

Sexual Evolution

Social implications of teledildonic adoption.

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A man in California hugs his girlfriend who is currently in Finland. They can feel the warmth from each others bodies, the squeeze of arms wrapped around them, and the pulse of each others heart beats. The technology that makes this remote physical contact available is called teledildonics, and while this particular case may not be a reality as of yet, more primitive implementations have already begun to make their way into our culture. As we begin to adopt these new technologies of physical telepresence, they will augment every opportunity for remote interaction currently in use and will amplify both the positive and negative aspects.

Teledildonics was originally a word coined by Ted Nelson, creator of the concept of hypertext. It's a combination of dildonics, which can be considered as a general self-operated or machine automated electronic haptic¹ pleasure device, and telepresence, which is a sufficient augmentation of experience to give a sensation of ones immediate presence shared across electronic and regional boundaries. When these two experiences are combined, they create the unique effect of cybernetics.

The key aspect to teledildonics power is its ability to communicate. Like Howard Rheingold said in his 1991 book *Virtual Reality*,

“The first fully functional Teledildonics system will be a communication device, not a sex machine. You probably will not use erotic telepresence technology in order to have sexual experiences with machines. Thirty years from now, when portable telediddlers become ubiquitous, most people will use them to have sexual experiences with other people, at a distance, in combinations and configurations undreamed of by pre-cybernetic voluptuaries.”²

All the major implications of social change will occur because of the evolutionary step in communication, and will have relatively less to do with advancements in tactile stimulation mechanisms. The tactile stimulation has been around for a while, but has been little adopted by anyone other than medical and machine fetishists. The aspect that entices people is the ability to communicate their physical actions to another person by actually performing it.

With the current state of remote sexual encounters, either through phone sex or cybersex, it is limited to sessions of descriptive chatting, expressing desires, emotions, and actions. It is limited to self stimulation, and there is no direct physical communication.

Remote sexual encounters have been prevalent in our society for a number of decades. Phone sex in itself is utilized by couples distanced from each other by school or jobs, people that have never met in person, and semi-anonymous “one-night-stands”. There has even amassed a large industry based upon people’s desires to listen to each other moan, and are willing to pay several dollars a minute to discuss their sexual fantasies, either with an operator or with other people who have called a hotline.

Cybersex as an act is not much different than phone sex, but in its communicative abilities it is vastly differing. It offers the same attributes of phone sex, but allows a higher level of anonymity, the creation of fetish communities, and more of a detachment from reality into whatever ones fantasy might be. Along with the inclusion of computing into the communication process, our methods of translating our condition include the written word, voice, still imagery, live video, and most recently virtual reality. Depending on the latency of communication, and the resolution of the communicative medium, the remote dislocation between people begins to deteriorate.

The use of varying communicative mediums in the online sex economy is vast. What started out as pay sites for pictures and videos developed into commissioned cybersex sessions involving audio, video, and two-way text communication. Within the meta-universe community of Second Life, there is a booming cybersex economy in-

1 “Haptic technology refers to technology which interfaces the user via the sense of touch.” -Wikipedia

2 “Cybernetics is a theory of the communication and control of regulatory feedback. [...] The modern study of cybernetics began at the intersection of neurology, electronic network theory, and logic modeling, around the time of WWII. The name ‘cybernetics’ was coined by Norbert Wiener to denote the study of “teleological mechanisms”” – Wikipedia

cluding brothels and avatar prostitutes controlled by real people. Within this alternative reality, they can gesture, animate, and emote in much the same way they would in real life, once again bridging the gap a little further.

But all of these experiences fall short of physical intimacy because none of them have integrated physical contact into the communication. This is the issue that teledildonics aims to solve. There have been fairly successful implementations and fairly disastrous ones. One of the more successful teledildonics released for the consumer market is the Simulator for women (fig 1.a) and Simulator Interactive Fleshlight for men (fig 1.b). Each model contains numerous sensors and actuators to both read signals from one's motion as well as transpose the signals from the other device into haptic response. So, without getting too graphic, when one person wants to penetrate another across the planet, they literally can through this telepresent technology.

The technology does bridge a communicative medium unseen before, but it does lack in several ways. Since the mechanism is designed for penetration alone, it doesn't provide physical stimulation for the wide variety of other aspects involved with sex, as well as physical contact experienced within a non-sexual context. You can not hug someone with a dildo. Unfortunately, there is not much of an economic market for remote hugging, and there is a rather large market for remote fucking. The economic properties of supply and demand have a direct impact on the direction of teledildonic development.

So the creation of the Simulator makes cybersex look primitive, but the Simulator is still primitive in comparison to the sensations and creative freedom of actual sex. Regardless of it falling short of actual sex, its widespread adoption could impact the norms and values of the already widely encompassing social atmosphere of cybersex.

It's debatable whether or not committing an act of cybersex is considered cheating if one is already involved in a relationship. I would consider the equivalent of a "one-night-stand" in modern day cybersex as nothing more than masturbation, but if an emotional relationship evolves between the two people it becomes more of a psychological connection between the two, and I would consider that connection to be cheating. Others would consider any sexual act, no matter how trivial or remote, as infidelity, simply because it should not occur with others.

Now bring into the debate the use of the Simulator in the same situation. Does the inclusion of tactile feedback bridge a closer bond and create a greater case that it is in fact infidelity? If one views teledildonic systems as cybernetics like I do, then the telepresent mechanism is seen as an extension of the self, and constitutes as physical contact. I would consider this to be a fairly clear cut case of cheating. Others still might view the use of teledildonics as merely sexual aids or "toys" the same way a dildo is used in today's society. I think it's clear that a dildo is self-operated, whereas a teledildonic device is a communicative translation of another person's physical stimulation.

Social withdrawal is an issue that has come up with cybersex. Some online sexual behavior can become compulsive and problematic. If cybersex is used not covertly in a way that enhances a relationship, it can be a positive thing. Then there are those that will become compulsively involved in online sexual activity to an extent that they become withdrawn from the rest of their life. If someone isn't getting emotional or physical affection from their current social life, they may seek it in unexpected places like chat rooms or virtual reality. If teledildonics were available and applied to this same situation, would it create a more tempting trap for people to fall into compulsive behavior? Cybersex couldn't really compete with actual sex, since it completely lacked any physical interaction between the two parties. When physical interaction is placed into the situation, it may give people a reasonable alternative to actual sex.

Rheingold thought that the first fully functional type of teledildonic system would be a communication device. Such a device would probably be a general transceiver of neurological signals. By directly transmitting neurological signals, not only are sexually stimulating signals sent but also hugs, kisses, hand holding, or whatever

other physical sensation the user wants to focus on. Unlike current teledildonics, the system need not be used in a sexual context. Such a system could be used to counter social withdrawal disorders through subtle entrainment. People with social phobias or neurological disorders such as autism are sensitive when interactive with others, and online programs have already been established to help these people get used to interacting with others. One group has established itself in the simulated world of Second Life, and has created a safe harbor for socially sensitive people where they can interact with each other as well as with people from around the world that come and visit their virtual area.

Now imagine applying teledildonics to this type of atmosphere. It would be applicable to patients that have phobias with casual physical contact, people who are afraid to leave the house, people with obsessive compulsive disorders that can't even stand touching door knobs. These patients are able to experience the physical sensations they might in the real world, although on a level that they can more easily control.

With sex can come a certain level of anxiety and risk regarding pregnancy, STD's, and social effects of the encounter. Since teledildonics involves no fluid transfer, then STDs and pregnancy can be eliminated as a concern. The only thing left is the social implications of performing a teledildonic act with a certain person. Would people hold the emotional connectivity of teledildonic usage with the same regard that they do with physical sex? This brings us back to cybersex and the controversy of whether it's cheating or not, and defining it as an emotional connection rather than a physical experience. Suppose that one uses chat rooms like someone else might use the bar scene. They casually hang out, meeting new people, and perhaps eventually find someone that they connect with on a deeper level. After meeting several times for some Yahoo Pool, a streaming movie or two, and numerous video conference sessions, they decide to take their relationship to the next level. Is this any different than dating in person? Is it not reasonable to expect a similar emotional bond to be created?

If widespread adoption of teledildonic devices took place, would it be effective enough as a social device to replace regular dating and regular sexual activity? Thoughts like this bring me back to the movie *Demolition Man* (1994), where a pseudo-utopian society exists where physical contact is outlawed and any sexual activity is done through neurologically controlled wireless transmitting devices, a highly advanced form of teledildonics. This is closer to the communicative device that Rheingold foresaw in his book *Virtual Reality*.

So taking all of this into consideration, should teledildonics continue to be developed? Since I believe that physical communication is a neutral medium of communication as is any other form, I see teledildonics as a necessary and imminent addition to the realm of technological communication. Its adoption is a step in human communication equivalent to telephones evolving from telegraphs, the Internet evolving from telephony, and modern voice and video chat evolving from the Internet.

Teledildonics will continue to improve to augment online social experience, although it will be highly determined by economic influence. Telepresence is a hot area of research now, and it is no wonder that haptic technologies are of great concern, seeing as how it's the least developed of all communication mediums. The biggest market is currently in sexual activity, and it will continue to progress along those lines as more and more people become accustomed to its usage as a regular aspect of our society. As with cybersex, teledildonics will have its positive usages and negative ones. Only when we see teledildonics move outside the paradigm of purely sexual activity will we begin to see more inventive usages that create more interesting social dynamics.

Images



Fig 1.b: Sinulator Female Complete Package



Fig 1.b: Sinulator Interactive Fleshlight



Fig 2: Vivid Entertainment Cyber Sex Suit



Fig 3: Demolition Man Neurological Sexual Interface



Fig 4: The Thrill Hammer

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