

Internet Relay Chat

From Fish Slap to LOL

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If you were to spend 30 minutes on any Internet Relay Chat channel in the late 1990s, chances are good you'd see someone slap another person around a bit with a large trout.

So I observed when I started hanging out on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) as part of an ethnographic study I conducted in 1998. IRC is a multiparticipant text chat that takes place in real time on forums or "channels" hosted on interconnected servers. Created by a student intern at the University of Oulu in Finland in 1988, IRC was flourishing at the time of my study, boasting hundreds of thousands of user-created channels, each name preceded by the # sign. For almost any topic you'd like to discuss or get help with, from #altruism to #teensex, there was an IRC channel that would serve your interests. Indeed, IRC was one of the earliest forms of social media, before social media existed as such. Although its popularity has been overtaken by web forums and social network sites since its peak in 2003, when there were more than 500,000 IRC servers worldwide,ⁱ as of 2021 IRC still exists on nearly 200,000 servers, and its chat protocol has been adapted for use on contemporary platforms such as Discord and Twitch.tv.ⁱⁱ

And even if you've never heard of it, you probably use language in your online communication that originated in IRC. This includes that prototypical example of modern netspeak, LOL ("laugh out loud"). That expression (and its variants lololol, lols, lulz, etc.) traces its lineage back to the same source as the Fish Slap—that is, constructions of the type:

* Susan slaps DrDoom around a bit with a large troutⁱⁱⁱ

On IRC, such third-person, self-referential expressions are known as “actions,” one of a set of line commands that allow IRC users to interact with the system and other users in a channel. Typing basic “slash” commands such as `/join` and `/nick` in the interface of an IRC client results in changes of state (such as joining a channel or creating a “nickname” or username). Similarly, one can type `/whois` (to see a user’s profile information), `/ignore` (to prevent a user’s text from appearing on one’s screen), or `/part` (to leave a channel).

The trout-slap, in contrast, is an example of an *action command* produced by typing `/me` followed by a verb in the simple present tense plus any additional specifications. The output replaces `/me` with the user’s nickname and displays a message in which the user appears to perform the action, like the example above of me slapping `DrDoom` with a large trout. On some IRC servers, the trout-slap became so popular that it got its own abbreviated command: `/slap`. Other abbreviated action commands include `/give`, `/laugh`, `/eye`, `/tag`, `/throw`, `/kiss`, `/hug`, and `/spank`.

Action commands typically describe purely *virtual* actions. IRC users, of course, are not literally slapping, spanking, kissing, or hugging others in a channel when they type these commands, nor does typing them result in any tangible change of state. At the same time, action commands create virtual realities that are nondeniable. {Do you prefer “undeniable” or “not deniable”?} Thus, within the virtual world of IRC, `DrDoom` might protest at being slapped around with a large trout, but he couldn’t plausibly deny that it happened. The command doesn’t just describe the trout-slap, it *performs* it.

From these relatively obscure beginnings on the early Internet, virtual performatives spread, meme-like, throughout digitally mediated communication, morphing into forms that no longer require special commands or any knowledge of IRC to produce. `LOL` is a virtual

performative; by typing it, you have effectively [LOL](#)'ed, whether you were physically laughing at that moment or not.

So how did we get from action commands to expressions such as [LOL](#)? I presume their evolution went something like this. Before there were abbreviated commands, a user who wanted to create a new virtual action on IRC had to type out most of the words. Consider this message:

```
* bonzo offers free weed to the first nine callers.
```

In order for it to appear, the user “bonzo” would have had to type:

```
/me offers free weed to the first nine callers.
```

However, since the /me command doesn't necessarily save keystrokes, some IRC users started to dispense with it, typing in virtual actions directly. Sometimes these direct expressions were set off by asterisks:^{iv}

```
<bonzo> *offers free weed to the first nine callers*  
<Susan> *slaps DrDoom with a large trout*  
<whitechellie> *happy sobs*
```

Other users left off the asterisks:

```
<DeANnA> dances for joy  
<p2p> drops to tie his shoe  
<DrDoom> chillin with the homies
```

Changes to the syntax of action commands took place, as well. As the examples above illustrate, direct virtual performatives typically omitted the grammatical subject, which was understood to be the users themselves, since their nick appeared by default (enclosed in angle brackets in the IRC client I used) at the beginning of each non-action message. Further, creative new uses of virtual performatives started to dispense with third-person present tense marking on the verb, producing uninflected forms such as [*gulp*](#), [giggle](#), and that now-classic [LOL](#). Finally, the requirement for a verb was itself dispensed with. Instead, virtual performatives could be nouns, such as [*happy sobs*](#), adjectives, such as [*reallyfuckingbored*](#), or even

expressive sounds, such as **hrmiph**. Thus freed from the platform-specific, syntactic constraints of the /me command, performative expressions proliferated, spreading from IRC to other platforms. All the examples above are from my 1998 IRC logs, but similar examples can readily be found in private chat and on social media nowadays.

Part of the appeal of virtual performatives is that they are linguistically innovative. Not only do they riff creatively on the syntax of the IRC action command; they disregard the rules of ordinary (off-line) performative expressions. In English, for example, there are numerous constraints on what expressions can be used performatively and how they are expressed. The subject must normally be the first person (“I”),^v as in “I apologize for being late” and “I promise to be good,” which constitute an apology and a promise, respectively. Some performatives require institutional authority, such as “I sentence you to 10 years in prison without parole” (said by a judge). Only certain communication acts can be performative. You can’t register a complaint, for example, just by saying “I complain about the new regulations.” Moreover, verbs describing mental and emotional states can’t be used performatively; you don’t cause yourself to love cashews by uttering the sentence, “I love cashews.” Finally, physical actions are excluded. There is no off-line context in which saying “I dance with joy” counts as an act of dancing (although it may count as a metaphorical expression of happiness).

In IRC and other text-based virtual worlds, in contrast, there is no difference between the uttering and the doing of an action. You can virtually “dance with joy” and “complain about the new regulations,” as well as apologizing and promising, and you can adopt the role of judge and produce utterances like:

*<DrDoom> *sentences you to 10 years in prison without parole**

As of this writing, IRC action commands—classics such as */flirt*, */hug*, */insult*,

and `/wave`, as well as newer commands such as `/bitcoin`, `/facepalm`, `/hookup`, and `/snopes`—are still used on some forum web chat and gaming chat servers, as well as in text chat in live streaming. Among these, the trout slap remains popular. Wikipedia has even expanded the command into the graphical realm, placing an image of a trout on a contributor's Talk page when the expression `{{trout}}` is added. This practice can be traced to the cyber-geeks familiar with IRC who formed Wikipedia's early user-base.^{vi}

It's doubtful that most social media users today know about IRC. Yet they still use IRC-like virtual performatives, such as this comment posted in a recent Facebook thread:

`A newly minted assistant professor enters the chat`

or this multimodal Twitter tweet:

`*Sips tea` 🍵👁️

This last example brings us to the most recent expansion of virtual performatives: emojis. Emojis are replacing many short-form performative utterances, such as 😂 (`lol`), 🤗 (`hugs`), 😊 (`winks`), 😘 (`kiss`), 😬 (`eyes warily`), 🙄 (`facepalm`), and 🕺 (`dance for joy`).

Moreover, they can combine to perform sequences of virtual actions, as in this tweet by a beauty influencer alongside a photo of herself at an airport:

`Michelle Lewin`
`going places` 🧳👉

In the IRC of 1998, this would be expressed as:

`<Michelle Lewin> going places *dances for joy* *clinks champagne glass*`

Thus, virtual performative constructions have come far from their origins in early multiparticipant text chat, all the while retaining their pragmatic force. Leaving me to wonder . . . shouldn't there really be a trout emoji?

i “IRC Is Dead, Long Live IRC,” Pingdom.com, April 24, 2012,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160407082808/http://royal.pingdom.com/2012/04/24/irc-is-dead-long-live-irc/>

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ii “Internet Relay Chat,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Relay_Chat. {Please add access date (the current date is fine as long as you double check the information is still there as of that date).}

iii IRC actions are automatically preceded by an asterisk.

iv These uses of asterisks in non-action messages visually set off performative expressions from other text, while recalling their origins as action commands (see note 3).

v The use of the third-person subject in virtual performatives likely derived from the practice in chat platforms such as IRC and multi-user dungeons of automatically preceding each utterance with the user’s “nick” or character name.

vi “Whacking with a Wet Trout,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Whacking_with_a_wet_trout.
{Please add access or last modified date if at all possible.}