

# Terrell Neuage 'Hurricane Floyd Chatroom' Case Study One



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## CS 1.0 Introduction

There are millions of chatrooms on the Internet, catering to a huge range of discussion topics. A majority of conversations in chatrooms however appear to have become seemingly stuck in the ‘hello’ or ‘anyone want to chat privately?’ categories. The chatrooms I am analysing are rich in turn-taking and developed conversation. This chapter on ‘storm’ is a study in chatroom linguistics during an emergency and is my starting point in working with real-time interactive discourse.

It is my desire to focus in detail on the interactive complexities of on line talk which led me to discuss the ideas of five of the leading proponents of 'Reader-Response' theory in my literature review (2.2.3 ): Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland, Julia Kristeva, and Umberto Eco, and these authors have been a particular influence in this case study. I intend to begin my analysis of online "conversational" practices by examining the reciprocity and interactivity of this curious textual form of talk, where readers and writers reverse roles in the mutual construction of "talk-texts".

### CS 1.0.1 Reason for choosing this chatroom

The first chatroom I examine was set up for Hurricane Floyd, a high-impact weather event in the USA on 15 September 1999, which occasioned full alert status for emergency services in the region. I chose this chatroom as the participants may be assumed to have had more urgent and compelling reasons to be involved in conversation than participants in most general chatrooms. I indeed found differences between how people relate in an emergency [1] and how they relate in other less urgent social settings. One of my hypotheses for this thesis is whether people create a different 'textual self' for each electronic communications environment they are in, and that we cannot continue to regard all electronic textual practices as equal. For example, textual practices are different in a chatroom than in an email. Chatrooms are multivoiced synchronous exchanges where many people often 'speak' before there is a chance to answer. In asynchronous email, on the other hand, there is time to respond without the dialogue scrolling by at a rapid rate.

A question arises as to the relative or formational influences on chatroom behaviours. Put simply, does the speaker make the chatroom or does the chatroom create the speaker? It is certainly observably true that, just as in physical speech situations, the style of talk in chatrooms parallels the specific environment. For example, one may speak differently at a church supper and a brothel. I explore this concept of developing styles of 'speech as home' or how chatrooms can become a particular socially-regulated environment, even in the absence of a constraining set of architectural and culturally-binding physical cues: see Case Study Three, 'Speech Acts as virtual places' (CS 3.3.2)

The first chatroom under investigation arose from an emergency situation, therefore I assumed when I first entered this chatroom, based only on the title, 'Hurricane Floyd Chat', that only conversation dealing with the emergency situation would be conducted. I did not expect topics or spontaneous exchanges about relationships, politics or sports, for instance. One of my interests in this room was how a 'textual self' was to be presented. I expected an emergency chat to be different from the casual-chatroom-chat (CCC) which constitutes the major part of most chatroom conversation. In an emergency, I expected those present to be seeking information that they could use to protect themselves, or to reassure themselves that friends and relatives were safe. I remembered experiences from earlier emergencies, where authorities had often appealed to citizens NOT to use personal communications systems, such as telephones or even public streets or walkways, leaving them free for emergency services, and depending on official media channels for "reliable" information and advice. What I found was that indeed there were few deviations from the topic, and every contributor discussed the storm

at some point. Though many different threads developed in the conversation, each of which I 'captured', they were all related to the storm. Though there was no prescribed rules of etiquette for the use of this chatroom to focus talk on the storm, users, by being in this chat arena were concerned with the storm. The primary way to set up a structuring model for a topic in a chatroom is to have a chatroom that addresses only one particular topic as is the case with this chatroom.

### CS 1.0.2 Background to Hurricane Floyd

“On Sept. 15, 1999, a one-two punch combination of hurricanes hit North Carolina. Earlier, Hurricane Dennis jabbed once at the Carolina coast before doubling back and coming ashore as Tropical Storm Dennis on Sept. 5, packing torrential rains and 70 mile-per-hour winds. Then came the knockout punch—Hurricane Floyd—ten days later.



**Figure 4 CS1:1 Storm Map**

Floyd was a large and intense Cape Verde hurricane that pounded the central and northern Bahamas Islands, seriously threatened Florida, struck the coast of North Carolina and moved up the United States east coast into New England. It neared the threshold of 'category five' intensity on the Saffir/Simpson Hurricane Scale as it approached the Bahamas, and produced a flood disaster of immense proportions in the eastern

United States, particularly in North Carolina.

South Carolina's Governor Jim Hodges ordered a mandatory evacuation of as many as 800,000 people in coastal areas today as Hurricane Floyd aimed for South Carolina's coast, just a week shy of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hurricane Hugo's destructive run through the state. Charleston South Carolina's Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. said that the entire city had to be evacuated, anticipating the eyewall of the storm passing over the metropolitan area." (North Carolina Register, September 15, 1999, p. 1).

### CS 1.0.3 Research Questions

1. Is the reader the writer who is writing the reader?
2. Do the reader or the writer produce meaning within 'this' chatroom, or do they create meaning together?
3. How important is the particular chatroom context for the reader-writer interpretive relation?

These three questions, elaborated below, are based on Reader-Response Theory. Reader-Response Theory may appear a paradoxical framework for a study of "chat", even within this textualised talk environment of the chatroom. Reader-Response Theory evolved as a re-examination of Literary Reception practices, at a period which has over-stressed the authorial function of literary texts, focusing on author biography or the social context in which literary works were created, with little or no attention paid to the biography or context of the reader – arguably just as influential on the interpretive act of "reading" (see for instance Fish 1990,

Iser 1989, 2000, Holland 1968, 1975). Reader-Response Theory analysts study the ways readers' own life experiences and situations influence the understandings they construct as they read, often tracing interpretive differences according to such social variables as age, gender, ethnicity, or educational background (see for instance studies by Schilb, 1990; Bakhtin, 1994; Holland, 1975; Vandergrift, 1987). The implication central to this view of the reading act is that a text is in fact "co-written" at the point of "reading", since the writer can offer only a potential reading – or set of potential readings – which the "reader" may or not be able to or choose to follow. To some degree, all readers will reconstruct a version of the text, to suit themselves – thus performing in the act of reading, an act of self-construction or transformation – which may or may not be of lasting influence.

Reader-Response Theory thus poses some interesting questions for the act of chatroom text-talk, where participants "respond" visibly and immediately to the text-talk of other – usually unknown – "authors". All participants are here simultaneously writers and readers, constantly adjusting their own and their "interlocutors'" texts, and so possibly "selves". With Reader-Response Theory practitioners then, my research needs to pose for chatrooms such seemingly impenetrable questions as: "Is the reader the writer who is writing the reader?"

In others words, is a chatroom participant in the first instance a reader or a writer – and if they are a reader first, encountering others' chat before posting their own, is the act of reading a simple and unproblematic "reception" of "what has been said/written ("posted"), or does this act of reading, like those of the literary texts analysed in Reader-Response

Theory, involve the (re)construction of views about the writer, the context, the topic focus, to build a view of “what has been said”. This leads to the second question of, “do the reader or the writer produce meaning within ‘this’ chatroom, or do they create meaning together?”

And finally, Is there any role played by the sense, “this chatroom”, in the meaning-making processing of reader-writers in chatroom: that is, how important is the particular chatroom context for the reader-writer interpretive relation? Is it a standard or a location-variable process?

Each of these questions is important to the reading process as the written text creates a reader’s response.

## CS 1.1 Methodology

This dialogue was ‘jumped’ in to, in order to replicate the “immersion” experience undergone by most ordinary users of chatrooms – both in their first introduction to a given space, and in subsequent visits. The complete interaction that I ‘captured’ lasted approximately 20 minutes, and left me with a transcription of 279 lines from 45 speakers. The participants did not all enter or speak at the same time as they would in a pre-announced moderated chatroom, such as in Case Study 6 or in the Postscript-911, when a certain topic was advertised to be discussed at a specific time. This is one of the most obvious differences between a chatroom transcription and a transcription of a spoken conversation. In chatroom transcription everything enacted is present: what is seen is what there is in a text-based chatroom, whereas in taped transcriptions sounds and pauses must also be recorded. Casual live conversation may have several ‘speakers’ talking at one time. This is also often the case in

chatrooms, as contributors' text-utterances arrive in random order.

Because the 'speakers' did not all arrive at the same time in the chatroom I have numbered them according to sequential chat-events.

There is an orderly and sequential flow of 'chat events'. This is one of the contradictory situations in chats. They are at the same both structured and unstructured. This is also chat's departure from casual conversation. In casual conversation there is no going back to an earlier chunk of speech. What is said has come and gone and may be referred to only within memory, as it cannot be re-run as 'captured' text. In a chatroom one can scroll back to what was said earlier and respond specifically to that. Below are several of the transcription methods I applied to this case study, and in chapter 3, Methodology (3.5 Protocol of a transcription methodology) I show transcription methods used across all of my study, suggesting some of the ways that this new complexity in such speech conventions as 'turn-taking' or "code changes" is influenced by chatroom texting practices.

In this chatroom I have taken the raw material and represented it in several formats. First is the raw data as it appears in the chatroom: for example - (Table 5 <http://se.unisa.edu.au/a1.html>).

Table 9 Appendix 1.

173.	<ankash>	noworry in West NC
174.	<guest-kodiak>	MANDY, whre did you hear that UNCC is closed
175.	<guest-sweetthing>	no trees flying yet thank god

176. <EMT-Calvin> thats why i have such a peace in my heart tonigt

#### Table 4 CS1:1 Raw data

It is immediately obvious that while all speakers can be said to stay focused on topic – even 176, whose comment on “peace in my heart” can be resolved in the context of a possible life-threatening experience from the Hurricane – the specifics of each contribution appear to be following a non-consecutive logic. Posting 174 for instance is not addressed to the poster of 173 – unless 174 knows something about “ankash” that we don’t (i.e. that her name is “Mandy”). Posting 175 does not reply to 174, and 176 appears to be either “musing” across all or any of the other contributions, or else responding to some utterance outside this sampling. While all contributors here can be said to be “writers” by reason of the act of posting, which among them can be shown to be “readers”, interpreting and responding to other text? The sequencing of dialogue is – at least arguably – entirely disrupted, so that little responsive or interactive logic is evident. How then are these “conversations” being constructed? From a sampling such as this, it is possible only to hypothesize that a) there is no dialogue: each participant is operating at least primarily in a monologic mode – a proposition which my subsequent analysis will suggest does have some validity in some cases; or b) that the dialogic mode has been stretched across much longer exchange relations than in live natural conversation, and will need to find a transcription method which can reveal it; or that c) chatroom “readers” are able to perceive and respond to very subtle or newly-coded forms of “topic focus”, and so are “writing” within the “reading” act, in ways not yet analysed within traditional

text studies, or linguistically-based conversation analysis.

Each of these hypotheses has some validity within this study, and will be taken up at some point of the subsequent analysis. At this stage however I want to pursue the problem of the extended “response” sequencing in chatrooms: Is it possible to actually locate an “initiation point” for all chatroom utterances: a clear “sourcing” statement, no matter at which degree of extension from the “reply”, which can prove a logical dialogic ordering of the kind proposed for live speech, and required in the act of Reader-Response Theory “writerly” or interpretive “reading”?

As a second transcription modeling, I have therefore isolated speakers within chatroom discussions, and grouped each speaker’s text together (table 3 <http://se.unisa.edu.au/a1.html>). For example the chat-author, <EMT-Calvin> in the sequence below, even though saying as early as chat-event 42 that there will be no more dialogue, is still writing at turn-taking 272. I did not record any more of this particular chatroom - but the speaker could have gone for much longer. The point to grouping individual speakers is to attempt to identify specific linguistic patterning within their language: in this case for instance a strongly assertive modality. Each contribution is an unqualified statement: <those folks WILL BE sent back...>; <the locals WILL BE the ones to get jobs>; <folks NEED TO BE CAREFUL>. A strong continuity in the contributions: both linguistic-structural: <And those folks...> and in the response structure: a progressing logic rather than a disruptive one – no “buts” or “on the other hands” - suggests a consensual discussion with co-contributors. Finally, there is of course a very clearly established antithesis being set up between <those folks> – Mexicans – and “the locals” (who in an



103.	<guest-MoreheadCityNC>	^ 97 >5	Fortunately our best friend is a roofer!
104.	<playball14>	^97 >7	everybody out for a buck ufortuneately
105.	<SWMPTHING>		YOU AINT TALKING ABOUT MEX ROOFERS ARE YOU?

**Table 4 CS1:3 Thread**

Here too, by grouping the various contributions which can be seen to be “responses” to this discussion strand, we can see very clear consensus being established – once again within the linguistic and political repertoires. <Kbabe1974> asserts openly: <I AGREE...”> while <guestMoreheadCityNC> endorses the consensus (on the criminality of itinerant Mexican workers) by expressing relief that he can evade their services: <Fortunately our best friend is a roofer!>, while <playball 14> sighs over a moral judgement: <everybody out for a buck>. <SWMPTHING>’s over-assertive (capitalized) entry can thus be read as a bid to join the consensus, rather than to actively oppose it: <YOU AIN’T TALKING ABOUT MEX ROOFERS ARE YOU?> suggesting the following gambit: “Thought I recognized the sort of complaints”, rather than something more like “How dare you: my best friends are Mexican” – another consensual bid, underlined by the abbreviation “Mex”, one among a long sad vocabulary of ethnic-marking diminutives usually found in racialised discourses. Though in a chatroom “Mex” could be an abbreviation for Mexican as often words are shortened to fit into the rapidly chat appearing on screen.

Grouping “response statements” in this way does then indicate the sorts of “interpretive reading” demonstrated in reader-response analyses. These respondents are working from cues operating at both the ideological level of content - such as lexical selection: “Mex roofers”, and from syntactical positioning: <Fortunately...> ... <I agree...> Even the use of class or regional dialectical usages, such as “aint” or “folks”, invites consensual identification at the level of community. “Folks” round here say “aint” – and are suspicious of “Mex roofers.” “Fortunate” folks have friends who will do their roofing properly, and not just “for a buck”. These ‘writers’ are “reading” each others cues in heavily reciprocal ways – especially given the quite restricted length of the utterances used.

Fourthly I have created a transcription protocol which can frame two ‘speakers’ interactions. This helps to display the inconsequence of all other dialogue being placed in the chatroom between the utterances of two interacting chatters, and so let us see whether a) chatters appear to be uninfluenced by the interpolated strands of “other” conversations, or b) in some way respond to them as they formulate (“write-read”) their responses to their active dialoguing partner, or c) engage in multiple strands of response simultaneously, or d) “receive” or are influenced by all utterances, and somehow display their reactions in their “returns” directed only to certain utterers. Below for instance, <ankash> jumps across 6 utterances to make her “second” contribution – but who is she addressing? The only possible answer is <guest-sweetthing>, assuring <ankash> that all is well in Concord North Carolina (NC) – presumably where <ankash>’s sister lives – and that <ankash> sends her respondent kisses (“XX”) and intensifies her guest-name from <sweetthing> to

<SweetNsexy> – perhaps even a pun on “NC”. The response indicates a deeper relationship of familiarity than the text provides for the uninitiated ‘reader’ – such as us – and reminds us that there are within this form of reading as many possible layers of past experience with these texts as with the literary texts of Reader-Response Theory. Here too there is a cumulative “intertextuality” of overt covert references, which initiated and uninitiated, experienced or inexperienced, “readers” pick up. But here this inter-text also contains the clutter of other dialogs, which may or may not at any moment intrude upon and influence the reading/writing.

Table 1 Appendix 1.		
55.	<ankash>	<ankash> Jersey knows, my sis lives there and she is out of school tomorrow, she is a teacher.
56.		<Kitteigh-Jo> They are better than frogs spiders are my thing
57.		<playball14> oh really
58.		<guest-sweetthing> I AM IN CONCORD NC AND NOTHING BUT RAIN AND LOTS OF WIND RIGHT NOW
59.		<EMT-Calvin> dont have to worry about someone telling me to report to worl
60.		<EMT-Calvin> k

61.		<lookout4110> How ya holding up Werblessed?
62.	<ankash>	<ankash> Thanks XXsweetNsexy!

**Table 4 CS1:4 Framing speaker's  
utterances**

Here, <Kitteigh-Jo> may be contributing something completely irrelevant to any “hurricane talk” and impossible to access by anyone except her immediate conversational interactant – or she may be commenting on folk beliefs in the pre-storm behaviours of various animal species, and their reliability as early-warning agents: a topic which could be picked up and recognized by other members of the chatroom. And it is also worth examining the small “corrective” contribution made by <EMT-Calvin> at utterance 60, where he recognises his previous mis-spelling of the word “work”, and adds the <k>. This tiny incident shows very clearly the “reading” role of the writer, and the desire to clarify for other readers the comment being made. Chatroom “writers” clearly do read back contributions appearing in the chatroom dialogue box – noting even their own errors – so that the chances of all participants ignoring all contributions other than those from their direct interlocutor are thus diminished. It will be worthwhile examining the full sequencing of future transcriptions, to analyse the influence of the “clutter” between reciprocal strands, as well as the clearly emergent conversational dialogues.

So what creates this clearly new and developing form of interactive “texted” talk exchange, and moves it towards the directions we are beginning to see in its distinctive development. Before one can engage in

a chatroom conversation one needs certain technical requirements.

Firstly, chatroom ‘talkers’ need a means with which to communicate such as a personal computer, or other transmission device. Currently mobile phones, palm computers, laptop computers as well as desktop computers are used in chatroom dialogue. Communicating via chatroom is available in many airports worldwide, as well as on planes, trains, buses and ships and within shopping centres, and even restaurants. This extension of a “private” or “personal” form of communication – a feature clear from its current formation around the talk-exchanges of casual “chat” rather than the more formal textual genres of business documents or “literary” writing – into mobile technologies and public spaces has already blurred the social contexts of this chat. “Private” talk on mobile phones is now quite commonly enacted in company of strangers, while as we have seen, strangers are able to achieve rapid consensual talk, in the midst of many surrounding unrelated dialogic exchanges. The growing availability of access to these new talk-texting technologies – even the somewhat perverse emergence of texting via the audio-device of the mobile phone - will mean that eventually it will be as common to chat via computers and as easy, as making a phone call.

Short Messaging Service, (sms) like chatrooms are a rapidly growing way of communicating. Currently, there are approximately 16 billion SMS messages sent globally each month. The tables below show the growth of instant messenger services (IMs are discussed further in Case Study 2):

**Unique Users of Instant Messaging Services  
At Home-Work Combined in the US**  
Source - Media Metrix (<http://www.jmm.com> - 2002)

	Unique Users (in thousands)					
	Nov-01	Dec-01	Jan-02	Feb-02	Mar-02	Apr-02
<i>All Web and Digital Media</i>	104,811	106,412	109,951	112,017	114,119	116,420
<i>Rollup of Instant Messaging Services</i>	61,199	62,823	68,080	68,164	71,826	72,130
AOL AIM	29,301	29,821	31,869	30,918	32,412	31,456
MSN Messenger Service	22,968	25,189	26,043	26,199	28,968	29,121
AOL Instant Message*	21,811	21,779	22,684	23,009	22,986	23,442
Yahoo! Messenger	17,084	16,865	17,827	17,396	19,406	19,165
ICQ Instant Message	8,599	8,524	8,351	8,222	8,335	8,113
Trillian	...	...	...	344	525	610

**Table 4 CS1:5 Unique Users of Instant  
Messaging Services**

Media Metrix Instant Messaging Services-Average Minutes Spent Per Month Per Person At Home-Work Combined in the US Source - Media Metrix ( <a href="http://www.jmm.com">http://www.jmm.com</a> - 2002)						
	Average Minutes Per Month					
	Nov-01	Dec-01	Jan-02	Feb-02	Mar-02	Apr-02
<i>All Web and Digital Media</i>	1,273.90	1,250.20	1,399.20	1,307.80	1,424.00	1,398.80
<i>Rollup of Instant Messaging Services</i>	303.4	295.1	328.4	314.8	324.1	332.7
Trillian	...	...	...	366.9	532.7	433.6
AOL AIM	293.5	288.3	291.8	297.8	300.7	324.3
Yahoo! Messenger	204.1	240.4	284.6	272.4	264.3	284.4
AOL Instant Message*	170.3	169.3	170.1	157.6	162	155.3
ICQ Instant Message	139.5	120.1	129	112.8	125	119.8
MSN Messenger Service	120.1	86.8	116.6	107.9	115.9	109.6

**Table 4 CS1:6 Instant Messaging Services-**

**Average Minutes Spent Per Month Per****Person**

Media Metrix						
Instant Messaging Services - Average Days Used Per Person Per Month At Home-Work Combined in the US						
Source - Media Metrix ( <a href="http://www.jmm.com">http://www.jmm.com</a> - 2002)						
	Average Days Per Month					
	Nov-01	Dec-01	Jan-02	Feb-02	Mar-02	Apr-02
<i>All Web and Digital Media</i>	15	14.6	15.6	14.5	15.9	15.6
<i>Rollup of Instant Messaging Services</i>	9.9	9.7	10.3	9.9	10.3	10.3
AOL AIM	10.3	10.2	10.3	10.2	10.6	11
Yahoo! Messenger	9.7	9.9	10.5	10	9.9	10.2
Trillian	...	...	...	8.4	7.8	10.2
ICQ Instant Message	10.2	9.8	10.5	9.6	9.8	9.8
MSN Messenger Service	8.3	7.6	8.2	7.7	8.2	8
AOL Instant Message*	6.2	6.3	6.3	6.1	6.3	5.9

**Table 4 CS1:7 Average Days Used Per****Person Per Month**

But of more significance for this study is the degree to which chatroom participants must develop different communicative skills and strategies in order to participate in chat talk. One often overlooked is simple typing ability. The fast typist has an advantage – although perhaps one equalized by the necessity to learn new non-alphabetic commands on the mobile phone keyboard in order to SMS; a signal too that the emergence of the sorts of specialist “graphic coding” of such symbolic forms as emoticons and recombinant keyboard usage – for instance phonetic and

acronymic compounds such as “C U 4 T @ 3pm” – is rapidly evolving completely new types of communicative ability. At the same time, there are clearly certain requirements of face-to-face conversation that need to be adapted in order to converse electronically.

The overt processes involved in language, the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking (see CS 1.2.2 ‘Linguistic skills’ below) change their focus dramatically in a chatroom. Electronic conversation is carried on most successfully through a process-task approach. The emphasis is put on reading and writing and the processes of listening and speaking are done through text on the screen we are reading from. This in itself adds to the complexity of the text-talk process – and to even begin to see its differences, we need to consider the act of text creation and use in far more detailed ways.

Each of the process-tasks of reading and writing is composed of component sub-skills. Grabe (1992:50-3) lists six in particular in the case of reading. These are: 1) the perceptual automatic recognition skill; 2) linguistic skills; 3) knowledge and skills of discourse structure and organisation; 4) knowledge of the world; 5) synthetic and critical evaluation skills; and 6) metalinguistic knowledge and skills.<sup>[2]</sup> Below I will consider the use of each of these sub-skills in the analysis of ‘Storm’. But before moving to such detailed analysis, it is important to return to the major precepts of reader-response theory, to remind ourselves of the ways in which the variant “process tasks” we will uncover in the chatroom, came into being in the service of these new communicative groups.

## CS 1.2 Reader-Response theory

For Reader-Response Theory, there can be no pre-ordained ways of approaching and interpreting texts. No matter how far an author may attempt to control the reading of a text: no matter how overt his positioning of his preferred reader, for what he may think is the ideal reading, actual readers will create variant interpretations. And in the chatroom, where no posting can be made without an initial reading – where even the first participant of the day who “arrives” on site will “read” that circumstance and comment on it (perhaps with “Hi! All alone here: doesn’t anybody use this space?”) – the authorial role of the “utterer” is heavily dependant for its continuance on the ongoing act of reading.

Most simply put, it is the participant-observer in the chatroom, the writer-reader of the text, who influences and is influenced by the chat milieu. But while this is at one level a shared and negotiative act, it is at another a private and self-assertive one.

A group of readers together in a reading environment, often a classroom or a library, sometimes for extended periods of time may be thought of as an interpretive community. Although this is a community of readers, a particular reader's initial engagement with a text is ordinarily a private event with meanings internally experienced in the consciousness of that reader and not necessarily shared (Vandergrift 1987, p. 34).

As Vandergrift states above, a group of readers together in a reading environment may be viewed as an ‘interpretive community’ – perhaps producing the sort of consensus seen above in the “Mexican roofers” discussion during the Storm chats. In this case study I will argue that online chatters are just such a community of readers, who engage with one another, usually, after they have read and given meaning to a prior

utterance. Even before they become engaged in a chatroom conversation, participants need to read the title of the chatroom, so as to 'go' to a particular chatroom, selected for one of many possible reasons. For example, to gather information, meet others or to proclaim a position.

Reading is as important to writing, and as prior to its enactment, as listening is to speaking (see Fiumara, 1994). It is the response to the text by the reader that evokes the written dialogue of the reader-writer-listener-speaker in a chatroom. For example, the two extracts analysed below shows that one person reads what another has written and answers it. But it is how another person reads the turn takings which determines whether a correct response is given.

145 <BASSALE53> im from conn its heading our way
--

146 <guest-kodiak> where did you hear this
--

In turn 145 <BASSALE53>, making the first entry in what is thus far captured is stating that the storm is headed toward Connecticut and <guest-kodiak> seemingly responds asking where this information was gathered from. But this is an assumed answer if one were reading these lines sequentially and had just entered the chatroom prior to turn 145 and had no read any previous lines. However, scrolling back to an earlier utterance of <guest-kodiak> in turn 127 <does anyone know why UNCC has not closed> has a response in turn 138, <uncc is closed>, from <guest-mandy> and <guest-kodiak>'s response could be to <guest-mandy> and not to <BASSALE53>. A few turns later, turn 148, though it is revealed that <guest-kodiak> was indeed not responding to the turn

before of <BASSALE53> but instead to <guest-mandy> and this is clear with <guest-kodiak>'s next response <i didnt know uncc was closed>. Putting together all the turns of <guest-kodiak> we see there is no concern about the storm heading toward Connecticut and <BASSALE53> makes no more contributions to this particular chat during the 'captured' period. <guest-kodiak> is not reading carefully or he or she would have seen that <guest-mandy> in turn 140 has already answered the question, perhaps thinking that someone would ask where he or she had received the information by giving the source of the information <gocarolinas .com>. <guest-kodiak> makes three enquiries as to where this information was collected from in turn 146 <where did you hear this>, turn 150 <it doesnt say it on any of the broadcasts> and in turn 174 <MANDY, whre did you hear that UNCC is closed>.

127 <guest-kodiak> does anyone know why UNCC has not closed
---

138 <guest-mandy> uncc is closed
----------------------------------

140 <guest-mandy> gocarolinas .com
------------------------------------

146 <guest-kodiak> where did you hear this
--

148 <guest-kodiak> i didnt know uncc was closed
---

150 <guest-kodiak> it doesnt say it on any of the broadcasts
--

174 <guest-kodiak> MANDY, whre did you hear that UNCC is closed
---

Not only is the reader reading a previously posted text, but as he or she

becomes the writer, it is clear that they are also reading their own writing at the same time as they are writing. There is, in effect, a metatextual awareness obvious. In some chatrooms<sup>[3]</sup> we can even see what is being written at the same time as everyone else in the chatroom does.

Furthermore, a reader may respond, even before the first utterance is complete. The responder anticipates the remainder of the writer's thoughts. This moves the chatroom's "conversational" style into yet another realm of Reader-Response Theory, involving more than simply reading the text.

I am concerned with online conversation which is text based <sup>[4]</sup>. When I began this thesis (1998) textual interfaces in chatrooms were the norm, following the early stages of direct on-line communication, when email, newsgroups and chat-rooms were developed (Zakon, 1993-2002; Lynch 2002). Text based chatrooms are easy to download to computers as they do not take a lot of computer memory to operate. As computers have become more powerful however, chatrooms have developed multimedia applications such as web cams and voice based systems for chatters to add to their conversation (See *Virtual Web Cams* at <http://www.virtualfreesites.com/cams.html> which boasts more than one-thousand sites with web cameras for any topic). As a medium for exchanging ideas, communicating using text online has a number of qualities that are useful with exchanging information: The text is highly adaptable. The alphanumeric keyboard is common<sup>[5]</sup>, and therefore people can assemble discourses on any topic. Using emoticons and abbreviations, discourse online can be quite expressive. Communication can be done in almost any situation.

Reader-Response Theory can be used to reveal the complex web of authorship, readership and intersubjectivity established in the chatroom texting activity. The first difficulty in using an unmodified Reader-Response Theory is however that it is often impossible to identify the author. The author may be using an avatar or username representative of some aspect of him or her self that is being revealed, stressed or constructed at that particular time. For example, <ANGELICSTAR> says <MY PRAYERS ARE WITH ALL OF YOU ON THE EAST COAST....takecare....bye>. The author is even able to have a multiple-representation of him or herself within the same chatroom by having several usernames at the same time (See Case Study 4 for further discussion of multiple usernames). Another complication of reading chatrooms, is the fact that not only is the author unknown, but the reader can also be unknown, and therefore unpredictable in response.<sup>[6]</sup>

The reader of the text is defined variously by such theorists as Umberto Eco, who writes of 'The model reader' (1979); Julia Kristeva: 'The Ideal Reader' (1986), Wolfgang Iser, 'The Ideal "implied" Reader' (1978); and Fish's (1980) "informed reader,"<sup>[7]</sup> Gadamer talks about the "original reader"<sup>[8]</sup>, and Barthes gives total power over the text to the reader<sup>[9]</sup>, going as far as to say that the reader is 'no longer the consumer but the producer of the text' in his writing on 'the death of the author' (See Introduction 1.4.1). There are others who offer variations on this the construed 'perfect reader', and almost any discussion of philosophy, psychology, or sociology will have discussions on who the reader is. But who is the proper reader in a chatroom? After careful examination of many varying types of chatroom talk-text, I believe that any definition must

include the idea that the perfect reader in a chatroom is one who is able to interact with what is written, so that others can in turn respond to what he or she writes. In other words, the chatroom reader is dually an author: in the Reader-Response Theory sense of co-constructing the “read” text, and in the sense of enabling the talk-text flows by enacting that “active-receptive” role.

The only way we can know if someone has responded in a chatroom to what we wrote is by what they write in answer. The person in the chatroom can perform one of two roles or both roles. One is the role of the witness, who is the reader; the second is the role of the responder; the one who in turn writes, or speaks. Even before the roles are enacted, there is the choice of whether to play both roles. For example, one can lurk<sup>[10]</sup> in a chatroom: read only, and not respond. In Case Study One, there were 48 participants who took 279 turns (Appendix One, table 10). However, four of the 48 people in the chatroom made only introductory comments (although it may be impossible to consider them as classic lurkers, as they entered toward the end of my recording of this event, and may subsequently have contributed. However, they showed they had taken on a lurker’s attributes by commenting on earlier dialogue, such as at turn 208 <BayouBear> saying, ‘LA sent a bunch of crews today’, signifying that he or she knew what the chatroom topic was about.

The classic convolution of the Reader-Response Theory question posed at the beginning of this chapter: whether ‘the reader is the writer who is writing the reader’, is firstly explored for chatroom texts by asking, ‘Does the reader or the writer produce meaning within this chatroom, or do they create meaning together?’ Reading-Response theory claims that a text,

any text, has no meaning whatsoever until it is actually read (Iser, 1978; Eco, 1979; Kristeva, 1996). Other writers examine such active or interpretive reading from a psychological perspective (Holland, 1975; Barthes, 1970; Fish, 1990) and take into account the reader's mindset and what they bring to the text from their personal experiences, which, in turn, influences their interpretation of the text. Language features that are common to all communication are what makes interpretation possible. Using Reader-Response theory to bring meaning to a chatroom text is dependent on various language skills.

## Language features

The following features of language common to all communication are relevant to an analysis of chat by means of Reader-Response Theory and will be discussed in this study: skills of shared language; linguistic skills; knowledge of the world skills and metalinguistic knowledge and skills, each has relevance to our interpretation (Bruti, 1999). To be able to communicate effectively, one needs to have at least two of the four skills needed to share language; reading, writing, listening and speaking. There are other means of communication that can be used in person-to-person communication, such as body language, but the overt processes involved in language sharing are some combination of these four.

### CS 1.2.1 Skills of shared language

In text based chatrooms we take away the two skills of listening and speaking. We are left with reading and writing as the only means of sharing information. In this model, for an online shared language, I would

equate 'listening' with reading and 'speaking' with writing. Reading and listening are as active as writing and speaking are (see especially Fiumara, 1995 and Ihde 1973, 1991). We have to combine reading and writing with the understanding of symbols and abbreviations to correspond with the chatroom language. If people are using the same emoticons and abbreviations as others in the chatroom but they ascribe different meanings to them then the communication will fail. It has been noted that the links between reading and writing, for example, have been emphasized to such an extent that it is now normal to see them referred to as "literacy" (Wray & Medwell 1991, p. 3). It is not difficult to say the same thing about online communication. As chat-languages (this includes SMS Messaging<sup>[11]</sup>) become more widely used they will be accepted as online-literacy. In Case Study Three I will use semiotic analysis to examine how "rich" in significations such literacy can become. Within the frame of Reader-Response Theory however, it is enough to indicate that, in the absence of those intonational and gestural cues available in live speech communicative relations, the "active" or "writerly" reader will be open to any enhancements which can help enrich their reception of a talk-text element.

Each of the "four skills" of reading, writing, listening and speaking are composed of sub-skills, according to Grabe<sup>[12]</sup>. I have adapted the following six skills necessary in order to create a meaning sphere from chatroom readings,<sup>[13]</sup> these are: the 'perceptual automatic recognition skill'; 'linguistic skills'; 'knowledge and skills of discourse structure and organisation'; 'knowledge of the world'; 'synthetic and critical evaluation skills' and 'metalinguistic knowledge and skills'. 'Perceptual automatic

recognition skill, demonstrates the semiotic argument that perception of a meaningful new system of coding is a “language” in evolution.

"Recent findings on language processing suggest that basic strategies focusing on the most important words in a text for example, and activating background schemata are the same in listening and reading..." (Danks & End, 1985; Lund, 1991). Despite the wealth of experience this offers chatroom participants in relation to “reading” chaotic texts: those more akin to “multilog” live chat in crowded social settings, chatroom technology limits the degree to which “complex” texts can be uttered: those with sufficient richness to alert recipients to complexities in their meaning. With the fast paced conversation in most chatrooms, if someone writes a long text, others in the chatroom are not able to read and grasp the whole text before dozens of new texts make the message disappear on the screen. Therefore, in an active chatroom with dozens of people speaking, only the words which stand out are noted. Below is an example of a contribution with too many words and a response to it. It can only be assumed that <guest-MisterD1> is responding to <SWMPTHING> or the change of the topic of the conversation from turn 77 when Mexican roofers are being discussed. Because <guest-MisterD1> has not made any contributions since turn 45 it can be assumed this response was made in regard to the last dozen or so turns. This chatroom does not show when people log in or out so it is impossible to know whether someone is lurking or observing the conversation. The only time we know someone is in here is when he or she writes something.

91. <SWMPTHING> WHOSE GONNA SEND THEM CLIMBING ALL OVER EVERY HOUSE ON THE COAST SE HABLO ESPANOL
---

93. <guest-MisterD1> sigh...
------------------------------

**Table 4 CS1:8 Too many words**

Some chatrooms reveal when someone enters, for example,

(18:30:46) <i>says to Abelia Aiton: -s- welcome back</i>
--

(18:30:59) <i>says to †† Tatjana Darcangel ††: -makes a face- should i be leary??</i>
---

(18:31:45) <i>says to Neena LeCroyMortal: I would be excited if they were all buying me gifts...</i>
--

(18:32:23) <i>says to Yiannis PappodolopisPater Ma...: what brings you to the Manor, Sir?</i>
---

**Table 4 CS1:9 Entering and leaving times**

[http://cs5.chatropolis.com/enter/crimson\\_manor](http://cs5.chatropolis.com/enter/crimson_manor)

(Sun Feb 03 19:55:59 2002) Ricean Vampire Role play

In this example of a chat we know the user is still in the room until they log off. I discuss lurking further in Case Study 6.

## CS 1.2.2 Linguistic skills

In normal reading situations one is able to re-read a statement, passage, chapter or even a whole book to locate what the author is saying. In writing, even in emails, we can change what we wish to say, and edit the text – even re-run our comments after posting, if we need to correct things. There is control over what is conveyed. However, in chatrooms we seldom have the time to reread, let alone rewrite text. Are we to trust the words we read? What about the words we write? If we are in a conversation on the Internet, and we want to have an exchange of meaning, and our spelling and typing are a disaster, how do we say what we have to say? What linguistic skills do we need to communicate effectively on the Internet?

Observation shows that the ability to communicate in a chatroom is not based on conventional assessments of command of language, but on an entirely new set of skills. As these evolve, the formal rules governing the language in use are overturned and adapted. At some point in our language acquisition, we learn rules of sentence structure and word order. We learn how to use pronouns to replace noun phrases, or the order of adjectives before a noun or when to use plurals. In chatrooms we seem to pay little attention to such rules of grammar. I investigate grammar in Case Study Six (CS 6.2.3) and will only mention this in passing here, as an illustrative point to the creativity of how people communicate online, under the constraints of a high-paced keyboarded texting.

In turn 174 <EMT-Calvin> writes,

174. thats whty i have such a peace in my heart  
tonigjt

**Table 4 CS1:10 Grammar errors**

and in turn 174 he or she writes,

214. i am one of the carteret county personal for ems  
and fire we evacuated the beach and barrior islands  
today

**Table 4 CS1:11 Grammar OK**

The two examples sound almost as if they could be two different people. Turn 174 is not particularly literate, in conventional terms, compared to turn 214, although there seems to be more accuracy in grammar and textual structure, and even a literary turn of phrase. It would take longer to write the 20 words in 214 than the 11 words in 173, and yet the spelling is correct, even for complex lexical items such as the Latinate “evacuated” or the proper nouns for place names. Because we have no idea of what someone is doing when communicating in a chatroom - any number of simultaneous tasks is possible - we cannot know why a participant writes the way they do in a chatroom. What produces the shifts in formal literacy levels between postings 174 and 214 is impossible to fathom – but for the reader such individual elements as the dropping of punctuation “that’s”; of capitals “Carteret”; the use of uncapped abbreviations: “ems”; spelling errors: “personal” for “personnel”; run-on sentences “... we evacuated the beach...” can all be over-ridden in the act of reconstructive reception.

There appears to be no sense of discontinuity as linguistic control over formal presentational levels shifts in quality: yet another way in which the interpreting “reader” contributes actively to the formation of these texts.

Within a given language system and its social contexts of use, we also learn various social aspects of language usage, such as when to use slang, to make racist or political statements, and when not to. Here, Grabe’s category involving knowledge and skills in discourse structure become relevant. To contribute meaningfully to a discussion, it is necessary to be familiar at some level with the understandings and terms used within that topic: to understand and be able to deploy its particular language practices. For example, in turn 75, <SWMPTHING> writes,

75. THERE'LL BE PLENTY OF MEXICAN ROOFERS IN N CAROLINA NEXT WEEK

**Table 4 CS1:12 Mexican roofers (begin)**

There were no statements about Mexican roofers or anything to do with roofing prior to this utterance. Furthermore, <SWMPTHING> had contributed four turns in the chat which I captured, and nothing implied that he would begin a conversation about Mexicans, with a racist tone. To initiate such a discourse in the absence of previous explicit cues indicates that <SWMPTHING> sees himself as comfortably amongst friends, or like minded individuals, and so able to begin this thread. Indicators from the previous talk exchanges however reveal only reciprocal flows on other topics, suggesting that <SWMPTHING> reads the easily fluent FORM of these exchanges as equivalent to a linguistic “habitus”, perhaps similar to his experience of both his ‘lived’ speech community, and/or to other chat

spaces, in which the politics he is about to reveal – the racialised discourse he is about to enter – are permissible and expected. I will discuss this issue of “linguistic or discursive comfort level” more when I speak about the theorist, Holland, who takes a more overtly psychological approach, and says that we may infer what we communicate, with our individualized self. <SWMPTHING> is revealing that he or she is comfortable with expressing opinions and whether it is racial slurs or not it does not matter. The author in this chatroom is free to speak, as there is no one monitoring the room. I discuss moderated chatrooms in Case Study 6.

We need to apply prior knowledge and experience when trying to make sense of utterances. The goal is not to understand words, per se, so much as to understand the ideas behind the words. And yet, in a chatroom, words are all we have: words form many different contexts and so arising within many divergent discursive frames – and yet all scrolling in standardized form across a standardized screen in a standardized font. Communicating in a chatroom is akin to learning a new way to apply language. Yet beneath our use of it as either reader or writer lies the standard social expectations of communication: that there will be at the foundation of each talk-texting gambit an intention to communicate something: a rationally motivated and executed act, which can be interpreted accurately and responded to.

The core of psychological understanding revolves around the notion of motive—desire, want, wish, reason. We understand an action when we know what motivated it. The motives for action are usually clear, since action itself usually indicates the motive that prompts it. Why am I paying money to the cashier in a supermarket? So that I can buy food and

eventually eat it. We generally act in order to fulfill our manifest wishes. Sometimes the motives for action can be obscure, as when you see me searching frantically in a drawer and don't know that I left a lot of money in there and now can't find it. Motives are internal mental states that cause action and that make sense of actions; action is seen as rational in the light of motives that lead to it. We apply this reasoning to both the motivation for the ideas of a text as well as to the author's motive for writing that text.

(Colin McGinn, "Freud Under Analysis," *The New York Review*, November 4, 1999, p. 20.)

The motivation for a text in a chatroom is not easily known, since it can only be interpreted from the text on the screen – filtered through the “reader’s” own experiential pre-dispositions. Is the writer attempting to change the course of the dialogue, upset others who have a topic of discussion in process, sell something or use any of an array of tactics for a personal reason? Motivation can only be assumed. In the Hurricane Floyd chatroom the overriding motivation appears to be to find out information on the whereabouts of the storm. Within that chat however, there are personal beliefs stated by several users that take the topic of the storm into a much wider area of discussion. For example, even though the discussion is on the storm, one chatter below shares his or her religious belief in regards to the dangers of the impending storm, while another presents yet more opinions about Mexicans. As responses one to the other, these exchanges make little sense - in fact invite a reading suggesting the rather alarming view that Jesus will intervene to fight off marauding Mexican roofers. Within the “local” context of the scrolling exchanges however, there has been enough “experience” of this debate so far, to permit participants to “read” each posting from within its correct

thread – just as, within the “local” contexts of religious faith and racialised politics, participants are able to recognize a particular discursive strategy being deployed.

120. <KikoV> we got gun laws to deal with them.....

**Table 4 CS1:13 Gun laws (Roofers 2)**

121. <EMT-Calvin> i have faith in jesus

**Table 4 CS1:14 Faith in**

Knowledge and skills of discourse structure and organization

Discourse structures refer to the specific levels of skill in reading and writing which involve the analytical capacity to determine and select in response the “correct” phonology, morphology and syntax for use in a certain communicative context. Discourse structures mediate the interrelationship between language and society, allowing <EMT-Calvin> to assert his religious belief with such suitable terms as “faith”, and to offer such a comment at the suitable moment in a talk exchange, where issues of danger and deliverance are being discussed. They are the bridges built between what language systems offer, and that category titled “Knowledge of the world”, which Grabe suggests allows us to reciprocate in conversation: to build in our own minds a sense that we are sharing meanings with others.

In this Case Study, the knowledge of the world is localized to knowledge

of the East Coast of the United States of America: a place of storms, but also a place of religious faith, and of ethnic tension – both of which are evoked as discursive frames by varying participants, as if “natural” within talk about such a “local” topic. Notice the constant flow of specific place names and location cues, acting to anchor this talk around its event – but also to ease it into likely “local” discourse selections. Though there are chatters who say they are from California and one from Canada, they are still knowledgeable about the storm. Whether or not they are able to quite so comfortably move into the extended discursive positionings on race and on religion which we see here, is more problematic. To be able to converse fully in a chatroom we need to be able to both share topic matter and be part of the discourse.

### Metalinguistic knowledge and skills

At first sight, chatrooms seem as close to being pre-literate as they are to being an advanced literate textual state. Language appears to be in a process of being broken down to its simplest rudimentary format. At the same time there is a certain advanced form of communication involved, when one is limited to a few words to state irony, belief structures or humour, and so required to have a command of enough emoticons and abbreviations to create meaningful interaction. Metalinguistic ability is the capacity to think about and talk about language, or the function of language in referring to itself; cf. metalanguage which is called by Jakobson the 'metalingual' function:

“The metalingual function is focused on the verbal code itself, that is, on language speaking of itself, its purpose being to

clarify the manner in which the verbal code is used...”  
Jakobson, 1960 p. 365.

In the ‘Reader-Response Theory’ critical approach, the primary focus falls on the reader and on the process of reading rather than on the author of the text. There are two basic theoretical assumptions in Reader-Response Theory: The first is that each reading is a performance, similar to performing a musical work, etc. The text exists only when it is read, giving rise to a new meaning, which in this case, becomes an event. The second assumption is that the literary text has no fixed and final meaning or value; there is no one "correct" meaning. Textual meaning and value are "transactional," or "dialogic," created by the interaction of the reader and the text.

There are many reasons why a person may be in a chatroom and this may determine how the text is read. For example:

- Pleasure (assumed as this person does not live in the storm area but seems to be just saying hello)

<guest Jojo> Hello Folks~Greetings from Canada~~  
How are you holding out down there?

**Table 4 CS1:15 pleasure**

- identification,

95. <KBabe1974> i agree with emt calvin

**Table 4 CS1:16 Identification with**

- Information seeking,

86. <lookout4110> Have the winds been strong?

**Table 4 CS1:17 Information seeking**

- Looking for companionship,

195. <ankash> ImFLOYD would you like to chat privately?

**Table 4 CS1:18 Companionship seeking**

- Assertion of personal beliefs,

120. <KikoV> we got gun laws to deal with them.....

**Table 4 CS1:19 Beliefs**

- Beliefs (Gun laws - see CS 1:8)

and

158 <EMTCalvin> i have faith in jesus

**Table 4 CS1:20 Faith in (see CS 1:9)**

We can also see chatroom turn taking as a transaction, much as Louis Rosenblatt did with her transactional theory model for literary analysis. In *Literature as Exploration* (1937) she saw reading as a transaction between reader and text. For Rosenblatt, as for other proponents of Reading-Response theory, meaning is as dependent upon the reader as it is dependent upon the text. There is no universal, absolute interpretation

of a text; rather, there can be several probable interpretations, depending in part upon what the reader brings to the text. In other words for Rosenblatt, the reader is not passive. This is obviously the case in chatrooms where the reader shows his or her assertiveness through writing a response to an earlier text, or by submitting a statement, opinion or question to the chatroom.

Participants are able to scan back to earlier contributions, or perhaps hold them in memory, and to add in a reply specific to a particular comment, no matter the sequencing of contributions arriving since on the site. While the direct sequential juxtapositioning of texts creates an “intertext” of one type (chaotic, random, inconsequential) the capacity to “suspend” these “random” flows, and to selectively create meaningfully responsive ones, lies at the core of the chatroom ethos. For example in the table below <guest-kodiak> asks a general question to anyone in the chatroom [i.e. there is not a user name in the request] and in turn 138, <guest-mandy> answers and in turn 146 <guest-kodiak> questions <guest-mandy>.

127	<guestkodiak> does anyone know why UNCC has not closed
138	<guestmandy> uncc is closed
146	<guestkodiak> where did you hear this

### meaningful responses

There is more discussion on this matter in the next hundred turns I recorded. However, this is an example of meaning generating within a

chatroom where a simple question elicits an answer, even though there was not a follow up answer. As a matter of fact <guest-mandy> makes no more contribution to this chat and we can assume perhaps he or she left the arena of chat.

Stanley Fish, (1990) like Wolfgang Iser (2000) focuses on how readers adjust to the text. Fish is interested in the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words of sentences as they follow one another in time.<sup>[14]</sup> This perspective is useful for an analysis of chatroom talk in many ways. One interesting and quite frequent case is where the writer, usually through pushing the return or enter key on the keyboard by mistake, says only half of what they had intended to say, and the remainder of their utterance appears several turns later. For example,

Turn 275 <IMFLOYD> i've got a sister.....want to see
--

Turn 278 <IMFLOYD> her she is again
-------------------------------------

### **Enter key mishap**

In a sex chatroom, turn 275 would have received a different response. Here no one commented on the oddness of this phrasing. Reading this text it is possible to use the context of the ongoing discussion to see that <IMFLOYD> is saying he is concerned about seeing his sister. Knowing this is a chatroom about a hurricane we can assume, as other on-line readers appear to do, that <IMFLOYD> is hoping to see his sister because the storm may have a bad effect on her. So it seems that there is evidence enough to show that readers are able to use at least the current context of discussion to reconstruct meaning where only partial

contributions are presented. And from the analysis above (dealt with in more detail in Case Study 3 below) of the shift to a “racialised” discourse during conversation ostensibly on the approaching storm, (the Mexican roofers chat sequence), we can deduce that chatroom “readers” are also able to make assumptions about broader social, cultural and even political contexts, to the extent of believing that they are operating in an environment of shared belief.

How is it then that we process such textual cues? Is this learned from the practices of intertextual linking, established within our reading background and acquired alongside literacy – or is it a part of our dialogic skills developed in talk: a central feature of “natural conversation”, rehearsed in everyday chat, and transferred across into text-based chatroom behaviours? How much more can our text-based ‘reading’ traditions tell us of the chatroom texting act?

### Phenomenological approach to reading

The phenomenological method accounts for the reading process by focusing on what happens in the reader's mind as he or she reads (Iser, 1990; Fish, 2000; Holland, 1968). Fish defines his own phenomenological approach as "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time."<sup>[15]</sup> This definition of how a reader assesses meaning could accurately be applied to real time written Reader-Response Theory in a medium such as a chatroom or SMS messages on a mobile (cell) phone. Where the “flow” of words suits the already-established contexts of both the chat session

itself, and the “chatters” in their broader social settings, a consensual flow of “developing responses” occurs – as we have seen in examples above. More indicative of how chat practice differs from other forms of “conversation” or writer-reader exchange however, are those moments at which a writer introduces a directional change. In chatrooms this change can drag several others along. For instance, speaker <SWMPHNG> begins to speak about Mexican roofers in a negative way in turn 75,

THERE'LL BE PLENTY OF MEXICAN ROOFERS IN N CAROLINA  
NEXT WEEK

#### **Table 4 CS1:21 Mexican roofers statement**

which leads <EMT-Calvin> in turn number 82 to say

and those folks will be sent back to mexico.

#### **Table 4 CS1:22 sent back to mexico**

During this exchange, with the topic being offered by <SWMPHNG>, six other people added comments. There were a total of 23 speakers during the turn taking between 75 and 130 (see table 5 in Appendix One) with seven, 30 percent, being part of this thread regarding Mexican roofers. This dialogue was thus 20 percent of the chat during this time. How <SWMPHNG> leads close to one-third of the chatters to follow his/her views is strategically and technically similar to how topics are changed and people follow in face-to-face conversation. In Case Study four, where I look at chatroom talk using Conversational Analysis, I discuss the rules for turn taking in conversation, using the work on CA by, Slade and Eggins (1997), John Austin (1962), Robert Nofsinger (1991), H Sacks

(1974), E. Schegloff (1974), and Deborah Tannen (1989).

In phenomenological studies of language meanwhile, speech (the particular signifying act) is considered to precede writing (the field of signifying possibility), in that an utterance must exist as a ‘phenomenon’ to which the interpretive receiver responds. Such interpretation, calling on multiple repertoires of contextual cultural experience, is thus in itself a form of “writing”: a linking of the uttered “clues” back to their possible signifying referents. However in a chatroom, speech itself – the act of uttering - becomes the written text. Writing in chatrooms is thus always a signifying act at the same time as it is filled with signifying possibilities, i.e. one can initiate or respond in any number of ways, with the expectation of intersecting the “preferred readings” of at least some of the many participants present.

The phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering the literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text (Iser 1978, p. 43)

In chatrooms this analytical consideration of the act of reception of a text extends forward, into a complex mesh of “pre-consideration” of that reception process. This is both conversation OVER-heard as well as heard, and at least semi-archived, in that while contributions scroll quickly through dialogue boxes, they do remain on screen long enough for experienced chatters to run multiple threads simultaneously. Isolating one speaker, <EMT-Calvin>, in the turns below we can see he or she goes from telling what the weather is, to discussing Mexican roofers to answering questions to giving information.

<i>speaker</i>	<i>turn</i>	<i>turns</i>
<EMT-Calvin>	1	hahahaha lol
	14	That weather building in cherryt point says it s 126 degrees in cherry point
	35	well folks im signing off here
	42	i need some sleep
	63	i like being self employed
	69	dont have to worry about someone telling me to
	70	report to worl
	82	and those folks will be sent back to mexico
	85	The locals will be the ones to get jobs
	97	folks need to be careful for con artest after the storm
	112	i aint worried our new 99 home is under warrentyu
	118	morehead guess how many tie downs are on here
	121	68 tie downs
	153	folks my God is able
	158	i have faith in jesus
	163	if he aint done with me
	164	i wont get hurt

173 thats why i have such a peace in my heart tonight  
179 so howdy neighbor  
188 but i know alot of graphms  
193 i am a member with beaufort ems  
200 folks dont worry we have got power crews coming from  
other states  
214 i am one of the carteret county personal for ems and fire  
we evacuated the beach and barrier islands today  
222 and a mandatory evacuation for folks in flood prone areas  
231 Swmp are you near paris and  
238 morehead you got a plane at beaufort air port  
252 hmmm  
259 and yes i been to topsail beach just last month to unlock a  
car  
262 hi wes  
263 Im a talkcity op also  
272 i am a room op in room called fire-4-God

---

**Table 4 CS1:23 <EMT-Calvin>'s turns**

The sophistication here rests not in the first instance in the “writing” as “utterance”, but in the phenomenological reception “writing” of attaching those utterances to conversational and broader cultural contexts: to

“receive” them as meaningful. The phenomenon of chatroom communication thus doubles the phenomenological “status” of each participatory act, to produce not “writers” and “readers”, but “writer-readers”, who consider the reception of their posting and pre-dispose its possible interpretive ambits, and “reader-writers”, who actively connect the utterances they scan to known contextual repertoires, to render them meaningful. Once again chatroom texts, seemingly so reduced and basic in semantic loading; so primitive and abbreviated in linguistic form, prove to be the complex constructions of a carefully considered communicative processing.

### CS 1.3 Discussion

The reader is left with everything to do, yet everything has already been done; the work only exists precisely on the level of his abilities; while he reads and creates, he knows that he could always create more profoundly; and this is why the work appears to him as inexhaustible and as impenetrable as an object (Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature*, 1949, p. 176).

The sorts of pre-dispositioning of interpretation or “reception” involved in chat-reading are captured here in Sartre’s attempt to capture the complex processing of literary texts. Interestingly however, Sartre here, like Eco rather later (1978), glimpses the degree to which the literary texts he is discussing are already heavily invested with what later commentators called “preferred readings”. These pre-empted interpretive strategies are built in to serious literature, which attempts, as Sartre puts it, to already do everything: to make certain that the reader “gets it right”, or reaches the

same interpretive conclusions as the reader. Eco goes as far as to suggest that those “popular” literary creations which critics consistently accuse of being “formulaic” or over-simplified in their techniques, actually offer the newly creative and “liberated” reader of the post reader-response moment, MORE freedom to interpret than those of high-literature. In popular texts, according to Eco, everything has NOT already been done’. The formulaic structure leans heavily on prior texts, inviting memory to make comparisons. Plots are often ill-knit, and character motivations unexplained. There is indeed much for the active reader to do: part of what Barthes described as the openness to interpretive ‘pleasure” in such texts, which he called “writerly” (scriptable), in that they leave the reader to “co-write” in the otherwise incomplete spaces.

Is this part of the “doubling” in role which operates inside chatrooms? While the term “scriptable” or “writerly” is useful in describing the work done by the heavily interpreting chat reader, its opposite: “lisible” or “readerly” is used by Barthes and Eco to describe not the “active” interpreting reader of the “open” text, but the “disciplined” and more “passive” readers of literary texts, in which in Sartre’s formula, “everything has already been done”. In chatrooms, where everything is very much still to do – where the rapidity of text entry and scrolling and the multiplicity of strands produces especially “scriptible” texts, entries are far from “lisible”. We thus need not the “either/or” of the old poststructural binaries in which Barthes and Eco were at that time working, but the “and-and” of poststructuralism, to allow both “posting participant” and “reading participant” to work on texts which are heavily “scriptable”. Here, I argue that we have both a “writerly writer”, and a “writerly *reader*”.

## CS 1.3.1 Two readings of a chatroom

### Chat title

There are two actual moments of reading a participant takes in understanding meaning within a chatroom. Firstly, the title of the chatroom is read. Chatrooms are divided into what could be closely referred to as communities and within the communities there are further divisions or rooms. This is like being in a section of a city that appeals to us. Chat servers are large entities with many areas for people to engage in chat<sup>[16]</sup>. For example, TalkCity.com is one of the larger chat servers and it has divided its services into three areas<sup>[17]</sup>. TalkCity reports more than 10,000 chat sessions a month, and with over 5 million active participants each month it can be seen as a significant city<sup>[18]</sup>. There are rooms for any topic imaginable and my purpose in visiting the various rooms within the TalkCity arena was to get a 'feel' for the variety of conversations in different rooms. I hoped to find whether the chatters carried on conversations which were reflective of the chatroom title. Does the "specific use" chatroom I have been analysing above, the emergency chatroom for Hurricane Floyd, display the same reading techniques as a general chatroom?.

I was unable to 'capture' dialogue in TalkCity as their rooms appear in java applets, which will not allow cutting or copying and pasting. My comments therefore, will not discuss cited examples of actual text as I do in the chatrooms in this and other case studies. Instead I will give a general overview to identify whether there is turn-taking as described in

the individual case studies above. I was not looking for actual turn-taking in these rooms but to discover whether topics of conversation were based on the title of the chatroom. Here, I sought to find how the writerly-writer who initiates a conversational thread, and the writerly-reader who responds, can be shown to demonstrate especially “open” and “active” strategies of initiating text and responding to it based on the title of the chatroom. Barthes would see this turn-taking as ever present:

The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (S/Z 1975 p. 5)

The eight TalkCity rooms I visited: *dealing-with-disability*, *diddling'n'doodling*, *flippinchicks*, *massachusetts\_flirts*, *not-necessarily married*, *married-lonely-hearts*, *not-necessarily married* and *sexy-adults-who-arent-shy*, displayed something of the rejection of an experience of predisposition towards “lisible” text which many chatroom users report experiencing – in that there is so very frequently no neatly-waiting, well-formatted, accessible text to “read”. Chat seekers have to work hard even to find that “already done for you” site. In this case I had selected the site called *dealing-with-disability*, I checked into this room on several occasions and there was no one in it. The time of day I visited was between 9 AM and Noon Australian time which meant the middle of the night in the United States of America. There was a set topic, ‘Showing we

care', but as there was no one to chat with I moved on to the next room. In this next room, *diddling'n'doodling*, I expected a far more "open" topic, the sort of invitation towards "scritibility" which would entice chatters yet no one was in this room and there was no one in the *flippinchicks* room either. I am unsure what either of these titles represents and my only reason for entering them was due to their unusual names.

It is possible that even the very undirected titles of these spaces discourage the "writerly writers" of chat, who seem much more drawn to the totally opportunistic exchanges offered by rooms titled around social relations. For chatters, these spaces are not places for texting, but for talk directed to "meeting people". In the chatroom, *massachusetts\_flirts* there were 21 visitors. In *massachusetts\_flirts* there was a lot of 'talk' with no more than the usual chatroom greetings, 'hi', and people enquiring whether there were 'any females who want cybersex'. There were a few statements, such as 'I will never eat McDonalds again', with no follow up, even by the same person. It seemed in this chatroom people were just passing time with out an obvious purpose to communicate. This is one of the features of chatrooms, which makes it a new genre of engagement. It is unusual in other forms of conversation, such as person-to-person at a public gathering for everyone to continuously to say hello and to ask if anyone wants to talk.

When in the *not-necessarily married* chatroom, which had five participants, I said I was doing a PhD on 'Conversational analysis of chatrooms' the five people already in the room used that topic to dialogue on my PhD for about half an hour. It became a question and answer chat and shows that whatever was being discussed in a chatroom can be

changed – as well as suggesting that in these “social-relational” spaces, there is most often an absence of topic.

*married-lonely-hearts*; No one in the room.

Of course, I don’t know what was previously said, but for the approximately 200 turn takings I was involved in questions and answers which were almost sequential. Someone would ask a question, and I would answer.

The *!sexy-adults-who-arent-shy* room had seven participants – and once again, when I entered, everyone wrote in something to the effect of ‘neuage are you a male or female?’

The chatserver Chatropolis (<http://www.chatropolis.com/whochat/x.html>), had 1684 users when I visited. The rooms on this server, unlike the ones in Talkcity, were very specific and the users participating were interested only in the topic in question. Chatropolis has a number of specific areas: Cybersex, Image Exchange, Alternative Lifestyle, Vampires, Bondage, S&M, Fetish, Gorean Lifestyle, Role Playing and Bars, each with many rooms such as Cybersex, which itself has sub-rooms as [Analopolis ‘*Anal Sex Chat*’], [Bed & Breakfast ‘*General Chat*’], [Bits of Tits ‘*Breast Chat*’], [Five Knuckle Shuffle ‘*Masturbation*’], [Gang Bang ‘*Cyber Sex*’] and [Hairless and Horny ‘*Shaved Smooth*’]. As with TalkCity above there are many rooms catering to whatever anyone fancies.

What I found from visiting the above chatrooms and sampling approximately twenty-turns in those that were active, was that in the rooms that had visitors they would ‘talk’ about what the title of the chatroom was. I explore this more in Case Study two when I use a pop-

celebrity, Britney Spears to explore whether people in a room focus on the topic of that room. But where the title invited chat for the purposes of establishing social or personal relationships, the texting was in fact minimal.

Before anything can be understood in a chatroom what is being said needs to be read. There are two readable texts available within chatrooms that are important to guide a person who is new in a room. Firstly, the title of the chatroom draws one to it, and establishes some predispositions towards both initiating postings, and responses to any chat already posted. However, unlike the title of an article or a book which gives an indication of what the subject matter is, the title of a chatroom may be unrelated to what is actually there. . For example, in case study 3 the title of the chatroom is 'Britney Spears Chatroom'. But in the 70 lines I 'captured' there was only one mention of Spears, in line 39,

39. <Joypeters> hello.....is.the real brittany spears on line
--

#### **Table 4 CS1:24 Britney Spears CS 3**

So was this title misleading, or could there have been discussion of Britney Spears for days, while the few lines I captured had nothing to do with her? Discussion of that site in Case Study 3 will demonstrate the degree to which chatters may be seeking more the social context of "Britney" chat, than its actual enactment – in effect, seeking fellow Britney fans as social companions, rather than information about the idol herself. In such cases, it is the second "readable text" which new entrants to a chat space use to orient their subsequent postings: the reading of the first

few lines seen when the chatroom is first entered.

Everyone who enters a chatroom has an agenda or reason to be there. It could be because they simply want to be part of an online community, or because they want to experiment with a persona, or with writing styles, or to share or gather information. Not all motivations are central for all participants – and nor are all utterances “readable” as related to all postings. With these conventions of talk-sequencing suspended by the multiple posting and the randomized entry points into the dialogue box, it is often impossible for participants to assess whether the responses are for them. When I entered the Hurricane Floyd chatroom I pasted in my initiating explanatory statement, which the ethics committee at the University of South Australia requested that I make before saving any dialogue in a chatroom for research.

<Neuage> ‘I am saving this dialogue, as long as I am in this room, to use in research on Internet Chat for a postgraduate degree. If anyone is opposed to me saving their conversation say so and I will not save the chat’.

#### **Table 4 CS1:25 Terrell statement**

The first utterance I saw after submitting my above statement was;

3. <EMT-Calvin> hahahaha lol

#### **Table 4 CS1:26 Response to Terrell statement?**

How should this be read? Was this chatter commenting on my statement

about saving chatroom dialogue or is <hahahaha lol> in response to something said earlier? Chatrooms are discourses already in process and so one is entering into an established conversation. What is “read” is not necessarily what is being “said”. The same problem would occur if we were to begin reading any text at random in a book. Until more is read one cannot correctly enter into discourse. For me, the next few lines clarified that this chatroom discussion was about the hurricane, as the title indicated:

- |  |
|--|
| 4. <TIFFTIFF18> DO U MOW IF ITS GONNA HIE JERSEY AT ALL        |
| 5. <Werblessed> Where your hous thilling                       |
| 6. <Kitteigh-Jo> near Princeton                                |
| 7. <RUSSL1> right over my place                                |
| 8. <ankash> New Jersy in under Tropical Storm Watch now Right? |

**Table 4 CS1:27 Five turns re. Storm**

Listing the first few lines I ‘captured’ from each chatroom however gives an indication only of what is being discussed at the time. Along with the reading of the title to the chatroom, the reading of these first few utterances seen in a given chatroom determines how the new participant will respond. Because most text-based chatrooms are already conversation in progress the first lines seen are rarely the starting point of the chat, yet must act so for the newcomer. It is at this moment that the accessing of “scriptible” text already entered utterances which are both

meaningful, yet open to interpretive contribution – is crucial to successful, and maybe to worthwhile, participation.

Case Study Three is the Britney Spears chatroom. The dialogue at the time of my entrance is simple and it continues for 70 more turn-takings with little more than two or three words or an abbreviation being offered. In this case the discourse was not on the music performer Britney Spears though the room was named after her. This was instead the sort of very reduced, relationally-oriented chat exchange that one would expect in a very general non-topic-specific (NTS) chatroom.

1. <SluGGiE-> lol
2. <Mickey_P_IsMine> LoL

**Table 4 CS1:28 First lines in Case Study 3**

Case Study Four is titled 'Astrology Chatroom' so we would expect to find a discussion on astrology occurring here. In the first two lines I read as I entered this was the case.

1. <gina2b> everyones a know it all!
2. <dingo42> nicole wahts your sign ??

**Table 4 CS1:29 First lines in Case Study 4**

What is shown here is that the users in this chatroom were interested in the title of the chatroom and wished to discuss astrology.

For Case Study Five I chose a room at random from one of the thousands of rooms available on the TalkCity.com chat site. It was simply called “room #50”. The lines I first read upon entry confirmed that this might indeed be a non-topic-specific chatroom.

- |  |
|--|
| 1. <tab_002> HI nice to see you too Jennv<br>:)))))) |
| 2. <Leesa39> ooooo my sweetie jake is angry          |

**Table 4 CS1:30 First lines in Case Study 5**

In this chatroom there was no specific topic and with no expectation of what the subject matter would be the visitors to this room seemed not to have a set agenda.

I chose a software development site chatroom for Case Study Six because I wanted to collect topic specific chat from a moderated chatroom. In this case study however it was not until turn ten that the topic of software was brought up. The nine turns before were greetings and utterances unrelated to the topic of the chatroom. Turns ten and eleven mark the beginning of the chat on 3D animation which continued for five-hundred more turns.

- |   |
|---|
| 10. <web3dADM> just got the Cult3D folks to agree to show up on March 3 |
| 11. <Justin> what's cult3d  |

**Table 4 CS1:31 First lines in Case Study 6**

For Case Study 7 I have used a chatroom on baseball. Here, not only are the usernames related to baseball, but the statements are all about baseball teams:

4. <BLUERHINO11>	sox beat the tribe
5. <NMMprod>	Nop
6. <MLB-LADY>	no clev fan but like wright

**Table 4 CS1:32 First lines in Case Study 7**

These two chatrooms have discussion on the title of the chatroom and nothing else was spoken of.

Two other chatrooms I have mentioned in my case studies also reveal that right from the time I entered the chatroom it was clear what the conversation was about.

<Latexena>	she does have nice tata's
<Zeedo>	ever see what goes on in a slaughter house

**Table 4 CS1:33 First lines in bondage chatroom**

<Cupid's Sister>	Dolly.....Nowhere that's just how I am.....I prayed hard to God for my father to recover....but God took him and now my father is in heaven
------------------	---

**Table 4 CS1:34 First lines in christian****chatroom**

Whereas turn-taking is thought of primarily as a two-part turn taking system, in chatrooms there are so many voices that actual individual turn-taking has to be teased out to find meaning in dialogue and to discover who is speaking. For example, in the multilogue in this chatroom, the text in 73 is not answered until 83.

73.	<lookout4110>	How ya holding up Werblessed?
83.	<Werblessed>	So far just strong wind gusts and lots of rain.. Over 8 inches so far..

**Table 4 CS1:35 73 is not answered until 83**

See Appendix table 9, for the ten turn takings between.

I refer to these gaps between responses as Chatter's-Event-Response Gaps (CERG). In Figure CS1.4 there are ten other turns involving eight chatters, who discuss other issues. <Werblessed> having read <lookout4110>'s utterance, and perhaps the ten in between, chose to answer <lookout4110> and not anyone else. This could be because <Werblessed> was named in turn 73 and in the 282 turn-takings I 'captured', only two other times was <Werblessed> addressed - and that was later in the chat dialogue, in turn 101 and turn 102.

101.	<ger3355>	where is that at werblessed?
102.	<guest-mandy> ^96	werblessed where are you

**Table 4 CS1:36 Utterance to...**

There are eight individuals between this question and answer, yet, as is often the case in chatrooms, we can find dialogue. How does this happen? Without reading the text as it rapidly scrolls by, there cannot be an answer. And this is a comparatively easy example to follow. Often there will be dozens of turns, with dozens of speakers, and no one is directly addressed, yet there is a turn taking, and a conversation develops between two or more individuals in the midst of a more general conversation.

Two ways in which chatters can identify whether to respond to the posting by someone else is firstly if he or she is addressed directly such as <Werblessed> is here. Secondly, the chatter may choose to respond by deciding whether or not the topic may signify him or her, or having meaning for him or her, i.e.

223. <guest-MoreheadCityNC>	Worried, who's worried?
224. <guest-ohNO>	i am:)

**Table 4 CS1:37 Answer un-named**

Three Hurricane Floyd discussion strands

I have saved three approaches of online communication for this case study to illustrate how chatroom 'talk' differs from other Internet based conversations. The first is a bulletin board of one-way communication where people were able to leave messages for others in the '1999 Message Line of World Wide Inquiries Lost and Found Hurricane Floyd Review'. An example from this communication shows that the writers are

not engaged in real-time conversation, i.e. there is a day in between the correspondence, but they are leaving messages to describe their situation<sup>[19]</sup>,

09-14-99	Graham,D East Bay St., Charleston, SC	Gone to Atlanta, am fine I will call; cell phone dead. Went by and picked up Betsy.
09-15-99 - 11:23 AM	Greene,G Effingham, SC	Am fine, hatches battened out, going to Mother's

**Table 4 CS1:38 Storm bulletin board**

The second online message shows the difference between a chatroom correspondence as in Figure CS1.31 and a text which may have been planned before sending online. This was on the Hurricane Floyd Messages board<sup>[20]</sup>,

By <wpapas> on Monday, September 13, 1999 - 08:45 am:

Significant safety concerns for family, friends, and property on San Salvador, Rum Key, Turks & Cacos. If anyone is on line there Please post to messaging board, I know there are those monitoring short wave radio on San Salvador; Please radio The "Pitts" Sandra & Nick on San Salvador and forward any request or messages. There was very little news before after and during Dennis.

Sincerely. Wp

**Table 4 CS1:39 Hurricane Floyd Messages board**

## 48. <ankash> Tornadoes in Pender Count

**Table 4 CS1:40 Floyd chatroom**

The difference between a text-based chatroom and the bulletin board and message board above is shown in the immediacy and shortness of statements in the chatroom. There is little Reader-Response Theory time to what is said in a text-based chat and word usage to transfer meaning must be short and understandable by others in the room. Often there is not an expected immediate response with bulletin board or email messages, as the one or others addressed may not be online.

The role of the reader in a chatroom is ultimately to become the writer of a text. If the person is only an observer or lurker, then the role of the reader can involve any number of motives.

But when one participates fully in a chatroom, strategies must come into play in order that the reader may find meaning not only in the words, with their misspellings and often improper grammar, but also in the use of emotions and abbreviations.

One of the features of 'Reception and Reader-Response Theory' as I am using it in chatrooms is that it shows how a reader brings certain assumptions to a text based on the interpretive strategies he/she has brought to a particular community, from other social-cultural contexts. Increasingly, such socio-cultural contextual experience and therefore capacity for interpretation involves on-line communities themselves. The community here then is the Internet community itself, and every chatroom is an individual textual based social community. Interpretation of the text

will depend on the perceived purposes or dynamics or cultural sphere of the chatroom community. And reactions to specific instances of chatroom utterance will depend on general regulatory features established within that talk, even if nowhere else. The fact that such 'talk' within a community can at times be 'policed' by others within the chatroom, indicates that users are consciously developing special regulatory systems. For example, a 'speaker' may be harassed into either conforming or leaving a chatroom if their talk is inappropriate for that room.

A mild form of this is present in the lines I have been working with in this first section. The 'speaker', <SWMPHNG> in turns 105 and 115 is starting a process of getting the chatroom interested in talking about Mexican roofers. The 'speaker' <Zardiw> in turn 123 makes a short sharp comment to let <SWMPHNG> know that his/her lines of dialogue are not necessarily appropriate. Of course this is a very mild rebuttal compared to when several participators push a person out. An example of this can be found in a chatroom where a voice appearing as a rude male has entered and is harassing a room of females who do not want the male impute. Then the voices become more harsh and attack the 'intruder' until he leaves.

105 <SWMPHNG>	YOU AINT TALKING ABOUT MEX ROOFERS ARE YOU?
---------------	--

115 <SWMPHNG>	i SAW A BUS LOAD HEADING ACROSS THE GEORGIA STATE LINE THIS MORNING
---------------	--

123 <Zardiw> smptthing.....go back to your SWAMP

**Table 4 CS1:41 Annoyed response**

## CS 1.4 Answers

### CS 1.4.1 The Reader is the writer who is writing the reader J

*The Reader is the writer who is writing the reader J* was my original question for this chatroom. To write in a chatroom is to seek to be read, to provoke recognition and the response which guarantees socially constructed identity. It is an existential act. The reader's response is also the response the writer seeks – and works to provoke.

A reading of any text produces a set of responses or gives us any variation of feedback as I have shown in this Case Study, even my question above, 'The Reader is the Writer who is writing the reader :)' can produce a large number of sequences of textual responses, for example in a search engine we can get thousands of websites shown just by putting in almost any words. For example, if I put in 'Hi' in Google, I get, '20,800,000' responses. How different is it then in a chatroom, when there are so many ways to group our two to six words, to interpret the words or phrase we write?

129. <guest-Jojo>                      pretty freaky

**Table 4 CS1:42 Pretty freaky**

'*Pretty freaky*' has 128,000 responses in Google. It is only in context that our words can mean anything and this, content, I explore in each of my Case Studies.

CS 1.4.2 Does the reader or the writer, produce meaning within 'this' chatroom, or do they create meaning together?

Both the person writing and the one reading are co-language-meaning creators. Meaning cannot exist in a vacuum and the only time a vacuum of communication exists in a chatroom is when there is only one person present. I could be present in a chatroom and write my whole thesis, with questions and answers and text continuing forever. However, if no one joins me, or even if someone does join the chatroom and only reads my writing and does not write anything then there is not a conversation. Chatroom text takes us further than Sartre's, "The reader is left with everything to do, yet everything has already been done...; (Sartre's, *What is Literature* (1949, p. 138). Of course he was not anticipating the type of reading done in chatrooms, where not everything is done for the reader. Later commentators come closer to the interactive or inter-textual work enabled by chatroom technologies, seeing the rather more active role played by readers as (at least) co-authors of texts. The passive reader is no longer passive. In a chatroom even the one who reads and does not engage with others occasions response, being denounced or at best tolerated by participants, and called by the derogatory title of a lurker, one not involved, but considered close to the socially unacceptable role of the voyeur or stalker. For this thesis I have been nothing more than a lurker in all my Case Studies. I have saved the log files of the chatters and not contributed once in any of the chatrooms. I have been a reader only, or a

lurker. I defend this role as observer-researcher who is tracking conversation to develop a theory or theories of how people communicate online – so that even my indirect “writing back” ultimately produces an interactivity: a long delayed, but nevertheless culturally and socially responsible, “response”.

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[1] I have also saved sections of chat from September 11, un-moderated chat as well as a moderated chat of the same event with an ABC radio moderator. The moderated chat had a heading: “How easy is it to hijack a plane? Are pilots trained to handle such a situation? ABCNEWS Aviation Analyst John Nance will answer your questions about today's events in a live chat at 7:30 p.m. ET. Nance is a decorated Air Force pilot and a veteran of Vietnam and Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. He serves as a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve and has extensive flight experience, having logged more than 13,000 hours of flight time in his commercial airline and Air Force careers. Please post your questions for him now in the space below”. At the same time I ‘captured’ a chat from a un-moderated chatroom: afghanchat. This comparative sample of chatroom dialogue is stored at: [http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated\\_unmoderated.htm](http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/moderated_unmoderated.htm).

[2]. McCarthy, Ciarán P. Reading Theory as a Microcosm of the Four Skills. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/McCarthy-Reading.html> accessed 6-05-2000

[3] Not all chatrooms reveal what is being said letter by letter. In most chatrooms the writer of the text needs to click the ‘enter’ key before the writing appears on the screen ready for others to see.

[4] Metaphysical-chat-linguistics is anticipating what will be said before the completion of the utterance, either due to the writer-speaker hitting the 'enter' key on the keyboard or the chat server not allowing more than a couple of lines at a time to be shown on the screen, thus breaking the conversation before it is completed.

[5] The alphanumeric keyboard key board is the same on computers, electronic organizers and typewriters.

[6] Wolfgang Iser's First sentence in the Preface to his book, "The Act of Reading" (1978 p. ix) is, "As a literary text can only produce a response when it is read, it is virtually impossible to describe this response without also analysing the reading process".

[7] Fish wrote that 'readers belong to the same "interpretive communities" with shared reading strategies, values and interpretive assumptions (i.e., shared "discourse")'. His "informed reader" fits well into this discussion of an ideal reader, who shares values and strategies in order to enter, comment, maintain and even to change the discourse in a chatroom. Fish, 1980, p. 36)

[8] The hermeneutic philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, says, "The idea of the original reader [and hence of a recoverable historical meaning] is full of unexamined idealization."

[9] Barthes held that everyday culture in all its forms could be analysed in terms of language of communication (both visual and verbal) and culturally specific discourses. As this thesis progresses it will become clear that this same principle applies in the chatroom.

[10] Lurking in a chatroom is when someone enters the discussion but says nothing. Whether lurking is an actual turn or not differs by the person describing the turn taking. I have saved a dialogue from the Internet listserv group languse on turn taking at <http://se.unisa.edu.au/lurking.htm>.

[11] There is not the scope to research SMS Messaging in this thesis except to say that it has different ramifications. Chatrooms are quite often used for entertainment or needs of a psychological, sociological nature (taking on another identify than one usually acts out) where as SMS Messages may be about meeting at a certain time or place and the messages are so much shorter than online that there needs to be a precise outcome of the utterance sent.

[12] Grabe (1992:50-3) lists six: the perceptual automatic recognition skill; linguistic skills; knowledge and skills of discourse structure and organisation; knowledge of the world; synthetic and critical evaluation skills and metalinguistic knowledge and skills.

[13] It would be easy to side-track but a point that should also be taken into account is that it is now possible to be in a conversation with a chatter-bot (bot being like a robot) without knowing it. Chatter-bots can and do participate in online chatrooms and email lists without necessarily being identified as bots. Online, the source of chatter-bot conversation becomes ambiguous. In an Internet chatroom or on an email list, it can be impossible to know whether you are conversing with a human being or a piece of software. (Auslander 1997). What happens to the writer – reader when they don't know they are interacting with a robot online? Some example of chatter-bots are the Eliza Bots, which tries to match a pattern in your input and produces an answer from a list of available answer patterns for this input pattern. If there is none it will try to launch the conversation with a few random sentences or it also might look at you and your inventory and say something about you for the same purpose. A site that provides software so anyone can create their own chatter-bot is at, <http://tecfa.unige.ch/guides/js/ex-intro/chat-bot-text.html>.

[14] One definition of Fish's on meaning is; "...[Meanings] will not be objective because they will always have been the product of a point of view rather than having been simply 'read off'; and they will not be subjective because that point of view will always be social or institutional. Or by the same reasoning, one could say that they are both subjective and objective: they are subjective because they adhere to a particular point of view and are therefore not universal; and they are objective because the point of view that delivers them is public and conventional, rather than individual or unique." (Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? pp. 335-6).

[15] Stanley Fish. [1980] Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 27.

[16] There are many large chat servers. Several of the well known ones are:

WIS chat	<a href="http://www.wis.sa.gov.au">http://www.wis.sa.gov.au</a>
Excite people & chat	<a href="http://chatesp.excite.com/">http://chatesp.excite.com/</a>
Yahoo chat	<a href="http://chat.yahoo.com/?myHome">http://chat.yahoo.com/?myHome</a>
WWB chat	<a href="http://wwbchat.com/login/index.shtml">http://wwbchat.com/login/index.shtml</a>
Chat Planet	<a href="http://www.chatplanet.net/">http://www.chatplanet.net/</a>
Chatbase	<a href="http://www.chatbase.com">http://www.chatbase.com</a>

OmniChat! <http://www.4-lane.com/>

Microsoft's Chat <http://communities.msn.com/people>

[17] The three main areas of TalkCity are; Hosted Rooms (“Our safest rooms, with hosts who help keep the conversation on track -- and help new chatters feel at home”), rooms in this area are: TalkCity-Lobby+, TalkCity-News+ and TalkCity-NewToChat+. Featured Rooms (“Rooms where chatters prefer to follow Talk City Standards. Rooms may be owned and hosted by members. Conversations on TalkCity run the gamut from personal lives to sports to world events. Here are some rooms with a focus on different subjects. This is a good starting place for finding people with interests similar to yours.”), rooms in this area are: Local-Texas+, TeenTalk+ and Headlines-Computers+. And Open Rooms (“Open category rooms are not regularly moderated or monitored. Visitors accept additional risks when chatting here”), some of the rooms in this area (there are more than 500 rooms) are: MarriedNLonely, Tennessee-Chatters and Wellness as well as the rooms I list below which I visited.

[18] Talk City can be viewed as the second largest city in the United States, in between New York City and Los Angeles. [http://www.talkcity.com/notice/letter\\_oct1.html](http://www.talkcity.com/notice/letter_oct1.html) viewed, 2002-05-28.

[19] Hurricane Floyd Messages are saved at, <http://se.unisa.edu.au/phd/storm/bb.htm>

[20] Hurricane Floyd Message Boards begin at,

<http://www.viexpo.com/discus/messages/81/327.html>

[http://se.unisa.edu.au/1\\_files/Disaster\\_Message\\_Service1.htm](http://se.unisa.edu.au/1_files/Disaster_Message_Service1.htm) (saved on my server for reference)