

I Think, Therefore IM: Instant Messaging and Sisterhood

Erin Kilian

In this article, Kilian explores the influence that the genre of instant messaging had in shaping her relationship with her sister. She discusses the advantages of communicating in this genre, including its potential for sharing humor and creating bonding. She also looks at how the automatic archiving of instant message conversations generates written histories of our personal relationships.

When I type my sister Meaghan’s name into my Gmail search box, a vast collection of everyday e-mails greets me. But the real gold is in the auto-saved “Chat” section. It contains archives of instant message conversations between us—853 of them to be exact. They date from the past four years, most of them conducted during a time when both of us were working desk jobs that bored us more than a little. The oldest one, from November of 2007, includes this important exchange:

10:13 AM **Meaghan:** i was just looking at youtube videos of wombat s doing tricks
10:14 AM **me:** what’s a wombat, actually
10:15 AM **Meaghan:** on the video it looked cute, but if you google image search it you’ll have nightmares
its like a big rodent, like an opossum or something, which i hate more than anything
me: you hate opossums more than anything?
10:16 AM **me:** seems like an overstatement
Meaghan: i hate any form of rodent

I wish I could say that as the conversations get more recent, they get more sophisticated. But as recently as last week, our conversations were full of talk of gossip about our friends and our analysis of old episodes of *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Because of school, work, and other unavoidable circumstances, I have not lived with my sister since she was twelve and I was fifteen. Consequently, instant messaging has shaped our relationship. It has been the best venue for us to vent about our problems, celebrate our successes, and just engage in idle chatter. There are distinct advantages to this mode of communication for us. Thus, this article is an investigation into the genre of instant messaging and how it informed and continues to inform my relationship with my sister. Let me walk you through it. . .

Advantage 1: Talking Becomes Multi-tasking

Five years after our wombat chat, my sister and I live a thousand miles apart, and instant messaging is still our primary mode of communication. The phone often seems too formal and time-consuming and texting cannot convey all of the minutiae we have to point out about *American Idol*. So instant messaging is, as Goldilocks once said, just right. We can talk as little or as much as we want. If one or the other of us is genuinely busy, there is no guilt in saying a quick “Gotta go. TTYL.” And we can use these chats to say things that are funnier or more outrageous than we could ever manage to be in person.

Equally important is the fact that this relationship building can happen while I’m doing other things. Research shows that “32% of IM users say they do something else on their computer such as browsing the web or playing games virtually every time they are instant messaging and another 29% are doing something else some of the time they are IM-ing.”¹ I have learned how to juggle conversations with my sister and three or four other friends at the same time, often relaying messages between them. I’ve worked on my computer, trying to craft a short story and popped on to chat with her when I needed quick vocabulary advice. She could say a sentence or two back and then return to her own work. We could be in each other’s lives and our own at the same time, with just a click of the mouse. This allowed for. . .

Advantage 2: Bonding through Humor

Reading the transcripts of my sister and my chat sessions, you get a sense of the shorthand of our relationship, full of pop culture references and inside jokes. Sometimes the jokes rely entirely on the typed convention of the genre

and wouldn't be as funny if they were spoken. Take, for example, this passage in which we write try to spell out our imitations of my mother's Boston accent:

9:26 PM	me: howayou?
9:26 PM	Meaghan: wonduhful, howayoooo?
9:26 PM	me: good, hows ya fathhaaa?
9:27 PM	Meaghan: whatevuh
9:27 PM	me: Oh, shoooooo-uh

We both put a lot of effort into being funny in these conversations. There's definitely one-upsmanship at play—we see which of us can make the other one laugh harder while seated at their desk. In an article in the academic journal *Media, Culture & Society*, Ori Schwarz discusses this “performativity” and its relationship to instant messaging. He argues that because we know these instant message conversations can be saved, we attempt to be more entertaining versions of ourselves in them. He says that instant messaging is like “co-authoring of a text fixed in time, a collective production of an artifact which may later be consumed. . . for future reminiscing.”² And it is true that when I look back on these chats, I value the funny ones most. Thus our debates about which *World's Strongest Man* contender is our favorite (the dominant Mariusz Pudzianowski or hometown favorite Kevin Nee) take precedence over mundane negotiations about where to go out to dinner or what to get our parents for Christmas gifts. Which brings me to. . .

Advantage 3: Archivability

Being the electronic hoarder that I am, I started saving the funnier or more poignant conversations between us when I was in college. Reading the transcripts is like combing through my personal history: It features details of friendships I used to have that have fallen by the wayside, stories that I thought were hilarious at the time but I cringe about now, and events I don't remember attending. The exciting byproduct, since our switch from AOL instant messenger to Google Chat, is that these transcripts are now saved automatically. Everything we say is recorded and stored in the cloud somewhere, easily accessible for re-reading. It suits my penchant for nostalgia, for getting lost in memory. It is not unlike curling up with a book you've read before, thrilling at moments when characters seem uncertain of the future because you know how it all turns out.

Schwarz also says that “IM *objectifies* interaction[s], turns them into data-objects, fixed in time, subject to search-queries, copying, sharing, quoting and

re-use.”³ Though “objectify” seems critical, I think having these transcripts as objects, mementos, and physical manifestations of my relationships is what I like best about instant messaging. I can go into my archive and parrot back to my sister (via copy-paste) ideas and emotions we shared when we were still teenagers. Plus, the search function provides me with evidence for a silly argument over who came up with what shared catchphrase first. It’s documentation of how we became who we are.

While I have used the unique properties of instant messaging with other people and for other purposes, the transcripts with my sister are the most consistent and extensive. They chronicle the pains and frustrations of our young adulthood: fights with our parents or indecision about what job or opportunity to pursue next. Last year, they intersected with the most challenging episode in my family’s history—when my sister got very, very sick. The last IM exchange before she was hospitalized reads like all the others: equal parts Red Sox and *Real Housewives* criticism. She was just back from a trip to Las Vegas and had had a few weeks of recovery since her stellar run in the Boston marathon. But she had been feeling tired and bruising easily. Thanks to WebMD, she was self-diagnosing with all sorts of bizarre illnesses I didn’t think she could possibly have. Before her scheduled doctor’s appointment, our chat read:

10:57 AM Meaghan: i’m gonna go watch some tv and luxuriate on the couch. if i’m not back before my dr’s appt i’ll talk to you tonight aftawards or tmrw am
me: ok, see ya good luck with your diagnosis I hope you don’t have any scary diseases
Meaghan: athankee

This was our normal, joking tone. But as we found out after an emergency room trip, multiple blood transfusions, and a bone marrow biopsy, she did have a scary disease: Aplastic Anemia. AA is a blood disorder where your marrow does not produce enough platelets and red and white blood cells. It left her needing either an intensive program of chemotherapy or a bone marrow transplant. It was gut-wrenching news and we had no good way to manage it.

At first, I think writing about the horrible new reality helped us gain control of it. For instance, during the first chat we had after she got sick, we discussed looking for doctors who handled the disease (there are only a few in the country). We turned to each other for reassurance:

11:13 AM **Meaghan:** did you fidn the list of institutions that can treat it?

11:13 AM **me:** no, but there was a link to a website that had clincl studies. there were a few in boston, only one that was specifically for aplastic anemia (instead of like leukemia and aplastic anemia) and that was at children's hospital

11:14 AM **Meaghan:** hm
well, like i said, hopefully this is all moot but good information.

11:16 AM **me:** yeah
i still believe it will be moot

Meaghan: guh. maybe tomorrow i'll wake up and my bloods will be normal

me: that would be nice

Although these chats memorialize our experience after her diagnosis, the absence of communication that followed is just as telling as the transcripts themselves. There are nearly two months in the fall of 2010 with no chats. This was the period when she was the sickest. She was hospitalized to get chemotherapy and in and out of the clinic daily for blood transfusions with the rest of the time spent at home, no longer tethered to the desk job that compelled her to instant message me daily. Because we were both in Boston at the time, I was seeing her all the time and even going to most of her doctor's appointments. It could be that we didn't see the need to IM, but more likely it was too difficult to articulate our fears and frustrations in writing. Even still, it hurts to go back now and find no evidence of what our communication was like during that rough period. It makes me feel like that terrible period doesn't really exist because there's no written evidence. As such, there's. . .

Advantage 4: Writing Our History

Although looking back can be hard, these instant messages transcripts can often provide comfort when nothing else will suffice. In the article "Chat History" from the website Good.Is, writer Rebecca Armendariz recounts the heartbreaking story of her relationship with Clark—a rock musician who, over the course of their time together, was diagnosed with an aggressive form of skin cancer and passed away. She reflects on how difficult it was to be in their shared apartment or their local bar afterwards, as these places triggered sad memories of Clark's decline. But she found solace in reading their old electronic chats:

My Gmail is a priceless hoard of us making plans, telling inside jokes, calling each other "snoodle" and "bubbies." I type his name into the search field and enter a world of the unscripted dialogue

that filled our 9-to-5 existences. I become immersed in the coziness of our union. In hundreds of chats automatically saved to my account, we express our love for each other readily and naturally in our own private speech. This is a history of our relationship that we didn't intend to write, one that runs parallel to the one authored by his uncontainable illness.⁴

Though my story turned out differently, I can relate to Rebecca's sentimentality over the simple, digital transcripts that mark a place in time before everything changed and became darker and more complicated.

My sister is recovering now. She's planning to be off of her most serious medications by the end of the year. Here's one of our conversations from last spring:

12:11 PM **me:** when's your next dr's appt?

Meaghan: the 29th

12:11 PM i think generally they will be the last friday of the month going forward

12:14 PM **me:** nice (said like borat). it seems like you go so long between them, it's great

12:17 PM **Meaghan:** ya. it's really weird to think that i used to be in there like 3 or 4 times a week

12:18 PM **me:** yeah, you were a sorry little person

Meaghan: i sure was

Meaghan is back to work, at a new job she loves, which severely cuts into our chatting time. I wonder if, as we move from our twenties into our thirties and continue to have more taxing careers and family lives, our chatting will continue as it has. I hope so. I want to be able to look back when I'm eighty at the first chat we had after her wedding or the birth of a first niece or nephew. I will also want to know what she thought of the terrible reality shows that will be popular in 2030. I hope the future history we write is a good one, full of laughs. More wombats than woe.

Endnotes

1. Shiu, Eulynn, and Amanda Lenhart. "How Americans Use Instant Messaging." *Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project*. 1 Sept. 2004. Web. 5 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2004/How-Americans-Use-Instant-Messaging/1-Summary-of-Findings.aspx>>.

2. Schwarz, Ori. "Who Moved My Conversation? Instant Messaging, Intertextuality and New Regimes of Intimacy and Truth." *Media Culture & Society* 33.1 (2011): 71-87. Social Sciences Citation Index. Web. 5 Dec. 2011.
3. Schwarz.
4. Armendariz, Rebecca. "Chat History." *Good Magazine*. 14 Sept. 2011. Web. 5 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.good.is/post/chat-history/>>.



Erin Kilian is a doctoral student at ISU, a fiction writer, a documentary buff, a novice at crocheting, an amateur dog whisperer, and, above all else, a Bostonian.