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## **Young people in France and their uses of computers : a potential space ?**

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### ***Key words***

Potential space, personal digital world, multimedia, socialization, digital umbilical cord, psychoanalysis.

### ***Abstract***

Our text looks at the potential space hypothesis: what is it about domestic multimedia spaces that can also be considered as transitional spaces in which the identity of each person is played, replayed and rebuilt? We firstly present our psychoanalysis orientated methodology. We then investigate the transference processes in action in this research context. With these research elements having been posed, we analyze the gathered material, especially the pictures of the student's domestic multimedia spaces. In this framework, the PC seems to have the status of a transitional object according to Winnicott's works. This object is linked with cyberspace through a digital tie which can be analogically considered as reproducing the structure of the mother-child relationship described in particular by Melanie Klein. We therefore endeavor to present the relevance of the potential space concept in order to attempt a better understanding of young people's domestic multimedia space in a psychoanalytical perspective.

## Introduction

Our initial research objectives were empirical, ethnographical and monographical in the context of a research contract with Orange Labs. How could we look at young people using multimedia at home? How do they build their own domestic multimedia space? How do they build this space whilst building themselves as adults?

Our work and past studies (de Swarte, 2001, 2005) have made us aware of the psychological and psychoanalytical dimension of the uses of information technologies. Of course, if one is to use a computer, it is obviously going to be for "practical reasons" such as buying a train ticket or listening to a piece of music that has been downloaded from the internet. Moreover, using a computer can also be a question of "being practical", for example, talking to friends and family who are physically far away or participating in an international discussion forum on a specific subject. Furthermore, computers can also be used for what would seem to be "less practical reasons" such as finding a soul mate among millions of theoretical possibilities, playing a *war game* in which the user virtually kills thousands of enemies, or living another online life through an avatar on the "second life" website or MSN messenger.

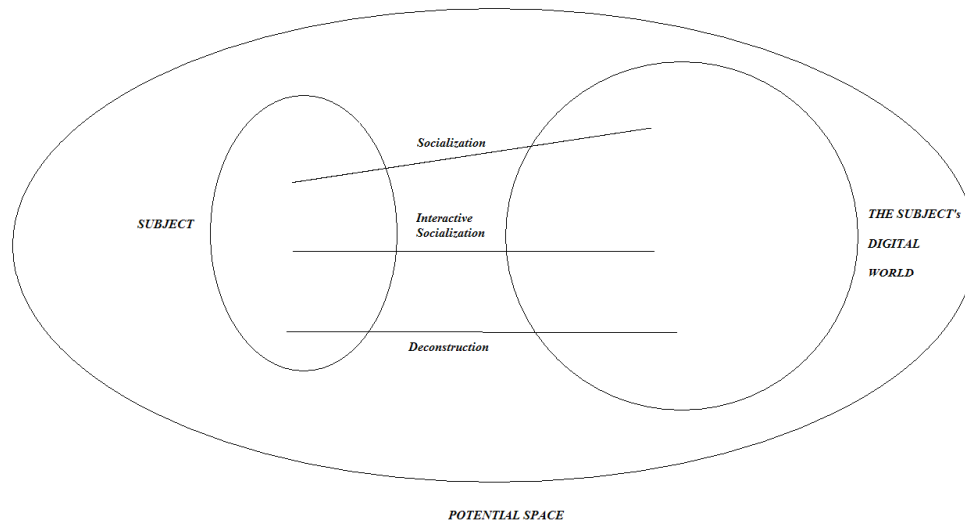
From our point of view, three possible relationships between the subject and his digital world, viz. socialization, interactive socialization and deconstruction, constitute a potential space (in the sense of Winnicott, 1971) which we aim to investigate in the following pages. Loving, playing a war game or being someone else with another identity opens the door to subjectivity, which operates and runs as the basis of each person's uniqueness. Whether the subject<sup>1</sup> becomes socialized through loving meetings or playing war games is definitely not a new subject for research. It is this first point which corresponds to diagram 1 below, the digital world appearing therefore only as an additional possible game to play, in the sense of Winnicott's work (1971). The interactive socialization hypothesis seems to fit within the digital world where the possibilities are practically endless (on instant messaging for example), whereas socializing practices were previously limited by the players having to be geographically nearby. Above all, the issue of deconstruction concerns the apparent threat posed by the ever increasing virtual scene and how wired young people communicate in that scene.

So, our text looks at the hypothesis of the "potential space" : what is it about domestic multimedia spaces (spaces that could also be sometimes considered as transitional spaces) that shape young people's identities? What happens to the identity of each young person, identity which is played, replayed and sometimes rebuilt? We are firstly going to present our psychoanalytically oriented methodology. We will then investigate the transference processes<sup>2</sup> operating in this research context. With these research elements having been posed, we shall analyze the gathered material, especially pictures of the student's domestic multimedia spaces. In this framework, the PC seems to have the status of a transitional object according to Winnicott's works (1971). This object is linked with cyberspace through a digital tie which can be analogically considered as reproducing the structure of the mother-child relationship described in particular by Melanie Klein (1921-1945). We therefore endeavor to present the relevance of the potential space concept in order to attempt a better understanding of young people's domestic multimedia spaces in a psychoanalytical perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Subject has to be understood in the Lacanian sense (1954) as potentially divided and therefore more complex than the Freudian "ego" (see Evans 1996 p. 195).

<sup>2</sup> In the psychoanalytical sense where the desire of the subject to understand its own sub-conscious processes is transferred towards the psychoanalyst who is perceived as a "subject supposed to know" (Lacan).



### ***1 A Psychoanalytically Oriented Methodology***

We have a double objective and methodology. On the one hand we argue that technologists have an unnecessary monopoly of the analysis of emerging technologies and their uses. We wish to restore dignity to the human sciences and methodical observation approaches in this area. On the other hand, our intuition has been to get out of the ghetto that methodological psychoanalysis finds itself in by getting back to Freud (1904, 1916).

We are also conscious of the risk stated by Moscovici (1976) concerning the image and social representations of psychoanalysis. So we are constantly thinking about subconscious processes and talk about them as much as possible. This is so that we don't give rise to resistance to psychoanalysis which is all the more necessary given that the media world is saturated with psychoanalytic vulgate and that society appears to sometimes immerse itself in *psychoanalyism* (Castel, 1973). Therefore, we have chosen to abstain from all explicit references to psychoanalytic concepts which might bias the research with a pathological and sexually connoted image. We have limited the explicit theoretical references to "psychology" only<sup>3</sup>. This is what Gabriel (1999) calls a situation whereby the researcher is "informed", and in our case, "orientated" by psychoanalysis but the research protocol is not a psychoanalytical one.

A prior stage to the research study with the students consisted of identifying the cartography and physical organization of multimedia space. Effectively, before looking at potential space, it is necessary to begin by describing the real space. This method draws a great deal of inspiration from ethnologists and particularly from an ethnopschoanalyst called Devereux (1967). First we gathered together photographs and technical descriptions and had discussions about how the students organized their domestic space. The second step consisted in creating suitable conditions for the students to benefit from transference and be able to analyze themselves in their relation with multimedia. The transference is a basic condition in any pedagogical relation. Psychoanalysis is original in the sense that the analyst is in some way, his own teacher: the transference via the analyst serves the discovery of its psyche by the subject himself.

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<sup>3</sup> by analogy a surgeon does not need to explain his assumptions or theoretical background to his patient to be a "good" surgeon. A strong criteria of his scientific ability is his capacity for diagnosis based on the analysis of data and information.

Devereux has laid great stress upon the role of counter transference, knowing there is a risk that the analyst could project onto the patient his pre-established grid of ideas. Devereux's proposition consists of psychoanalysis favoring a counter transference self analysis and he suggests that examination and inclusion of the transference and counter transference Dialectics are anticipated and inserted into the research plan. The research analysis is then a dynamic communication process between two sub-consciences, the sub-conscience of the researcher and the sub-conscience of the research subject. In such a communication process the affect circulates whilst giving its contents to the transference process.

We must bear in mind this methodological framework and work on this pedagogic transference *based on a model of co-construction* amongst the researchers who have performed interviews and the students who analyzed themselves whilst as researchers we endeavored to understand the psychological meaning of domestic multimedia organization.

## **2 Our ability to listen to the Unconscious dimension**

When we ask young scientists to analyze a vague human situation, their first reaction is often to draw up a closed questionnaire. Their fantasy of understanding social or psychological reality whilst gathering "objective" data is a profound fantasy from a psychoanalytical perspective.

A psychoanalytically orientated study of transference must therefore be orientated to create a research plan where the *subject of the observation accepts* to be himself and for him to be also an *object of observation*. There is an epistemological rupture and like all ruptures of that nature, this is a kind of break which can allow the unconscious contents to be expressed. In the work of Françoise Dolto (1971) a Lacanian (see Dor, 1998) has a sharp clinical sense. She affirms that sometimes, a porter could play the role of a psychoanalyst. Why? The key to being successful is the quality of one's listening skills and that the transference allows the unconscious thoughts to be expressed.

In a slightly surprising framework of marketing studies where young engineers who are about 23 years old are supposed to calculate and gather objective data, qualify and if possible segment the markets, they are going to be asked, on a voluntary basis, to analyze their own subjectivity. They are asked to observe their own subjective data in an objective way in order to know more about domestic multimedia organization and the meanings that the uses of domestic multimedia organization can have. This is what Jacques Girin (1989), in a perspective that is more ethnological than psychoanalytical, calls "*opportunisme méthodique*".

Our approach has therefore been as follows. To know a market, it is necessary to know the client first. To know the client needs to take into account their unicity and otherness, which makes them unlike me. We are not going to look to plant, to "stick" as the psychoanalysts say, their reality to mine nor mix up the different levels of their reality. The issue is certainly not to "psychoanalyze" a client. However it seems possible to self analyze in order to distinguish within the multimedia equipment market, what is important to me and what is important to the other.

It is in the course of a phrase, through a hesitation, a Freudian slip, sometimes a contradictory speech, or an approximation during the conversation that the unconscious could suddenly appear in the young engineers conversations (Freud, 1905). The situation is not psychoanalysis but the researchers are trying to listen from a psychoanalytical mode and *a minima* on a very open one. Robert Castel (1973) has criticized *Psychoanalysis* of being a method reducing social problems to individual problems by focusing only on the unconscious aspects while neglecting their social and political dimension. So we have tried to use psychoanalytical culture but not psychoanalytical vulgate (Mum, Dad, early childhood, sex, ...) to understand a relation to the multimedia scene where psychoanalysis is one approach among other approaches.

From a methodological point of view, our research follows a Freudian tradition in that the lapsus or the "holes" in a conversation are when the unconscious is being expressed. We also take into account

the psychological intuitions of the young engineering students, even if they are not problematized. Our idea was to give words and sense to the psychological and unconscious reality that they were only suggesting in some *true words* instead of a long analysis. From a more classically psychological point of view, it is necessary to thank the students for their intelligence and depth when carrying out this study. They accepted with great enthusiasm a research method which certainly didn't intend to expose their unconscious, but which required them to study themselves and break with all that they were able to do until that point, especially in the case of the so "rational" scientific universities and French *grandes écoles*.

### ***3 The « self analysis » Research Group: from the domestic space to the potential space***

During the first year of the research program (2006), the aim was to construct a cartography; a set of records and scenarios for the evolution of the domestic multimedia space. We used a quantitative methodology. When presenting the project, the researchers insisted upon self analysis of the students' relationship with multimedia and compiling monographs and projections into the future (10-15 years). Writing a science fiction on the subject had been proposed. The photos of the domestic multimedia space were demanded in order to better overcome the difficult Lacanian language barrier (see Evans, 1996, de Swarte, 2005) linked to the young student engineers' lack of knowledge of psychological language. It was also necessary to be able to have iconographic material at our disposal.

#### **A) Configurations of young people's domestic multimedia spaces**



**Figure 2: The domestic multimedia space of a teenager in de Swarte & al. (2007)**



**The domestic multimedia spaces of young adults (23 years old) having a job**

**Above: living at his parents.**

**Below : living in couple.**





### **The domestic multimedia space of a nomadic 23 y.o. student**

#### **B) Young engineers and the transitional object: domestic space versus potential space**

The question we ask ourselves is: from comparing these three photos, which conveys the concept of a potential space? We have generally noticed that there is much more disorder amongst students who are in a nomadic/temporary living situation than amongst those students who are "settled" and where the family domestic multimedia space is constricted by the logic of sharing the resource and the rest of the family being able to see what happens in this space. A common space is more likely to be organized, as shown by the photos. For the nomadic student, all alone in his dwelling, technical possibilities of accessing a potential space on the Internet are nearly endless. Likewise, the usages are also practically unlimited because he has his own room and an individual internet installation. This "interior freedom" and this freedom of usages can be translated as the disorderliness at the heart of the physical space. A personal space doesn't necessarily have to be highly organized.

#### **The Computer: a transitional object at the heart of the potential space?**

Based on these observations, the location of computers at the heart of the students' domestic multimedia spaces is entirely comparable to the location of transitional objects as defined by Winnicott (1975 p. 8):

1. The nature of the object (which has to be valued affectively).
2. The student's ability to recognize the object as "non-self".
3. The location of the object is neither inside nor outside.
4. The student's ability to create, imagine, invent and design in order to produce a multimedia system, to be specific.
5. The institution of an affectionate relationship.

The observation over a long period of time of a population of young engineers, their self-observation work and the comparison with more restricted domestic spaces therefore reinforces the hypothesis of a potential domestic multimedia space linked to the presence of a transitional object.

#### ***4 From the digital umbilical cord to the potential space***

The idea to use Winnicott for this research came to us when we « heard » -in the psychoanalytical sense described in our methodological approach- the students saying that for them the multimedia scene was a process of *digital socialization* and/or that they were *highly dependent upon the « network »* (see also de Swarte, 2001). It is obvious for a researcher familiar with group dynamics and psychoanalytical processes that such words are neither neutral nor innocent. The reference to the socialization process means that one has to deal with the most archaic link, that is to say the link which has been built with the mother.

Effectively, the hypothesis of the link between the subject and the digital world reproducing the archaic link with the mother seems interesting<sup>4</sup>. The "network" would be a metaphor (even a metonymy) of the umbilical then, later, of the mother-child relationship in early childhood, as shown by the table below which gives another look at several issues expressed by the 2006 group during their work.

	<b>Archaic relationship with the mother</b>	<b>Observed relationship with multimedia</b>
Nature of the exchange	Mother's Milk	Multimedia Contents
Feeling of Power	Maternal Omnipotence	Hyper strength of the Internet
Feeling of Radical Power	Absolute dependence on being fed	Very strong dependence of the population studied in relation to the network
Frustration	Infant' s lack of nourishment	Worry of being disconnected
Psycho-physiological Mediator	oral (mouth, suction)	tactile (keyboard, mouse)

#### **A) The Interactive Socialization Process**

##### *An Amniotic Relationship ?*

Students appear to have an *amniotic* relationship with the multimedia world. In the way that a fetus is protected by amniotic fluid, the students themselves are immersed "digitality", by being protected from the outside world and have practically limitless access to multimedia files (music or standard MP3 files or films) which the community makes available to them. The hypothesis about this relationship is incidentally corroborated by a study by Lardellier (2006), who points out that adolescents are both *in front of* and *inside* their screen, especially in the case of *second life*.

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<sup>4</sup> The table below could seem insufficient to validate the hypothesis according to which the relationship to multimedia is backed by archaic maternal components. We shall have to better triangulate our results later, i.e. to validate with different clinical material the same theoretical hypothesis. The link to the symbolic mother is the matrix of many actual or future attachments. The umbilical cord and afterwards the breast are the vectors of a relationship that becomes increasingly symbolic (in the Lacanian sense of the term) little by little replaying the event of the nurturing mother who eventually becomes symbolic and this is applied in the same way with the computer. Much later, what in principle will, briefly but undeniably, come from sexual relationships and pleasure is that this relationship recreates in the imagination the feeling of fullness generated *in utero* by the umbilicus.

### *Level of Interactive Socialization that children gain from their parents*

The so significant advertising metaphor used by the telecom operator France Telecom *le fil de la vie* (a line for life) is well-known in France and comes out strengthened by the instances in which young engineers using the internet are interrupted. Acting as a true umbilical cord, the telecommunications network connects them to their friends and family via MSN or at the very least, by E-mail.

Susanna: "I taught my parents, who are quite old, how to use the internet and *Netmeeting* (a software for low costs telecommunications), because for us Spaniards, family is very important. Well, now I live abroad, a thousand kilometers away from them, and these technologies allow us to talk nearly every day".

Regarding our plan, we are concentrating on the socialization domain, on how the process is sometimes reversed. We add here that Latin family structures are considered to be more matriarchal and potentially more amniotic: think of Fellini's film, "*la Mamma*", for instance. This reinforces the digital umbilical cord hypothesis.

## **B) Winnicott, playing, reality and potential space**

### *The domestic multimedia space: a potential playing space but anchored deeply within technological and institutional reality*

Winnicott (1971) defines playing as "the ability to create an intermediate space between the inside and outside; ability which isn't fulfilled in regulated games, well-constructed as fantasies or rituals, but which are situated at the origin of cultural experience" (last page: *quatrième de couverture* in the French edition).

To what extent is this definition applicable to our case? The cultural experience is very *original*. Young engineers are good students, gifted in mathematics, who have worked hard in order to integrate the school and who most often have their first cultural experience of the multimedia space when arriving at the school, aged 20 or 21 years. There is no longer any doubt as to the intermediate nature of this space between the inside and outside.

MSN is a system of instant messaging provided for free by Microsoft. It allows chatting and talking worldwide. "MSN allows young engineers to be both inside and outside at the same time: inside because they are "at work", on a work placement or writing a project report and outside because they are permanently connected to their primary social group via MSN" (de Swarte & al., 2006).

There is a sort of sanctuary where cultural contents are freely made available to the community through of a very dense and private Peer to Peer network<sup>5</sup>. Here, we are neither outside, knowing that these types of cultural practices are illegal in the social world outside of multimedia exchanges, nor are we inside, knowing that the explicit functioning rule is the sharing of multimedia contents between pairs of people. Below is an explanation of how interactive socialization between groups of pairs technically works.

Virtual games are certainly adjusted and well organized, especially by technological constraints, but the contents are largely free. It is therefore reasonable to believe that each one can express a certain number of fantasies- only a certain number since the place has an institutional nature and there is a code of practice. All in all, young engineers' domestic multimedia spaces appear to largely conform to Winnicott's definition, without being totally identical.

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<sup>5</sup> A P2P network connects the contents of the hard discs of several computers making it possible to download and share for free films, music, etc.

By continuing to delve into Winnicott's article (1975 p. 139) we can read his principal thesis on localizing cultural experiences, knowing that "the place in which one situates cultural experiences is the potential space between the individual and his environment. We can talk about that as much as playing. Cultural experience begins with a creative way of life which is manifested in playing above all."

We can return to our general plan and point out the correspondence with "interactive socialization" linking the subject with his digital world. Winnicott continues (1975 p. 150) "the specific link with this place where playing and cultural experience is as follows: *the very existence of this place depends on life experiences*". Therefore, this is exactly the radically new situation that can be found occurring amongst young engineers. They are isolated for two years on the edge of Western Europe, in a place called "Devil's Point" (!), which has a resemblance to the insular places such as that described in the novel "Lord of the Flies". In his psychoanalytical group studies, Didier Anzieu (1984) considered this situation as a theoretical matrix to the extent that the situation depicted here is one where there is no authoritative figure or adult present. Even if things are not always so clear, what seems clear here is the nature of the socialization arena of such a place in such a period of a young engineer's life. Therefore, it is in this place that the majority of young engineers have played the "founding scene" in building their intensive relationship with multimedia, especially within the group of youngsters studied in 2006 (who were 17 years old in 2000, the year of the Internet boom) and who have most often discovered countless playing possibilities on the Internet when entering the engineering *grande école*.

### ***5 Are Human Sciences and Psychoanalysis ahead of Ergonomics?***

The importance of the early relationship between a mother and her baby is also a strong point developed by Serge Tisseron. He is a French picture psychoanalyst who began his studies by interpreting Hergé's production of Tintin. Tisseron (2005, 2006) analyses the dialogue between the ego and the computer, and develops the Winnicottian framework in order to explain how the domestic multimedia space is run in psychoanalytical terms.

"The relationship with the screen reveals a new paradigm. Dialogue with the computer becomes multi-sensory. Here, human sciences are ahead of ergonomics: man-machine interfaces are going to evolve around a tonic-postural model whose matrix is the mother-child relationship that has been developed before the age of 1 year. This relation was developed in a play mode of mutual understanding around babbling and language learning; it corresponds to the baby's desire to understand the speaker's mental state, and vice versa. This first positive step in learning, communication and interpersonal language exchange constitutes the matrix for future learning. It is from this largely unconscious, however very meaningful matrix, that multi sensory and multimedia language exchanges with different types of terminals and especially different affective communication network partners are built."(Tisseron, 2006).

### ***Conclusions***

We have been interested in the origin of the digital relationship and the digitalization of the relation to origins as well. Therefore, if the reader agrees with our hypothesis on the correspondence between the symbolic level and the real level, they will be led to the idea of an interactive socialization process of an amniotic nature. It is this amniotic nature which apparently gives a particular intensity to the digital relationship, that we have noticed as more predominant amongst boys than girls.

The confrontation between Winnicott's theoretical hypothesis and our empirical material gives meaning and in several respects validates this assumption. It is also coherent with the neo-Winnicottian psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron's study "How the spirit comes to objects" (1999).

A multimedia space is run holistically and not individually, even if the concrete situation for domestic usage is often individual. Furthermore, the playing dimension appears to be a great deal more interesting to look at for further research. Finally, the idea of a potential space doesn't contradict developing research on the plurality of symbolic playing systems in the digital world and maybe beyond in post modern societies.

We have put forward an analysis of the relationships established between young people and their digital world. More precisely, this model analysis has concerned young adults' domestic multimedia spaces (young engineers) or 15-18 years olds teenagers. Three cases have been envisaged: socialization, interactive socialization and deconstruction.

The socialization hypothesis was quite easy to reveal: Today, it is commonplace to say that young people socialize through extremely varied and constantly recomposed means. For us, it would be worthwhile to try to describe and analyze the different kind of "selves" who are expressed online or on the screen, by inspiring them with a theoretical plan for an open definition of the "self", sometimes a pure construction of the imagination (see Lacan, 1973 and Dor, 1985). The subject's identity deals with diversity and complexity. The digital world is an additional element of complexity, not less but no more.

Interactive socialization has been tackled through a description of the domestic space and a primary analysis on young peoples' multimedia potential spaces. Winnicott's definition of potential space seems appropriate as it allows to emphasize phenomena such as the playful and "amniotic" nature of the relationship with "virtuality", the symbolic power of the digital umbilical "cord" and young people's "reversed socialization" with their parents or grandparents. However, this would need to be "tested" in depth on a research programme which would explicitly aim to pinpoint the properties of such a potential space.

As far as the hypothesis of deconstruction is concerned, two levels have been envisaged: the gathered empirical material (i), the research methodology (ii).

(i) From an empirical point of view, none of our material indicates that developing an online life has a significant impact on splitting the psyche, on addictive behaviours or on certain pathologies. On the contrary, the young people's common sense emerges, supported by a certain degree of scepticism about the virtual world. In short, the use of information technologies doesn't appear at this stage to "deconstruct" the subject. If there are pathologies there, their origin would be to search somewhere other than in online life, and with another research protocol. That protocol could be more psychoanalytic or less. Conducting in parallel two new studies would be better to evaluate the relative contribution of Psychoanalysis.

(ii) In methodological terms, the researcher's aim was to dismantle (in Derrida's sense, 1995) a discourse. This discourse was about a form of technology and its usages by investigating the intuitions, the blanks and some incoherent components of the discourse. As such, we obtained a possible reconstruction of some young people's multimedia universe, which is neither the description spontaneously produced by them nor the too formatted readings and interpretation from social sciences. From this point of view, the method looks to be promising. Effectively, it is both totally ethnographical (cartographies, meticulous descriptions, photos...) and supported by the strong hypothesis that communication from one unconscious to another unconscious allows to produce different kind of results.

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