FCJ-059 Domestic ICTs, Desire and Fetish

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> We make our objects from what we make of our world, and in return they teach us: this is fetishism's object lesson. Ellen Lee McCallum (1999: xxii)

Introduction

Matthew lives alone in a run-down, one-bedroom apartment in Melbourne suburbia. Visitors to Matthew's home are extremely rare. However, if visitors should enter the apartment and attempt to navigate through it, as we researchers did, one does so at a risk; the sides of the walls are piled ceiling-high with old technological items—keyboards, computers boxes, typewriters, monitors, amplifiers, radios, televisions, cables, circuit boards and other artefacts. Once in the living room, visitors may proceed along a narrow path between haphazard stacks to find a desk with a computer, a telephone and a stereo. Matthew sits here up to 12 hours a day, downloading from the Internet, chatting to one or two of his online friends, or drafting a letter of complaint about something he has heard on the radio. At night, Matthew may swivel his chair to watch a documentary on a television surrounded and surmounted by non-functioning electrical goods. Negotiating a passage through the kitchen and the bedroom is similarly precarious, for they too are piled high with electronic paraphernalia.

Matthew leaves his apartment only when necessity dictates—to visit a chiropractor, to submit his fortnightly unemployment form at the Social Security Office, or to get supplies at the supermarket. When he ventures into the 'outside world', he often returns with an old monitor, a computer box, a TV, a typewriter, a telephone, or a fax machine, that has been discarded on the street. 'You never know when something will come in useful, and I hate to see things chucked away', he informs us. [1] Indeed, Matthew's desk computer is an assemblage of parts he has found, and he is often opening the box to exchange a hard drive, replace a switch, or just poke around. Matthew is very competent at assembling, disassembling and repairing computers, particularly Macintosh computers.

At face value Matthew's lifestyle is eccentric to say the least, and the temptation is to summarily dismiss his relation to ICTs as arising entirely out of the particularities of his life-history and his psyche, perhaps going so far as to pathologise his behaviour and his mental state. But in our research on 'Connected Homes',[2] we found that Matthew's case was perhaps not so extraordinary: it was not uncommon for members of our twelve participating households to manifest what might well be considered a fetishistic relationship with ICT—for their obsessive preoccupation with having the latest and best technology, for their desire to technologise or digitalise ever-increasing domains of domestic tasks and entertainment options, for their compulsive checking of email messages and use of internet and games, in their collection, restoration and display of old ICT, and for their reconstitution of architectural space to suit perceived ICT needs (Arnold, Shepherd, Gibbs and Mecoles, 2006a, 2006b; Shepherd, Arnold and Gibbs, forthcoming; Shepherd and Arnold, under review). In this paper, it is argued that Matthew's case exemplifies aspects of a normalised relation to ICTs, and the extremities of Matthew's particular case serve the useful purpose of making these stark.

Through this case we contribute to an ongoing examination of our socio-cultural relation to ICTs. From this perspective, people's personal relationships with ICTs goes well beyond the pragmatics of 'ICT as tool' and well beyond the acquisition-consumption semiotics of 'ICT as status symbol', and are constituted within a nexus of powerfully emotive states expressive of desire, possession and pleasure on the one hand, and aversion, rejection and pain on the other. In what follows, after considering the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism, we develop a discussion of psychoanalytic analyses of fetish to identify our relationships with ICTs as fetishistic, and to illustrate this relationship in Matthew's case.

Fetishism

In late modernity ICTs join those commodities that lend themselves to fetishism and the intense affective states that fetishism involves. A broader understanding of the ICTs in our lives therefore examines not only ICTs in their capacity as interpersonal mediators, but also the intrapersonal dynamic that circulates between subject, object, and desire.

Although the notion of fetishism had its origins in the sixteenth century encounter between Portuguese sailors and West African peoples (see McCallum, 1999), the contemporary notion of fetishism has been elaborated within two principal intellectual traditions. The first of these is Marxism. For Karl Marx, a commodity is far more than a material object with a particular use-value; objects also possess a mystical or metaphysical character, the conceptualization of which resides in Marx's idea of the 'secret' of commodity fetishism. This mystical quality is precisely the result of the way that 'the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things' (Marx, 1977: 163). As a material embodiment of alienated labour, Marx identifies the commodity as a substitution through which social relations of labour and surplus value are transformed into objects in ways most palpable within capitalist production. The nature of the fetish consists in this tension between the sensuality and materiality of things on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the hidden social relations that that materiality substitutes (Marx 1977: 163-177).

9 The second of these traditions is psychoanalytic theory. If Marx stresses the fetishism of 'political economists' as a 'substitution' of social relations for a commodified object (Marx, 1977: 983), psychoanalytic theory posits the fetish as the sublimation of an aversion (now unconscious) for a conscious desire and action. In Sigmund Freud's classic 1927 paper entitled 'Fetishism', fetish is the symptom of an ailment rarely known to the sufferer, and results from the painful experience of the young boy's observation that his mother is without a penis and the parallel, emergent, fear of his own castration. According to Freud's logic, fetish is intended to preserve the penis—his mother's and his own—from extinction. Fetish, then, is a substitute for the penis that the boy's mother turns out not to have, and is also accompanied by a repressed aversion for the real female genitalia (Freud, 1927: 152, 154). Fetish is 'a token of triumph' over castration, and in Freud's view it prevents the male subject from becoming homosexual by making women 'tolerable sexual objects' (p. 154). By way of their fetish, fetishists disavow women's castration, as well as the threat of their own, while curiously affirming it by constructing a fetish in which the disavowed is subtly represented, such as (to use one of Freud's cases) the fetish for an article of clothing (an athletic support-belt) that at once covers the genitals and serves to conceal the difference between the male and female genitalia.

10 While some anthropological and sociological understandings of fetishism have drawn on the Marxist tradition (eg. Pietz, 1993; Taussig, 1980), in the contemporary social sciences it is the psychology of fetishism that has gained most prominence, whether or not that psychology is construed with a strictly Freudian psychoanalytic framework. In this essay and in relation to the case study in particular, we make no claims about the narrowly defined sexual nature of fetish as a penis substitute. However, we do follow the core methodological principle common to all understandings of fetish, both Marxist and psychoanalytic; that is, fetish uses an object to negotiate a binary difference between presence and absence to accomplish an immaterial end, be that prestige, emotional security or some other psychical satisfaction (McCallum, 1999: 1) and, as Freud suggests, the disavowal of what might be called 'painful knowledge' or 'painful experience' underpins fetish.

11 Following this psychologism, we understand that fetishism arises in the affective space that separates desire from reality, and manifests itself in a gaze that focuses on the materiality that is inscribed with the capacity to bridge that space and embrace the desired. This relation between subject and object, or desire and object, is profoundly affective, and has historic associations with leather, panties, petticoats, high-heels, corsets, and particular parts of the (usually female) anatomy such as the feet or the breast (Steele, 1996; Stoller, 1985). Although in 'technofetishism' this overtly sexualised fetishism is commonly understood to extend into the realm of aeroplanes, ships, motorcycles and cars (Bayley, 1986; Fernbach, 2002), the diverse literature on fetishism has, in the main, overlooked ICTs. Where this is not the case, ICTs have been pictured as simply another example of technofetishism (Fernbach, 2002) or lumped in with 'commodity fetishism' alongside cars, shoes, fashion and so on, with little inclination to tease out the fetishistic peculiarities of ICTs. [3] And whilst fetishistic desire is in a narrow sense associated with 'perverse sexuality', the literature suggests that fetishism invokes desire across a much broader spectrum of emotions,

embracing desires to possess, to consume, to gaze upon, to represent, to display, to handle, to manipulate, to feel, to experience, to venerate, to exalt the desired object.

12 As Emily Apter (1993) describes, 19th and 20th century commodity cultures have revealed objects as provocations to desire, possession and, ultimately, fetishisation. As expanding commodity markets and advertising widely promoted consumption as a rational and necessary undertaking for the enhancement of 'quality of life', supposedly irrational or aberrant desire—particularly sexual desire and the practices thereby entailed—was medicalised and branded as 'Fetishism' by doctors and psychiatrists as early as the 1880s and 1890s (Nye, 1993). While the medicalisation of aberrant desire has contributed to fetishism's marginalisation and its association with kinky sexuality, it also points to the psycho-sexual content that has underpinned much of the analysis of fetishism. Indeed, this form of 'cultural fetishism' (Stratton, 1996) includes the fetishism for consumer items that exhibit no immediate link to sexuality. Discussed in Freudian terms, Stratton explains that the cultural psychosexual formation of consumption is founded on the culturally-produced male eroticisation and objectification of the female body:

13 > Since this desire operates in the space between what one has and what one wants, the person who is socially constructed to have an active desire, the male, will seek to reduce his anxiety by producing or acquiring what he wants (Stratton, 1996: 6).

14 According to Apter (1993: 4), the spectacularised female anatomy 'is sexually domesticated through sartorial masquerades, just as the household fetishes of cars, TVs and swimming pools are shown to be sites of displaced lack'.

15 Contemporary discourses that theorise fetishism consistently emphasise the hidden psychosocial structure of lack, inadequacy and pain that underlies desire. Fetishism, therefore, is cast as the desire for the experience of empowerment vis-à-vis the experience of disempowerment, whether disempowerment is situated as a real or perceived effect of the modern state (or the phallus) (Stratton, 1996), the woman (Apter, 1993), or the alienation of labour from the commodities produced—which as we have seen is Marx's original coining of 'commodity fetishism' (see Steele, 1996).

16 Without delving further into theories of concealed psychoanalytic motivation, the important point for our argument is that these fetishised 'objects of desire' are not simply desired in and of themselves for their personal use-value or public social status value, but are also valued because of the unconscious or unspecified experience of lack, of inadequacy, of emptiness, of disempowerment, and of loss and pain manifest in the ache of unsatisfied desire, and the concomitant desire for adequacy, fulfillment, empowerment and affective satisfaction. To possess, to fondle, to fill, to touch, to use, the fetishised object is to symbolically nullify that experience of lack and its attendant emotions. Fetishism thus follows its own logic of gratification by providing a reflection of the imaginary first form (i.e. that which is lacked—consciously or unconsciously). As Apter (1993: 4) notes, although this reflection is an inferior, degraded simulation, 'fetishism records the trajectory of an idée fixe or noumen in search of its materialist twin—god to idol, alienated labor to luxury item, phallus to shoe fetish and so on'.

17 It is precisely this quality of fetishism, as a bridge between the concrete object and the intangible 'spirit within the thing' (Taussig, 1993: 217), which distinguishes fetishism from addiction, or obsession. In our field studies of technologies in the domestic context, we have seen various behaviours which we would customarily recognise as addiction, and the literature provides numerous examples of behaviour in the context of computer programming, single and multi-user game playing, and on-line interaction, that have been described as obsessive (eg. Berger, 2002; MacBeth, 1996; Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Ullman, 1995). Although fetishism surely shares some of the characteristics of addiction or obsession, it is the transcendental/symbolic and masquerading value of fetishism which clearly differentiates it, and gives an explanatory/interpretive power that notions of addiction and obsession lack.

18 But what can fetishism tell us about ICT use, and is it perhaps a more useful term than obsession? We broach this question by citing Ellen McCallum:

19 > [F]etishism is a form of subject-object relation that informs us about basic strategies of defining, desiring, and knowing subjects and objects in Western culture. More importantly, in the way that it brings together peculiarly modern anxieties—especially about sexuality, gender, belief and

> knowledge—fetishism reveals how our basic categories for interpreting the world have been reduced to binary and mutually exclusive terms. (1999: xi-xii)

20 Drawing on McCallum, we allow that these 'epistemological promises of fetishism' (McCallum, 1999: xxii) offer us a strategy for analysing ICTs in the phenomenological lifeworld as fetishistic subject-object relations. The analytic ambition of an argument based on domestic-ICT-fetishism is to avoid the common perspective that locates ICTs either in dysfunctional terms of psychological addiction, or in functional terms as communications channels, mediating relations between people, or mediating people's access to information, data, or cultural products.

21 Although it is impossible to avoid reference to the instrumental function of ICTs in connecting people to people, and people to data, we attempt to maintain a focus on the subject-object relation. In particular we keep our analysis trained on the emotive, affective constitution of ICT possession and use, through recording autobiographical stories of desire and lack, in which ICTs are co-protagonists. It is here at the interface of subject-users and object-ICTs that the notion of fetish acquires particular resonance. ICT-fetishism is not just the province of a few eccentrics, but is arguably a common bio-psycho-social mechanism (Berger, 2002) which underlies the ICT use of many users and the 'displaced' meanings thereby elicited.

22 These subject-object relations focus on the object (in this case ICTs) to; 1) tell a story to oneself, 2) that is about desire, 3) is autobiographical insofar as it provides the subject-self with meaning, understanding and self-knowledge, and 4) is a story that both negates and invokes lack, absence, inadequacy, pain or fear. We argue that these four characteristics of fetishised subject-object relations are characteristic of many relationships with ICTs, and that Matthew's case is simply an example that is more starkly rendered than yours or ours. But we would also emphasise that the subject-object relation does not stand alone. As we go on to show in the case study, ICT fetishism as the hoarding of technological objects (in the case of Matthew) is inevitably interwoven with ICT use, such that the ICTs as objects of fetish cannot simply be understood as functionally equal to, or interchangeable with, other objects of fetish. Rather, the peculiar character of ICT fetish must be seen as co-constituted by both the objects and their use.[4]

Approach

23 This argument contributes to an emerging body of literature that attends to ICTs in terms of the emotional affects of these particular subject-object relations, over and above the functional or instrumental effects of ICT use. Complementing this focus on the affective content of ICTs is the attention given to the home as a site of empirical interest in ICT research (Blythe and Monk, 2002; Hindus, 1999; Venkatesh, 1996). While research on the efficacy of ICTs in the workplace still exceeds scholarship on the emotional affects of ICTs in the home by an order of magnitude (Hindus, 1999), the recognition of affect as a subject of research, and the home as a location of research, is welcome.

24 In departing from standard ethnographic methods based on participant observation and interview, this essay also contributes to our repertoire of methodological practices for research in domestic environments. Our methodological departure took the form of the 'Domestic Probe' – an adaption of a novel research method derived from the 'Cultural Probes' developed by Gaver and his colleagues (Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti, 1999; Gaver and Martin, 2000; Gaver 2001, 2002, 2004; Crabtree et al., 2003). In essence, the Domestic Probe comprised a box of equipment given to the household to use in order to record and interpret their use of domestic ICTs. The box contained: local, national and global maps to trace origins and destinations of communications; colour-coded stickers to record each ICT's user and frequency of use; digital and instamatic cameras to record snapshots of the routine and the novel in domestic life; diaries for each household member; a scrapbook for photos and jottings; additional stationary such as coloured pencils, textas, glue, sticky-tape, scissors, etcetera (see Arnold, 2004).

25 In 2004 and 2005 the 'Connected Homes' project had twelve households around Melbourne make use of the probe. In agreeing to participate in the study, the respective householders were in effect agreeing to participate as co-researchers or collaborators in our research work.[5]

26 We met with each participating household three times. On the first visit we dropped off the Domestic Probe pack, explained its contents, and conversed generally about the household's technology use. Some two weeks later we returned to be taken on a 'technology tour' of the home,

to be led from one room to the next by one or more members of the household, during which we filmed the domestic ICTs in situ as the participants told stories about their origins, their history, their use, their strengths and shortcomings. Our third and final visit took place after three to four weeks. This time we engaged in conversation relating to the traces left by the probe in the diaries, the scrapbook and so on. In effect, the recordings or traces generated through the use of the kit provided provocative and evocative grist for the mill of conversation among the participant householders, and between the participant householders and ourselves.

27 This method, we felt, did not silence 'the natives' by treating them as objects to be observed and explained. Nor did it patronise them by treating them as sources of unprocessed, primary data only—without also asking them to join with the research and reflect on the traces, and interpret and analyse that data. Moreover, it did not frame the household participants as instrumental, rational, solution-seeking users of ICTs, but as ludic, emotive beings. We certainly did not pathologise them as 'others' for, disconcertingly at times, and comfortingly at others, we saw in them a reflection of our own behaviours, motivations, desires and 'lacks': insofar as subjects desired the latest, fastest or most encompassing technologies, insofar as they were self-avowed compulsive and excessive users of these technologies, and insofar as they collected old technological paraphernalia, displayed it in prominent positions in their houses, and identified with these objects (Arnold, Shepherd, Gibbs and Mecoles, 2006a, 2006b; Shepherd, Arnold and Gibbs, forthcoming). In this essay we focus on the particular case of Matthew— who was visited three times between 14/10/04 and 8/11/04 in his Eastern suburbs apartment in Melbourne. The case is especially illustrative of fetish precisely because Matthew's ICT collection appeared to satiate the 'lack' which was all too evident in his ICT use.

Collecting and Using ICT

28 As described in the introductory vignette, Matthew was a collector of discarded electrical items that he found by the road-side, among other places. In particular, ICTs took his fancy, and he was unwilling to pass them by without picking them up. Matthew used some of the materials he collected for their given purpose. For instance, he assembled the Macintosh computer he used to go on-line out of bits and pieces he had found on the streets. In general, however, Matthew's ICTs were not 'used' in the conventional sense, and it seemed that Matthew had a limited capacity to keep track of the bits and pieces he had accumulated over the years.

29 It was clear from the outset that Matthew's enthusiasm for collecting ICTs extended well beyond the instrumental use-value of the items, even if he rationalised that all of it could potentially be useful 'one day'. Evidently, Matthew harboured a strong emotional attachment for electronic technologies, and ICTs in particular, and importantly, this was all part of 'home' and was integrated in his life. When we contrasted the level of intensity of Matthew's attachment to the ICTs with the reasons he offered for acquiring and literally filling his home with ICTs, those reasons seemed weak and perhaps arbitrary. Above all, it was the activity of acquiring and surrounding himself with ICTs that seemed to confer personal meaning upon Matthew's lifeworld and compensate fetishistically for the absences and lacks that characterised his life. And it is precisely in Matthew's use of items from his collection that we were able to find evidence of these absences and lacks; in effect, Matthew's use of ICTs provided the clue to understanding his fetish.

30 Surrounded and perhaps protected by these materials, Matthew lived inside his apartment in virtual isolation. While he had little face-to-face interaction with other people, he had until recently spent considerable time emailing and chatting on the Internet with three online friends who lived overseas (two in the USA and one in Ireland). In particular, he developed a close connection with Fiona, living in Ireland, who Matthew counseled for two years through a suicide support forum. During this time Fiona declared her love for him, and became his online girlfriend.

31 But the Internet for Matthew was also full of 'idiots', 'fuckwits', 'bastards', 'psychopaths' and 'Americans', to mention just a few of the epithets he frequently used to describe those he encountered on the suicide newsgroup, in gaming environments such as Kings of Chaos, or on the software download sites he visited. Experiencing a world rich in friends and enemies, and telling us that 'it's every man's duty to fight evil', Matthew entered into battle with unseen actors, the most disturbing of whom was 'The Psychopath', an American man, Bruce, from the Suicide Newsgroup. Matthew found Bruce the Psychopath to be an objectionable individual that had to be opposed because he was constantly preying on vulnerable people's weaknesses through nefarious and

underhanded means. Bruce had also made himself unpopular with Matthew because he had revealed his intentions to act off-line and actually visit Fiona in Ireland. Matthew subsequently confessed to invoking his relationship with one of his US friends, Vivien, to make Fiona jealous. 'I suppose I was saying [to Fiona] "if you hurt me with Bruce, I'll hurt you with Vivien."' Matthew regretted having reinvigorated contact with Vivien 'under false pretences'. 'I'm back on Yahoo with Vivien and it's all my own fault—I be fool.' On the basis of these and numerous similar instances, Matthew reflected:

32 > I want to spread good will and combat evil but I seem to do more harm than good. I should be more positive, but I'm worried that I'm accidentally going to stuff up and add to the negativity in the world.

33 Matthew seemed to use the functionality of his ICTs to oscillate dramatically between 'spreading good will', which involved forming and maintaining a small number of intense and supporting relationships, and 'combating evil', which involved posting abuse to 'psychopaths', 'Americans' and so on. In doing so, Matthew always tried to stand firmly on the side of truth and justice. Similarly, in the world of broadcast media, Matthew saw it as his responsibility to email the hosts of radio shows in order to correct what he saw as the dissemination of false information that prejudiced one or another underdog. To give one of several examples, when a radio commentator suggested that the Americans invented terrorism during the American War of Independence, Matthew saw fit to advise the host that while under Roman occupation, "the jews practiced terrorism". As in most other instances of this kind, Matthew's email was ignored, and in turn Matthew ceased to listen to the programme.

34 The story here (and in many other places in Matthew's life) is one of reaching for empowerment (in a badly flawed world) through disempowerment (via turning his back on that world). But if Matthew gained a sense of vindication by boycotting the program, triumph was soon replaced by many days of self-incrimination as he sought to determine what he himself had done to cause the 'snub'. Finally, Matthew discovered the 'truth' in the object – in the material particularity of his correspondence: 'I spelt "jews" without a capital "J", and I know he's touchy about Jews'. He must have thought I had an agenda. Berating himself intensely ('I'm such an idiot!') and losing many nights of sleep over the issue, Matthew finally wrote in to apologise for the lower case 'j'. The spelling was of itself not important to Matthew. His online correspondence used the casual and customised spelling and grammar common to online messages. But it is easy to see that the emails were important, and that every detail of the email was subject to minute and obsessive scrutiny. The autobiographical narrative at work here is telling a story of a subject-object relation in which the object's materiality took on great significance – not of itself – but as a needle on a dial that oscillated between desire (for self-affirmation) and lack thereof.

35 It is evident from these and many other examples that Matthew's use of ICTs at home constructed signifiers of connection, not only to distant others but more importantly, to the highly charged emotional world of his 'self'. His emotional inner-life, moreover, was extremely volatile as he swung between his self-righteous proclamations of truth and fairness on the one hand, and guilt and self-blame on the other. Between these extremes, what was represented in the emails and on-line chat was his self-image as a worthy human being, adding to the net good of humanity, and the extent to which others could be trusted as allies in the cause. Matthew made use of ICTs precisely to test his capacity to establish trust, but what he risked, and perhaps invited, was betrayal. This tension between trust and betrayal revealed itself repeatedly, crystallized in the materiality of the words on the screen. The autobiographical story told by this fetishistic subject-object relation is one of lack (of trust), empowerment (testing trust) through disempowerment (telling something), and desire (for trust). The flickering but obdurate words on the screen manifested, aroused, denied, and gratified Matthew's desire for trust, for love, and to contribute to the net good. The emails Matthew received (and didn't receive), the sentences that scrolled down the screen in real time, were objects that invoked lack and desire.

36 We found that Matthew's mediated relations with distant others could not be spoken about without a powerful affective reaction to the vicissitudes of communication-at-a-distance. For example, an important dimension of the lack of acknowledgement of self, materialised in the emails, was a lack of empathy, and this caused Matthew considerable grief. Matthew viewed empathy as a precondition for trust, but he was constantly upset by what he saw as peoples'

capacity to be deceitful. Matthew reflected on the personal dynamics of the Suicide Newsgroup at the time when he had first 'gotten together' with Fiona.

37 > Vivien was a big hassle. I knew that if she knew about Fiona and myself… she would go berserk… and then one day something happened… We were all suicidal, that's how we met… Fiona was saying something about me to Vivien, and Vivien said to me 'what's going on here?', and I said, 'nothing, there's nothing, nothing between us', and I told Fiona that I said that, and she said, 'right, fine, BYE', so I thought 'oh, Shit! I better tell Vivien then' and I told her, and she went ballistic, then she abused the hell out of Fiona and myself.

38 It was arguably the tension between lack and desire that lay at the heart of every exchange, a tension between the performative potentials of the connecting power of ICTs and the profound angst of disconnection that drew Matthew to ICTs, and compelled him to collect hardware as visible, solid, representations of satiated desire. The fetishistic collection of hardware constituted the most reliable source of satiation. But we can also see Matthew's online interpersonal relationships in terms of fetish, and not simply as stories of online interpersonal relations (though they are this). Matthew's stories were stories of words that appeared on the screen. They were stories of fetishised objects that were capable of materialising a position on an axis between personal lack and personal desire, in this case circulating not so much around sexuality, as around self-affirmation (or love) in the context of good and evil. The relations materialised in the emails were subject-object relations (i.e. Matthew-email relations), and whilst subject-subject relations are signified, (e.g. Matthew-Fiona), it is the internal dialogue that gives rise to lack and desire, and provides the resources to bridge the two. An interpretation that focuses on interpersonal subject-subject relations misses the significance of the fetishised object, and the object's capacity to invoke intrapersonal dialogue as well as interpersonal dialogue. The fetishised objects were captured as much in Matthew's hardware collection as in his objects of online interaction; and the emotional and social lacks were evidenced in his ICT use, and compensated for both in his ICT use and in his ICT collection.

Discussion

39 The above descriptions of Matthew's relations with ICTs can be summarised as follows. Matthew obsessively collected and hoarded household ICTs, most of which had little or no use-value or commonly appreciated aesthetic value as they gathered dust and narrowed his physical mobility in the apartment. Living a highly reclusive existence, Matthew's connectedness to the outside was mediated through radio, television, telephone and computer technology. By way of his computer and dial-up Internet access, he forged and maintained a small number of very intense online friends, with whom he precariously explored the parameters and limitations of trust and distrust, love and hate, good and evil. In addition to positioning himself morally, he was able to tentatively consolidate, negotiate and jeopardize his humanity in relation to other men and women online. As part of these interactions and dependencies, Matthew found himself oscillating between (often extreme) negative and positive emotional states.

40 At face value what we have here is a story of an eccentric person who happens to have a fixation on hoarding computer parts and electronic goods – though one may think it might as well be old beer cans, car parts or anything else – and a fixation on collecting software that is never used, and movies that are never watched. Our eccentric hoarder is also a loner, suffering from depression and perhaps mild paranoia, who has nonetheless established and maintained a small number of important friends and enemies, through on-line interaction.

41 The temptation is to make two strategic moves with an analysis of this case. The first is to dismiss Matthew's experience as peculiar to Matthew; interesting perhaps, but unrepresentative of a more general population. The second is to separate out his behaviour as a collector from his behaviour in forming on-line relationships, and then pathologise the former and celebrate the later, or perhaps pathologise both. We consider that something is to be learned from resisting both moves.

42 Let's consider first the extent to which Matthew's experience is non-generalisable. Matthew acquires, but does not necessarily use the object with which he fills his world, to the point where he is uncertain about just what he possesses. The contemporary Australian household contains up to 3000 items, excluding individual books and records (Lally, 2002). Very few of these acquisitions hold any special meaning or significance (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981) – they are

simply the sedimentary layers of consumption laid down by households in late modernity. The contemporary Australian car has a capacity for speed that can never be used; the contemporary home-computer has processing capacities that are never used; our mobile phones, home-theatres and VCRs have features that are never used; our wardrobes contain clothes that are not worn, and all of this reduces their desirability not a bit. To acquire objects that are not used, to fill one's house with useless consumer goods, to derive satisfaction from acquisition more so than use, is scarcely eccentric behaviour.

43 Matthew acquires objects that are abandoned – discarded and no longer functioning, useful, or valuable. Matthew can see their value though, and gives them a home. It is not delving too far into amateur psychology to suggest that Matthew may see something of himself in these objects. Nor is it novel to suggest that we all acquire and then appropriate objects in the same self-defining spirit. Perhaps the most influential account of this process of identity construction through appropriation will be familiar to the reader as 'objectification' – a process whereby the external world of things is internalised and shapes the psyche, just as the psyche is brought to bear in building the environment that surrounds us, and in attributing meaning to the objects in the environment. Lally quotes Bourdieu's take on objectification as the 'dialectic of the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality' (Lally, 2002: 39). The particularities of Matthew's collection may be eccentric, but the principles at work are common.

44 Matthew happens to collect ICTs – machines that are built and bought primarily for communication – which are the iconic technology of the contemporary era. Again Matthew is scarcely alone in this. Whilst most of our homes are not stacked floor-to-ceiling with home theatres, plasma televisions, iPods, personal computers, mobile phones and music systems, this class of products is certainly significant in the Australian retail economy and in our domestic economies. Like Matthew, we choose to acquire media electronics and communications electronics, and CRT television sets, wired phones, mobile phones, CD players and DVD players are consumed at near saturation levels, while personal computers and an internet connection are now possessed by a majority (Philipson, 2005).

45 Matthew's connection to significant others in his life are primarily mediated by email and telephone, and in this respect he stands apart from those of us who have routine face-to-face communication with friends, intimates, acquaintances and strangers. Having said that, it is also the case that for many of us, ICT-mediated communication is a routine and normalised form of socialising. Matthew's media of choice does not stand apart from ours; rather, it is the relative exclusivity of that choice that stands him apart. And further, to choose to stay at home and allow the world at large to filter through to us via mass media such as television, and to reach out into the world at one remove through personal media such as email, is a common enough practice to cause concern to some (Putman, 1995) and to capture the interest of many (Poster, 1995). In these respects Matthew's life is characteristic of a common experience.

46 To turn now to the second move. At face value, the obsessive acquiring and hoarding of hardware and software can be separated out from his use of that hardware and software to maintain on-line relationships – the former read as pathologies and the latter as achievements. Having made this move, the pathologies might be accounted for in their own terms – in reference to psychology and its theories of clinical depression, obsession, autism, or obsessive/compulsive behaviours for example. On the other hand, his achievements in the pursuit of on-line relations might be accounted for in their own socio-theoretical context – through reference to Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), and the body of theory and empirical research that focuses on online communities, online social relations and so forth.

47 We have no particular comment to make on the ability of Clinical Psychology to account for Matthew's mental condition in terms of depression, autism and the like. However, we suggest that separating out the collecting from the communications, and treating the former as pathology and the later as personal achievement, is not helpful to an understanding of sociotechnical relations – either Matthew's, or more generally. We suggest that Matthew's experiences collecting and using ICTs, diverse as they are, are all tied in to one another, and the notion of fetish provides insights that bridge this range.

48 Matthew positions himself, his actions and the actions of others in a moral universe, and the positions occupied in relation to good and evil invoke emotive and not just intellectual responses.

He has a strong sense of morality, and a strong sense of duty that he exercises via the media at his disposal, and this duty extends to others in his universe. His expectations are high, and this causes him considerable grief. Matthew's conscious self struggles with evil and for good, to establish the worth of his life, his identity as a human being, his quest for respect, and love and trust. All of these symbolic-emotional values swing him between pleasure and pain, affirmation and rejection. These, moreover, are struggles, quests and values that are played out and are manifest in both the collection of hardware and the online interaction. It surely is not a coincidence that the collection is of ICTs and not beer cans or car parts. It is surely not coincidental that ICTs are deployed to compose and transmit the 'flickering signifiers' (Hayles, 1999) in which so much angst and emotion are invested.

49 The ICT collection itself materialises the same desire that is played out when the ICTs do function and Matthew is online. This desire – to be good, to be worthy, to trust and be trusted, to be useful, to love – is what collecting is all about. To collect is to make a commitment, and to assert worth and value of some kind, even though it may be against the odds and not appreciated by others. 'Useless objects' (read – Matthew) are rescued from abandonment (or for Freud, castration), given a place in the world, given a potential, valued in some sense – not for their performance, not for what they actually do, not for their instrumentality, but for their adhering ontology as ICTs (read – as a human being). To return to Steel's (1996: 168) take on fetishism, the ICT collection is 'a story masquerading as an object'. The objects that crowd out Matthew's home are an autobiography that tells a story of Matthew's worth; of his desire to do good as he moves and acts in the world. The desire fetishised in the collection – to be good, to be worthy etc., to act and do in the spirit of virtue by recycling and repositioning objects that are abandoned, undervalued, at risk, but nonetheless have a latent potential to be good and useful and take their place in a world – is also evident in Matthew's online interactions.

50 To turn now to computer mediated communication (CMC). These issues of online communication that circulate around media in the context of authenticity, trust, relationship formation and maintenance, love, identity of self and other, have been the preoccupation of CMC discourse, and much research has been conducted in an examination of the phenomena. A fine-grained review of this corpus is available elsewhere (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002), but for our purposes a course-grained overview will suffice. At this course-grained level we see utopic and dystopic argument and example in the CMC literature; the stories are celebratory and have happy endings, or offer salutary warnings and have sad endings. The happy stories tell of close and supportive friendships, of integrated and multi-dimensional identities, of people who create as well as maintain meaningful relationships at a distance, and of the benefits of CMC in this important aspect of our lives. Those that are not so happy tell of the superficiality of communication that lacks contextual and situational cues derived from co-presence, and lacks the moral obligation and commitment derived from shared material circumstances.

51 Both kinds of story are premised on ICTs as subject-to-subject communications devices that provide the mediation required to establish and maintain a relationship with an other. That is, both kinds of story construct and assess ICTs in exclusively instrumental terms, attending only to the efficacy of their function as communications devices that link subjects, and assessing the performance of that function relative to alternatives in terms of interpersonal relations. Matthew's case might thus be written up in the CMC literature as a good news story of ICTs enabling an otherwise isolated individual to establish and maintain meaningful human relationships, or a bad news story of a troubled individual sinking deeper into social isolation as an inadequate media, superficial games and virtual relationships stand between him and real life.

52 Now, in a sense either of these stories may be correct. ICTs may support the conduct of meaningful relationships as a general capacity, and may have done so in Matthew's particular case, or they may not. But, as Martin Heidegger (1962) argued, a correct understanding of technology does not exhaust a true understanding of technology. Though it is correct that Matthew uses his ICTs to communicate with absent others, and thus establish and maintain relationships with Fiona, Vivien, Bruce the Psychopath, radio producers and others, the ICTs are not only instrumental in mediating relations, and an understanding of the significance of ICTs to Matthew is not exhausted by an account of their function. They are not simply a means to an end, where the end is an interpersonal relationship. They are this, but they are more than this. Just as a

fetish for motor cars does not preclude using a motor car to move from A to B, so it is that moving from A to B does not provide a true understanding of the meaning and appeal of a motor car. That ICTs are used to interact with others is correct, but this does not exhaust a true understanding of the place of ICTs in people's lives. In view of the case study presented in this article, we contend that the notion of fetishism encompasses all of Matthew's ICT practices – collecting and communicating – even though it is correct that collecting ICTs is in some sense pragmatic, and even though it is correct that ICTs provide Matthew with a communications medium.

53 The contribution made by the notion of fetishism is to move an analysis beyond the implications of instrumental function in the context of subject-to-subject relations, and into the space of the self-referential desire that adheres to a fetishised object – self referential in that desire's beginning (arousal) and desire's end (gratification) are both located in the subject, constituting a 'closed system' as it were. The hardware collection is not a means to an end. The means and the end circulate through the collection; there is no other 'end' available to Matthew, or apparent to us. Interpersonal relations with another are objectified and reified in the emails, and a subject-object fetish in which desire circulates between subject (Matthew) and object (email correspondence) accounts for the fixation on these emails. Their extreme significance is in relation to Matthew's own desires and emotions, while Matthew's relations with other people per se, are marginal to desire and its satisfactions.

54 The towering stacks of computer components are towering stacks of self-affirmation that push back, at least in some sense, into the empty spaces of Matthew's sense of his life. The emails sent to radio stations, newspapers, and most importantly, back and forth to Fiona et al, are important as autobiographical footnotes that reference action as a desire to be good, worthy, and useful, and sometimes, to his extreme angst, tell ('something') of his worthlessness, idiocy, or foolishness. To see them as communications to a significant other, in terms of say, interpersonal relationship building, is to misunderstand their importance as significations to himself. To return to the quote with which we opened the paper, the hardware and the emails are the objects from which he has made his world, and in return they teach him: this is fetishism's object lesson.

Conclusion

55 We suggest that the possibilities of fetishism have at least three important contributions to make to our knowledge of ICT use. Firstly, the discussion of fetishism takes us beyond ICTs as simply instruments of mediation between subjects, and into the realm of subject-object relations. Although subject-object relations are invariably inflected by the content of subject-subject relations, the emphasis on subject-subject relations in social studies of ICTs has tended to overstate the role of function and instrumentality at the expense of what we might call common bio-psycho-social-object mechanisms (adapting Berger, 2002). Rather than subordinate these subject-object relations and the constellation of emergent psycho-social phenomenon to instrumental outcomes, our research points to the converse possibility that instrumentality may be subsumed by the less tangible but extraordinarily powerful realm of desire and, through the 'conquest' of objects, fetish. Indeed, instrumentality itself may be considered the arbitrary instrument of fetish.

56 This brings us to our second point. In pursuing an analysis of festishism in order to better understand ICT use, we bring affect into focus in a way that disrupts our explanatory predilection for direct cause-effect relationships. Since fetishised desire works emotional affects through and into its objects, the locus of pain or (dis)satisfaction is displaced, projected elsewhere, and objectified. The analysis of fetishistic ICT use thus complicates the affective aspects of the relationships subject-subject and subject-object. As indicated in the discussion above, the affects of pragmatic instrumentality may be performed symbolically in situations where no communication or (computer) mediation occurs, such as in the collecting and hoarding of technological hardware. Given this inevitable symbiosis between ICTs as mediators on the one hand, and fetishistic desire on the other, we can appreciate the fetishism for ICTs in terms of, rather than incidental to, their instrumentality. As such, instead of reducing the ICT fetish to just any fetish (high heels, petticoats or cars), we are able to engage the multiple affordances of both effective and affective ICTs as potential variables and equivalents within the spectrum of responses, behaviours and emotions that constitute the ICT fetish.

57

Finally, we believe that the (story of) fetish provides description and analysis of ICT use with a fresh perspective on, and alternative to, popular interpretations of ICTs use which are quick to distinguish 'normal' use and users from 'aberrant' use and users. While reassuring (to those of use who like to think we are sane), this division between 'us' and 'them' and its attendant celebration of 'normalcy' hides the fetishistic tendencies that arguably inhere in much so-called 'normal' and supposedly purely 'instrumental' ICT use. In our Connected Homes research, we found that the collection and display of ICTs was common; nominally compulsive email checking and internet use were common; and among teenagers in particular, arguably excessive sms-ing and computer gaming were common. Whether these common practices amount to fetishised use of ICT is, in each instance, debatable. At what point, one may ask, does an interest become an obsession, and become a fetish? The boundary between an interest and an obsession is the product of a normative evaluation—an evaluation which serves to ascribe positive and negative values to a particular action, such as in determining whether a given ICT use is 'acceptable', 'healthy' or 'excessive.' As we have shown elsewhere (Arnold, Shepherd, Gibbs and Mecoles, 2006b; Shepherd, Arnold and Gibbs, forthcoming), this evaluative process in an integral aspect of the sociality and control of ICT use, particularly (but not only) as parents seek to influence the direction of their children's ICT use and media consumption. In contrast, the designation of fetish is not so much evaluative (although it may be this) as it is an analytic achievement in which a generally unconscious lack, fear, pain or disempowerment is transformed into a conscious, fetishistic action and referred to an object, through which the subject may overcome lack, gain ascendancy over fear, replace pain with sensual pleasure, or regain a sense of control over oneself and the world. Despite the obvious methodological difficulty in the idea of fetish, we would suggest that too much of what currently passes simply as obsessive and instrumental use of ICT, might well be understood through the psychoanalytic mechanism of fetish as an emotional reinvention of the unconscious self through subject-object relations.

58 Following McCallum (1999), fetish may thus be understood not in negative terms as a problem or a perversion but as a positive strategy in the ongoing process of subjects' negotiating psychical satisfaction. In this essay, we have sought no more than to give a preliminary orientation as to how the concept of fetishism can apply to ICT, and how ICT as objects and ICT 'use' combine to tell a story to oneself, that is about desire, is autobiographical insofar as it provides the subject-self with meaning, understanding and self-knowledge, and is a story that both negates and invokes lack, absence, inadequacy, pain or fear. In so doing, we would suggest that fetish is an analytically richer term than addiction for understanding particular kinds of ICT use, and we would encourage ethnographers of ICT (as well as those of panties, cars and corsets), to explore the 'fluctuation between thinghood and spirit' (Taussig, 1993: 217) that enables, as Steele puts it, a story to masquerade as an object (Steele, 1996: 168).

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Notes

[1] All of Matthew's quotations are drawn from video-tapes of our visits, from his Connected Homes Diary, or from his Connected Homes Scrapbook. The initial interview was conducted on 14/10/04, the technology tour on 26/10/04, and the final interview on 8/11/04. All names used in the essay have been altered for the purposes of publication.

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[2] This research was supported under the Australian Research Council's Discovery funding scheme (project number DP0557781).

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[3] Steele (1996: 6) makes a similar point in respect to the fetishism of fashion, as if it 'made no difference whether an individual chose high-heeled pumps, combat boots, or a leather jacket'.

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[4] We thank each of the anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to this important point.

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[5] The first sample of six households was drawn primarily from around the Coburg/Brunswick area of Melbourne, and the empirical research was conducted between August and November of 2004. The second sample of six was located in the new northern suburb of Springthorpe in Melbourne. Here, we carried out the research from August to December 2005.

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