

## COMMENT AND RESPONSE

### EXTENDING EMILY GROVES: FEATURES OF AIM IN RELATION TO THE VOYEUR AND THE NARCISSIST

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In her essay, “The Emerging New Discourse of the Away Message System,” Emily Groves argues that AIM (America Online’s Instant Messenger) has evolved from a means of conversation to a mode of self-expression as a result of the away message (5). Groves astutely describes the away message in its inception as a kind of visual answering machine that has evolved to be used to explain why users are not available, where they are, and/or anything else the user wishes to say to potential viewers (5). This statement goes hand in hand with Groves’ other notable point; users of AIM are both self-conscious of how they present themselves and judgmental about how others are portrayed, what she identifies as the two roles of users within AIM: “voyeur” and “narcissist.”

Extending Groves’ analysis, I examine three additional facets of the program to provide further evidence that the narcissist/voyeur dichotomy is used within AIM. Along with this potential for individuality, these features add another level of meaning for viewers to interpret and analyze.

To differentiate identities in an initially anonymous system, each user creates a screen name that becomes his or her persona. Screen names themselves are a form of self expression because they can be used to say something about the user. A name like “ChefJoe,” for example, would lead a person to believe that the person is both named Joe and a chef. “Zeldafan31” has the obvious intent of stating the person’s devotion to the video game series, *Zelda*.

Many voyeurs come to know other users and define them, at least partially, due to their screen names. Depending on how frequently or infrequently users see each other away from AIM, an impersonal relationship can result from the removal of the physical interaction. The disembodied voice at the other end becomes less and less, “Mike,” and more strongly associated with his “Zeldafan31” screen name. As Groves argues, voyeurs view and make assessments about another person’s AIM profile while users who, by acknowledging the existence of voyeurs, tailor their profiles and take on the role of narcissist (7). Screen names further motivate the narcissist to make a more personal statement with his or her own profile.

Groves’ identification of the “voyeur” and “narcissist” is applicable to the whole AIM program. Most of the updates and new features which have been added to the AIM system over the

years were done to aid in the user's ability for self expression and to satisfy the voyeur within many users. Groves equates the voyeur's hunger for information as being a trend, and, "Like any trend, it must constantly change to maintain viewer interest" (9). Fortunately, there are many means to achieve this.

A very popular way for users to add their own stamp to their profile is the buddy icon. Buddy icons are small squares with a picture/cartoon located to the left of the box where text is to be entered. When someone receives an instant message from someone else, the sender's buddy icon is visible to the receiver and vice/versa. Since there are a number of websites devoted entirely to the storing of buddy icons, anyone with the right program and an artistic inclination can create a buddy icon and post it onto a website. These icons are available for other people to click on and use for their own profiles.

What good are these small images, though? For those who rely upon AIM for a large percentage of their communication, the buddy icons can be something special, such as great conversation starters. The narcissist puts out a statement for all to see, seeking a response from the voyeur. As Groves says, "Finding commonalities with other users validates each user's choice of message" (7); the buddy icon is the message in this case and takes on the same role (7), taking the place of real life visual conversation starters.

Along these lines, humankind has always been reliant upon what they see to affect what they say. By using AIM, we are transferring that tendency and substituting images that represent the physical realm into a non-physical arena. Just as online social networks Myspace and Facebook give members a place to list their interests, AIM gives its users a way, albeit a small and square way, to say something about themselves without using words.

Since there is no way to hear how a person is trying to communicate when using AIM, vocal emphasis, inflection, and tone are all nullified. Sometimes, the option to add a smiley face in the field of text can let a person know when a phrase is made in jest, or a frowning face (or a crying face) can be an attempt to garner sympathy and convey a negative emotion. These cartoon faces take the place of physically seeing a person's response to an utterance.

By utilizing the diversity that the smiley faces offer, the narcissist can be given his or her voice. There are options where the color or design of the faces is customizable. The standard yellow faces are quite common but are not the only choice. I have seen blue faces, frog-themed faces, puppy faces, and clown faces. There are a number of others users can decide upon to best reflect their personality.

Another feature of AIM is the audible notification when a user signs on or off or puts up an away message. These changes in status are often indicated with the same tone that is heard when sending a message. This tone is akin to the sound of a few notes on a xylophone being played quickly. However, users can further make their profile their own by altering these once standard sounds. I have heard a brief clip of a song as well as evil laughter. People who use these

are in the extreme minority, but given the nature of the narcissist and voyeur roles, it would be reasonable to expect their use to become more prevalent.

The alteration of sound effects within AIM proves that the program is evolving and attempting to be as broad as possible with its possibilities for self expression. By acknowledging that the voyeur has more than just the sense of sight, the narcissist appeals to another, previously untapped sense: hearing. The progress which AIM has made thus far shows the substantial room for growth that it has had since its beginnings. Surely, there is even more that can be done to the program, given the expectations and demands of the clientele.

Groves' assertion that "people who constantly leave basic away messages, such as 'Away,' 'Leave a Message' and 'I am away from my computer now,' are looked upon critically by other AIM participants" (10) is, in my view, perhaps an overstatement, but nonetheless holds some truth within the system. A certain amount of personal disclosure is expected by many voyeurs, which a default setting would not give. This is related to the integration of the "public" and "private" within the AIM social structure. Groves says that in modern conversation "all participants seek identity and attention in order to make, create and preserve relationships" (9), which says to me that it is socially beneficial for users to proclaim their differences.

Just as Groves asserts that away messages say something about the narcissist, AIM user profiles, whether screen names, smiley faces, buddy icons, and even sound effects, are expected to be increasingly revealing. Lately, "the private is being more and more demanded by the public" (9). The voyeur's curiosity is piqued mostly by what they can learn about another user. To feed this, the narcissist reciprocates by meeting the voyeur's demand, satisfying the narcissist's need for attention and the voyeur's need for information. The existence of both sides fuels the still evolving means for self-expression offered by AIM.

### **Works Cited**

Groves, Emily W. "The Emerging New Discourse of the Away Message System." *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 3 (2005): 5-10.