

## *The Dotcomrade*

### The Many Faces of Online Friendship

The Germans, whose language maintains the formal and informal “you” in common usage, have a mechanism for evaluating the closeness of a relationship. Acquaintances will initially address one another with the formal *Sie*, but once they become sufficiently familiar, they will often switch to the informal *du*—a transition marking the start of a friendship. While other countries may not have an equivalent linguistic division, an interesting parallel can be found in cyberspace. Social networking websites such as MySpace and Facebook provide each user with a page he or she can customize. Users entertain themselves by exploring others’ pages; if another person seems interesting or has shared interests, the user clicks “Add to Friends,” extending an offer of digital “friendship” which the other party may accept or decline, also with a click of the mouse. A similar mechanism exists in instant messaging (IM) software to add a new “Buddy,” as well as in most massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). This practice is commonly known as “friending.”

In considering the social implica-

tions of the Internet, romance and sex—from the silly to the sordid, from dating websites to child pornography—grab most of the media attention. Online friendship, by contrast, has received far less consideration. Yet in the variegated world of online gaming, as well as an array of social networking websites and IM programs especially popular among youth, this new, hyper-modern way of making and being friends is a subtler but portentous development.

Online friendships vary widely depending where on the Internet, and with whom, one virtually mingles. In MMOGs like *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Second Life*, players (or “residents,” as they are called in *Second Life*) control characters that inhabit and roam a unique virtual world, interacting with other characters controlled by people from all over the globe. In many cases, these virtual worlds are intentionally designed to give players incentives to work together in teams. “In *EverQuest*, we forced interdependence in several ways,” one of the game’s designers told an interviewer. “By creating a class-based system, players need each other. By creating

an environment often too challenging for a solo player, people are compelled to group and even to form large guilds and alliances. All of this builds community, and it all keeps players coming back for more and more.”

These social bonds between players are often formalized by joining “guilds” whose members embark on missions together. Guild allegiance creates a sense of group identity and team effort that keeps users “coming back for more and more.” An estimated ten million people worldwide are active MMOG players. As one gamer told a Stanford University researcher, in “real life... we have little reliance on others and individuals are rarely thrown into life-or-death situations.” These games attempt to simulate those missed experiences which require mutual trust for survival. In real life, we may not have comrades-in-arms, but online we can have “dotcomrades”—friends to whom we pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor (virtually, that is).

As in MMOGs, friendship formed or maintained through IM programs or social networking websites occur in the context of a virtual community. But while the primary MMOG community is the guild, frequently composed of people who are strangers in the offline world, IM and sites like Facebook and MySpace are largely used by teenagers and young adults to maintain (incessant) communication with acquaintances from school and the rest of “the real world.”

In a 2005 study, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that

two-thirds of all American teenagers use IM; MySpace has over 100 million registered users, while Facebook claims the souls—or at least the profiles—of three in four American college students. Berkeley researcher Danah Boyd considers these applications an extension of the high school hallway; students “congregate” online after school to continue their in-school socialization, from gossipmongering to relationship-building. Members use such websites to help jumpstart friendships or flirtations, to keep a finger on the pulse of large social networks, to stay in touch with contacts through private messages or by posting on a public “wall,” or simply for pure visibility (posting photo albums online is very popular). As one teen told Boyd, “If you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist.”

Meanwhile, the Pew researchers have found that almost half of teens have over fifty people listed as “friends” or “Buddies” in their IM software. One high school freshman interviewed for *The New Atlantis*, who admits she “has gone through phases of [AOL Instant Messenger] abuse,” has about 320—but she is quick to point out that “you can’t call half of them ‘friends.’” She considers only six to be “really amazing, close friends” with whom she keeps in daily contact.

What does it mean, then, to be on someone’s “Buddy List,” or to be “friended,” by contrast to what it means to be a friend? And will the rising generation be able to tell the difference? Our wisest sage on the subject

is Aristotle, who, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, distinguishes three main types of human friendships. The lower two forms, those based on utility and pleasure, are rooted in what each expects to receive from the other; when one is no longer useful or pleasing to the other, the friendship almost surely will fade. By contrast, “the complete form of friendship is that between people who are good and alike in virtue,” where the emphasis is not upon what is gained, but rather upon the common love of the good. While online interaction can undoubtedly form and further friendships of utility (mutual survival) and pleasure (mutual interest), can it promote friendships of mutual virtue?

This is surely a question that social scientists cannot fully answer, but one recent study might shed a little light on the subject. “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades,” published in the June 2006 *American Sociological Review*, presents data showing that Americans in 2004 had on average smaller discussion networks—that is, a smaller number of confidants with whom they “discuss important matters”—than when surveyed in 1985. According to the study, “Many more people *talk to no one* about matters they consider important to them in 2004 than was the case two decades ago” (emphasis added). Those surveyed in 2004 reported, on average, two “core confidants,” down from three in 1985.

Why then—when the flourishing of today’s tools of communication have

enabled an explosion of sociability—have the ranks of our closest confidants been diminished? Various interpretations tempt our judgment: Does the “self-creation,” or distortion, made easy by online anonymity and customizable avatars damn us to lose (as Yeats put it) “the heart-revealing intimacy / That chooses right” without which we will “never find a friend”? Does youth culture’s cry, “If you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist,” reveal a generation of Berkeleyan idealists in the making, to whom “to be is to be perceived”? Or, as Ann Hulbert suggests in a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, does such data imply we are simply making better Aristotelian distinctions between friends—“a stark testament that we value a deep bond when we find it and aren’t fooled when we don’t”?

The authors of the study avoid any far-reaching conclusions. But the data almost speaks for itself: Since 1985, the discussion networks of Americans have become “smaller, more densely interconnected, and more centered on the close ties of spouse/partner” even as the Internet has increased our access to a wider, more diverse, more dispersed array of social bonds. We seem to be losing confidants even as we gain an online portfolio of virtual “buddies”—living out the proverb “a friend to many is a friend to none.” In this age in which “friend” has become a verb, the most elevated kind of friendship seems ever harder to sustain.

—**Brian Boyd**, a *New Atlantis* intern, is a student at the University of Notre Dame.