

# "Technologies of the Self:" Foucault and Internet Discourse [\(1\)](#)

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## Abstract

While some have argued that computing via the Internet offers a vision of freedom and a shared humanity, others have claimed with equal vehemence that it may become the instrument of global surveillance and personal alienation. Foucault's notion of self-fashioning (*souci de soi*) exemplifies both sides of this debate, since fashions may both be imposed and freely chosen. To present a Foucauldian perspective on fashioning of self online I use instances of recent postings to the Usenet news group *rec.games.chess*. Key aspects of self-fashioning that I identify include romantic and modernist images of interior experience, the importance of keeping your "cool," the discussion of techniques designed to improve skill or strength, and the purchase and use of chess computers as icons of mastery. Finally, I consider some implications of this Foucauldian approach for future research on Internet self-constructions.

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## Introduction

As the media breathlessly remind us several times a day, the Internet is a global computing network that makes it possible for people to talk to one another over great distances very cheaply and quickly. Newsgroups, one of the services available on the Internet, are electronic bulletin boards which allow subscribers to read and post messages in thousands of specialized areas. There are very few controls on postings to any newsgroup, which are as a result frequently off topic, repetitive, vacuous, or offensive. Newsgroup postings offer an opportunity for an anthropologist to do some "lurking" without the usual costs of time, money, discomfort, or political hassle associated with ordinary types of fieldwork. A disadvantage of Internet ethnography of this sort is that it is much harder to figure out what's going on when you can only observe what people say, and not what they actually do. [<2>](#)

As part of my continuing research on play and modernity, I have downloaded several weeks of postings [<3>](#) to the Internet newsgroup *rec.games.chess* (henceforth "r.g.c") and studied them carefully; the examples that I use

here are drawn from these postings, changed only to conceal individual identities. <4>; To interpret these postings, I have devised a model of the online fashioning of personal identity. This model is based loosely upon Michel Foucault's notion of %soi de souci%, the ethical care of self, roughly equivalent to the idea of self-government which he addressed in his last writings (Foucault, 1990: p. 32; 1991b: p. 93). The title of this paper refers to Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self" as devices -- mechanical or otherwise -- which make possible the social construction of personal identity (Foucault 1988b). I take the Internet to represent one such technology of the self.

The model has four components: (a) the private "inner substance" that is believed to be the ultimate source of personal identity; (b) the degree and kind of commitment that is made to a given activity; (c) the personal routines or disciplines that are adopted to reshape one's identity; (d) the eventual goal of the personal transformation that has been undertaken. <5> I shall show how each of these four components is aligned with a specific theme on r.g.c, and give pertinent examples. I shall then discuss some implications of this approach to understanding the fashioning of an Internet identity.

## Inner Substance

Inner substance may be discerned by the way people speak of themselves. A nineteenth-century emphasis upon "romantic" imagery, associated with mysterious inner passions and upwelling creativity, has been supplemented in this century by "modernist" notions of advancement through reason, study, and planning (Gergen, 1991, ch. 2). The posters on r.g.c use both romantic and modern images, a blurring of styles fairly common in everyday life as well, i.e., people often speak of themselves as being deep and authentic, while nevertheless receptive to personal improvements and achievements that reveal them "as they really are." On the basis of a qualitative content analysis, I have identified the inner substance of r.g.c with a romantic image of "strength" or a modernist image of "skill." I'll give some examples of this mixed romantic/modernist style of speaking from r.g.c postings. In the first, the thread is "how to advance from intermediate level:"

It's just a matter of gaining intuition as to where your pieces belong so that they work well together. Now that I've made some progress in this area, I really cringe when I see some B player put his pieces on all the wrong squares and tie himself in a knot.

Well, I am an inactive 1711 player and I wish to interject the notion of "nerve" to ratings improvement. I have seen some lower rated players who just have no nerve to play an aggressive move or even a move that looks good to them but where they cannot see the obvious lines. . . Perhaps nerve can be learned by getting comfortable with different positions but some seem to have more of it than others.

The posting above combines the language of personal "progress" with the vocabulary of deep inward feelings or dispositions ("intuition," "nerve"). The second example deals with the issue of creativity or "genius:"

What I want to investigate is the innovators of the game. Those who played the game but revolutionized the game due to their own genius. . . Can anyone shed some light on these geniuses and what makes them different from the average player or even the average GM?

Here the romantic idea of "genius" and intrinsic "difference" or uniqueness is juxtaposed to the modernist notion of progress ("revolutionized the game") and the "laws of logic and science." Yet the "average GM" referred to is a white male of Euro-American heritage: by implication, all are not equally capable of improvement. <6>

## Degree and Kind of Commitment

An ideal commitment to chess adopts a demeanor which is neither too distant nor too involved, a "cool" emotional style which requires the routine expression of feelings in day to day public encounters, yet also constrains such talk lest it cause embarrassment or public disturbance (Stearns, 1994, p. 192). Posters to r.g.c use four devices to shape their sense of commitment.

By far the most frequent such device, appearing in about three-quarters of all postings on r.g.c according to my count of subject-headers, is the posting of facts or techniques which display shared interest in a topic. Here is a common example, which refers to an opening sequence known as the Taimanov Benoni:

```
My experience with this line goes back to
1987 when ex-New Zealand player
David Flude played it against me in a
weekender in Melbourne. I responded with
18.Qf3,Qxf3 19.Nxf3,Rhe8 20.Kf2,c4?! (rather
than Shabalov's 20...Re4!) 21.Rd1
and eventually won. However I wasn't
convinced by my opening play, so took the
opportunity to ask David Norwood . . . He
offhandedly suggested 18.Qa4+,b5 (note
that this is why Black plays 14...Bxc3+, as
otherwise White could play Nxb5) 19.Qf4 ..
```

This sort of analysis has been greatly intensified by the outpouring of chess literature since the 60's, the recent increase in the number of international tournaments, and the proliferation of specialized chess knowledge at every level of play. The emotional tenor of this posting is what I would characterize as "impersonal, but friendly" (cf. Stearns, 1994: ch. 7). There is much more that needs to be said about the use of factual or technical postings on r.g.c, and I shall return to this theme in the following section.

A second device that expresses an appropriate middle distance is the "smiley" or "emoticon," which appear in 5-10% of all postings to r.g.c. The smiley uses computer keystrokes to create an orthographic picture that can be viewed only by cocking one's head to the left. Another device to express emotion places the word designating an appropriate gesture or feeling in brackets. These are conventions which add emotional nuance to abstract messages otherwise hard to interpret. In this context, it serves to report the emotional standing of the poster just as if s/he had said "cool," "great," "boring," or another term of the current vocabulary of feeling. A couple of examples will suffice:

```
Long time no talk.
```

```
You'll notice they haven't been developed
before castling kingside in BOTH games. ;-)
```

Emoticons and verbal representations of emotions are often used to take the edge off confrontational postings, though some posters use them routinely simply to enliven online talk.

A third device, apparent in approximately one-third of the postings to r.g.c according to my subject-header

count, is the "flame." Here is an extreme example of an r.g.c flame:

Chess Clock: Mechanical  
Yugoslavia made, working great. I am selling  
this because I got a digital clock  
and don't need it anymore. The only  
problem is the glass of one of the clocks  
is broken (just a little bit, not  
entirely). \$10 , firm + shipping. If you are  
interested, please e-mail me.

(response)

You are stupid. If you are a girl I will  
add this: You are a stupid bitch!!

The next flame is more typical, excerpted from a lengthy, vitriolic debate that has continued for weeks on rgc concerning the financial probity of the United States Chess Federation (USCF):

The Old Guard should say what's really on  
their mind: We report news  
that incommodes the powers-that-be and they  
hate us for it.

It's certainly not obvious from these examples that flaming maintains an appropriate personal distance, since there seems to be too much involvement expressed. One way to interpret these flames would be to argue that flaming defines the rule of emotional distance by transgressing it, and certainly posters occasionally react to flames by reproaching the flamer for her/his excess.

I have a strong impression, however, that the "flame" is also a kind of ritualized confrontation that expresses formulaic anger much as televised sports may express formulaic masculinity (Duncan, Messner, and Aycock, 1994). I will not attempt to demonstrate in this paper that "flames" are indeed formulaic, since that would be a major research direction in itself, but I will point to the standardization of verbal cues ("bitch," the "powers-that-be") which is characteristic of other more familiar confrontations such as bar fights, exchanges between motorists, letters to the editor, and abusive phone calls.

The fourth device to shape commitment to chess is the purchase, use, and discussion online of commercial chess products and services (see Jackson Lears, 1994: pp. 46ff., and Miller, 1994: pp. 76ff. on romantic/modernist impulses in consumer culture). A formal methodology would offer a more reliable figure for the frequency of commodity-oriented postings on rgc, but my estimate of the content of such postings is over 50%. Postings about commodities are similar to factual postings because they demonstrate a shared interest in the discussions of rgc. As a financial commitment, commodities exhibit owners' personal involvement in online chess discourse. The good or service purchased shows that the owner maintains an appropriate distance, e.g., buying an book on the Taimanov Benoni, playing the opening in tournament games, and chatting about it online is a reasonable thing for a middle-class hobbyist to do. By contrast, spending many thousands of dollars on books and equipment might not be quite so reasonable, suggesting too great an involvement with the game (cf. Aycock, 1988a and Aycock, 1995 on the use of commodities in chess "over the board").

Here is a simple example, which suggests the importance of commodification as a form of commitment to chess:

I'm trying to complete my set of British  
Chess Magazine and would like to purchase three  
volumes if anyone has them. They are 1881 (vol 1),  
1882 (vol 2) and 1891 (vol 11).

It is implicit in this posting that the personal ownership of a chess archive is in some sense equivalent to the mastery of chess knowledge (Foucault, 1989: p. 45).

## Personal Routines or Disciplines

Routines or disciplines on the Internet consist of the use of "words without things," in which the words themselves become resources for self-fashioning (Poster, 1990: p. 17; cf. Foucault, 1973: pp. 312ff.). Most of these words are offered online as "facts" or "techniques." I mentioned above that two-thirds of rgc postings were about "facts," but I haven't yet said what I think "facts" are. For purposes of this paper, I define a "fact" as an utterance which produces an effect of apparently simple referentiality, e.g., "the sun rises in the east," or "this is a picture of my child." This discursive effect of factual innocence usually reduces or eliminates altogether the opportunity for further explanation. The social stereotype of a bore or an ivory-towered intellectual would be someone who attempts to interpret things which appear to be factually transparent. It is intriguing that in a situation such as the Internet where referentiality is more or less impossible to determine, the majority of postings claim factual referentiality as their main source of legitimacy; I'll return to this in my conclusion.

Factual talk is produced by a discursive purification which strips statements of their particular personal, institutional, and historical contexts, presenting them instead as universals. Information expressed as objectively true may be used to sustain global claims of rationality or common sense. When facts have been removed from an easily recognizable context and formalized in some way, I refer to them as "technique." <7> In addition to the legitimation lent by factual talk, discussion of technique gives an impression of being "in the know." <8> I'll give some examples of postings to illustrate how this important impression is produced on rgc.

First, a request for information about the rules of play. This request is especially significant because it pertains to "blitz," a variety of chess that became popular in the 70's and 80's when chess clocks became more accurate and players' demands for increased tempo of play were formally registered by chess organizations (cf. Aycock, 1988b on the role of chess organizations in institutionalizing play at all levels).

```
I am curious about some freak cases that can
come about in blitz games
I have the USCF Rulebook (3rd edition, not
4th) which has FIDE 5-minute
chess rules in it, but these cases are not
clearly covered...
```

Second, here is some "techie talk" which is peculiar to the computerization of chess in the last ten years, and to the development of the Internet:

```
Hi. I have just discovered the Internet
Chess Server and would like to ask for
some advice. I run X-windows on a Sun
Sparc1, connect to an internet-connected
site via 14.4 kB modem, and telnet to the
ICS from there. I am currently observing
games using the ASCII graphics provided by ICS,
but I do have Xboard on my machine.
```

At one level of analysis, this posting is nothing but an invitation for enthusiasts on rgc to exchange abstruse technical information. At another, however, such exchanges construct a hierarchy of expertise and personal legitimation. The final series of examples shows how factual and technical talk becomes routinized through "political arithmetic" (Foucault, 1988b: p. 151) on rgc:

```
(first example)
My 2 bits are that I have never liked the
```

BHB. I think the numbers are too small  
and it is hard to tell how much time you  
have left in sudden death.

(second example)

I am teaching 7- and 8- year olds to play  
chess. What would be a good clock  
setting for children at this age?

(third example)

Why doesn't someone just sit down with a  
january issue of chess-life and the  
current FIDE rating list and post the  
difference in ratings for a dozen or so US  
players? then we can get an accurate  
picture, rather than debating about  
this flat 150 pt rating discrepancy hogwash.

These examples are about the intensity of personal routines. Time controls and statistical ratings define how players are to discipline themselves for "serious" play, and how they are to be ranked against one another (Hacking, 1990; Aycock, 1992a). Both are commodified, since to be rated, one must pay tournament fees to participate in timed play under the auspices of a formal chess organization. Time and ratings are subject to long and passionate dispute on rgc and elsewhere, leading to identification of calculable artifacts such as "sudden death," "an accurate picture," "discrepancy," or "good clock setting."

## Goal of Personal Transformation

For most of those who post to rgc, the goal of personal transformation is the formal mastery of chess.<9>  
Postings to the Internet differ from other popular chess literature, however, in that there is far more attention lent to the mastery of chess by computers. Speaking of computer technology on rgc promotes notions of solidarity and empowerment (Nye, 1994, pp. 172, 277).

An initial example of the goal of personal transformation, as I have described it, is a posting about a computer program that plays chess.

Grandmaster Sagalchik returns to UMBC to  
play one slow, rated game against a CM-5  
Supercomputer running the MIT Star Socrates  
chess program. . . .Kuszmaul (MIT) will  
deliver a technical lecture on massively  
parallel search and its application to computer  
chess. . . Star Socrates is one of the best computer  
chess programs in the world and plays at the  
grandmaster level.

The notion of chess programs which play "at the grandmaster level" is especially fascinating for rgc posters, who debate endlessly whether a computer will ever be world champion, whether computers signal the "death" of chess, and whether the published ratings of computers are equivalent to those of human players. In this instance the chess program has been constructed discursively as a competent agent, the precise analog of human players (Aycock 1990).

A second example is one of human play mediated by Internet computer linkages.

Some of you might like to play "live" chess  
on the internet, and may not be aware  
of the Internet Chess Server! . . . It's a  
fun, club-like atmosphere, with people talking

about chess, kibitzing during games,  
shouting greetings to each other, discussing  
sports, arguing politics, etc.

The sense of community <10> is explicit here ("a fun, club-like atmosphere," etc.), and it is interesting to note that by contrast with the instance of the computer which plays chess "at a grandmaster level," here the computer linkage has become effectively transparent, a mere facilitator of the human agents who use it.

My model of the online fashioning of personal identity has helped me to identify some interesting aspects of online discourses. In particular, I have drawn attention to the significance of romantic and modernist images of inner substance, the importance of maintaining a middle distance or "cool" commitment to chess, the value of factual and technical postings as personal routine or discipline designed to improve skill or strength, and the intense rgc interest in chess computers as icons of mastery.

## Conclusion: Implications for Research on Online Play

One of the most common themes in popular computing literature is that computers and the Internet are making us strong, smart, fast, and free. <11> Yet this is what fills my screen every time I sign on to the university mainframe that serves as my gateway to the Internet:

```
*****  
      USE OF THIS SYSTEM BY UNAUTHORIZED  
      USERS IS PROHIBITED
```

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*****  
  
      INDIVIDUALS USING THIS COMPUTER SYSTEM  
      WITHOUT AUTHORITY, OR  
      IN EXCESS OF THEIR AUTHORITY, ARE SUBJECT TO  
      HAVING ALL OF THEIR ACTIVITIES ON THIS SYSTEM  
      MONITORED AND RECORDED BY SYSTEM PERSONNEL.
```

In the process of monitoring individuals improperly using this system, the activities of authorized users \*may\* also be monitored. Anyone using this system without authorization or in excess of their authorization expressly consents to such monitoring and is advised that if such monitoring reveals possible evidence of criminal activity, system personnel may provide the evidence of such monitoring to law enforcement officials.

This panoptic regulation raises a variety of important issues such as freedom, power, technique, and privacy, and links them closely in Internet practice: in only four sentences, some variation of the word "authority" is used six times, "monitor" or its variants are used another six times, "use" appears five times, and the word "system" is used seven times. The message is that authorities monitor users on behalf of the system; authorities are aligned with law enforcement, users with impropriety or criminal activity.

Perhaps this is an extreme example of Internet surveillance, but much Internet discourse is at least covertly normative despite the overt emphasis that Internet practitioners place upon its factual or technical nature (e.g., "monitor" is both a physical object and a kind of surveillance). By the same token, the Internet is largely a domain of words without things, which nevertheless are represented by those who post there as being utterly referential (e.g., a "system" is both a hardware arrangement and an image of a self-governing organism). The agents of discourse themselves are unequal irrespective of their technical prowess (e.g., in computing jargon,

authorities have "privileges" that users do not). These contradictions permeate the discourse of self fashioning on the Internet in general and, as I have shown, on rgc in particular. What broad strategies of self fashioning are available under these circumstances? I'll suggest three possibilities, all of which tread the narrow line between constraint and freedom.

One rgc poster, for instance, turns romantic images against modern ones:

Computers are tools that we have created  
to assist us improve in chess. The  
fact that [computers offer] the illusion  
of a well-played game of chess are irrelevant,  
because there is no player. My  
chessmaster 3000 can beat me all the time, but  
I have not forsworn the game: the game is  
fun. I use the computer as an opponent to  
improve my skill. But I play the game  
against other human's for the fun and  
competition of it. We just need to be  
philosophically clear: computers are tools.  
Humans are sentient creatures, worthy opponents.

And if some day we humans become  
universally bored with chess because we have  
exhausted the possibilities of it . . .  
change the rules a little. It is our game, we  
created it... Chess can still evolve if we grow  
bored with it. But in the meantime, it is still fun  
to play, fun to learn, and fun to compete. I can't  
drive in a nail with my fist: does that mean I  
should make my hammer out of nerf to  
preserve my ego? I can't lift my car off the  
ground: does that mean I should throw  
away my hydraulic jack? No body builder  
will ever be able to lift as much weight  
as a motorized winch. So why do they bother?  
To improve themselves, and to compete  
against humans.

As the Internet moves rapidly to a private enterprise model, the limits and possibilities of self-fashioning proliferate. This poster suggests that the self fashioning of play can be much more diverse than "the illusion of a well-played game of chess" by a computer. Here "worthy" "sentience" supplements strength or skill as the inner substance to be worked upon, while fun as well as mastery is a goal of play. Although the poster argues that personal disciplines should include competition against other humans and the use of computers to "improve," he has carefully referred to them as mere "tools" and compared them to lesser, utilitarian objects such as the "hammer," the "motorized winch," and the "hydraulic jack." Most interestingly, the poster recommends that commitment to chess include not only buying the tools of play, but also altering the rules of the game at will to diminish the effects of those tools.

Another debate on rgc suggests a modernist, rather than a romantic solution:

Let me compare the human limit to the  
computer limit: ... The exponential complexity  
of chess is such that increases in speed are  
becoming incredibly ineffective at  
furthering . . . depth... So what are GM's  
limits? All it takes to beat the best  
computers is to follow strong strategic plans  
that don't produce a win until 20-30+ moves down  
the pike. . .

The strongest programs and the best humans are playing two different games. The strength of the strongest programs is in killer tactics, and the strength of the strongest humans is in killer strategy. . . It's not obvious to me that the program will have to play the human's game in order to achieve dominance; but it is obvious that the human has to play the program's game to retain dominance, since he has to survive the near term in order to cash in on the long term.

If it's "easy" to avoid deep tactical blunders while building a long-range strategic plan, the human GM can continue to win or draw. If not, then not. It all depends on the shape of the chess draw/win space. If there is a broad flat plain of draws/wins out there for the first player, then it's a GM game. If it's a narrow knife-edge of variations leading to co-optimal play, then it's a program game, in the limit.

I would find it an amazing coincidence if world championship level chess were forever almost but not quite within reach of the best possible program on the best possible hardware.

The "limits" of play are defined by the GM (always a "he") and by the "best possible program on the best possible hardware," both presented as social agents who in romantic images attempt to perfect their "complexity" and "depth," and in modernist terms, must "plan" 20-30+ moves ahead, "cash in on the long term," use "killer" tactics and strategy, "retain dominance," and avoid "blunders." The poster uses mathematical analogs drawn from geometry and game theory to display a "cool" distance toward the fate of the game and those who play it: the "shape of chess space" is studied by ideal social agents, super-computer and super-GM, who search for "co-optimal play." The conclusion is that unless there is "an amazing coincidence" computers will achieve "world championship level chess," the triumph of the modern (Adas, 1989; Segal, 1985, 1994).

Finally, Foucault himself offered, in quite another context, a problematique of the Internet that might be neither romantic nor modernist. I'll cite it without comment:

So many things, in their language, have already escaped them; they do not mean to lose, in addition, what they say, that little fragment of discourse . . . whose frail and uncertain existence is necessary to prolong their life in time and space. . .  
In each sentence that you pronounce -- and very precisely in the one that you are busy writing at this moment, you who have been so intent, for so many pages, on answering a question in which you felt yourself personally concerned and who are going to sign this text with your name -- in every sentence there reigns the nameless law, the blank indifference: 'What matter who is speaking; someone has said:

what matter who is speaking' (Foucault, 1991a, pp. 71-72).

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## Footnotes

1. A substantially different version of this paper was originally presented on February 22, 1995, during my tenure as Visiting Fellow at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. I would like to thank Kathy Woodward for inviting me to join the Center during the 1994-95 year. I would also like to thank Carol Tennesen, Cathy Egan, and Nigel Rothfels for their continuing administrative and collegial support during the year. Paul Brodwin made some valuable suggestions that led me to reconsider the conclusion of my paper, as did the reviewers for the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. I especially thank Margaret Carlisle Duncan for her critical reading of several versions of this essay. [\[back\]](#)
2. Cf. Aycock, 1989, 1992b on issues arising from discursive approaches to the ethnography of play; see also Aycock, 1993a, 1993b, and Aycock and Buchignani, 1995, on Internet ethnography. [\[back\]](#)
3. In all, I downloaded about a megabyte of information. [\[back\]](#)
4. I have not corrected spelling, grammar, or typos, as the examples themselves make evident. [\[back\]](#)
5. The corresponding Foucauldian categories are (a) the identification of an individual's ethical component, or substance, which s/he must develop; (b) a mode of subjection which establishes an individual's relationship to the ethical rule or discipline in question; (c) an ethical labor that transforms the individual's substance; and (d) a goal of self-care (Foucault, 1990, pp. 26-28). [\[back\]](#)
6. A perennial favorite of rgc posters is gender disproportion in chess, where male masters outnumber females manyfold. This is often attributed to "natural" causes, i.e., different brain structures. It's interesting that although the white-black disproportion is far greater, there is no comparable debate about that, because it is taken as given that blacks' social disadvantages prevent them from participating fully. [\[back\]](#)
7. I'll not deal here with the difficult question of how "facts" and "techniques" are linked as practices. [\[back\]](#)
8. The term "pure technique" that is so often used in ordinary parlance on rgc or elsewhere seems exactly right, since it suggests both the exalted, refined essence of those who share this understanding, and as well the process of definition that is associated with purification (Douglas, 1992; Zerubavel, 1991; Lamont and Fournier, 1992). [\[back\]](#)
9. For those very few who have already become masters, achievement of an international title is the next step. [\[back\]](#)
10. Though not necessarily a substance shared by everyone, since solidary talk about "sports" and "politics" seem to focus on stereotypically male interests. [\[back\]](#)
11. For instance, Nelson, 1987; Naisbitt, 1990, 1994; Tapscott and Caston, 1993; Kehoe, 1994; and Toffler, 1990. [\[back\]](#)

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