

Cyber-addiction Dilemma

From Communications of the ACM, 3/98, p11:

"Almost a fifth of college students spend more than 20 hours a week on the Internet...this amount of time qualifies as addition....a New York University study (that) correlates high student Internet use with doubled rates of academic dismissals. As a way of dealing with this problem, schools in Michigan, Maryland, Texas, and Washington have imposed limits on student Internet use. Dominant areas of user involvement: email, Web surfing, MUD interactive role-playing, and home page production."

ibid. p.128 (by Peter Neumann):

"...activities that can lend themselves to addictive or compulsive behavior include...even programming itself -- which seems to inspire compulsive behavior in certain individuals....computers intensify and depersonalize whatever activity is being done, enabling it to be done remotely, more expeditiously, less expensively, and perhaps without identification, accountability, or answerability.

The effects of compulsive computer-related behavior can involve many risks to individuals and to society, including diminution of social and intellectual skills, loss of motivation for more constructive activities, loss of jobs and livelihood, and so on. A reasonable sense of physical reality can be lost through immersion in cyberspace. Similarly, a sense of time reality can be lost through computer use that is totally encompassing and uninterrupted by external events."

Biological systems are incomprehensibly complex. Computational systems are incomprehensibly simple. Since the world we live in is beyond our comprehension, we construct projections (virtual worlds with detail removed) to support the illusion that we understand and are in control. The manufactured flat surfaces which surround us everywhere are an example of the removal of natural complexity to enhance our illusion of tractability. Computational environments are another example of this **abstraction neurosis**.

People fall into cyberspace because it is unnaturally simple and therefore supports the illusion of competence. Of course, cyberspace is not simple, it too is an artifact of biological activity. It is the illusion of potential simplicity which makes computational systems attractive.

Questions

Why have you chosen a profession which requires you to stare at a computer screen all day?

Was your mother correct when she asked you not to sit too close to the television screen?

Is the modern mind committed /addicted to representations of reality (reading-writing-arithmetic, books, films, computers, etc.) rather than to reality itself?

How do you think physical reality will respond to the competition of virtual reality for the attention of humanity?

What is the ethical dimension in these questions?