

Dossier #2: “GayOL” Chat Rooms and Power

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Film 105: Dead Media Studio

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<https://youtu.be/d9GgH9N9OJg>

AOL, AIM, and Chat Rooms

American Online (AOL) — while it was still known as AppleLink — launched a beta test for its chatrooms known as “Samuel” in 1988. The service went public in 1992 through it’s new “People Connections” section, and, in continuing years, continued to grow and gain more traction, reaching its peak use in the 90’s (Wagstaff). AOL popularized the chat room service that would be later taken up by different internet service providers.

The AOL space created a new Web Environment that was foreign to Internet users at the time: AOL provided its own web environment to users to work within and with each other, while most internet service providers at the time were mainly used as a portal through which to access the World Wide Web. Within this contained environment, AOL users would create profile names, generally allowing them to be anonymous if they so wished. The user-friendly interface, plus this new way of navigating the Internet, was a big pull to join the AOL world — and this included its communicative, social form in the chat rooms.



AOL Chat Rooms provided a new way of meeting and communicating with others.

In 1997, AOL launched AOL Instant Messenger — popularly known as AIM. With this service, AIM users could message other users privately outside AOL’s “garden walls” for free. This, used in tandem with chat rooms (which were then incorporated into the AIM service itself), would provide the infrastructure for queer people to design and create their own spaces for their own purposes.

“GayOL” Chat Rooms

As a result of the gained traction of queer AOL users through the development of AOL-backed forum groups, more and more queer users were utilizing and creating chat rooms. By the mid-90’s, one-third of all the member-created chat rooms on AOL were gay-based topics, and the Gay and Lesbian Community Forum (later renamed onQ) was getting close to 2 million hits a month (Alvear). This dense population of gay and lesbian users came to be dubbed “GayOL” by the community itself.

These chat rooms — allowing 23 users at a time — gave users the opportunity to create or join small communities that could discern between them a location, topic, purpose, etc. These specified chat rooms would play towards specific intentions or actions — of which included general discourse, coming out advice, dating, or hook-ups.

A Redistribution of Power

The numerous and densely collected number of gay chat room users on AOL proposes a need to develop an understanding of how these kinds of users — or perhaps marginalized users, in general — are drawn to these sorts of services. In study on the online social practices of queer youth, these users were, “choosing the internet because it is an anonymous and safe space in which they can practice aspects of same-sex sexuality,” allowing them to express themselves in ways they could not in non-digital spaces (Hillier and Harrison 95). Thus, the anonymity possible in such digital spaces can lead to feelings of “freedom, power, and connectedness... [and the ability to] explore self and identities through virtual relationships” (Maczewski 145).

<https://youtu.be/9f7zb9uUB08>

“AOL gives me power at my fingertips!”

In a similar vein, the infrastructural and systematic design choices made in the development of the AOL chat room — including its use of anonymous profiles, and site-wide connectedness — create an environment that allowed queer users to connect with each other and gain access to advice and resources that were necessary to the development of their respective queer identities. Thus, in this way, the online chat room made way for a more equal distribution of power, that contrasts the social and political mirroring of marginalized communities outside the Web.

This idea is investigated in Allen Thomas’ qualitative study on the Internet chat room participation and the coming-out experiences of young gay men. In the study, Thomas conducts qualitative, in-depth interviews with gay men who participated in gay-themed chat rooms online, and the effect of the platforms on their sense of self and overall empowerment (Thomas 22). One of his interviewees detailed:

[The chat room was] a crutch to get [me] into the gay society. I used that crutch, I walked with it for a few days and it was gone. Look at me now. I don't care what you think of me. I will go out in public how I want to go out... Before I even started on AOL I would have never thought that.

In addition to this, Thomas also details the ways in which gay AOL chat room users would also use the connections made through the platform to meet in person, and begin discourse around their sexual identities face-to-face — essentially circumventing the stigma of queerness in physical spaces (Thomas 24). In this way, AOL chat rooms provide a way for gay people to develop a sense of power that translates from online discourse to self-empowerment.

M4M Cruising

AOL's chat features through both chat rooms and instant messaging provided a space that was ripe for online dating and cybersex, and was made clear through AOL themselves in the form of commercials that espoused these features.

https://youtu.be/2iy_HuLd65U

AOL Chat Rooms: "There's a time and a place for chat"

Thus, with the power to connect and freely identify through the online chat room, gay men utilized the platform for cruising, mirroring the setting of a 1970s bath-house. Popularized on the platform as "men-for-men" (M4M) chat rooms, queer men could meet each other for dating or hooking up (Alvear). This was made accessible through the naming of chat rooms by users themselves. By being able to name your own chat rooms and list under specific categories, one could gather other users based on a number of preferences — including geography, age, body-type, or other common bonds (Woodland 417). Thus, through a combination of empowerment and accessibility, AOL chat rooms were able to provide a space for queer men to easily meet and cruise for sex, avoiding the stigma associated the expression of their sexuality in physical spaces.

<https://youtu.be/ifxtA28lvLo>

The naming and categorization functions of user-made chat rooms allowed for easy identification and communication of and with other gay men.

Throughout the 90's, "GayOL" chat rooms provided a unique space for gay men that had not yet been seen at the time. As the popularity of such platforms began to increase, it led to providers that sought to create competition in the gay dating market. More and more platforms were created around the late 90's, that provided the accessibility and anonymity seen in GayOL chat rooms, with extra incentives such as more categorizations, porn videos, etc. (Silberman). Regardless, AOL chat rooms remained the predominant platform of use by gay men throughout the 90's and early 00's.

Sources

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