Computation, sex, psychology, soul


Sherry Turkle's new book reads like a good novel, and many of the images it evokes could well be rooted in a world of fantasy fiction. Yet there is a sharp urgency to a commentary frequently touching, often sad, which warns that members of the computer culture have so much added their souls to the computer as allowed their souls to become computers, in order to establish, on a basis of equality, relationships with machines that they have failed to achieve with fellow human beings.

The computer, says Turkle, "the clock, the telephone, or the train. It is a machine that 'thinks.' It challenges or reduces not only of time and distance, but of mind." It is from this premise that the author embarks on an exploration of "the machine as it enters into social life and psychological development, the computer as it affects the way we think, especially the way we think about ourselves and our lives."

"Take me on a tour from childhood to adult life to demonstrate how the computer enters "into the development of personal identity, of self-esteem, of sexual identity," we read. "We start with Robert, a 7-year-old who, frustrated with Merlin, a computer "game" which plays tic-tac-toe, throws it down in anger. "He leaves his brains break."

Moving to older children and adolescence we see the lure of video games, "a window onto a new kind of intimacy with machines that is characteristic of the newest computer culture. . . . The holding power of video games, their almost hypnotic fascination, is computer holding power." 12-year-old Jarish lacks friends, years for control and, unable to find in the world of human interaction, finds solace in the machine. Jimmy, 14, who has a "fear defect that has left him with a sickened past and slightly sharpened spirit," is also calmed by a machine that makes him feel "perfect."

"At MIT, Turkle found hackers with similar psychological dispositions. One of them, Burt, compares to masturba-tors: 'You can always satisfy yourself to perfection. With another person, who knows what might happen?' "A lot of the drives that cause hacking and sex are the same," says another MIT student, Anthony. "They are both risk-taking activities and they both lend a sense of accomplishment. But hacking is safe in that you are in complete control of your computer, world, and sex and relationships are risky in that the rest of the world has control.

According to Turkle, hackers see themselves as ugly and as socially isolated. The UNOCO competition epitomizes their feelings of inadequacy. Hackers need to feel mastery, so "many hackers are expert lock-pickers," not for reasons of theft but for the "thrill of the chase.

We finally arrive at the world of sex and love. Turkle interviews Marvin Minsky who sees connections between AI and pornography. A student of Roger Schank for "soft mastery," in contrast, "is the mastery of the artist: try this, wait for a reaction, try something else, let the overall shape emerge from an interaction with the medium. It is more like a conversation than an exchange. While machines and the arts are the preserve of the 'softs,' the 'hards' gravitate to science and technology."

"Girls tend to be soft masters, while the hard masters are overwhelmingly male," Turkle observes. "The girl is first drives to objectivity because she is allowed to main-tain more elements of the old fusional relationships with the other." Turkle clearly sees in computation a way to provide for both boys and girls, but in implicitly keeping such a divide, promotes the maintenance of a barrier which limits" would say is an artifact of culture rather than a necessity of nature. An attempt to pit computer theories against psychoanalyst would have given Turkle's act "hard" gravitate to science and technology.

Turkle declares. "The girl is less driven to the development of personal identity, of self-esteem, of sexual identity," we read. "We start with Robert, a 7-year-old who, frustrated with Merlin, a computer "game" which plays tic-tac-toe, throws it down in anger. "He leaves his brains break."

Moving to older children and adolescence we see the lure of video games, "a window onto a new kind of intimacy with machines that is characteristic of the newest computer culture. . . . The holding power of video games, their almost hypnotic fascination, is computer holding power."

12-year-old Jarish lacks friends, years for control and, unable to find in the world of human interaction, finds solace in the machine. Jimmy, 14, who has a "fear defect that has left him with a sickened past and slightly sharpened spirit," is also calmed by a machine that makes him feel "perfect."

"At MIT, Turkle found hackers with similar psychological dispositions. One of them, Burt, compares to masturba-tors: 'You can always satisfy yourself to perfection. With another person, who knows what might happen?' "A lot of the drives that cause hacking and sex are the same," says another MIT student, Anthony. "They are both risk-taking activities and they both lend a sense of accomplishment. But hacking is safe in that you are in complete control of your computer, world, and sex and relationships are risky in that the rest of the world has control.

According to Turkle, hackers see themselves as ugly and as socially isolated. The UNOCO competition epitomizes their feelings of inadequacy. Hackers need to feel mastery, so "many hackers are expert lock-pickers," not for reasons of theft but for the "thrill of the chase."

We finally arrive at the world of sex and love. Turkle interviews Marvin Minsky who sees connections between AI and pornography. A student of Roger Schank for "soft mastery," in contrast, "is the mastery of the artist: try this, wait for a reaction, try something else, let the overall shape emerge from an interaction with the medium. It is more like a conversation than an exchange. While machines and the arts are the preserve of the 'softs,' the 'hards' gravitate to science and technology."

"Girls tend to be soft masters, while the hard masters are overwhelmingly male," Turkle observes. "The girl is first drives to objectivity because she is allowed to main-tain more elements of the old fusional relationships with the other." Turkle clearly sees in computation a way to provide for both boys and girls, but in implicitly keeping such a divide, promotes the maintenance of a barrier which limits" would say is an artifact of culture rather than a necessity of nature. An attempt to pit computer theories against psychoanalysis would have given Turkle's act "hard" gravitate to science and technology.

Turkle declares. "The girl is less driven to the development of personal identity, of self-esteem, of sexual identity," we read. "We start with Robert, a 7-year-old who, frustrated with Merlin, a computer "game" which plays tic-tac-toe, throws it down in anger. "He leaves his brains break."

Moving to older children and adolescence we see the lure of video games, "a window onto a new kind of intimacy with machines that is characteristic of the newest computer culture. . . . The holding power of video games, their almost hypnotic fascination, is computer holding power."

12-year-old Jarish lacks friends, years for control and, unable to find in the world of human interaction, finds solace in the machine. Jimmy, 14, who has a "fear defect that has left him with a sickened past and slightly sharpened spirit," is also calmed by a machine that makes him feel "perfect."

"At MIT, Turkle found hackers with similar psychological dispositions. One of them, Burt, compares to masturba-tors: 'You can always satisfy yourself to perfection. With another person, who knows what might happen?' "A lot of the drives that cause hacking and sex are the same," says another MIT student, Anthony. "They are both risk-taking activities and they both lend a sense of accomplishment. But hacking is safe in that you are in complete control of your computer, world, and sex and relationships are risky in that the rest of the world has control."

According to Turkle, hackers see themselves as ugly and as social-ly isolated. The UNOCO competition epitomizes their feelings of inadequacy. Hackers need to feel mastery, so "many hackers are expert lock-pickers," not for reasons of theft but for the "thrill of the chase."

We finally arrive at the world of sex and love. Turkle interviews Marvin Minsky who sees connections between AI and pornography. A student of Roger Schank for "soft mastery," in contrast, "is the mastery of the artist: try this, wait for a re- action, try something else, let the overall shape emerge from an interaction with the medium. It is more like a conversation than an exchange. While machines and the arts are the preserve of the 'softs,' the 'hards' gravitate to science and technol-