee Church Ov Moo, <http://victoria.tc.ca/~half-mad//moo/>. There are also many serious, solo ritual acts online, such as signing condolence books or lighting virtual memorial candles (for instance, the World Trade Center memorial on ICQ, <http://www.cgi.icq.com/cgi-bin/memorial/candles.pl5>), or, in Jewish tradition, sending a note with a prayer or request to be inserted in the Western Wall in Jerusalem (http://www.aish.com/wallcam/Place_a_Note_in_the_Wall.asp). See also Cohen (2002).

⁶² See Davis (1995); O’Leary (1996); Schroeder et al. (1998); Dawson and Hennebry (1999); Dawson (2001).

what evidence is there that the channel succeeds in meeting players' needs more fundamentally? These questions will be treated in future publications.

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