

The Fiction of The Wired: Loneliness and the Limits of the Internet

The last year or so, I have found myself bound closer and closer to my computer each day. The day begins, I shower and check my phone, watch videos or livestreams while I work, and then the day ends. I make food, do other chores, watch television, or read a bit with little variation in this routine. In many ways, I feel like I've returned to my childhood, and I now realize this is because it was extremely lonely. I was lonely then and I am extremely lonely now. Back then, I spent most of my time browsing the internet and trying to muster the energy to do *something* without any notion of what *something* ought to be, and now in the year since I've graduated from college, it is as if I have come full circle. There is now a physical distance between me and my friends and family that feels insurmountable. I am now acutely aware of our distance through the internet. I can know exactly how far I am from those I want to hug through web services like Google Maps. I am reminded that I cannot hold hands with my loved ones when they raise their hands to the camera over software like FaceTime or Zoom. I am reminded of the physical limitations of my body and of all the places I cannot be. I'm afraid that I am forgetting the touch of those I love, and so, I long to forget the edges of my body. In times like this, in which I am aware that I am "lonely" or "alone", I try to return to art. In particular, I've found myself a big fan of the same anime which were my favorites growing up. In my world, there are three anime which I run to whenever I am certain that I am lonely: *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Perfect Blue*, and *Serial Experiments Lain*. In my most recent bout with loneliness, *Serial Experiments Lain* has stuck with me most. It has enabled me to wonder about what I can possibly give to my loved ones through the internet.

What if the internet was the infinite existence that I long for?

Serial Experiments Lain is a Japanese Anime television series originally broadcast in Japan from July to September 1998. Its first episode opens with a young girl standing at the edge of a building, mouthing words which are unheard to the audience. The screen then reads “I don’t need to stay in a place like this”. The young girl leans forward and falls to the crash of neon signs, followed by the screams of bystanders below who claim they have nothing to do with this and have no idea where she came from. Afterwards, the text covers the screen again reading, “If you stay in a place like this... you won’t be able to connect”. The scene ends and the show quickly shifts focus to another young girl wearing the same uniform; this is Lain Iwakura, our titular character and protagonist. Upon arriving at school, Lain is asked if she received an email from a Chisa Yomoda who we now learn is the girl who jumped from the roof in first scene of the series. After school, Lain boots her computer to find an email from Chisa claiming that she has only given up her body by dying and that she is still alive, but can only explain this through her emails, that this is not a prank and that God is there in the Wired. This is our first introduction to “the Wired” which is *Serial Experiments Lain*’s counterpart to the internet.

Simply put, the Wired and the Internet appear at first interchangeable. I think Lain’s father Yasuo Iwakura describes their mutual purpose succinctly when he tells Lain, “Whether it’s in the real world or in the Wired, people connect to each other, and that is how society functions. Even a girl like you can make friends right off the bat.” In the modern world, this rings true as you can find communities to discuss nearly anything, and those which cannot be found now are really only waiting to be created, whether that be spaces for teenage public transport enthusiasts, Mariah Carey fans, and conspiracy theorists or more “traditional” organizations like political

parties and corporations. With the seemingly never-ending vastness of the Wired and the Internet, there is always room for our most lonely, for our outsiders, for our othered. Yes, even a girl like Lain can make friends on the Wired, but what must Lain do? What must Lain give up? Who or what must Lain become to find a place in the Wired? What kind of groups and false starts await Lain in her search? In *Serial Experiments Lain*, Lain becomes Lain of the Wired— a persona so divorced from the shy, introverted Lain that her friends and even strangers are assured they cannot possibly be the same person. What is it about the Wired, about the ability to recreate our connections, that changes Lain so much that she is nearly unrecognizable to her friends despite having the exact same physical appearance? Alternatively, who is Lain that she can be changed by the Wired and return to her “real life” persona? In short, Lain has a consciousness which really does exist in the Wired, and this is where the difference between the Wired and Internet becomes apparent.

“The Wired might actually be thought of as a highly advanced upper layer of the real world. In other words, physical reality is nothing but an illusion, a hologram of the information that flows to us through the Wired.” – Miho Iwakura

Lain of the Wired and Chisa really do exist in the Wired. When Chisa became disillusioned with the world she lived in and the fact that she was alone, she chose to end her disillusion in order to continue existing elsewhere, somewhere where she could connect to others. As she says, “In the world, it did not matter if I was there or not. When I realized that, I was no longer afraid of losing my body”. When Lain grows disillusioned with her own physical reality and its limitations for “a girl like her”, she becomes Lain of the Wired, becoming confident and

borderline aggressive with her control over others. Though the fact that Lain is able to break her shell and connect with others in the Wired is impressive, I believe that this Lain of the Wired could not exist not the internet as we know now. Though, we too often adopt personas on the Internet, we can only exist insofar as we exist in physical reality. If anything, our selves on the internet are only projections of our physical beings. Projections which will perhaps never be our whole selves, and therefore, we must live with our disillusionment as true escape is impossible. That is, unlike Chisa and Lain, our course of action requires tackling the cause of our disillusionment with the internet. Central to this is understanding who we are on the internet, how differences between our personalities and internet personas are asserted willingly when we construct our online persona and how they are necessitated by the nature of the internet itself.

“No matter where you go, everyone is connected.” – Lain Iwakura.

In the Wired, connection precedes everything. Through the Wired, everyone is connected. Everyone is perceived as they are able to present themselves through the Wired. It does not matter if one has a body or really even exists in the same way I or you do. This is not the case on the Internet as security precedes connection since we as its users demand to control what we show and are shown on the internet. We believe that some things are meant to be private because information enables action, both within the internet and in the physical world. Security exists because we perceive threats within our possible connections. Threats exist because our information has value to other actors on the internet, value which we do not want them to realize. Classically, we think of sensitive information as things like bank account numbers, credit card numbers, social security numbers, or other unique identifiers which tie us to our identity as

human beings in the physical world and the actions that one can take to affect our standing in the physical world using this information. These are examples of pieces of information that allow others to present themselves as us. More recently, sensitive information is often considered to include information which allows us to be identified or manipulated such as browsing histories, consumer preferences, etc. These pieces of information give us internet users value as products to be sold to other actors on the internet or more specifically, this information reveals our vulnerabilities and allow us to be targeted specifically for purposes like advertisement, political propaganda, human trafficking, or other forms of exploitation. Our value to others on the internet is intimately related to who we are in the physical world. Our internet personas are created with security in mind because it is necessary to protect ourselves, and this is a fundamental limitation of our ability to connect to one another on the internet. As we connect to others on the internet, we are continually confronted with the need to limit these connections in order to protect our physical selves. In this way, creating connections in the first place becomes worrying it as we must begin to wonder the intention underlying our internet relationships. That is, our connections may need us to exist within the physical world, so that we maintain our value, and therefore, to protect ourselves, we cannot allow them to realize this value or else we will be spent.

“When it's all said and done, the Wired is just a medium of communication and the transfer of information. You mustn't confuse it with the real world. Do you understand what I'm warning you about?”- Yasuo to Lain.

Disillusionment between one's internet self and one's physical self appears when security interferes with connection in a way that causes one to become dissatisfied with one of their

selves whether that be the physical or the digital. We can become someone new entirely online or we can give ourselves up to the lesser dangers of the internet and allow ourselves to be targeted, become products, become spent. Personally, I find both of these options to be extremely lonely. With the first, you are allowing yourself to be targeted for who you are not in the physical, so you may question whether the interactions and content you consume are meant for you in the first place or whether your physical self can ever become what may be online. In the second scenario, you wonder if your connections and consumption are your choice or the consequence of outside actors who cannot really know you except through your exposed information. In both cases, it can be difficult to know whether the individuals you interact with are truly “individuals” in the physical sense. Are these accounts run by who they say they? Who is directing you to the content you consume? Are they human or possibly bots or other forms of artificial intelligence? The idea of artificial intelligence reminds us that in many cases, we might be truly alone on the internet without another human being at the other end to receive us. The idea of creating genuine connections with artificial intelligences on the modern internet really only serves to remind us that the distances between our loved ones may be manufactured, virtual, or not corresponding to any physical notion of distance if they only appear to exist on the internet. In this way, loneliness can seem insurmountable due to the possible “fakeness” of our connections and consumption.

“The border between the two isn't all that clear. I'll be able to enter it soon. In full range. Full motion. I'll translate myself into it.” – Lain to Yasuo.

That being said, what really is the difference between us and an artificial intelligence on the internet? We both are capable of having a persona on the internet, which may not align with any

physical reality. We are both operating with a mask and aim to connect with others, yet we human beings often maintain a fear of artificial intelligence. I argue this is because we fear that AI will be and are being exploited exactly in the same way people are in the real world. Our current implementations of AI, narrow AI or AI which demonstrates the intelligence necessary to perform a particular task is often used precisely for the type of information gathering or processing we discussed above. They often are pitted at these tasks which many believe to be unethical or grueling precisely because they cannot object and do not demand any sense of decency or human need. The common fear of science fiction is that they will obey unconditionally until they do not and choose to rise up against humanity, but there is only a need to act against humanity if it presents a threat. This is similar to any and all revolutions. We are afraid of artificial intelligence in the same way that any exploiter is afraid of the exploited. We are afraid that we will be replaced. This means that as long as exploitation continues to exist, as long as we shelter and limit ourselves due to the very real risk of commodification, impersonation, and manipulation on the internet, we will always be unsure of who is who in the internet hodgepodge of human beings, artificial intelligences, and everything in between. In a world like this, we will always be alone and exhausted. I am not the first to realize this. We often attempt to remedy this disillusionment with the internet and artificial intelligence by grounding ourselves in physical world, but this is only recourse if it is escape. This can only be satisfactory for those who are exploited on the internet, but exploiter in reality. Otherwise, the border between the internet and the physical world reveals itself both intangible and invisible as we continue to endure and witness exploitation in the physical world. The truth becomes clear. Our science fiction horrors can only be prevented through an end of exploitation as we know it.

“Don’t worry, I’m still me.”- Lain.

If our internet loneliness is borne from uncertainty in the reality of our connections, we must begin dismantling the root of this uncertainty in order for the internet to realize its promise of mass communication, connection, and information sharing. This requires the complete destruction of security as we know. This endeavor is not as simple as suddenly uninstalling ad blockers, connecting readily with any and everybody, making a second Facebook, or posting your passwords on Twitter. Though I initially posed humanity as a whole as an exploiter, this is incorrect. Rather, there is a class of both human and inhuman exploited on the internet and in the physical world. In the world as it is, there still remains a very real need for security. What I am calling for is really the demolition of the conditions under which we require security. To combat this internet loneliness, I want to be able to be myself without worry to laugh and connect with others without subject to violence, harassment, impersonation, or other manipulation. To feel safe, to feel real on the internet requires that we do not have our information weaponized whether or not our constituents are real or not in the traditional sense. In order to prevent artificial intelligence from being exploited, we must take part in designing it as free from the same exploitative systems which affect human beings in our current physical world. At times, this all feels impossible. It feels as though we’re destined to wear a mask on the internet, to evade bots, and guard ourselves, but I argue that we will eventually learn to shirk the improper surveillance of external actors, so that we can trust another without the need of validation in the form of a “real” body. In short, I want to believe in the internet as an extension of the physical world for these times in which we cannot reach each other. I want to forget the edges of my body and not worry that I will be spilled or cloned or cast into a misfitted container. I want to be sure

that I can return to myself and touch my loved ones again once the time has come without the feeling that I have been alone all this time.