

THE STONE

This Friendship Has Been Digitized

Do I need to explain to my son that a bot will never have his back?

By **Stephen T. Asma**

Mr. Asma is a professor of philosophy.

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“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” my 15-year-old son shouted from his room. “I’m playing Xbox with a friend.”

“Who’s your friend?” I inquired.

“A guy named Scuzzball,” he replied.

“Oh, what’s Scuzzball’s real name?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” he said, slightly annoyed.

“Where’s he from?” I continued.

“Somewhere in Canada, I think ... no, wait, maybe it’s France. I don’t really know. Oh, wait, it doesn’t even matter, because Scuzzball just left the game and he’s been replaced with a bot.”

“That sucks,” I tried to commiserate. “Your buddy is replaced by artificial intelligence?”

“It doesn’t matter, Dad, it happens all the time! The game continues.”

My son’s indifference about playing with a person or a bot is actually very typical of gamers these days. They refer to one another as “friends,” but to me their bond looks very tenuous. I don’t recognize any sense in which Scuzzball and my son are real friends. And that concerns me. I wonder whether the pre-internet, face-to-face experience of friendship that I knew growing up will be lost to our post-internet children. And I’m not alone.

Friendship has been an important part of our understanding of the “good life,” as far back as we can trace the human story. “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” which is perhaps our oldest tale, written some 4,000 years ago, is a bromance of sorts between Gilgamesh and his beloved friend Enkidu. The Bible, too, celebrates friendship in the story of Naomi and Ruth, revealing Ruth’s great loyalty and devotion despite the lack of blood ties.

Each year, more and more of our lives take place in the digital space. The average teenager spends up to nine hours a day online. My freshman college students tell me they are actually on screens for around 12 hours a day, since almost all homework is also now online. According to a 2018 Pew report, nearly 90 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds regularly use social media. In 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement warning, “Children who overuse online media are at risk of problematic internet use, and heavy users of video games are at risk of internet gaming disorder.” Even Silicon Valley is growing skeptical about digital utopia; 32 percent of tech professionals now believe digital life will harm our mental well-being over the coming decade.

Around 2005, people reported that the average number of their strong friendships had dropped from three to two. At the end of a 2006 study, close to 25 percent of respondents said they didn’t have *anyone* they could truly trust. More recent research suggests that these trends are persisting, as intimacy among teenagers is replaced by efficiency.

The loss of intimacy, however, does not seem to be a concern among the young people actually growing up online; they report feeling socially supported by large networks of online “friends” whom they rarely or never see face-to-face. Getting “likes” and other forms of digital grooming from larger audiences validates their repeated self-disclosures.

But do these young people even know what they are missing? And does it matter?

Social isolation has certainly increased in Japan, where half a million young people live as “hikikomori” — recluses who don’t leave their homes. And loneliness in Britain has increased enough that the government has created a “minister for loneliness.” According to a new survey, 86 percent of American and British citizens believe that “increased use of technology” is contributing

to social isolation.

Some of the earliest philosophical work on friendship comes from Aristotle, who pointed out in his “Nicomachean Ethics” that friendships of pleasure and utility are easily formed but also easily abandoned because such bonds are flimsy. Deep friendship, by contrast, is when you care for your friend *for her sake*, not for any benefit you can accrue from the relation. This is selfless friendship. You can have only a couple of these friends because they require a lot of time, work and effort, and a general blending or intertwining of two lives. You have to clock time with these people, and you must make sacrifices for each other.

Classmates and workmates can become friends, as can fellow members of sports teams and musical groups, spouses, religious or military colleagues, and so on. These examples suggest that friendship needs three criteria for full realization: shared experience, loyalty and shared intentionality, or mental connection.

What about in the digital sphere? Our online “friends” — whether it’s Scuzball or the Facebook friend you’ve never met — satisfy the intentionality criterion, because we communicate extensively with language and report to each other long-term goals, disappointments, beliefs and other facets of mental life.

We can share experiences with a person online, but the experiences seem thin when compared with face-to-face experiences. Online adventures (social networking, gaming) can certainly strengthen friendship bonds that were forged in more embodied interactions, but can they create those bonds?

Teenagers playing “Call of Duty” with online teams, for example, are having collective emotional experiences, as in the case when my son’s squad must work to capture the enemy’s munitions. And these shared adventures strongly trigger the dopamine pleasure system, so it seems like there should be bonding. However, the online “friends” may be little more than dopamine-dosing tools and easily replaced without much dissonance. Indeed, one doesn’t even know who Scuzball is, or where he lives, or if he’s a he, or if he is a person or a bot.

The kind of presence required for deep friendship does not seem cultivated in many online interactions. Presence in friendship requires “being with” and “doing for” (sacrifice). The forms of “being with” and “doing for” on social networking sites (or even in interactive gaming) seem trivial because the stakes are very low.

More important, the “shared space” of digital life is disembodied space. We cannot really touch one another, smell one another, detect facial expressions or moods, and so on. Real bonding is more biological than psychological and requires physical contact. The emotional entanglement of real friendship produces oxytocin and endorphins in the brains and bodies of friends — cementing them together in ways that are more profound than other relationships.

It is possible that virtual reality and augmented reality technology will soon be able to generate such friendship-forming experiences. Having embodied adventures with another person — even in a V.R. suit — is more likely to trigger the deeper oxytocin-based bonding. Current social networking, however, seems to privilege the shallow triggers of the brain’s reward system (dopamine squirts in the ventral tegmental area).

Perhaps the most defining feature of deep friendship is “doing for,” as when my friend has my back in a combat situation or, more prosaically, brings me soup or medicine when I’m sick. Only strong bonds, built through embodied mutual activities, have the power to motivate real sacrifices. But it is unclear why online “friends” would bother to do the hard work of friendship. When the going gets tough, wouldn’t my disembodied online friend just retreat to frictionless virtual friends who have few needs and make few demands? When I asked my undergraduate students whether they had people in their lives who would bring them soup when they’re sick, they laughed at my Stone Age query and said they’d just order soup from GrubHub or UberEats.

In the end there are three possibilities regarding friendship and digital life. First, digital life replicates all of the essential criteria of friendship, so there’s nothing to worry about. I sincerely doubt that. Alternatively, digital life fills and absorbs waking life time so that people do not engage in paradigm cases of friendship (like sports, collective arts, free-range childhoods, etc.). In this way, digital life contributes to certain kinds of social isolation. Or last, digital life produces false friendships (because they are relatively disembodied). In other words, young people do not know that they lack real friends.

Maybe our fears about technology are exaggerated. My son reminds me that the average American kid still gets an enormous amount of face-to-face social time in school every day.

“We hang out!” he told me, when I asked what he does with his friends. “During lunch and free time we play multiplayer games on our phones,” he elaborated, “and we talk about the girls and teachers. We help each other with homework. We insult each other and laugh at memes, and maybe pull some pranks.”

When I asked what makes a good friend, he said, “Friends should have common interests, and I like it if the person is funny. I guess they should also be nice and loyal ... but be able to give and take a good put-down too!”

These modest criteria are pretty close to my own. In my own friendships, I’m willing to accept that flawed attachments are better than none, so I guess I should extend the same realism to my son’s generation.

In truth, the more I learn about online life, the more I begin to doubt my understanding of friendship altogether. It wouldn’t be the first time I theorized something into a corner.

I was surprised and moved, for example, to learn from a BBC report about a young man named Mats Steen whose body was severely disabled by Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Before his death at 25, he had accumulated many devoted friends in the virtual space of “World of Warcraft” as a well-loved muscular avatar.

On his blog, Steen wrote: “There my handicap doesn’t matter, my chains are broken and I can be whoever I want to be. In there I feel normal.” Some of his closest friends online did not even know about his disability, and they became close because their nightly communications jumped straight over the usual biases of gender, race, religion, place, age, ability, and got on with the mysterious bonding of souls, via the shared minutiae of everyday struggle. Some of Steen’s online friends flew to Norway from various countries to attend his funeral and pay respects to his family. As a measure of friendship, that’s way more impressive than bringing someone soup.

Our worries about online life are inevitable, I suppose. We’ve never seen anything quite like it in the social world before. But maybe, just maybe, the kids are all right. Maybe even that Scuzzball kid.

Stephen Asma is a professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago and a member of the Public Theologies of Technology and Presence program at the Institute of Buddhist Studies. He is a co-author of “The Emotional Mind: The Affective Roots of Culture and Cognition.”

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