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Writing Cure

A reflection on online communication platforms through personal experience

From feelings to research to practice

During the summer of 2020 I deleted my Facebook and Instagram accounts from my phone. It might not sound revolutionary, but it affected me mentally and emotionally. At times I felt liberated from the endless scrolling and other times I felt lonely and isolated. People were not contacting me as before because I don't have an online presence at the moment. I realised these social platforms were my main communication tool with some people, especially now that I live away from my home country. In parallel to social media, I realised I'm heavily using communication platforms like conference calls, because of the pandemic. I started to pay attention to my online encounters and decided that I would find a way to process how they affect me.

From this moment on, for the past months, I have started a research process in a form that I never tried before: writing and documenting. On the one hand, I'm writing texts about my use of communication platforms where I highlight key moments and realisations of my experience. On the other hand, I'm actively initiating interactions with others via communication platforms, trying to understand what they are feeling at the moment. To be specific, I'm using a chat website called "Talk with Stranger!" where I chat with random people and next to that, I am having conference calls with Israeli people of around my age that live abroad like me. These choices were based on more of a gut feeling than intentional but as I continued my research they felt complementary to each other --self reflection combined with trying to understand the experience of others.

Writing is a tool of exploration, by writing about my experiences I reflect, analyse and draw conclusions. This is a way for me to process my thoughts and feelings, in order to eventually be able to articulate them. My type of research is mostly related to the qualitative research form of autoethnography. Inspired by modernism and the "crisis of confidence" in the government and the institution in the 1980's, mostly in the US and Western Europe, came opportunities to challenge social science. Scholars felt that the current state of it was limited and began questioning the methods that were considered purely scientific. Furthermore, they felt that the point of view of "standard" or "mainstream" research is mostly of a white, masculine, upper-middle class, Christian perspective. Attributes like race, gender, sex,

education, etc. can produce different types of observations. The new understanding of a connection between author, audience and texts resulted in complex stories that taught moral and ethics through them. These helped people make sense of themselves and others (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). In other words, by authors sharing a personal point of view, people found themselves more able to relate. Researchers understood that objectivity is almost impossible and that we should embrace the researcher's influence on the research rather than hiding it.

> *"I, and others, started out wanting a strong tool for deconstructing the truth claims of hostile science by showing the radical historical specificity, and so contestability, of every layer of the onion of scientific and technological constructions, and we end up with a kind of epistemological electroshock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder."*
> *(Haraway, 1988)*

Donna Haraway has a very critical view toward what is considered "the truth" and the struggle of going against mainstream research methods. She questions why we believe someone just because they were given academic titles. This is a very large topic that I can't fully grasp in this text, however, my takeaway is the question of the validity of my own research. Who am I to make statements or assume to know something about the truth? Haraway is critical towards the "not scientist" as well, but she makes room for contemplation on who determines what reality is in relation to social science research.

I found myself deeply relating to the idea of combining autobiographical elements, reflecting on past meaningful events in my life, and ethnography, which is the study of shared experiences and beliefs with the purpose of understanding a cultural happening. Writing, reading and interviewing are all tools I use to support my arguments and they create a different type of research results than a scientific one. In my research I play the part of a participant-observer.

It is hard for me to consider myself a researcher because of personal insecurities regarding my ability to share my ideas. Sometimes I don't feel like I have the right to do it.

If autoethnography is my method, the resulting analysis and my way of portraying it to the public, aka the practical project, are the outcomes. When approaching my project I aimed to find narratives that can intrigue others to think about similar situations in their lives, therefore reflect on the way they use online communication, especially in the time of the pandemic. I suggest a form of therapeutic process that encourages self reflection --in my case acknowledging occurrences in my daily life as events that form my thoughts and behaviours. When I write about them I'm forming my own interruptions and point of views, therefore I process them. This is the base of modern psychoanalysis and "Talking Cure'' --the process of retelling or reliving past experiences, therefore removing inner blockages that allows a flow from the "inside" to the "outside", with the desire of achieving catharsis (Lieberman et al., 2007).

This form of research is not easy going for me, often it is a true struggle. Nonetheless, most of the time I feel content after finishing a talk, or as I sit down to write about these occurrences. It directs me towards interesting points of investigation in online communication: the search for the cathartic feeling is very present --small epiphanies, the way others react to the texts and the sensation of encountering an important point that will be a staple going forward with my practical project. An example for one of the first texts I wrote is about being away from home during the holidays and the way online communication is playing a part in my contact with my family during those times:

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It's the holiday season in Israel. Rosh HaShana is a major one that you usually spend with your family. I was supposed to make a meal for my friends here and celebrate with them, but my boyfriend is sick and we don't want to risk it. When I was travelling in South America after my army service, I used to

call during Shabbat dinners via Skype and my family would put the computer on the table as if I was sitting on one of the dining table chairs. Tonight I did a video chat with my family via WhatsApp. Israel is going through a second lockdown, but my sisters' lives next to my parents so they can go for dinner there. Usually these calls are pretty hectic, there are so many people around, a lot of kids as well. My family alternates who is talking to me. They put me in front of the kids, sometimes they talk with me for a few moments and then they lose interest (I don't blame them). It's pretty hard to get any real conversation in but I enjoy seeing my parents' house and everybody in it because I miss it. Sometimes it's just a bunch of noise but I like the sound of Friday night dinner because here Friday is just a regular day. One time they gave the phone to the baby, we played with each other for a while and then he crawled away and left me there, it was pretty funny because they forgot I was on the phone. Tomorrow my middle sister is moving to London with her partner and three kids and I can see when we speak that my sister is a bit nervous and my mom is a bit heartbroken. Another part of the family is moving away and we will need to figure out how to stay in touch. We end the call with a kiss and say that we will talk later. After these calls I have mixed feelings of gloominess and warmth and I get back to my usual business.

This research made me understand I want to tell a story that is based on my personal experience and can hopefully be relatable to others. In my project I intend to use known elements of communication platforms like webcams, conference platforms, chats and more as a storytelling device, experimenting with manipulating and changing the platforms that are in common use nowadays.

Though I'm taking inspiration from the now, I think my project contains reflections on our history and future of online communication. This is my way of coping with this huge thing in my life, the thing that helps me keep some

kind of human interaction in a time that it is not possible. This thing can make me feel happy, sad, frustrated, angry, overwhelmed and therefore I want to understand it more or maybe just get more confused.

Investigating communication platforms

As a starting point for this thesis, I decided not to presume that the things I'm writing are true for the majority of the world's population. My research is about myself and my surroundings. However, researching what different communities online are talking about at the moment, I can assume that there are similarities with other's experiences. For me, a 31 year old woman coming from Israel and studying in the Netherlands, it is interesting to witness how fast the use of digital interfaces became so banal and normal. We rarely ask ourselves about the impact that these interfaces have on us. In this chapter I will discuss the evolution of digital interfaces so we can understand the way they are built and integrated in our culture, and why that makes them powerful and influential. I will zoom in on communication platforms as they are the main focus of my research. My main question is how the structure and the usage of those interfaces affects our real life connections and what are the mental borders we have around them. I will also discuss the limitations of the interfaces and ask what part they play in our lives when replacing face to face communication.

Nowadays, being online is natural to us. We log in and out seamlessly, cruising between interfaces, making actions and decisions all the time. We encounter hundreds of images, buttons, input fields and other graphical elements. Most common products and services have a digital interface whether it is financial, cultural or a communication tool. Since the 80's, when the first personal computer entered our homes, the relatively new fields of Interaction Design, Experience Design, Design Research, User Research, Usability Testing, Service Design, etc. have been evolving rapidly. Back in 2001, new media theory author, Lev Manovich, stated his thoughts about the most rapid revolutions in our history:

> „*Just as the printing press in the fourteenth century and photography in the nineteenth century had a revolutionary impact on the development of modern society and culture, today we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of all of our culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication. This new revolution is arguably more profound*

than the previous ones, and we are just beginning to sense its initial effects."(Manovich, 2001)

A general name we can use is User Interface that can be defined as the means by which users interact with content to accomplish some goal (in this case digital interfaces). Like many commercial products, the look and feel are most important and many efforts are dedicated to make an interface appealing and usable. Phrases like "intuitive" and "easy-to-use" are commonly used when describing a good digital product interface. (Blair-Early and Zender, 2008). While working as an Experience Designer I was part of teams that were involved in long term processes from preliminary research, through product development to launching the product to mass public use. It is a long, meticulous journey that includes interviews, prototyping and many design iterations. Each product is designed to address different needs and is directed for certain demographics.

It Is important to understand how much work, effort and thought goes into our daily interfaces to understand their influence on us. The field of digital interfaces is in constant growth and has introduced elements that infiltrate our culture and coined visual and semantic symbols that we use in our everyday life. Genres of interfaces, like personal banking, dating or e-commerce, each developed characteristics that define them. Over time, users of digital platforms developed the ability to encounter new interfaces and adapt to them, relying on what they already know from other products they encountered. For example: messaging platforms established a visual way to represent a conversation --talking bubbles from both sides of the screen. Gradually, more elements were added, like the three animated dots that appear when typing. If we see this representation in a film, we will recognise the reference and understand the context.

I suggest that the connection between how these interfaces look, how they perform and the purpose they serve is what makes them an entity in our lives. They have space in our environment, they have characteristic features and most of all, we develop a relationship with them. The evolution of communication platforms is part of the new media revolution and is one of the most prominent ones, which fulfils a very basic human need for connection. Now this communication is mediated by interfaces, and their worth as replacements for real life connections is debatable. Whatever your

opinion is, there is no denying that they are not the same and as any communication form, digital or not, they affect our emotions, thoughts and behaviour.

As mentioned in the introduction, in my research I focus on two interfaces - the video conference and online chats. There are assumptions about human communication that are implied in those platforms, for instance the idea that people can adopt virtual environments for their communication needs and can act with similar social conduct and rules. In other words - society can translate interpersonal communication online with all its nuances. Of course it can't be exactly the same, human interaction is much more developed in real life, so the interface needs to compensate for things that are not possible online. With that in mind, the interface's features are built to support different behaviours and functions - highlighting the current speaker triangle in a conference talk, giving her/him the ability to speak uninterrupted or the announcement in the bottom of the screen that someone new entered the room. When I think about this topic I understand the limited abilities of the interface to reach such a goal and wonder if we even want it to succeed in providing an alternative. The GUI (graphical user interface) has evolved over the years to make the machine that runs it transparent, meaning that we forget it exists. But even if there is a goal for smooth transition between real life and the interface, the fact is that the interface itself and the computer that it lives on influence the way we communicate with each other. (Shah, 2019) For example, in video conferencing the webcam is only showing a very specific frame with no peripheral vision, the background is usually controlled and a person can jump in and out of sight. The sound quality depends on the quality of the equipment. The conditions of the talk are controlled by the strength of your wifi signal. These elements that are mounted on top of our communication are making us aware of the fact that we are being mediated by a platform.

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Once a week I have an online session with my Psychologist. I started seeing him before I came to Rotterdam and we continue to meet via Skype. Moving to Rotterdam was a quick decision and I figured I should continue therapy to make the transition easier.

The meetings are different now --when we were meeting in person
I either came straight from work or from home and it took some
time to get there. Now, I'm at home when we meet. My boyfriend
needs to leave the house for me to have it. During COVID
sometimes he was still there in the bedroom listening to music.
That made me uncomfortable. Sometimes the sessions are an hour
after I wake up, sometimes I do them in my pajamas.
My laptop's camera is broken so I use a tablet which is less
than 10 inches. We always spend the first few minutes adjusting
the sound, going from headphones to without headphones.
Sometimes he switches to his phone because the connection on the
computer is not good. Sometimes the sound that is coming from
the street feels enhanced. I remember I used to think that the
therapy room he rented was pretty sad. It was random, not that
pleasant. Two ugly leather couches in the middle, the curtains
needed to be cleaned. Now, I do it from my living room.

There are many positive things that the wide adoption of conference call
interfaces opened up. The ability to participate in global events and
conferences that are now online lifted the boundaries for people that can't
afford or are unable to travel. People may feel more included in communities
that they didn't have access to before. The pandemic also brought to the
table the discussion of diversity, equity and inclusion. Platforms now
understand the need to be available to people with lower bandwidth or
low-performance devices (Niner, Johri and Meyer, 2020).

Moreover, from my experience, the immediacy of the platforms and the fact
that they are more commonly used at the moment, improved
communication as well. As part of my research process I interviewed Israelis
that live abroad at the moment (Berlin, Wales, Tokyo and LA), like me, via two
different online conference tools: Zoom and Jitsi. I wanted to understand their
experience of being away from home and how they communicate with
friends and family. I hadn't spoken to any of them for more than 5 years. To
my surprise, with each of them I talked for more than 2 hours in one online sit
down. The conversations were intimate and deep, not compatible to my
expectations of them being awkward and impersonal. The similarity of our

situations comforted us and talking about it allowed us some outlet. I'm sure that if the conference format wasn't so popular at the moment, these connections wouldn't have been possible. Now, jumping into a video call is so normal that it removes barriers that might exist in a face to face meeting. Even if we lived in the same city, I don't believe we would have taken the time to meet, let alone talk so openly, so fast.

However, the conversations I had also highlighted the sense of isolation. The combination of the use of online communication and the physical quarantine we experienced created a variety of repercussions that are evident online.

15/10/20
Roni and I have been friends since kindergarten. She lives in London at the moment, she just finished her master's degree. It's her birthday tomorrow and her sister (who lives in the Netherlands as well) and her mom organized a Zoom party. I was in charge of inviting her friends from back home. We were given a task of sending photos of Roni with a personal sentence next to it. We all gathered in 3 different time zones (Tel Aviv, Netherlands, London) and waited for Roni to arrive, it's kind of a surprise party. While we wait I see people that I haven't seen for a very long time, some of them Roni keeps in touch with more than me. Some of them used to be close friends of mine. A lot of her family is here too and I know most of them. Roni shows up, at first no one sees her, then her sister draws our attention that she is here, kind of overwhelmed by the situation, and we all start to say "happy birthday". We are about 25 people. The concept of the party is less talking and more dancing and one of the friends is DJing. She is showing the slideshow with all the pictures we sent as well. In the chat people are saying happy birthday and other funny comments about the situation. The slideshow has pictures from the last 20 something years of Roni's life, a lot of them are my memories too. This meeting is more nostalgic than I anticipated but I have to say that I feel nostalgic a lot lately. I even talk about it more with old

friends and family, bringing up childhood memories. My mom sent
me a picture that my niece found of me, I think I'm about 5
there. I'm wearing a pink dress, shiny shoes, white wool tights
and a pink headband. I'm posing on one knee with my hand on my
waist. I really remember loving this dress.

While the slideshow is going I'm texting on my phone with 4
different friends that are also at the party, telling jokes and
commenting on what is happening. I can see my friend's genuine
reaction when she reads a text from me, she is laughing. This is
weird because you usually don't get to see the facial expression
of the person you sent a text too. At some point Roni's
grandparents want to congratulate her and they say that she
always had her own path in life. Another older family friend
congratulated her, again saying some variation of that
sentiment. Then the "old" people leave and we have a dance
party. The music is nice so I move to my kitchen where I have
more room to be on camera and dance at the same time. My
boyfriend is on the couch on his phone not really participating,
it's not his thing. We dance for a bit more, we text between
each other and the music stops, we say happy birthday one more

time and we leave the meeting. It's quiet again. I miss my friends from back home and I miss home.

I found more feelings of loneliness while chatting with strangers at talkwithstranger.com, an online chatroom where you get connected with random people. People shared much of their lives with me with the help of total anonymity. In a chat conversation I had with "Bivk" he talks about loneliness with me, a person he never talked to before (I am L). In this chat I inserted personal thoughts and comments.

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B:   its not loneliness its the feeling about loneliness
     Because all they have told us is about love being in love
couples shit
     Even if you are alone and not attached you can love
love is not a thing
L:   So you don't believe in it?
B:   I believe in love but not romanticise about it
     its not something beautiful
     love is everything
     not just beautiful things
L:   That is true
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At this point he is writing a lot and I just insert not meaningful comments. I don't mind I enjoy seeing the "Bivk is typing…" line blinking and read his thoughts. That is what I came here to do.

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B:   Loneliness is not bad
     Its just the idea about loneliness being bad that is bad
L:   Do you think there is love on these chatrooms? Like random
love, not just meeting people and fall in love?
B:   idk man
L:   Like does people come here with love in their heart?
B:   Depends on how you see love as
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       See people come here because of need
       where does that need comes from
L:     Good question
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The interfaces we use have history, they evolved over the years and morphed into their current state for social, psychological and economical reasons. I have shared in this chapter some of the main sentiments brought forward through my research --the way these communication interfaces are built, the components that our communication interfaces are composed of and the behavioural changes it causes, the way and frequency we use them and the question of whether they provide an alternative for IRL communication. Moreover, when I focused on communication platforms I noticed this constant tension: being connected but yet emotionally disconnected, feeling together but isolated, realising online life can be draining yet not knowing when to log off.

Chapter two
Cyberspace, reality and the border between

In "Hamlet on the Holodeck" Janet Murray defines the role of the computer as a kind of border: *"Computers are liminal objects located on the threshold between external reality and our own minds".* Later, she writes extensively about the computer's enchantment, and its ability to pull you in and make you lose your sense of time. In my opinion, "enchantment" is an accurate phrase --cyberspace, online life, digital connectivity, or any other term you choose, has this power over us, something that is hard to define, almost mystical. This parallel universe does not have the same rules as our regular existence. When I think about this enchantment I wonder about the fast transitions I feel when logging on and off --between public and intimate, togetherness and loneliness, safety and fear. It is hard for us to define the border between cyberspace and reality because It is not physical, but mental and abstract. It is hard for us to grasp the depth of its influence and the substantial effect on our consciousness. In this chapter I will try to understand why we feel differently when logging in or being online and what are the causes.

Why is it hard to define the digital world and the border? One of the reasons is the use of language in the digital sphere. In her article "*Not Art&Tech, On the role of Media Theory at Universities of Applied Art, Technology and Art and Technolog*y", net artist Olia Lialina focuses on the use of the word "technology" instead of "computer" as a way of dissolving the actual hardware and software into all "technology". The word hardware refers to the computer itself --an artefact built from plastic, metal and electric circuits. It's the object that makes many of our devices function. Software is developed and programmed by people for other people to use, users. The word technology is more abstract, it doesn't have a clear definition that we can visualise or fully understand because it is so general. It mentally detaches us from the control we have over computers and software, the ability to program or reprogram them. Different tech companies benefit from the mysterious atmosphere around this topic. If people don't fully understand the computers they are using, they can be sold on many things that will help them achieve technological "greatness" (for example, a new Apple Macbook with a processor that you need in order to have the best performing laptop).

Computers became an essential necessity for many purposes and the fact that the majority of the population doesn't really understand how it all works, allows this industry to portray itself as "high-end". Using conceptual buzz words allows maintaining obscurity.

The term "cyberspace" can translate differently, depending on the context. In the context of my project, when I refer to cyberspace I mean a place where people meet online with an emphasis on emotional connections and less on the technical side (the technical is a tool for the emotional). Though specific wording is one example of things influencing our perception of our computers, it can explain how logging in to our computers feels like entering a different world, that is structured differently, therefore not entirely comprehensible to us. When we feel we entered a different reality, it impacts our sense of self in that space. This contributes to the way we immerse ourselves in online life. Relationships, games, social media, etc. can maybe feel similar, but not quite the same as in "real life".

20/10/2020

Since I deleted facebook and instagram from my phone I feel like I'm constantly looking for a replacement. I pickup my phone and look for some feed to scroll. I feel like I just replaced them with YouTube which is very time consuming --I get into the rabbit hole of beauty influencers' reaction to other people's skincare routine, what I eat in a day and k-pop videos. My latest addiction is Karen's public meltdowns in the US (if you don't know, Karen is a pejorative term for someone perceived as entitled or demanding beyond the scope of what is appropriate or necessary. A common stereotype is that of a white woman who uses her privilege to demand her own way at the expense of others). I tried to uninstall YouTube as well but I reinstalled it. I also browse Facebook a lot on my desktop nowadays. I just feel uneasy and that I need to check it all the time, the feeling that I was trying to stop by deleting it from my phone. I know this is not a very interesting revelation, we all know that these platforms control us. I guess I'm just wondering if I remember how I felt

before I had these things in my life. I think I was pretty much
addicted to TV when I was a kid, but this is different. Time is
slipping away from me more than ever, is it because I'm getting
older? One thing that I'm happy about is that I no longer start
and finish my day with Instagram. I know for sure that this has
been a positive change and maybe more will follow, maybe I will
be able to erase my accounts for good. I doubt it, but maybe.

When referring to the fine line between real-life and online life, the addictive component is key. In my case, I feel it especially with social media but it applies to news, shopping, gaming, etc. These are platforms that are designed with the intention of users spending as much time as possible in them. The architecture of it locks us in, induced by the fact that many people are using it. The fear of missing out usually prevails over the misery or depression that these mediums can cause. If we examine the case of social media it makes sense because it is a one stop shop: updates about current events, communication with others, offers for our next apartment or videos of animals behaving like humans.

Our swiping, scrolling, and reading of summarized, easy to digest information and status updates, assists with transferring our mind elsewhere. In his book "Sad by Design", researcher Geert Lovink describes our use of social media as daydreaming.

> „Surfing the web has become like watching TV back in the day, just
> flicking through a handful of websites looking for something new on.“
> (Lovink, 2019)

This is an accurate definition in my opinion, because it captures the feeling of wandering off to other places, not always intentionally. In this state, the connection to reality is blurred and other worlds merge with ours. The ability to assess thoughts and feelings in an objective way towards a piece of information we encounter online is compromised by the social and behavioural impact that cyberspace has on us, as individuals and as a society. For example: I tried to pay attention to my scrolling through Facebook. I realised that when I read a post about a political opinion that is not compatible to mine, I almost immediately go to the comment section. When

I read them I have mixed emotions of hate, anger and fear towards some and justification, eagerness and relatability to others. Even if this is not a true representation of reality, the algorithm presents the information to me in a certain way that makes me react, sometimes in a way that doesn't align with my actual opinions and beliefs. Reality is manipulated and served in a way that triggers me, and awareness doesn't necessarily solve the issue. I felt withdrawal symptoms when erasing Instagram. For a while, it felt like I'm missing a limb. I don't consider myself a person with addiction tendencies, but I guess that the symptoms that disconnection causes are inevitable.

Our online personality consists of the groups we belong to, the posts we like, the people we follow, the choice of what platform we do or don't use, the music we listen to and so on. I feel like mine is a collection of arbitrary and intentional decisions that I'm anxious by the thought of how they are perceived, even in the eyes of people that know me and have probably formed an opinion about me "in real life". I choose what sides of me I emphasise and which I hide from others. In her research in the book "Alone Together" Sherry Turkle quotes a high school student that participated in her study: "*Anyone you interview who tells you that his Facebook page is 'the real me' It's like being in a play. You make a character.* " Although the book is from 2011, and this statement has been made by many, I choose to highlight it because of the theatrical aspect and the way it contributes to how we perceive reality. If the computer is the stage, our online personas are the actors. This feeling was eminent when I was chatting with strangers online. I had choices to make like my nickname or if I'm going to be truthful about where I am from or what my intentions are. Some of the choices I made were more spontaneous. I wrote about the first time I entered the website "Talk with Stranger!" and what impacted my state of mind:

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I entered this chat room. This is the first time I'm trying this
for this purpose of experimenting for the project. The last time
I was in a chat room I was in the 5th grade I think, I don't
really remember but I think I mostly used it to talk to
strangers. I don't think it had any sexual context back then but
I have to say my memory is very blurry regarding this.
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This site is second in my Google search, I chose it just because I tend not to choose the first result but I'm too lazy to look for a long time. When you enter this website there is a lot of text. Most of it is about the purpose of the website. A lot of the text is not in proper English and it feels just like a lot of random information about chatting in general and chatting with strangers in particular. One of the paragraphs I like says:

"When commuting bus or trains, we immerse ourselves in the mesmerising world of social media when we are bored we bury ourselves in the non-stop entertainment if you are feeling lonely find a mate through the internet. As this new interface for communication has been introduced, researchers have been doing their part in finding out the benefits or drawbacks it might have on a person's quality of life."

I like it that they, whoever they might be, are sharing some point of view. There seems to be some agenda behind this website which is pretty positive in my opinion. Maybe it's naive but it feels like these people believe in the power of talking to strangers.

There is a section with tips about interaction with strangers online and this is one of them:

"Talking to strangers also means that there's always a chance of meeting someone who thinks differently from us. Whilst some might frame this in a negative way, it gives us the opportunity to understand new perspectives, and to learn about different experiences and ideas. Talking to people with different backgrounds can help us understand the first hand experience of other groups. In turn, this helps us become more understanding, more accepting and more aware of the wide variety of experiences out there in the world. We become more sensitive and empathetic."

I start looking for someone to chat with. The first three have some variation of the word "penis" in their name and the first

message they send me is "M". Actually everybody is starting the conversation with "M". I have no idea what that means and I wonder if this is because of my age (later I found out the M stands for male). I don't want to engage in conversations with a sexual nature so I switch to another person. With one click of a button you can stop talking to one person and start talking to the next. The 6th person I meet has the nickname Bivk. My Nickname is Lillian, I don't really know why I chose this but I think I wanted to be approachable and have a real person's name though I have no personal relationship with it, it just came to my mind.

I remember deciding on not being cynical towards the conversations I'm going to have, to believe the people I talk to even though we are hiding behind the mask of anonymity. This requires "the willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge) which we many times activate when entering some kind of fictional world. This allows us to leave prejudice behind and use our intelligence not for dissecting the situation, but for actively immersing ourselves in it, to trust and accept it. Moreover, we also exercise a creative belief which allows us to engage in the experience as opposed to questioning it all of the time (Murray, 1997).

A prominent representative of cyberspace's ability to create a world within a world are MUDs. In the 1980's MUDs (Multi-User Domain or Multi-User Dimension or Multi-User Dungeon) were introduced. They allowed distant internet players to share a virtual space. Traditionally a place for live fantasy and fictional role-playing, that over the years evolved to massive communities of gaming like World of Warcraft (which is actually a MMORPG- Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game), and social virtual worlds like Second Life. MUDs are usually long term experiences: the character you created is moving in the virtual world accumulating skills, relationships with other players and possessions. It's a collective creation that allows people to exist in a different world, while being the person or character they decide to be. The power of the MUD is the ability to flip back and forth between the online persona and yourself (Murray, 1997).

While MUDs or online gaming are noticeable examples, online collective places are abundant. The possibilities are endless and are amplified by the multiple communication tools we use such as emails, social media, different messaging platforms and conference talk platforms. It often makes us feel like we are a part of a net, sometimes resulting in flattening personality features or individuality --people become profile pictures and avatars, likes and views are counted and displayed, the same visual representation repeating themselves over and over. Because of the large quantity, it can reduce people to seem more like objects to us. Humaneness exists online in many forms, but the blurring line between what is cyberspace and reality can make us question fundamental aspects of human communication. The ways of communication can often make us feel confused or alone. For example, texting iт not a new form of communication but over the years social codes of conduct have formed around it that allow people to opt in and out, therefore making it many times a disrupted form of communication.

11/10/20

It's a Sunday, I was really trying to make this a productive day. Instead I was in bed until noon, watching a series. At some point I noticed that no one texted me the whole day, which is a weird feeling. I shoot a few texts to friends from back home and try to see how they are doing. In Israel Sunday is the first day of the work week so lots of them are not that available to talk. I had a nice conversation with one friend about what he did over the weekend and I share mine as well. At some point the conversation naturally dies down and we stop texting. Another friend tells me he is having a busy day and he will talk to me later. He probably won't but honestly that's fine. I do this sometimes when I feel like I miss home --I text 3 or 4 friends at the same time, have multiple conversations. sometimes I regret doing it because it's hard to keep up. Some friends reply later and I'm no longer in the mood to talk. I like talking to my friends and get updates about their lives though I feel more and more disconnected. That is the thing about keeping in touch

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when you live far away --you have to invest in it and you need
to be good at it, and it doesn't come easy to everyone.
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One of my main references at the moment is the book "Alone Together" by Sherry Turkle. She is a Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology that took a turn from an everything-tech enthusiast in the 70's and 80's to one of its major critics. The book presents examples of how computers entered many aspects of our lives so fast, that we didn't have time to understand if it's the right thing for us. We keep creating easier ways for us to connect, but does it help us with isolation and depression? The more complex cyberspace is, the more options we have to lose ourselves in it. The way that software and interfaces were built over time wasn't always done with our best interest in mind. In our digital lives, there is a new commodity, our attention. The theory of the "Attention Economy" explains that commercial companies aim at maximizing attention to their platforms in order to gather data and generate profiles about their users for the purpose of selling targeted advertisements. These profiles are used in AI and machine learning datasets. Our attention can be measured with likes, clicks, views, downloads and followers. This is a rare product because it has a limit and it is mostly consumed by the massive amount of information online (Terranova, 2012). Many new industries grew from the desire to grab our attention, understanding that this is the modern way to make money. When our attention is sought out by different "internet forces", our mental well-being is not a priority.

So how do we keep our feet on the ground and tell the difference between fantasy and reality? Janet Murray writes: *"Part of the early work in any medium is the exploration of the border between the representational world and the actual world."* This concept intrigued me because I feel that it relates to my exploration of the different influences of online communication on us. It formed the question of how the structure and the usage of those interfaces affects our real life connections and what are the mental borders we have around them. In her book Murray refers to the illustrated children story "*Harold and the purple crayon"* that tells the story of a kid drawing a magical world around him. Everything that belongs to "the real world" is in black and white and the new world is purple. While Harold creates the world around him, a black and white moon follows him wherever he goes. The moon always

reminds him of the place he came from and plays the part of an anchor to reality. Like Harold, when we immerse ourselves in cyberspace we step into another world, but there are always elements that remind us of "the real world". If I take video conference interfaces as an example, the fact that we always have a rectangle that represents us in that space, keeps us grounded.

Though this chapter only presented several paths of exploration, it was important for me to introduce the connection I see between works of theory in the field of HCI (Human Computer Interaction) and social science and my research that focuses on online communication. This connection helps me to make sense of what I'm feeling and the reason I started to write my journal. As I investigate communication platforms, especially their emotional qualities, my goal is to use the concept of cyberspace as a path for a reader or user into my own affective experience. With this idea of cyberspace, a delineated place like Harold's magical world, always anchored to the real, I can approach my project as a gateway for narratives, always considering the border. This is a challenge of defining the border between me and my audience but also a way to set boundaries to this online space where I intend to act out my experiences. This question remains open: how can I define this place?

Chapter Three
Finding inspiration

At the time I'm writing this, during the 2020-2021 pandemic, cultural, city and social life doesn't really exist. While there is an attempt to translate everything to an online format, the physicality of it is missing. I spoke to my classmate Anna last week and she shared that she is so tired of websites and I agreed with her. Though "websites" is a very general term, I think Anna meant that we are tired of sitting in front of web browsers and interfaces, it is all more of the same thing.

Though my feelings toward the internet may not be the most positive at the moment, a way for me to cope is to challenge it. I feel like this is an appropriate time to ponder how cyberspace can be a place for reflective work. That is why my practical project is aiming to experiment with platforms and maybe introduce new ways of being in this space. For example, one of my first actions was to manipulate the CSS code of Jitsi's interface. This was an intuitive, simple experiment of playing with the graphical elements of it. My conclusions were interesting: First, I noticed that even though the interface is pretty minimal looking it had a lot of components and functions. Second, it was fun to "mess" with the interface and the ideas of playfulness in this space became more evident. Finally, actively changing the interface, even just visually, encourages a thinking process of challenging it and gives the manipulator power.

I started researching how other creators respond to tools of online communication.

Digital media are a fruitful ground for art and creation. Many artists, designers, writers, philosophers, etc. focus on the potential of it. On the one hand, digital media have many possibilities - they are highly accessible in the developed world, can be cheap to use and evolve all the time. On the other, they have constraints and technical barriers for some. Many terms can be used to describe them: net art, digital art, data visualisation, new media and so on. In this practice there are visual, performative and theoretical aspects. For the purpose of understanding art and creation in online space I searched for creators that address questions of communication, space, identity and utility. Each work relates to different topics that I find insightful in relation to my own project. In this chapter I will present some of those works and will explain my takeaways toward my project, as a way to explain how others' work helps me understand key concepts that I'm interested in.

An early example for an artist's encounter with electronically mediated social interaction is the 1974 performative work of Canadian artist Vera Frenkel "String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video". She partnered with Bell Canada Teleconferencing Studios to produce a multi participant improvisational experiment in visualising modern communication technology. Using The Cat's Cradle finger and string game methodology in real life scale, she interrupted an invisible thing, real-time video transmission, into a physical form. Like in the game, the strings constantly change their shape according to the way the participants are situated (in the game it is done with fingers on a smaller scale). In this work Frenkel is using orchestrated movement to explore the capacity of communications technology in that time (Allen, 2011).
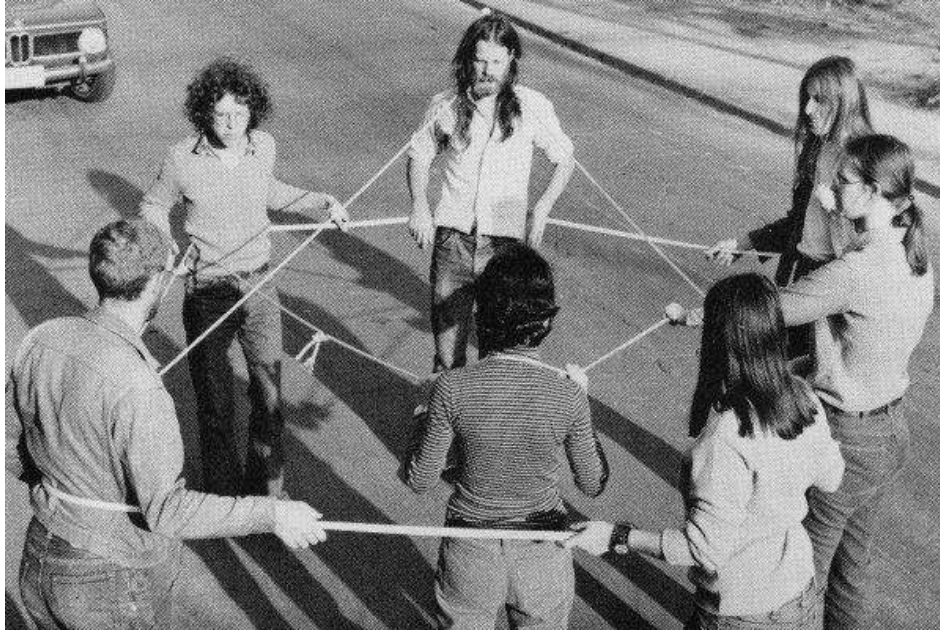
In relation to the previous chapter and how technology is mysterious to us because we can't visualise the processes at the backend, it is interesting to witness how Frenkel is trying to make sense of it. By giving a physical representation to a digital network, she provides the viewer with a different kind of tool for interpretation which is more relatable. The performative aspect enhances our ability to imagine how this technology works.

Through this work I take notice of the way we can reflect and react to something we don't actually see. In my project I refer to the way we perceive online space, spaces that don't have a shape or a form until we give it one. Frenkel's naive perspective inspires me to approach a subject I want to tackle with the intention to embrace its inherent form instead of going against it. If I want to reflect on communication platforms I should embrace their limitations and try to explain them to myself in a different way.

Digital media introduced more ways of using interaction in the arts, an interesting aspect is collaborative participation that can be facilitated more easily with internet connectivity. "La Plissure du Texte" ("The creasing of the text" according to Google translate) is a project by artist Roy Ascott from 1983. This was a collaborative fairy-tale coordinated by Ascott incorporating fragments from participants around the globe who sent in their parts of the text on the ARTEX computer network. Each location had a node where people

could send their texts from. The process took 3 weeks and was put together in Paris. In this quote the artist reflects on his part as the facilitator:

> "To start it off—I played the part of a magician in Paris, so I would naturally say, «Once upon a time...» and then others from their point of view --the Wicked Witch or whatsoever—would pick up the narrative, and develop it online. So that what was happening, you would go online, and you would see the story so far, and then input."

At that time global collaboration like this was new and exciting. The possibilities internet networks introduced stimulated creators and created new types of artwork. As I mentioned before, because today we are online so much, it is hard for me to feel the joy of discovering new potentials. If I want my research and work to relate to my desire to reflect on communication platforms, this project inspires me to try and look at it with fresh eyes, with less judgment and control. Moreover, I appreciate the simple action of using internet connectivity to make a collaborative narrative. It tells the story of the world wide web in a straightforward way, in a nutshell.

Fast forward to 2012, artist Angela Washko immerses herself in MMORPG's (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) virtual environments. She

founded "The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioural Awareness in World of Warcraft" as a way for her to intervene in the massively popular game "World of Warcraft". The game's community is generally very misogynistic, you can notice it mostly by the way female characters are designed, usually with big chest, tiny waist and skimpy clothes. Washko's cause is not to participate in the normal activities of the game but to engage in conversations with other participants about the female role and how they react to the word "Feminist". She encounters many oppressive opinions that are said by characters in the game (Washko, 2021).

In this project the artist is playing by the rules of the platform she investigates to make a point. The act of immersing yourself in this environment but using it for a different cause is important, it means that these worlds we create online can be challenged and revised. Another interesting side is the way people communicate online when they are anonymous or playing a character. This question came up when I was chatting with strangers online as well - how does anonymity affect the way we interact and what are the decisions we make as we go along?

The subject of gender also came up both in this project and in my chats with strangers, gender is most of the time the first thing you talk about. I found it interesting that in a place where people are anonymous, gender is still so

important. This is a large topic so I will just keep this as an observation for now.

This project supports my choice of using an existing platform structure and working with it. Washko proves that state of mind is important --challenging what the platform is intended for.

The last project I want to mention interested me because of its theatrical perspective. During my research I found myself wondering about the performative potential of online platforms, how can they be a platform of storytelling?

If cyberspace is the stage,
Who are the actors?
What is the set?
Where is the venue?
And who is the audience?

In "Sei Personaggi Part 2, a play by computers" computer artist and programmer Valentina Vuksic is creating a continuation for a play by Italian theatre author Luigi Pirandello. In the play there are 6 characters, a family, in search for a stage and an audience. The play is raising the question if the characters really exist if there is no play. In her work Vuksic is searching for the meaning of the stage on the network by setting computer processes as actors in the play. Disused hardware and the performance of the operating systems affects the course of the play. Everything happens on an invisible stage located in the space between the networked machines. Microphones pick up the sounds and "conversations" that the machines produce (Vuksic, 2007). This work offers an interpretation for a theatrical space. The original play questions the most fundamental assumptions in theatre; the project adds another layer of imagining what a wholly different space might look, sound and feel like using computers.

In my work I find myself wondering how I can use cyberspace for narratives and storytelling, and it deals with the idea of what can even function as this place and how can I convey that to others. Like a play, in my texts there are characters, relationships and interactions. This project encourages me to look for the stage for my stories and to further develop my idea to use the communication platforms themselves as a stage. At the moment my way of doing that is to try to restructure them by using their elements in different ways. For example: I'm experimenting with the webcam and the fact that we see ourselves in video calls. I offer reflection by duplicating and manipulating the webcam output.

This collection shows a variety of concepts, from each informing a different aspect of my project. When approaching my project I have some main points I want to address that other creators inspired me to think about: immersing myself in my research and in the platform, reflecting on platforms, the magic of discovering new possibilities, being critical about what we use and how to convey my thoughts to a larger audience. Moreover, the subject of storytelling in cyberspace is one that intrigues me the most because of the journal entries I created and my desire to present them to others.

Conclusion

This document is a layout of my thought process over the past 7 months. Describing and articulating my thoughts and interests created a solid base for my practical work where I want to address the main questions and concerns I explored in this research process:

The first is processing and sharing my own experience as a research method for the purpose of self and collective reflection of the way online communication affects us. From that I continued exploring how the rapid evolution of digital interfaces, their integration in our lives and the effort that is put into making them made them an integral part of our lives with the power to have mental repercussions on us. Later I examine the concept of the border between real-life and cyberspace. I touch upon possible explanations for the difference we feel while going online. In this parallel universe we have different ways of being and it challenges our perception of reality. Finally, I mention different works of creators that influenced me because of the way they approach subjects of digital communication. For example, Roy Ascott's projects "La Plissure du Texte", reminded me of the great ability of internet connectivity and inspired me to explore the ways I can build a narrative in that space.

While touching upon issues of isolation, connectivity, mental effects, online addiction, online personas, etc. throughout this text, there are more observations from my journal entries that might come into play in my project, such as notes on the experience of space while communicating through a platform. Not sharing the same physical space creates another divide that the platform is trying to bridge. Each place the participants are in has different dimensions, light and objects. This example raises a question about the ability of platforms to form an alternative online space. The practical project is taking the form of a narrative based web platform that allows navigation between different scenarios that are described in my journal entries. I intend to incorporate visual and interactive interpretations for the scenarios in a way that will use known elements from the platforms themselves like the webcam and the chat. The purpose is to enhance the key moments and findings of my research and allow others to experience them.

This is a work in progress, as I go along I find more connections within my research that I can relate to in my project. In the same way online communication is evolving all the time, these conclusions can shift and change, but my project reflects on the ideas I've developed at this point in time. New questions appear all the time and I need to find a way to navigate between them and choose which ones I highlight. This is the challenge of the practical project.

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