

STRIVING FOR CLOSURE

Interactive ASCII Art on Internet Relay Chat

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A recent and growing trend on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is the shift from text-based to visual communication, sometimes accompanied by sound files. This paper discusses two channels on the Undernet in which affinities with traditional crafts, and, indeed, many players are involved in material-based crafts such as needlepoint, sewing, quilting or woodworking.

This activity serves two functions for individuals, aesthetic pleasure in color, pattern, and symmetry, and instant *communitas*. The paper identifies and illustrates a number of strategies players use to strive for a sense of closure and perfection, via the creation, display and viewing of images. Kitsch representational motifs such as teddy bears, hearts and roses abound, as do non-representational images containing rich play with typography, pattern and symmetry. This activity is a creative response to rapidly changing technology by newcomers to cyberspace, rank and file individuals who are not highly educated members of professional or managerial elites. It is a further step in the playful aestheticization of digital writing which began with the ASCII art of the 1960s and 1970s. More women than men participate, an unusual phenomenon on the Internet today. I speculate on what deeper needs this activity fills in players' lives.