

### Note

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## CHAPTER NINE

# Compulsive use of virtual sex and internet pornography

## Addiction or perversion?

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**V**irtual sex" has many forms; internet pornography, telephone sex chatlines and "chatting" online or texting sexually explicit messages may all be used as sexual stimuli. These activities are deemed "virtual" because although they entail imagined scenarios where there may be a fantasy of other participants, actually the person is alone and the sexual act consists of masturbation; in addition, the term "virtual" refers to the use of new media technologies to access sexually stimulating materials to elaborate or reflect the person's fantasy. The use of sexually explicit materials to stimulate sexual fantasy and masturbation is not new and is not in itself a problem; people often seek help at the point when the behaviour has become frequent, compulsive and distressing, and appears to jeopardize or impair other intimate relationships or to impinge on the individual's working life. For those accessing illegal pornography (i.e. child pornography) there are added concerns for the individual about detection, arrest and criminal conviction, and for others about the exploitation and abuse of the children depicted in the imagery.

Within the literature and within clinical practice, the compulsive use of internet pornography is the predominant focus of concern

and apparently the most pervasive problem. However, I want to broaden this out and address the various forms of "virtual sex" interchangeably. There may be something very specific about the power of visual imagery and looking in the use of pornography, but, with respect to the kinds of issues discussed here, there do not appear to be qualitative differences between the person who looks at pornography, and those compulsively using phone chat-lines, or those who use the internet or mobile phones to exchange sexually explicit messages while masturbating.

It has been observed that pornography is always a front-runner in exploiting new media technologies. Within the last year patients have started to talk about the use of web-cams so that they can now see and be seen by the person they are interacting with online; downloading pornography from the internet to their mobile phones; and of people accessing pornography through someone else's wireless connection to evade detection. Within the next year, no doubt, such things will either have become commonplace or eclipsed by still more ingenious methods of exploiting developments in the technology.

There are statistics which give us some indication of the pervasiveness of virtual sex and the proportion of people for whom it has become problematic. It has been suggested that almost 70 per cent of all dollars spent online are spent on sexual pursuits (Sprenger, 1999 cited in Cooper Griffin-Shelley, 2002). A recent article in the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK (Aitkenhead, 2006) referred to an estimate by British Telecom that 100,000 people attempt to access child pornography on the internet every day. If the adult male population of Britain is about 20 million people, and assuming this activity is mainly restricted to men, this would be approximately one in 200 men. A review of a number of large sample studies of the use of "virtual sexuality in the workplace" suggests that 20 per cent of respondents used the internet for sexual activities while at work (Cooper, McLoughlin and Campbell, 2000). Greenfield (1999) conducted a survey of 17,251 respondents and concluded that 6 per cent were internet addicted, and of these 20 per cent were sexually addicted, suggesting that a little over 1 per cent of internet users may develop an addiction to online sexual activity. When the number of people accessing the internet worldwide is now counted in billions

(clickz.com estimate 1.08 billion worldwide in 2005 and a projected figure of 1.8 billion by 2010), and the number of active users in the UK (using the internet at least once a month) is estimated to be 24.36 million (clickz.com), the number in difficulty must be very considerable.

In 1996 and 1997 there were no referrals to the Portman Clinic for compulsive use of internet pornography. In 1998 we received just one. By 2003 it had become one of the most common problems cited in referral and assessment information, alongside paedophilia, transvestism and assault. For the referral year to March 2003, on the basis of referral and assessment information, this was identified as a problem in 11 per cent of all referred adult patients (Wood, Ramadhan & Delmar-Morgan, 2005).

It is striking that very little has been written about the use of internet technology from a psychoanalytic point of view, with Gabbard's (2001) account of the use of e-mail by a patient to express an erotic transference to her therapist before this could be acknowledged within the consulting room and Young's (1996; 1998; 2003) internet-published papers as notable exceptions.

The literature on compulsive use of internet pornography, or cybersex as the Americans tend to call it, is almost entirely American, and almost entirely coined within an addiction model. The individual is seen to be in the grip of a behavioural addiction, and treatment focuses on strengthening motivation and strategies of self-management to reduce repetitive and compulsive behaviour and to foster alternative coping strategies and sources of gratification (see for example Delmonico, Griffin, & Carnes, 2002). Such approaches may include some consideration of the underlying function of the behaviour and its significance in terms of personal history; Delmonico, Griffin and Carnes (2002), for example, include "understanding the dynamics and decision processes of the sexually intrusive behaviour" and "understanding family of origin/childhood trauma issues" in their "sample cybersex treatment plan" (pp. 157-158). However, the way that this is presented implies that it would not extend to a full psychoanalytic understanding. Perhaps as a reflection of the underlying model of sexually compulsive behaviours, a group of respected American clinicians are lobbying to have sexual addiction included in DSM IV as one of the category of behavioural addictions, along with gambling

(Carnes, 2000). In parallel with this, it is striking how often patients present referring to their addiction.

The addiction model is undoubtedly of value. It has "face validity", addressing the patient's sense of being in the grip of something compulsive and addictive, and it no doubt generates useful, focussed treatment strategies. However, I think that the addiction model may be used defensively, and that this defence may be used by patients and clinicians alike, to turn a blind eye to the meaning of the behaviours. Specifically, I think it turns a blind eye to the perverse aspects of these behaviours.

The term "perversion" has moral connotations. Definitions in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* include "turning aside from truth or right; diversion to an improper use; corruption, distortion". In the diagnostic field the term has been replaced by the morally more neutral "paraphilia". DSM IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), for example, stipulates that the key characteristics of paraphilias are recurrent, intense sexually-arousing fantasies, sexual urges or behaviours, usually involving either non-human objects, the suffering or humiliation of oneself or one's partner, or children or non-consenting persons. The paraphilic fantasies or stimuli may be used episodically or may be perceived to be essential to sexual arousal, but must have an enduring role within the psyche and be used over a period of 6 months or more. Psychoanalysts would also stress these characteristics, viewing perversions as fixed, repetitive compulsive sexual behaviours or fantasies, which may not be essential to the sexual act but may be necessary to experience a subjective sense of full satisfaction. However, psychoanalysts continue to use the term perversion, not to pass moral judgement but because at a psychological level these behaviours are also seen to involve a distortion of constructive sexual intimacy. For Freud, perversions were an aberration from the "normal aim" of sexual intercourse with the "normal object" of a heterosexual partner (Freud, 1905); Stoller (1975) emphasized the use of sexuality as a vehicle for the expression of hatred rather than love; Limen-tani (1989) was concerned with the turning away from fundamental psychological "truths" in perversions, such as the truth of generational, gender or species differences (see Wood (2006a) for a fuller discussion of these issues). Psychoanalytic perspectives vary, but what contemporary perspectives all have in common is the notion

that, in the perversions, sexualization is used as a means of defending against, managing or masking the anxieties or destructiveness aroused by intimacy, or the "unbearable truths" with which one is confronted through intimacy. In this respect a sexual perversion represents a turning aside, a distortion from proper use or a corruption of intimacy.

In the realm of virtual sex, I think that the addiction model can be used to defend against the "perverse" aspects of these behaviours in this psychoanalytic sense. Specifically an addiction model may protect us from awareness of the predominance of sadism, the use of sexualization as a defence against intolerable affects and the powerful symbolism of the specific scenario on which the individual becomes fixated. All of these—the sadism, the sexualization and the symbolism—may be a source of intense guilt and shame to the individual. The drive to defend against them is powerful and understandable.

The ideas in this chapter are grounded in clinical experience with patients struggling with these issues and are informed by discussion of these issues at the Portman Clinic and elsewhere. The views proposed here are all founded on clinical observation and evidence, but to protect confidentiality no clinical material has been reported directly. Clinical vignettes are fictionalized and therefore serve as illustrations rather than evidence.

There are examples in the literature of people for whom the use of the internet for sexual means is innocuous, sometimes comforting or educational and sometimes potentially very constructive (see for example Tepper and Owens, 2002). In contrast, people attending the Portman Clinic for assessment and treatment all have serious difficulties in the sexual and interpersonal domains and their compulsive use of virtual sex has always seemed to be a symptom, if not a factor compounding these difficulties. The approach that I have taken here assumes that the compulsive use of virtual sex is a problem for the patient.

#### *Different types of users*

Initial studies suggest that there may be gender differences in preferred online activities. Men seem to be more likely to engage

in solitary activities (viewing and distributing pornography, reading written material) and women are more likely to engage in interactive activity (Ferree, 2003) such as exchanging e-mail, participation in chat rooms and engagement in cybersex (communicating online while masturbating). However, there are women who access pornography, and women are disproportionately represented amongst those who progress beyond recreational use to compulsive or "addictive" use (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000). It has also been observed that women are much more likely than men to attempt to have real-life meetings with online sexual partners, with attendant risks.

Carnes, Delmonico and Griffin (2001) have developed a useful typology for distinguishing between different types of users. They refer to "appropriate recreational users", who report no adverse consequences, and "inappropriate recreational users", who are not compulsive users but use sexual information gathered from the internet at inappropriate times or share it with inappropriate people, like colleagues at work. What they call the "predisposed" group already have indicators of problematic sexual behaviour, which seem to be fuelled by the internet. "Lifelong sexual compulsives" have existing problems and may use the internet as an extension of this behaviour as a way to avoid more risky forms of acting out, or to heighten arousal and add new risks to already problematic behaviours. Most interesting from a psychoanalytic point of view is the final group, known as the "discovery group", who reputedly have no prior inappropriate sexual fantasies or behaviours, but for whom the internet serves as a trigger for problematic usage. How should we think about this group? Is it possible that the internet can create disturbed sexual preoccupations where none existed previously? This issue will be discussed below.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, there may be other clinical distinctions to be made between different kinds of problem users. Clinical discussions generate examples of people for whom collecting, sorting and categorizing pornographic images seems paramount, and for whom sexual arousal or masturbation appears to play a minor role. The reasons why pornographic images should be chosen for this purpose may vary, but when coupled with impaired social relating the behaviour may be a feature of Asperger's Syndrome or obsessional-type difficulties. In other people, the

imagery or scenario sought out may seem extreme or very severely regressed, involving anatomically almost-impossible acts, or very young infants for example. When coupled with other evidence of a poor reality sense, there may be an impression of an underlying psychotic process, at least in the psychoanalytic, if not in the psychiatric sense. In other people the behaviours seem to be used as an anti-depressant, appearing to offer an escape from a feared state of emptiness and depression. This list is not exhaustive but demonstrates that the compulsive use of virtual sex may be thought of as a symptom, with variable phenomenology and aetiology. There may nevertheless be common features to the function that it serves within the psyche.

#### *Characteristics of the literature*

The literature on virtual sex has certain distinct characteristics, which may reflect something about the nature of this as a phenomenon. From a psychoanalytic point of view some of the literature appears to convey a manic excitement.

The global scale of the internet seems to invite expressions of awe. Cooper and Griffin-Shelley (2002) assert that "A new sexual revolution has begun . . .". They assert that the internet has the power to "turbocharge, that is, accelerate and intensify" online sexual activity. Internet pornography is often said to be "the crack cocaine of pornography" (Turpin, 2006; Schneider, 2000), an expression which Griffin-Shelley (2003) attributes to Corley & Corley (1994). Also commonly found in the literature is an expression coined by Cooper (1997), the "triple-A engine", to describe the characteristics of (easy) access, affordability and (apparent) anonymity which lend the internet particular appeal as a vehicle for sexual exploration and expression.

The second distinguishing characteristic of the literature is the huge sample sizes which can be obtained from posting questionnaires on websites. Sample sizes of more than 9,000 (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999), 17,000 (Greenfield, 1999), even 25,000 (Young, 1998) respondents to self-report internet questionnaires are not uncommon. The internet deflects attention away from the single case, and yet in the psychoanalytic tradition it is the

single case study which has underpinned theoretical and technical developments and which reveals the subtleties of meaning.

The third conspicuous phenomenon is the creation of a new language, the language of "cybersex", "cyberpsychology", "virtual sex addiction", "cyber stalking", "cyberspace" and "OSA (online sexual activity)". There is even a journal called "CyberPsychology and Behaviour". RL (real life) and f2f (face-to-face) also warrant abbreviations, as if they are just other domains to be visited in a virtual world. The language of cyberspace seems intended to define this phenomenon as scientific, potent and on a vast scale. In "space" the person is weightless, free from the constraints of relationships and the vulnerability bestowed by our ties and our limitations. I would suggest that the language of cyberspace is concerned with a phallic omnipotence.

Within the addiction model it is as though the omnipotence associated with the internet becomes projected into the pornography, which is then seen as an irresistible drug. Greenfield and Orzak (2002), for example, describe how the intoxicating mix of sexual stimulation and the "potent nature of the Internet medium" lead to a situation where a cycle of arousal and compulsion "almost ... spontaneously ignites" (p. 135).

We can credit Rado (1933), an early psychoanalyst, with recognizing the fallacy that an individual is helpless in the face of a potent drug:

The psychoanalytic study of the problem of addiction begins at this point. It begins with the recognition of the fact that not the toxic agent, but the impulse to use it, makes an addict of a given individual ... The drug addictions are seen to be artificially induced illnesses; they can exist because drugs exist; and they are brought into being for psychic reasons.

[p. 53 in 1997 edition]

Rado points out that the ancient Greeks used the same word to mean "drug" and "magical substance". One of the problems of the addiction model is that we can start to think of the internet and internet sex as though it had an almost magical power. While it is very useful to consider what aspects of internet pornography make it seem so seductive, we know that it is not "irresistible", and it certainly is not

magic. The question we need to ask is, what does it offer, not only to the conscious mind, but also to the unconscious, which for some individuals makes it so compelling? And what is it about them that makes them vulnerable to this?

These issues will be explored by considering some similarities between addictions and perversions, and some points of difference.

### *Similarities between addictions and perversions*

#### *The manic high*

A feature common to addictions and perversions is the manic high or the elation. Physiologically this may be induced by the chemical effects of a drug, or the pleasure of orgasm through masturbation. Rado (1933) notes that it is only when this physiological high is given meaning by the ego that it yields a subjective sense of elation or omnipotence.

The internet is indeed a technological advance with enormous scope and power. From a psychoanalytic point of view, those very qualities of the internet which render it powerful also bestow a potential for manic excitement and omnipotence. With the smallest gesture, the click of the mouse, the individual can control what happens, the part that they wish to play, and exactly when it should end. The individual can pursue sexual fantasies without any reliance on another person. In the use of pornography there is no unpredictable other who might accept or reject, cherish or criticize them. With both pornography and chat rooms the person can avoid the exposure entailed in intimacy with a partner: exposure of the physical body and aspects of themselves about which they feel ashamed or vulnerable.

Segal (1975) notes that when manic defences are employed, feelings of dependency and vulnerability are replaced by "a triad of feelings—control, triumph and contempt" (Segal, 1975, p. 83). She suggests that: "Control is a way of denying dependence yet compelling the object to fulfil the need for dependence since an object that is wholly controlled is, up to a point, one that can be depended upon." Triumph serves both to devalue the object (and so mitigate any potential feelings of envy), and to counter any feelings such as

pining or longing. Contempt also devalues the object and an object that is of no value is not worthy of guilt—the object can be treated mercilessly because its fate is of no consequence. All of these processes can be seen in operation in the use of internet sex. In the mind of the person, the object or the other is totally at their mercy; if there is some live interaction, the other can simply be switched off or terminated if they do not comply with what is sought. The other is frequently dehumanized, allowing the person to feel triumph and contempt. The function of the other is to provide the individual with sexual stimulation and gratification, or to serve as a vessel for the projection of fantasies, but there is no requirement to take account of the other's thoughts, feelings or mind.

Manic defences also serve to spare us from an awareness of our own dependency. While the "primary object" on whom our survival depends is usually seen to be the mother, the body is also a primary object on which we depend, which renders us vulnerable, and whose imperfections we have to recognize and live with. In virtual reality, the person is freed from all bodily constraints—a man can become a woman, a child, an Adonis, a fearless stud. The internet cuts the threads of physical embodiment which always tie us to an imperfect (and "depressive") reality.

A further quality of the internet which may fuel omnipotence and manic defences is the vast array of images available. Someone with a very idiosyncratic sexual fantasy might previously have had little hope of finding that exact fantasy realized. Enactment may therefore have always contained an element of disappointment; the individual cannot control or create external reality to exactly match his wishes or fantasies and omnipotence is thwarted. In contrast, the internet allows the individual to scan vast numbers of images, with the likelihood that any unusual fantasy will eventually find quite a close match. This possibility of finding a match between fantasy and external reality may heighten the sense of omnipotence and excitement (Williams, personal communication).

A common theme in the literature is the disowning of responsibility for the images which are viewed. The distancing effects of scale, technology and anonymity enable the individual to distance himself from guilt about the creation of images. Quayle and Taylor (2002) conducted an impressive study involving qualitative analysis of

interviews with 13 men convicted of downloading child pornography. They provide some stark evidence that for some, child pornography became "collectibles", likened by interviewees to baseball cards, stamps, or works of art to be collected, categorized and traded. Respondents would emphasize the importance of collecting complete series, and sorting and categorizing pictures. This was invariably associated with an absence of any reference to the fact that what was being collected was child pornography. Indeed, "Depersonalising of the pictures was seen most strongly when reference was made to the pictures as trophies" (p. 13). In this description, Segal's trio of contempt, control and triumph are once again evident. Manic defences are not simply allowed or endorsed, but seem to be actively fuelled by qualities of the internet.

Even when the internet is used to enact masochistic fantasies in which the individual is debased or made to suffer, that person is secretly in control, dictating the preferred scenario and terminating it when they have had enough. Thus, in the private world of the relationship with the computer, the individual may have the illusion that he or she is supremely powerful and invulnerable, or if this is projected, there may be masochistic gratification in believing that he or she is at the mercy of a supremely powerful other.

### *Escalation of the "dosage"*

Drug use and compulsive use of virtual sex have in common that the elation, the manic high, is ephemeral. It does not effect an enduring state in the psyche. The person has to keep repeating the act to get the high.

Rado suggests that,

At the height of the elation, interest in reality disappears, and with it any respect for reality.

[p. 57 1997 edition]

As the effects of the drug wear off, the person experiences not just a chemical come-down, but a harsh emotional reawakening.

The elation had augmented the ego to gigantic dimensions and had almost eliminated reality; now just the reverse state appears,

sharpened by contrast. The ego is shrunken, and reality appears exaggerated in its dimensions.

[p. 57 *ibid*]

The addict has a familiar solution to this depressing confrontation with reality: the craving for elation. Rado notes the diminishing returns derived from the state of elation. Progressively more of the drug is needed to effect the required state. He suggests that this effect may be in part physiological and in part psychological.

This is very similar to the pattern we see with compulsive use of virtual sex. It may be due to the guilt induced by the manic flight, the guilt induced by the contempt for the object or the guilt about the sadism expressed, but, once the pleasure of orgasm has worn off, the feeling of depression returns, often amplified. Increasingly desperate attempts to escape the depression may then lead to a search for more extreme material which is seen as more forbidden, more dangerous, and hence, for some, more exciting and more intoxicating. The internet affords the possibility that, when satiation renders the image less exciting or the need to surmount depression is intensified, more extreme versions can be found to heighten arousal. For some people this escalation leads to a search for imagery incorporating increasing levels of violence or increasingly young subjects.

#### *The illusion of an object relationship: a narcissistic relation to a projected internal object*

The third striking similarity between drug use and compulsive use of pornography is that there is an illusion of an object relationship, when what is enacted is frequently a narcissistic relation to a projected internal object. The drug user may apparently have a partner, but sexual interest typically wanes, and the partner often becomes more like a business partner, an associate in the business of procuring and funding the drugs. The relationship which is all-consuming is the relationship to the drug, the drug which can be omnipotently controlled and through which the person may enact the incorporation of an idealized object, or an excitingly cruel and dangerous object (see Rosenfeld, 1960).

In the use of virtual sex, the "other" with whom the individual

imagines they are engaged, whether it is a person in a static image or a respondent in a chat-room, will only be tolerated while they comply with the scenario that is being sought. Even in chat-rooms where there is a semblance of a relationship, what is engaged with is not an other who embodies difference, nor a transitional space where an individual may safely play with the fantasy of an other (Winnicott, 1951; Gabbard, 2001), but an other who must have fixed characteristics which coincide exactly with the "script" which is sought. The "other" then has no independent existence, but becomes a vessel for the projection of fantasy. The relationship is not one of mutuality, but of narcissistic engagement with a projected internal object.

Mr C sought out imagery in which the participants had to look awkward, unkempt or coarse, so that he could despise and triumph over them in his mind. Mr D, compulsively using chat-rooms where there is an appearance of an other, described himself as "hooking fish". As soon as the other person was seduced by his description of himself and interested in him, he broke off contact with them. The "fish" which he "hooked" were like trophies or junk food—something briefly gratifying but disposable, but far removed from a genuine, sustaining exchange with an other that might have ultimately been nourishing, but which for him was fraught with anxiety.

#### *Differences between compulsive use of virtual sex and drug addiction*

##### *The creation of a compelling scenario*

A striking feature of virtual sex is the creation of a scenario which is loaded with meaning, a "compelling scenario" (Wood, 2006b). While some might consider that rituals around drug and alcohol use also have this quality, it is not generally a focus of the clinical treatment of these conditions.

In Freud's (with Breuer, 1895) view, "symptoms" are often "over-determined". In the course of analysis we discover that there is not a single cause, but multiple experiences that seem to have led to this point; one of these experiences alone would probably not have been sufficient to produce or sustain the symptom.

Psychoanalytic exploration often reveals that the particular pornographic scenario upon which an individual becomes fixated has multiple meanings in terms of the person's history, and may have been "over-determined" in the way Freud describes. What the internet appears to offer is a massive library that allows the person to trawl through vast numbers of images or scenarios at great speed, until they alight upon that particular configuration which is, for them, compelling.

For Mr E the participants must be engaged in superhuman sexual feats, offering a fantasized escape from his own feelings of inadequacy and his shame about his life.

The specific sexual scenario may reflect a constellation of object relationships of longstanding significance for the individual. Mr F first had a fantasy of spying on a girl in the neighbourhood in early adolescence when he was socially isolated and unconfident about his appearance. He imagined following her unobserved and observing her relationships with her friends. This fantasy was associated with a generalized excitement but was not at this stage specifically sexual. Over time, Mr F has told me how, as a child feeling helpless in the face of deprivation and abuse, he imagined himself a glamorous (and deadly) international "spy"; how his emotionally unavailable mother would allow him to glimpse her naked while dressing; how enraged he would feel when brutally exposed to evidence of his mother's numerous sexual relationships; and how he imagined that a PE teacher took pleasure in spying on him. "Spying", for him, is suffused with meaning, but it was only in his late teens that he specifically sought out pornographic materials which had to involve the use of concealed cameras to "spy" on scenes of sexual intimacy between children and adults, to reflect what was, by then, an organized sexual fantasy, and which he now pursues on the internet.

I think the addiction model turns a blind eye to the significance of the compelling scenario in collusion with the patient's desire to deny the meaning that it holds. The compelling scenario, like a symptom, may be thought of as a compromise formation. Freud (1896; 1916-17) observed that symptoms, like dreams, represent both the satisfaction of an unconscious wish, and the disguising of that wish through mechanisms such as condensation and displacement. The eventual form of the symptom is thus a "compromise" between the desire for wish-fulfilment and the requirement to

comply with the demands of external reality. In practice the symptom very often both conceals and reveals the underlying impulse; the obsessional patient, for example, may simultaneously be washing away every trace of dirt on their hands, while leaving chaos and mess all around them and evoking frustration and rage in those who struggle to engage with them. The messy, aggressive impulses are both washed away and made evident. In the same way, when there is a fixation on a specific sexual scenario, the underlying impulses may be disguised by the sexual scenario, but the disguise is often very flimsy. The compelling scenario both conceals and reveals. What it conceals and reveals is often the most profound, highly charged and sensitive constellations of internal objects. Mr F, described above, could conveniently describe himself as addicted to scenes of covert voyeurism, and he has talked to me about his addiction, as if that explains it all. And yet if we look beyond the surface of the image there may be an underlying fantasy of incest in which he is the mother's chosen partner; there are indications of an ignored and neglected boy in him who longs to be a figure of interest and fascination, projected into the child in the scene; there is an identification with the sexually abusive "aggressor" who violates the child's innocence, and an identification with the power of the "spy" who knows everything that is happening but is unseen. The scenario re-enacts the situation where he feels tantalized and excluded from others' intimacies, but this time he imagines himself in control, cruelly witnessing another's vulnerability, naiveté and abuse. There may be an investment in turning a blind eye to these issues.

Laufer (1976) proposes that the child enters puberty with a "central masturbation fantasy", which may be largely unconscious, but which is an internalized scenario determined by their primary object relationships. In his view, the content of this fantasy "contains the various regressive satisfactions and the main sexual identifications" (p. 300). Laufer considers that this fantasy is fixed by the resolution of the Oedipus complex, and although the fantasy may take on a new meaning in adolescence as the young person assimilates the significance of mature genitals, "*the content of this central masturbation fantasy does not normally alter during adolescence*" (p. 300, his italics). I would question Laufer's insistence that the central fantasy becomes fixed at such an early age since latency and adolescent experiences seem highly influential, but the "compelling scenario" often seems

to encapsulate specific traumatic experiences and key object relationships from childhood and adolescence in the way that Laufer describes.

While some people find, through the internet, an external realization of a conscious sexual fantasy, I have come to believe that it is conceivable that, through the internet, some people discover sexual preferences which they might never have discovered through ordinary experience or conscious sexual fantasy. I think it is a mistake to conclude therefore that the internet can somehow "create" a perverse sexual interest like paedophilia. The internet cannot create something from nothing. However, it does seem able to "fan the flames" of something which might otherwise have remained smouldering within the psyche. It seems to do this by intensifying excitement and offering an organized articulation or realization to something that might, without it, have remained largely as disparate unconscious currents within the psyche. The images on which individuals become fixated may seem "novel" because they have not been consciously recognized before, and because they are at odds with the sexual imagery or opportunities generally available in adult life. However, what we find in therapy is that these images or the object relations which they portray are not "new" but are often very "old", referring back to adolescent, Oedipal or pre-Oedipal attachments to bodily functions, body parts, object relationships or primitive fantasies. What the internet provides is, in effect, an invitation to regress, to revisit early or repressed fantasies or experiences. These mental fragments may be highly charged, and so the sexual scenario that gives them form and expression is experienced as compelling.

#### *Sexualization and sexualization of aggression*

The second major difference between drug addiction and perversion is the extent of the sexualization, and specifically the sexualization of aggression in perversion. Drug use undoubtedly gratifies destructive urges, and there may be a perverse pleasure in the attack on the self, the body or the imagined objects who suffer or are punished. However, perversions are distinguished by the fact that destructive wishes are not simply libidinalized or eroticized, but are actually sexualized—woven into a specific and concrete sexual fantasy or act.

Psychoanalytic theorists such as Glasser (1979) and Stoller (1975) have emphasized the way in which perversions allow the sexualization of hatred and aggression, in a way that disguises and appears to "make safe" the aggression. Stoller stresses the aetiological importance of experiences in which the individual is humiliated with regard to their sexuality or gender, thus storing up hatred and a desire for revenge upon the object. Stoller argues that the perverse act—in many of his examples, transvestism—gratifies the desire for revenge. In the cross-dressing ritual the man appears to repeat what has been done to him, denies his masculinity and assumes the identity of a woman, but at the end of the ritual he masturbates and ejaculates, reasserting his masculinity and mentally triumphing over those who have humiliated or denigrated him. This is a re-enactment in which history is re-written: through sexualization, the apparent re-enactment of the trauma culminates in his pleasure and triumph.

In his view, the scenario on which the individual becomes fixated, whether it be cross dressing or an obsession with pornography, puts the individual in the superior, vengeful, triumphant position. The other is seen to suffer, and their suffering is a source of satisfaction and pleasure. Thus the original "victim" becomes "victor", "trauma" becomes "triumph" and "passive suffering" becomes "active revenge".

Mr G, who became fixated on sado-masochistic homosexual imagery, tells me how, when he started to look at this material, he was feeling unable to cope with his high-pressure job, was failing in relationships and felt he was falling apart. He identifies the victim in the imagery with himself as a child, physically and emotionally abused and "treated worse than a dog". And yet witnessing another being treated in this way gives him pleasure. The projection on to the victim of all that he could not bear to experience or own, is driven by rage and functions in his mind as an act of aggression; when coupled with sexualization, and elaborated into a specific fantasy, it becomes a source of sadistic pleasure.

For Glasser (1979a) it is the aggression aroused by core complex anxieties which is sexualized and made safe in perversions. He describes how what he calls the core complex arises as a response to frustration in early relationships resulting from separation. In the core complex the response to this frustration is to pursue a search for

blissful union with the object, which appears to promise the eradication of deprivation and need, and the total containment of destructive feelings. In those with perverse pathology, Glasser suggests that this primitive urge for union arouses a terror of annihilation—to be completely taken over by another is to lose oneself—and therefore arouses intense feelings of aggression against the object. Yet to destroy the object would be to be left without any hope of gratification, isolated, depressed and abandoned. Mr H described graphically in his first assessment session how he longed for a kind of back-in-the-womb-type experience in which he was completely fused with another. He went on to say how he felt completely pent up, like an atomic reactor about to explode. He made the link that his use of internet pornography was his way of diffusing the charge, essentially the rage, that he felt inside, although he had not made the link that this rage was a response to the regressive and primitive longing for fusion. Internet pornography thus provides him with an apparent solution to core complex anxieties.

In this group of patients for whom virtual sex, in its different forms, has become severely problematic, the virtual sex always seems to function, at least in part, to express sadistic impulses towards the object. Prior to and after breaks in the therapy, Mr J seeks out imagery on the internet in which women are treated sadistically. He has the satisfaction of "leaving" me and our work together, and taking off into his own world of pornography where I cannot contact him. Thus he reverses the situation where he is left by me in the break and takes revenge on me in his mind as Stoller describes. Through the pornography he also sexualizes the aggression and appears to discharge it and make it safe, so that he protects me in the consulting room from the full weight of his angry and vengeful feelings. He also protects himself from acknowledging the pain of separation and the depth of his longings. As Glasser describes, the perversion protects the relationship to the object which the individual fears might otherwise be destroyed by the aggression.

#### *Ambiguity about internal / external reality*

One of the particularly interesting aspects of the use of virtual sex is the ambiguity about whether or not this constitutes enactment or

fantasy. Is this taking place in external reality? Or in internal reality? Or somewhere in between?

The lawyer, teacher or hospital consultant who stands to lose everything if found guilty of looking at child pornography presumably convinces himself when looking at internet pornography that this is taking place solely in internal reality, in his mind. I am struck by how often, in discussion of this subject with colleagues, someone takes it upon themselves to remind us all that real children are involved in the production of child pornography, as if we could all be carried away by the illusion that this is all in the mind, and so, in effect, without consequence to anyone but the user. Taylor and Quayle's (2003) sobering book about the production and use of child pornography is a valuable reminder of the processes involved. For some patients, the ambiguity about whether it is external or internal, real or fantasy, seems an almost psychotic riddle which they find very disturbing. For others, it may be a source of additional charge or excitement, enhancing a sense of danger or risk. The person may be both excited by and frightened by the thought that they might be caught, or might be unable to stop themselves from enacting what they had witnessed. For some, exploiting the ambiguity about whether what they are doing is virtual or real becomes part of the excitement. As it is not illegal to fantasize or to look, but only to possess images, ever more sophisticated technological means may be employed to delete images, to destroy the "footprint" left on the computer and to leave no trace. In this way the individual may imagine triumphing over external authority (the police, the criminal justice system) by obliterating the evidence that this was enacted in external reality, and creating a pretence that it occurred only in the mind.

#### *The role of the superego*

When working with perverse patients, qualities of the superego are often known initially from projections on to the psychotherapist. The therapist may feel themselves to be alternately perceived to be ineffectual, weak and collusive, actively corrupt and seductive, or severely judgmental and punitive. Such projections may have their origins in actual childhood experiences of active seduction and abuse or the failure of parental figures to protect, as well as in early

experiences in which the primitive qualities of the superego were fuelled by fantasy and destructiveness (see for example Glasser's (1988) account of the poor integration and hence primitive nature of the superego in paedophilia).

At the simplest level, the internet may appear to invite a disregard for authority because, alone in a room with a computer, the individual imagines that there are no witnesses to their actions. Their awareness of external controls (such as social disapproval or the law), and the self-consciousness associated with this, may be eroded (Young, 2003).

Constraints on an individual's behaviour also derive from internal controls, the functions of conscience, self-observation and ideals of behaviour that we associate with the superego. The internet may be a convenient object for projections of qualities of the superego. Where the internet has become the focus of compulsive sexual activity, the internet is often identified with a corrupt or seductive superego, and the therapist (and sometimes the criminal justice system) are alternately seen to be weak and helpless, or harsh, judgmental and persecutory.

The internet has many of the characteristics of a powerful parent: it knows "everything", it is immediately responsive, it can be summoned at will and it relieves boredom and loneliness. The projection on to it of a parental, and perhaps specifically paternal, authority is thus not remarkable. However, the internet is also a parent who never says "no". Indeed, elaborate systems exist to tempt the user to remain online, to visit additional websites or to scan more extreme imagery. The pornographic imagery, or the expressed sexual preference, appear to bear the stamp of social approval or endorsement, because there are clearly other people who share this fantasy and have posted the image or information on the internet. Chat-rooms, where it is possible to exchange views with others with socially proscribed sexual interests, appear to normalize the specific sexual interest and create a sense that this is representative of a sub-set of society and hence not "deviant", thus allowing the triumph of a corrupt superego over ordinary social mores. The possibility of breaking the law and then deleting all evidence of the crime may further fuel the sense that the internet works in the service of a corrupt authority, and lends itself to acts of triumph over a watchful conscience.

Everyone has within them a sexually curious child, the Oedipal

child who wonders what goes on behind the door of the parental bedroom. It is as if the internet plays on people's sexual curiosity, symbolically beckoning the "child" into the parental bedroom with the promise of satisfying their sexual curiosity. Just as the reality of exposure to the primal scene may be profoundly disturbing to a child, so many people report seeing imagery on the internet to which they subsequently wish they had not been exposed.

There is anecdotal evidence that people with sexual addiction have commonly had early exposure to pornography, and it is striking how frequently patients refer to the discovery in early adolescence of pornography belonging to the father or a male relative. In these situations it is as though the father no longer embodies prohibition, the "no" of the Oedipal father, but is seen to be unable to contain his own polymorphous sexual interests, his own sadism or masochism, and his own voyeurism. The developing superego of the boy may bear the imprint of his identification with a corrupt or perverse paternal object.

For those who develop a compulsive interest in internet pornography, the breaching of social boundaries and taboos may not be just an unfortunate side-effect of their pursuit of specific sexual preferences, but a vital part of the behaviour. There is pleasure in transgression, in breaking social norms and taboos.

The damage to the superego is unlikely to occur in a single trauma and there may be other developmental factors contributing to this fragility or breaching of the superego. The impact of a mother who "turns a blind eye" and is seen to be complicit in the father's practices may also be considerable. But in some vulnerable patients, the corrupt internet "parent" who seems to invite exploration without restraint may find resonance with a part of them that derives pleasure from breaching boundaries and taboos.

### *Summary*

I have come to believe that there are aspects of the internet which render the pursuit of virtual sex particularly "addictive" in a functional sense. The access to powerful and exciting technology, the possibility of a fit between a sexual fantasy and external reality, the degree of control afforded to the individual and the absence of any

other with vitality and a will of their own, the promised gratification of sexual curiosity, sealed by the excitement of sexual orgasm—all these can fuel omnipotence, and can seem very intoxicating. However, to see compulsive use of virtual sex as “just” an addiction is at best misleading, and at worst, may collude with a defensive denial of the perverse aspects of the behaviour. The compulsive use of virtual sex has all the hallmarks of a perversion: it is a fixed, repetitive, often ritualized sexual behaviour, in which sexualization is used as a defence against profound disturbances in object relations and the relationship to reality. The behaviours are frequently underpinned by narcissistic disturbances, profound feelings of depression, and destructive wishes and annihilatory anxieties in relation to the object. A psychoanalytic approach to treatment offers the possibility of unravelling the highly-charged and sensitive constellation of fantasy, object relations and anxieties underpinning the behaviour, thereby leading to a reduction in the charge or compulsion to enact.