Also by Sherry Turkle

The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit
Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution

LIFE ON THE SCREEN

Identity in the Age of the Internet

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ASPECTS OF THE SELF

MUDS & identity

When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. This reconstruction is our cultural work in progress. The final section of this book explores the culture of simulation as it is emerging in the virtual workshops of online life.

Throughout this book, there has been a complex dance of acceptance and rejection of analogies to "the machine." On the one hand we insist that we are different from machines because we have emotions, bodies, and an intellect that cannot be captured in rules, but on the other we play with computer programs that we think of as alive or almost-alive. Images of machines have come ever closer to images of people, as images of people have come ever closer to images of machines. Experts tell us that we may read our emotions through brain scans, modify our minds through reprogramming, and attribute significant elements of personality to our genetic code. Chic lifestyle catalogues of mail-order merchandise carry mind-altering equipment including goggles, headphones, and helmets that promise everything from relaxation to enhanced learning if we plug ourselves into them. Their message is that we are so much like machines that we can simply extend ourselves through cyborg couplings with them.

At the same time that we are learning to see ourselves as plugged-in technobodies, we are redescribing our politics and economic life in a language that is resonant with a particular form of machine intelligence. In government, business, and industry, there is much talk of distributed, parallel, and emergent organizations, whose architecture mirrors that of computer systems. This utopian discourse about decentralization has come into vogue at the same time that society has become increasingly

fragmented. Many of the institutions that used to bring people together —a main street, a union hall, a town meeting—no longer work as before. Many people spend most of their day alone at the screen of a television or a computer. Meanwhile, social beings that we are, we are trying (as Marshall McLuhan said) to retribalize.[1] And the computer is playing a central role. We correspond with each other through electronic mail and contribute to electronic bulletin boards and mailing lists; we join interest groups whose participants include people from all over the world. Our rootedness to place has attenuated. These shifts raise many questions: What will computer-mediated communication do to our commitment to other people? Will it satisfy our needs for connection and social participation, or will it further undermine fragile relationships? What kind of responsibility and accountability will we assume for our virtual actions?

In political terms, talk about moving from centralized to decentralized systems is usually characterized as a change from autocracy to democracy, although the jury is still out on its ultimate effects. It may, for example, be possible to create an illusion of decentralized participation even when power remains closely held. In terms of our views of the self, new images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation dominate current thinking about human identity.

Psychoanalytic theory has played a complicated role in the historical debate about whether identity is unitary or multiple. One of Freud's most revolutionary contributions was proposing a radically decentered view of the self, but this message was often obscured by some of his followers who tended to give the ego greater executive authority in the management of the self. However, this recentralizing move was itself periodically challenged from within the psychoanalytic movement. Jungian ideas stressed that the self is a meeting place of diverse archetypes. Object-relations theory talked about how the things and people in the world come to live inside us. More recently, poststructuralist thinkers have attempted an even more radical decentering of the ego. In the work of Jacques Lacan, for example, the complex chains of associations that constitute meaning for each individual lead to no final endpoint or core self. Under the banner of a return to Freud, Lacan insisted that the ego is an illusion. In this he joins psychoanalysis to the postmodern attempt to portray the self as a realm of discourse rather than as a real thing or a permanent structure of the mind. In previous chapters we have seen the way computer science has contributed to this new way of talking. Its bottom-up, distributed, parallel, and emergent models of mind have replaced top-down, information processing ones.

The Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves. An interior designer nervously admits in my interview with her that she is not at her best because she is about to have a face-to-face meeting with a man with whom she has shared months of virtual intimacy in chat sessions on America Online. She says she is "pretty sure" that her electronic lover is actually a man (rather than a woman pretending to be a man) because she does not think "he" would have suggested meeting if it were otherwise, but she worries that neither of them will turn out to be close enough to their very desirable cyberselves:

> I didn't exactly lie to him about anything specific, but I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I'm just hoping that face-to-face I can find a way to spend some time being the online me.

A thirty-year-old teacher describes her relationship to Internet Relay Chat (or IRC), a live forum for online conversations, as being "addicted to flux." On IRC one makes up a name, or handle, and joins any one of thousands of channels discussing different issues. Anyone can start a new channel at any time. In the course of the past week, this woman has created channels on East Coast business schools (she is considering applying), on the new editorial policy of *The New Yorker,* and on a television situation comedy about a divorced woman having an affair with her ex-husband. She has concerns about her involvement with IRC that do not stem from how much time she spends ("about five hours a day, but I don't watch television any more") but from how many roles she plays.

> It is a complete escape. . . . On IRC, I'm very popular. I have three handles I use a lot. . . . So one [handle] is serious about the war in Yugoslavia, [another is] a bit of a nut about *Melrose Place,* and [a third is] very active on sexual channels, always looking for a good time. . . . Maybe I can only relax if I see life as one more IRC channel.

In the past, such rapid cycling through different identities was not an easy experience to come by. Earlier in this century we spoke of identity as "forged." The metaphor of iron-like solidity captured the central value of a core identity, or what the sociologist David Riesman once called inner direction.[2] Of course, people assumed different social roles and masks, but for most people, their lifelong involvement with families and communities kept such cycling through under fairly stringent control. For some, this control chafed, and there were roles on the margins where cycling through could be a way of life. In tribal societies, the shaman's cycling through might involve possession by gods and spirits. In modern

times, there was the con artist, the bigamist, the cross-gender impersonator, the "split personality," the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Now, in postmodern times, multiple identities are no longer so much at the margins of things. Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated. A wide range of social and psychological theorists have tried to capture the new experience of identity. Robert Jay Lifton has called it protean. Kenneth Gergen describes its multiplication of masks as a saturated self. Emily Martin talks of the flexible self as a contemporary virtue of organisms, persons, and organizations.[3]

The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create. What kinds of personae do we make? What relation do these have to what we have traditionally thought of as the "whole" person? Are they experienced as an expanded self or as separate from the self?[4] Do our real-life selves learn lessons from our virtual personae? Are these virtual personae fragments of a coherent real-life personality? How do they communicate with one another? Why are we doing this? Is this a shallow game, a giant waste of time? Is it an expression of an identity crisis of the sort we traditionally associate with adolescence? Or are we watching the slow emergence of a new, more multiple style of thinking about the mind? These questions can be addressed by looking at many different locations on the Internet. Here I begin with the virtual communities known as MUDs.

MUDs

In the early 1970s, the face-to-face role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons swept the game culture. In Dungeons and Dragons, a dungeon master creates a world in which people take on fictional personae and play out complex adventures. The game is a rule-driven world that includes charisma points, levels of magic, and rolls of the dice. The Dungeon and Dragons universe of mazes and monsters and its image of the world as a labyrinth whose secrets could be unlocked held a particular fascination for many members of the nascent computer culture. The computer game Adventure captured some of the same aesthetic. There, players proceeded through a maze of rooms presented to them through text description on a computer screen.

The term "dungeon" persisted in the high-tech culture to connote a virtual place. So when virtual spaces were created that many computer users could share and collaborate within, they were deemed Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs, a new kind of social virtual reality. Although some

games use software that make them technically such things as MUSHes or MOOs, the term MUD and the verb MUDding have come to refer to all of the multi-user environments. As more and more players have come to them who do not have a history with Dungeons and Dragons, some people have begun to refer to MUDs as Multi-User Domains or Multi-User Dimensions.

Some MUDs use screen graphics or icons to communicate place, character, and action. The MUDs I am writing about here do not. They rely entirely on plain text. All users are browsing and manipulating the same database. They can encounter other users or players as well as objects that have been built for the virtual environment. MUD players can also communicate with each other directly in real time, by typing messages that are seen by other players. Some of these messages are seen by all players in the same "room," but messages can also be designated to flash on the screen of only one specific player.

The term "virtual reality" is often used to denote metaphorical spaces that arise only through interaction with the computer, which people navigate by using special hardware—specially designed helmets, body suits, goggles, and data gloves. The hardware turns the body or parts of the body into pointing devices. For example, a hand inside a data glove can point to where you want to go within virtual space; a helmet can track motion so that the scene shifts depending on how you move your head. In MUDs, instead of using computer hardware to immerse themselves in a vivid world of sensation, users immerse themselves in a world of words. MUDs are a text-based, social virtual reality.

Two basic types of MUDs can now be accessed on the Internet. The adventure type, most reminiscent of the games' Dungeons and Dragons heritage, is built around a medieval fantasy landscape. In these, affectionately known by their participants as "hack and slay," the object of the game is to gain experience points by killing monsters and dragons and finding gold coins, amulets, and other treasure. Experience points translate into increased power. A second type consists of relatively open spaces in which you can play at whatever captures your imagination. In these MUDs, usually called social MUDs, the point is to interact with other players and, on some MUDs, to help build the virtual world by creating one's own objects and architecture. "Building" on MUDs is something of a hybrid between computer programming and writing fiction. One describes a hot tub and deck in a MUD with words, but some formal coded description is required for the deck to exist in the MUD as an extension of the adjacent living room and for characters to be able to "turn the hot tub on" by pushing a specially marked "button." In some MUDs, all players are allowed to build; sometimes the privilege is reserved to master players, or wizards. Building is made particularly easy

on a class of MUDs known as "MOOs" (MUDs of the Object Oriented variety).

In practice, adventure-type MUDs and social MUDs have much in common. In both, what really seems to hold players' interest is operating their character or characters and interacting with other characters. Even in an adventure-type MUD, a player can be an elf, a warrior, a prostitute, a politician, a healer, a seer, or several of these at the same time. As this character or set of characters, a player evolves relationships with other players, also in character. For most players these relationships quickly become central to the MUDding experience. As one player on an adventure-type MUD put it, "I began with an interest in 'hack and slay,' but then I stayed to chat."

The characters one creates for a MUD are referred to as one's personae. This is from the Latin *per sonae* which means "that through which the sound comes," in other words, an actor's mask. Interestingly, this is also the root of "person" and "personality." The derivation implies that one is identified by means of a public face distinct from some deeper essence or essences.

All MUDs are organized around the metaphor of physical space. When you first enter a MUD you may find yourself in a medieval church from which you can step out into the town square, or you may find yourself in the coat closet of a large, rambling house. For example, when you first log on to LambdaMOO, one of the most popular MUDs on the Internet, you see the following description:

> The Coat Closet. The Closet is a dark, cramped space. It appears to be very crowded in here; you keep bumping into what feels like coats, boots and other people (apparently sleeping). One useful thing that you've discovered in your bumbling about is a metal doorknob set at waist level into what might be a door. There's a new edition of the newspaper. Type "news" to see it.

Typing "out" gets you to the living room:

> The Living Room. It is very bright, open, and airy here, with large plate-glass windows looking southward over the pool to the gardens beyond. On the north wall, there is a rough stonework fireplace, complete with roaring fire. The east and west walls are almost completely covered with large, well-stocked bookcases. An exit in the northwest corner leads to the kitchen and, in a more northerly direction, to the entrance hall. The door into the coat closet is at the north end of the east wall, and at the south end is a sliding glass door leading out onto a wooden deck. There are two sets of couches, one clustered around the fireplace and one with a view out the windows.

This description is followed by a list of objects and characters present in the living room. You are free to examine and try out the objects, examine the descriptions of the characters, and introduce yourself to them. The social conventions of different MUDs determine how strictly one is expected to stay in character. Some encourage all players to be in character at all times. Most are more relaxed. Some ritualize stepping out of character by asking players to talk to each other in specially noted "out of character" (OOC) asides.

On MUDs, characters communicate by invoking commands that cause text to appear on each other's screens. If I log onto LambdaMOO as a male character named Turk and strike up a conversation with a character named Dimitri, the setting for our conversation will be a MUD room in which a variety of other characters might be present. If I type, "Say hi," my screen will flash, "You say hi," and the screens of the other players in the room (including Dimitri) will flash, "Turk says 'hi.' " If I type "Emote whistles happily," all the players' screens will flash, "Turk whistles happily." Or I can address Dimitri alone by typing, "Whisper to Dimitri Glad to see you," and only Dimitri's screen will show, "Turk whispers 'Glad to see you.' " People's impressions of Turk will be formed by the description I will have written for him (this description will be available to all players on command), as well as by the nature of his conversation.

In the MUDs, virtual characters converse with each other, exchange gestures, express emotions, win and lose virtual money, and rise and fall in social status. A virtual character can also die. Some die of "natural" causes (a player decides to close them down) or they can have their virtual lives snuffed out. This is all achieved through writing, and this in a culture that had apparently fallen asleep in the audiovisual arms of television. Yet this new writing is a kind of hybrid: speech momentarily frozen into artifact, but curiously ephemeral artifact. In this new writing, unless it is printed out on paper, a screenful of flickers soon replaces the previous screen. In MUDs as in other forms of electronic communication, typographic conventions known as emoticons replace physical gestures and facial expressions. For example, :–) indicates a smiling face and :–(indicates an unhappy face. Onomatopoeic expletives and a relaxed attitude toward sentence fragments and typographic errors suggest that the new writing is somewhere in between traditional written and oral communication.

MUDs provide worlds for anonymous social interaction in which you can play a role as close to or as far away from your real self as you choose. For many game participants, playing one's character(s) and living in the MUD(s) becomes an important part of daily life. Since much of the excitement of the game depends on having personal relationships and being part of a MUD community's developing politics and projects, it is hard to

participate just a little. In fact, addiction is a frequently discussed subject among MUD players. A *Newsweek* article described how "some players attempt to go cold turkey. One method is to randomly change your password by banging your head against the keyboard, making it impossible to log back on."[5] It is not unusual for players to be logged on to a MUD for six hours a day. Twelve hours a day is common if players work with computers at school or at a job and use systems with multiple windows. Then they can jump among windows in order to intersperse real-world activities on their computers with their games. They jump from Lotus 1-2-3 to LambdaMOO, from Wordperfect to DragonMUD. "You can't really be part of the action unless you are there every day. Things happen quickly. To get the thrill of MUDs you have to be part of what makes the story unfold," says a regular on DuneMUSH, a MUD based on the world of Frank Herbert's science fiction classic.[6]

In MUDs, each player makes scenes unfold and dramas come to life. Playing in MUDs is thus both similar to and different from reading or watching television. As with reading, there is text, but on MUDs it unfolds in real time and you become an author of the story. As with television, you are engaged with the screen, but MUDs are interactive, and you can take control of the action. As in acting, the explicit task is to construct a viable mask or persona. Yet on MUDs, that persona can be as close to your real self as you choose, so MUDs have much in common with psychodrama. And since many people simply choose to play aspects of themselves, MUDs can also seem like real life.

Play has always been an important aspect of our individual efforts to build identity. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called play a "toy situation" that allows us to "reveal and commit" ourselves "in its unreality."[7] While MUDs are not the only "places" on the Internet in which to play with identity, they provide an unparalleled opportunity for such play. On a MUD one actually gets to build character and environment and then to live within the toy situation. A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity, an idea that is well captured by the player who said:

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be. You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see is your words. And it's always there. Twenty-four hours a day you can walk down to the street corner and there's gonna be a few people there who are interesting to talk to, if you've found the right MUD for you.

The anonymity of most MUDs (you are known only by the name you give your characters) provides ample room for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves. A twenty-one-year-old college senior defends his violent characters as "something in me; but quite frankly I'd rather rape on MUDs where no harm is done." A twenty-six-year-old clerical worker says, "I'm not one thing, I'm many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world. So even though I play more than one self on MUDs, I feel more like 'myself' when I'm MUDding." In real life, this woman sees her world as too narrow to allow her to manifest certain aspects of the person she feels herself to be. Creating screen personae is thus an opportunity for self-expression, leading to her feeling more like her true self when decked out in an array of virtual masks.

MUDs imply difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation. Such an experience of identity contradicts the Latin root of the word, *idem,* meaning "the same." But this contradiction increasingly defines the conditions of our lives beyond the virtual world. MUDs thus become objects-to-think-with for thinking about postmodern selves. Indeed, the unfolding of all MUD action takes place in a resolutely postmodern context. There are parallel narratives in the different rooms of a MUD. The cultures of Tolkien, Gibson, and Madonna coexist and interact. Since MUDs are authored by their players, thousands of people in all, often hundreds at a time, are all logged on from different places; the solitary author is displaced and distributed. Traditional ideas about identity have been tied to a notion of authenticity that such virtual experiences actively subvert. When each player can create many characters and participate in many games, the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit.

Sometimes such experiences can facilitate self-knowledge and personal growth, and sometimes not. MUDs can be places where people blossom or places where they get stuck, caught in self-contained worlds where things are simpler than in real life, and where, if all else fails, you can retire your character and simply start a new life with another.

As a new social experience, MUDs pose many psychological questions: If a persona in a role-playing game drops defenses that the player in real life has been unable to abandon, what effect does this have? What if a persona enjoys success in some area (say, flirting) that the player has not been able to achieve? In this chapter and the next I will examine these kinds of questions from a viewpoint that assumes a conventional distinction between a constructed persona and the real self. But we shall soon encounter slippages—places where persona and self merge, places

where the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self.

These slippages are common on MUDs, but as I discuss MUDs, it is important to keep in mind that they more generally characterize identity play in cyberspace. One Internet Relay Chat (IRC) enthusiast writes to an online discussion group, "People on [this mailing list] tell me that they make mistakes about what's happening on cyberspace and what's happening on RL. Did I really type what's happening *ON* Real Life?" (Surrounding a word with asterisks is the net version of italicizing it.) He had indeed. And then he jokingly referred to real life as though it, too, were an IRC channel: "Can anyone tell me how to /join #real.life?"[8]

Role Playing vs. Parallel Lives

Traditional role-playing games, the kinds that take place in physical space with participants "face to face," are psychologically evocative. MUDs are even more so because they further blur the line between the game and real life, usually referred to in cyberspace as RL.[9] In face-to-face role-playing games, one steps in and out of a character. MUDs, in contrast, offer a character or characters that may become parallel identities. To highlight the distinctive features of the virtual experience, I will begin with the story of a young woman who plays face-to-face role-playing games in physical reality.

Julee, nineteen years old, dropped out of college after her freshman year partly because of her turbulent relationship with her mother, a devout Catholic. Julee's mother broke all ties with her when she discovered that Julee had had an abortion the summer after graduation from high school. Although technically out of school, Julee spends most of her free time with former college classmates playing elaborate face-to-face role-playing games, an interest she developed as a freshman.

Julee plays a number of games that differ in theme (some are contemporary whodunits, some are medieval adventures), the degree to which they are pre-scripted, and the extent to which players assume distinct characters and act out their parts. At one end of a continuum, players sit in a circle and make statements about their characters' actions within a game. On the other end, players wear costumes, engage in staged sword-play, and speak special languages that exist only within the game.

Julee's favorite games borrow heavily from improvisational theater. They are political thrillers in which the characters and the political and historical premises are outlined prior to the start of play. The players are then asked to take the story forward. Julee especially enjoys the games staged by a New York–based group, which entail months of preparation

for each event. Sometimes the games last a weekend, sometimes for a week to ten days. Julee compares them to acting in a play:

> You usually get your sheets [a script outline] about twenty-four hours before the game actually starts, and I spend that time reading my sheets over and over again. Saying, you know "What are my motivations? What is this character like?" It's like a play, only the lines aren't set. The personality is set, but the lines aren't.

In Julee's real life, her most pressing concern is the state of her relationship with her mother. Not surprisingly, when asked about her most important experience during a role-playing game, Julee describes a game in which she was assigned to play a mother. This character was a member of a spy ring. Her daughter, also a member of the ring, turned out to be a counterspy, a secret member of a rival faction. The scripted game specified that the daughter was going to betray, even kill, her mother. The members of Julee's team expected that her character would denounce her daughter to save her own life and perhaps their lives as well.

This game was played over a weekend on a New York City college campus. At that time, Julee says that she faced her game daughter and saw her real self. As she spoke to me, Julee's voice took on different inflections as she moved from the role of mother to daughter: "Here's this little girl who is my daughter looking into my eyes and saying 'How can you kill me? Why do you want me to go away?' " Julee describes the emotional intensity of her efforts to deal with this situation:

> So, there we were in this room in the chemistry department, and I guess we moved over into a corner, and we were sitting on the floor, like, cross-legged in front of each other, like . . . like, I guess we were probably holding hands. I think we were. And we, like, . . . we really did it. We acted out the whole scene. . . . It was, it really was a nearly tearful experience.

In the game, Julee and her "daughter" talked for hours. Why might the daughter have joined her mother's opponents? How could the two women stay true to their relationship and to the game as it had been written? Huddled in the corner of an empty classroom, Julee had the conversation with her game daughter that her own mother had been unwilling to have with her. In the end, Julee's character chose to put aside her loyalty to her team in order to preserve her daughter's life. From Julee's point of view, her mother had put her religious values above their relationship; in the game, Julee made her relationship to her daughter her paramount value. "I said to all the other players, 'Sorry, I'm going to forfeit the game for my team.' "

Clearly, Julee projected feelings about her mother onto her experience of the game, but more was going on than a simple reenactment. Julee was able to review a highly charged situation in a setting where she could examine it, do something new with it, and revise her relationship to it. The game became a medium for working with the materials of her life. Julee was able to sculpt a familiar situation into a new shape. In some ways, what happened was consistent with what the psychoanalytic tradition calls "working through."

Julee's experience stands in contrast to several prevalent popular images of role-playing games. One portrays role-playing games as places for simple escape. Players are seen as leaving their real lives and problems behind to lose themselves in the game. Another portrays role-playing games as depressing, even dangerous. It is implicit in the now legendary story of an emotionally troubled student who disappeared and committed suicide during a game of Dungeons and Dragons. Although some people do have experiences in these games that are escapist or depressing, others do not. Julee's story, for example, belies the popular stereotypes. Her role-playing is psychologically constructive. She uses it to engage with some of the most important issues in her life and to reach new emotional resolutions.

Role-playing games can serve in this evocative capacity because they stand betwixt and between the unreal and the real; they are a game and something more. Julee shaped her game persona to reflect her own deep wish for a relationship with her mother. Playing her ideal of a good mother allowed her to bring mother and daughter together in a way that had been closed off in real life. During the game, Julee was able to experience something of her own mother's conflict. Ultimately, Julee took a stand to preserve the relationship, something her own mother was not prepared to do. Although it had this complicated relationship with real life, in the final analysis, Julee's experience fits into the category of game because it had a specified duration. The weekend was over and so was the game.

In MUDs, however, the action has no set endpoint. The boundaries in MUDs are fuzzier. They are what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to as blurred genres.[10] The routine of playing them becomes part of their players' real lives. Morgan, a college sophomore, explains how he cycles in and out of MUDs and real life: "When I am upset I just . . . jump onto my ship [the spaceship he commands in a MUD] and look somebody up." He does this by logging onto the game in character and paging a friend in the game environment. Then, still logged on, Morgan goes to class. He explains that by the time he comes back to the MUD, the friends he had paged would now usually be on the game and ready to talk. Morgan has become expert at using MUDs as a psychological adjunct to real life. He

reflects on how he used MUDs during his freshman year. "I was always happy when I got into a fight in the MUD," he says. "I remember doing that before tests. I would go to the MUD, pick a fight, yell at people, blow a couple of things up, take the test and then go out for a drink." For him, a favorite MUD afforded an escape valve for anxiety and anger that felt too dangerous to exercise in real life.

Julee's role playing provided an environment for working on important personal issues. MUDs go further. You can "move into" them. One group of players joked that they were like the electrodes in the computer, trying to express the degree to which they feel part of its space. I have noted that committed players often work with computers all day at their regular jobs. As they play on MUDs, they periodically put their characters to sleep, remaining logged on to the game, but pursuing other activities. The MUD keeps running in a buried window. From time to time, they return to the game space. In this way, they break up their day and come to experience their lives as cycling through the real world and a series of virtual ones. A software designer who says he is "never not playing a MUD" describes his day this way:

> I like to put myself in the role of a hero, usually one with magical powers, on one MUD, start a few conversations going, put out a question or two about MUD matters, and ask people to drop off replies to me in a special in-box I have built in my MUD "office." Then I'll put my character to sleep and go off and do some work. Particularly if I'm in some conflict with someone at work it helps to be MUDding, because I know that when I get back to the MUD I'll probably have some appreciative mail waiting for me. Or sometimes I use a few rounds of MUD triumphs to psych myself up to deal with my boss.

Now twenty-three, Gordon dropped out of college after his freshman year when he realized that he could be a successful computer programmer without formal training. Gordon describes both his parents as "1960s nonconformists." He says there was little family pressure to get a degree. Gordon's parents separated when he was in grade school. This meant that Gordon spent winters with his mother in Florida and summers with his father in California. When Gordon was in California, his room in Florida was rented out, something that still upsets him. It seems to represent Gordon's unhappy sense that he has never really belonged anywhere.

In grade school and junior high Gordon wasn't happy and he didn't fit in. He describes himself as unpopular, overweight, unathletic, and unattractive: "Two hundred and ten pounds with glasses." The summer after his sophomore year in high school, Gordon went on a trip to India

with a group of students from all over the world. These new people didn't know he was unpopular, and Gordon was surprised to find that he was able to make friends. He was struck by the advantages of a fresh start, of leaving old baggage behind. Two years later, as a college freshman, Gordon discovered MUDs and saw another way to have a fresh start. Since MUDs allowed him to create a new character at any time, he could always begin with a clean slate. When he changed his character he felt born again.

On MUDs, Gordon has experimented with many different characters, but they all have something in common. Each has qualities that Gordon is trying to develop in himself. He describes one current character as "an avatar of me. He is like me, but more effusive, more apt to be flowery and romantic with a sort of tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the whole thing." A second character is "quiet, older, less involved in what other people are doing," in sum, more self-confident and self-contained than the real-life Gordon. A third character is female. Gordon compares her to himself: "She is more flirtatious, more experimental, more open sexually definitely."

Unlike Julee's role-playing game, MUDs allow Gordon more than one weekend, one character, or one game to work on a given issue. He is able to play at being various selves for weeks, months, indeed years on end. When a particular character outlives its psychological usefulness, Gordon discards it and creates a new one. For Gordon, playing on MUDs has enabled a continual process of creation and recreation. The game has heightened his sense of his self as a work in progress. He talks about his real self as starting to pick up bits and pieces from his characters.

Gordon's MUD-playing exhibits some of the slippage I referred to earlier. By creating diverse personae, he can experiment in a more controlled fashion with different sets of characteristics and see where they lead. He is also able to play at being female, something that would be far more difficult to do in real life. Each of his multiple personae has its independence and integrity, but Gordon also relates them all to "himself." In this way, there is relationship among his different personae; they are each an aspect of himself. The slippage Gordon experiences among his MUD and RL selves has extended to his love life. When I met him, Gordon was engaged to marry a woman he had met and courted on a MUD. Their relationship began as a relationship between one of his personae and a persona created by his fiancée.

Matthew, a nineteen-year-old college sophomore, also uses MUDs to work on himself, but he prefers to do it by playing only one character. Just as Julee used her game to play the role of the mother she wishes she had, Matthew uses MUDs to play an idealized father. Like Julee, Matthew tends to use his games to enact better versions of how things have unfolded in real life.

Matthew comes from a socially prominent family in a small Connecticut town. When I visit his home during the summer following his freshman year, he announces that his parents are away on a trip to celebrate his mother's birthday. He describes their relationship as impressive in its depth of feeling and erotic charge even after twenty-five years of marriage. However, it soon becomes apparent that his parents' relationship is in fact quite rocky. For years his father has been distant, often absent, preoccupied with his legal career. Since junior high school, Matthew has been his mother's companion and confidant. Matthew knows that his father drinks heavily and has been unfaithful to his mother. But because of his father's position in the community, the family presents a public front without blemish.

As a senior in high school, Matthew became deeply involved with Alicia, then a high school freshman. Matthew's role as his mother's confidant had made him most comfortable in the role of helper and advisor, and he quickly adopted that way of relating to his girlfriend. He saw himself as her mentor and teacher. Shortly after Matthew left for college, Alicia's father died. Characteristically, Matthew flew home, expecting to play a key role in helping Alicia and her family. But in their time of grief, they found Matthew's efforts intrusive. When his offers of help were turned down, Matthew was angry. But when, shortly after, Alicia ended their relationship in order to date someone who was still in high school, he became disconsolate.

It was at this point, midway into the first semester of his freshman year in college, that Matthew began to MUD. He dedicated himself to one MUD and, like his father in their small town, became one of its most important citizens. On the MUD, Matthew carved out a special role: He recruited new members and became their advisor and helper. He was playing a familiar part, but now he had found a world in which helping won him admiration. Ashamed of his father in real life, he used the MUD to play the man he wished his father would be. Rejected by Alicia in real life, his chivalrous MUD persona has won considerable social success. Now, it is Matthew who has broken some hearts. Matthew speaks with pleasure of how women on the game have entreated him to pursue relationships with them both within and beyond its confines. He estimates that he spends from fifteen to twenty hours a week logged on to this highly satisfying alternative world.

Role playing provided Matthew and Julee with environments in which they could soothe themselves by taking care of others and experiment with a kind of parenting different from what they had experienced themselves. As neglected children comfort themselves by lavishing affection on their dolls, Matthew and Julee identified with the people they took care of.

Julee's role playing had the power of face-to-face psychodrama, but

Matthew's life on MUDs was always available to him. Unlike Julee, Matthew could play as much as he wished, all day if he wished, every day if he chose to. There were always people logged on to the game. There was always someone to talk to or something to do. MUDs gave him the sense of an alternative place. They came to feel like his true home.

Since Julee was physically present on her game, she remained recognizable as herself to the other players. In contrast, MUDs provided Matthew with an anonymity he craved. On MUDs, he no longer had to protect his family's public image.[11] He could relax. Julee could play multiple roles in multiple games, but MUDs offer parallel lives in ongoing worlds. Julee could work through real-life issues in a game space, but MUD players can develop a way of thinking in which life is made up of many windows and RL is only one of them.

In sum, MUDs blur the boundaries between self and game, self and role, self and simulation. One player says, "You are what you pretend to be . . . you are what you play." But people don't just become who they play, they play who they are or who they want to be or who they don't want to be. Players sometimes talk about their real selves as a composite of their characters and sometimes talk about their screen personae as means for working on their RL lives.

Role Playing to a Higher Power

The notion "you are who you pretend to be" has mythic resonance. The Pygmalion story endures because it speaks to a powerful fantasy: that we are not limited by our histories, that we can recreate ourselves. In the real world, we are thrilled by stories of dramatic self-transformation: Madonna is our modern Eliza Doolittle; Michael Jackson the object of morbid fascination. But for most people such self-transformations are difficult or impossible. They are easier in MUDs where you can write and revise your character's self-description whenever you wish. In some MUDs you can even create a character that "morphs" into another at the command "@morph." Virtual worlds offer experiences that are hard to come by in real life.

Stewart is a twenty-three-year-old physics graduate student who uses MUDs to have experiences he cannot imagine for himself in RL. His intense online involvements engaged key issues in his life but ultimately failed to help him reach successful resolutions. His real life revolves around laboratory work and his plans for a future in science. His only friend is his roommate, another physics student whom he describes as even more reclusive than himself. For Stewart, this circumscribed, almost monastic student life does not represent a radical departure from what has gone before. He has had heart trouble since he was a child; one small rebellion, a ski trip when he was a college freshman, put him in the hospital for a week. He has lived life within a small compass.

In an interview with Stewart he immediately makes clear why he plays on MUDs: "I do it so I can talk to people." He plays exclusively on adventure-style, hack-and-slay MUDs. Stewart finds these attractive because they demand no technical expertise, so it was easy both to get started and to become a "wizard," the highest level of player. Unlike some players for whom becoming a wizard is an opportunity to get involved in the technical aspects of MUDs, Stewart likes the wizard status because it allows him to go anywhere and talk to anyone on the game. He says, "I'm going to hack and slash the appropriate number of monsters [the number required for wizard status] so that I can talk to people."

Stewart is logged on to one MUD or another for at least forty hours a week. It seems misleading to call what he does there playing. He spends his time constructing a life that is more expansive than the one he lives in physical reality. Stewart, who has traveled very little and has never been to Europe, explains with delight that his favorite MUD, although played in English, is physically located on a computer in Germany and has many European players.

> I started talking to them [the inhabitants of the MUD], and they're, like, "This costs so many and so many Deutschmarks." And I'm, like, "What are Deutschmarks? Where is this place located?" And they say, "Don't you know this is Germany." It hadn't occurred to me that I could even connect to Germany. . . . All I had were local Internet numbers, so I had no idea of where it [the MUD] was located. And I started talking to people and I was amazed at the quality of English they spoke. . . . European and Australian MUDs are interesting, . . . different people, completely different lifestyles, and at the moment, completely different economic situations.

It is from MUDs that Stewart has learned much of what he knows of politics and of the differences between American and European political and economic systems. He was thrilled when he first spoke to a Scandinavian player who could see the Northern lights. On the German MUD, Stewart shaped a character named Achilles, but he asks his MUD friends to call him Stewart as much as possible. He wants to feel that his real self exists somewhere between Stewart and Achilles. He wants to feel that his MUD life is part of his real life. Stewart insists that he does not role play, but that MUDs simply allow him to be a better version of himself.

On the MUD, Stewart creates a living environment suitable for his ideal self. His university dormitory is modest, but the room he has built for

Achilles on the MUD is elegant and heavily influenced by Ralph Lauren advertising. He has named it "the home beneath the silver moon." There are books, a roaring fire, cognac, a cherry mantel "covered with pictures of Achilles' friends from around the world." "You look up . . . and through the immense skylight you see a breathtaking view of the night sky. The moon is always full over Achilles' home, and its light fills the room with a warm glow."

Stewart's MUD serves as a medium for the projection of fantasy, a kind of Rorschach. But it is more than a Rorschach, because it enters into his everyday life. Beyond expanding his social world, MUDs have brought Stewart the only romance and intimacy he has ever known. At a social event held in virtual space, a "wedding" of two regular players on a German-based MUD I call Gargoyle, Achilles met Winterlight, a character played by one of the three female players on that MUD. Stewart, who has known little success in dating and romantic relationships, was able to charm this desirable player.

On their first virtual date, Achilles took Winterlight to an Italian restaurant close to Stewart's dorm. He had often fantasized being there with a woman. Stewart describes how he used a combination of MUD commands to simulate a romantic evening at the restaurant. Through these commands, he could pick Winterlight up at the airport in a limousine, drive her to a hotel room so that she could shower, and then take her to the restaurant.

> So, I mean, if you have the waiter coming in, you can just kinda get creative. . . . So, I described the menu to her. I found out she didn't like veal, so I asked her if she would mind if I ordered veal . . . because they have really good veal scallopini, . . . and she said that yes, she would mind, so I didn't order veal.
>
> We talked about what her research is. She's working on disease, . . . the biochemistry of coronary artery disease. . . . And so we talked about her research on coronary artery disease, and at the time I was doing nuclear physics and I talked to her about that. We talked for a couple of hours. We talked. And then she had to go to work, so we ended dinner and she left.

This dinner date led to others during which Achilles was tender and romantic, chivalrous and poetic. The intimacy Achilles experienced during his courtship of Winterlight is unknown to Stewart in other contexts. "Winterlight . . . she's a very, she's a good friend. I found out a lot of things —from things about physiology to the color of nail polish she wears." Finally, Achilles asked for Winterlight's hand. When she accepted, they had a formal engagement ceremony on the MUD. In that ceremony, Achilles not only testified to the importance of his relationship with Winterlight, but explained the extent to which the Gargoyle MUD had become his home:

> I have traveled far and wide across these lands. . . . I have met a great deal of people as I wandered. I feel that the friendliest people of all are here at Gargoyle. I consider this place my home. I am proud to be a part of this place. I have had some bad times in the past . . . and the people of Gargoyle were there. I thank the people of Gargoyle for their support. I have recently decided to settle down and be married. I searched far and near for a maiden of beauty with hair of sunshine gold and lips red as the rose. With intelligence to match her beauty . . . Winterlight, you are that woman I seek. You are the beautiful maiden. Winterlight, will you marry me?

Winterlight responded with a "charming smile" and said, "Winterlight knows that her face says all. And then, M'lord . . . I love you from deep in my heart."

At the engagement, Winterlight gave Achilles a rose she had worn in her hair and Achilles gave Winterlight a thousand paper stars. Stewart gave me the transcript of the engagement ceremony. It goes on for twelve single-spaced pages of text. Their wedding was even more elaborate. Achilles prepared for it in advance by creating a sacred clearing in cyberspace, a niche carved out of rock, with fifty seats intricately carved with animal motifs. During their wedding, Achilles and Winterlight recalled their engagement gifts and their love and commitment to each other. They were addressed by the priest Tarniwoof. What follows is excerpted from Stewart's log of the wedding ceremony:

> Tarniwoof says, "At the engagement ceremony you gave one another an item which represents your love, respect and friendship for each other."
> Tarniwoof turns to you.
> Tarniwoof says, "Achilles, do you have any reason to give your item back to Winterlight?"
> Winterlight attends your answer nervously.
> Tarniwoof waits for the groom to answer.
> You would not give up her gift for anything.
> Tarniwoof smiles happily.
> Winterlight smiles at you.
> Tarniwoof turns to the beautiful bride.
> Tarniwoof says, "Winterlight, is there any doubt in your heart about what your item represents?"
> Winterlight looks straightly to Tarniwoof.
> Winterlight would never return the thousand paper stars of Achilles.
> Tarniwoof says, "Do you promise to take Silver Shimmering Winterlight as your mudly wedded wife, in sickness and in health, through timeouts and updates, for richer or poorer, until linkdeath do you part?"

You say, "I do."
Winterlight smiles happily at you.

Although Stewart participated in this ceremony alone in his room with his computer and modem, a group of European players actually traveled to Germany, site of Gargoyle's host computer, and got together for food and champagne. There were twenty-five guests at the German celebration, many of whom brought gifts and dressed specially for the occasion. Stewart felt as though he were throwing a party. This was the first time that he had ever entertained, and he was proud of his success. "When I got married," he told me, "people came in from Sweden, Norway, and Finland, and from the Netherlands to Germany, to be at the wedding ceremony in Germany." In real life, Stewart felt constrained by his health problems, his shyness and social isolation, and his narrow economic straits. In the Gargoyle MUD, he was able to bypass these obstacles, at least temporarily. Faced with the notion that "you are what you pretend to be," Stewart can only hope it is true, for he is playing his ideal self.

Psychotherapy or Addiction?

I have suggested that MUDs provided Matthew and Gordon with environments they found therapeutic. Stewart, quite self-consciously, has tried to put MUDding in the service of developing a greater capacity for trust and intimacy, but he is not satisfied with the outcome of his efforts. While MUDding on Gargoyle offered Stewart a safe place to experiment with new ways, he sums up his experience by telling me that it has been "an addicting waste of time."

Stewart's case, in which playing on MUDs led to a net drop in self-esteem, illustrates how complex the psychological effects of life on the screen can be. And it illustrates that a safe place is not all that is needed for personal change. Stewart came to MUDding with serious problems. Since childhood he has been isolated both by his illness and by a fear of death he could not discuss with other people. Stewart's mother, who has always been terribly distressed by his illness, has recurring migraines for which Stewart feels responsible. Stewart has never felt free to talk with her about his own anxieties. Stewart's father protected himself by emotionally withdrawing and losing himself in fix-it projects on lawnmowers and cars, the reassuring things that could be made to work the way a sick little boy could not. Stewart resented his father's periods of withdrawal; he says that too often he was left to be the head of the household. Nevertheless, Stewart now emulates his father's style. Stewart says his main defense against depression is "not to feel things." "I'd rather put my problems on the back burner and go on with my life." Before he became involved in MUDs, going on with his life usually meant throwing himself into his schoolwork or into major car repair projects. He fondly remembers a two-week period during which a physics experiment took almost all his waking hours and a school vacation spent tinkering round the clock in his family's garage. He finds comfort in the all-consuming demands of science and with the "reliability of machines." Stewart does not know how to find comfort in the more volatile and unpredictable world of people.

> I have a problem with emotional things. I handle them very badly. I do the things you're not supposed to do. I don't worry about them for a while, and then they come back to haunt me two or three years later. . . . I am not able to talk about my problems while they are happening. I have to wait until they have become just a story.
>
> If I have an emotional problem I cannot talk to people about it. I will sit there in a room with them, and I will talk to them about anything else in the entire world except what's bothering me.

Stewart was introduced to MUDs by Carrie, an unhappy classmate whose chief source of solace was talking to people on MUDs. Although Stewart tends to ignore his own troubles, he wanted to connect with Carrie by helping with hers. Carrie had troubles aplenty; she drank too much and had an abusive boyfriend. Yet Carrie rejected Stewart's friendship. Stewart described how, when he visited her in her dorm room, she turned her back to him to talk to "the people in the machine."

> I mean, when you have that type of emotional problem and that kind of pain, it's not an intelligent move to log on to a game and talk to people because they are safe and they won't hurt you. Because that's just not a way out of it. I mean there is a limit to how many years you can spend in front of a computer screen.

Shortly after this incident in Carrie's room, Stewart precipitated the end of their relationship. He took it upon himself to inform Carrie's parents that she had a drinking problem, something that she wanted to sort out by herself. When Carrie confronted him about his "meddling," Stewart could not see her point of view and defended his actions by arguing that morality was on his side. For Carrie, Stewart's intrusions had gone too far. She would no longer speak to him. By the fall of his junior year in college, Stewart was strained to his psychological limit. His friendship with Carrie was over, his mother was seriously ill, and he himself had developed pneumonia.

This bout of pneumonia required that Stewart spend three weeks in

the hospital, an experience that brought back the fears of death he had tried to repress. When he finally returned to his dormitory, confined to his room for a fourth week of bed rest, he was seriously depressed and felt utterly alone. Stewart habitually used work to ward off depression, but now he felt too far behind in his schoolwork to try to catch up. In desperation, Stewart tried Carrie's strategy: He turned to MUDs. Within a week, he was spending ten to twelve hours a day on the games. He found them a place where he could talk about his real-life troubles. In particular, he talked to the other players about Carrie, telling his side of the story and complaining that her decision to break off their friendship was unjust.

> I was on the game talking to people about my problems endlessly. . . . I find it a lot easier to talk to people on the game about them because they're not there. I mean, they are there but they're not there. I mean, you could sit there and you could tell them about your problems and you don't have to worry about running into them on the street the next day.

MUDs did help Stewart talk about his troubles while they were still emotionally relevant; nevertheless, he is emphatic that MUDding has ultimately made him feel worse about himself. Despite his MUD socializing, despite the poetry of his MUD romance and the pageantry of his MUD engagement and marriage, MUDding did not alter Stewart's sense of himself as withdrawn, unappealing, and flawed. His experience paralleled that of Cyrano in Rostand's play. Cyrano's success in wooing Roxanne for another never made him feel worthy himself. Stewart says of MUDding:

> The more I do it, the more I feel I need to do it. Every couple of days I'd notice, it's like, "Gee, in the last two days, I've been on this MUD for the total of probably over twenty-eight hours." . . . I mean I'd be on the MUD until I fell asleep at the terminal practically, and then go to sleep, and then I'd wake up and I'd do it again.

Stewart has tried hard to make his MUD self, the "better" Achilles self, part of his real life, but he says he has failed. He says, "I'm not social. I don't like parties. I can't talk to people about my problems." We recall together that these things are easy for him on MUDs and he shrugs and says, "I know." The integration of the social Achilles, who can talk about his troubles, and the asocial Stewart, who can only cope by putting them out of mind, has not occurred. From Stewart's point of view, MUDs have stripped away some of his defenses but have given him nothing in return. In fact, MUDs make Stewart feel vulnerable in a new way. Although he hoped that MUDs would cure him, it is MUDs that now make him feel sick. He feels addicted to MUDs: "When you feel you're stagnating and

you feel there's nothing going on in your life and you're stuck in a rut, it's very easy to be on there for a very large amount of time."

In my interviews with people about the possibility of computer psychotherapy, a ventilation model of psychotherapy came up often as a reason why computers could be therapists. In the ventilation model, psychotherapy makes people better by being a safe place for airing problems, expressing anger, and admitting to fears. MUDs may provide a place for people to talk freely—and with other people rather than with a machine—but they also illustrate that therapy has to be more than a safe place to "ventilate." There is considerable disagreement among psychotherapists about what that "more" has to be, but within the psychoanalytic tradition, there is fair consensus that it involves a special relationship with a therapist in which old issues will resurface and be addressed in new ways. When elements from the past are projected onto a relationship with a therapist, they can be used as data for self-understanding. So a psychotherapy is not just a safe place, it is a work space, or more accurately a reworking space.

For Stewart, MUD life gradually became a place not for reworking but for reenacting the kinds of difficulties that plagued him in real life. On the MUD, he declared his moral superiority over other players and lectured them about their faults, the exact pattern he had fallen into with Carrie. He began to violate MUD etiquette, for example by revealing certain players' real-life identities and real-life bad behavior. He took on one prominent player, Ursula, a woman who he thought had taken advantage of her (real-life) husband, and tried to expose her as a bad person to other MUD players. Again, Stewart justified his intrusive actions toward Ursula, as he justified his intrusions on Carrie's privacy, by saying that morality was on his side. When other players pointed out that it was now Stewart who was behaving inappropriately, he became angry and self-righteous. "Ursula deserves to be exposed," he said, "because of her outrageous behavior." A psychotherapist might have helped Stewart reflect on why he needs to be in the position of policeman, judge, and jury. Does he try to protect others because he feels that he has so often been left unprotected? How can he find ways to protect himself? In the context of a relationship with a therapist, Stewart might have been able to address such painful matters. On the MUD, Stewart avoided them by blaming other people and declaring right on his side.

When Matthew and Gordon talked about sharing confidences on MUDs more freely than in real life, they spoke of using anonymity to modulate their exposure. In contrast, Stewart renounced anonymity on MUDs and talked nonstop to anyone who would listen. This wholesale discarding of his most characteristic defenses, withdrawal and reticence, made him feel out of control. He compensated by trying even harder to "put things out

of his mind" and by denying that MUDs had been of any value. Again, the comparison with psychotherapy is illuminating. A skillful therapist would have treated Stewart's defenses with greater respect, as tools that might well be helpful if used in modest doses.[12] A little withdrawal can be a good thing. But if a naive psychotherapist had encouraged Stewart to toss away defenses and tell all, that therapist would likely have had an unhappy result similar to what Stewart achieved from his MUD confessions: Stewart's defenses would end up more entrenched than before, but it would be the psychotherapy rather than the MUDs that he would denigrate as a waste of time.

Stewart cannot learn from his character Achilles' experiences and social success because they are too different from the things of which he believes himself capable. Despite his efforts to turn Achilles into Stewart, Stewart has split off his strengths and sees them as possible only for Achilles in the MUD. It is only Achilles who can create the magic and win the girl. In making this split between himself and the achievements of his screen persona, Stewart does not give himself credit for the positive steps he has taken in real life. He has visited other MUD players in America and has had a group of the German players visit him for a weekend of sightseeing. But like an unsuccessful psychotherapy, MUDding has not helped Stewart bring these good experiences inside himself or integrate them into his self-image.

Stewart has used MUDs to "act out" rather than "work through" his difficulties. In acting out we stage our old conflicts in new settings, we reenact our past in fruitless repetition. In contrast, working through usually involves a moratorium on action in order to think about our habitual reactions in a new way. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that it is precisely by not stirring things up at the level of outward action that we are able to effect inner change. The presence of the therapist helps to contain the impulse for action and to encourage an examination of the meaning of the impulse itself. MUDs provide rich spaces for both acting out and working through. There are genuine possibilities for change, and there is room for unproductive repetition. The outcome depends on the emotional challenges the players face and the emotional resources they bring to the game. MUDs can provide occasions for personal growth and change, but not for everyone and not in every circumstance.

Stewart tried and failed to use MUDs for therapeutic purposes. Robert, whom I met after his freshman year in college, presents a contrasting case. Although Robert went through a period during which he looked even more "addicted" to MUDs than Stewart, in the end, his time on MUDs provided him with a context for significant personal growth.

During his final year of high school, Robert had to cope with severe disruptions in his family life. His father lost his job as a fireman because of heavy drinking. The fire department helped him to find a desk job in another state. "My dad was an abusive alcoholic," says Robert. "He lost his good job. They sent him somewhere else. He moved, but my mom stayed in Minnesota with me. She was my security." College in New Jersey took Robert away from his high school friends and his mother. It was his first extended separation from her. Calls to his mother felt unsatisfying. They were too short and too expensive. Robert was lonely during the early days of his freshman year, but then a friend introduced him to MUDs.

For a period of several months, Robert MUDded over eighty hours a week. "The whole second semester, eighty hours a week," he says. During a time of particular stress, when a burst water pipe and a flooded dorm room destroyed all his possessions, Robert was playing for over a hundred and twenty hours a week. He ate at his computer; he generally slept four hours a night. Much of the fun, he says, was being able to put his troubles aside. He liked "just sitting there, not thinking about anything else. Because if you're so involved, you can't think about the problem, your problems."

> When I MUDded with the computer I never got tired. A lot of it was, like, "Oh, whoa, it's this time already." . . . Actually it is very obsessive. I remember up at college, I was once thinking, "Boy, I was just on this too much. I should cut down." But I was not able to. It's like a kind of addiction. . . . It was my life. . . . I was, like, living on the MUD. . . . Most of the time I felt comfortable that this was my life. I'd say I was addicted to it.
>
> I'd keep trying to stop. I'd say, "OK, I'm not going on. I'm going to classes." But something would come up and I wouldn't go to my class. I wouldn't do what I wanted to do.

Much of Robert's play on MUDs was serious work, because he took on responsibilities in cyberspace equivalent to a full-time job. He became a highly placed administrator of a new MUD. Robert told me that he had never before been in charge of anything. Now his MUD responsibilities were enormous.

Building and maintaining a MUD is a large and complicated task. There is technical programming work. New objects made by individual players need to be carefully reviewed to make sure that they do not interfere with the basic technical infrastructure of the MUD. There is management work. People need to be recruited, assigned jobs, taught the rules of the MUD, and put into a chain of command. And there is political work. The MUD is a community of people whose quarrels need to be adjudicated and whose feelings need to be respected. On his MUD, Robert did all of this, and by all accounts, he did it with elegance, diplomacy, and aplomb.

> I had to keep track of each division of the MUD that was being built and its local government, and when the money system came in I had to pay the

local workers. All the officers and enlisted men and women on each ship got paid a certain amount, depending on their rank. I had to make sure they got paid on the same day and the right amount. I had to make sure people had the right building quota, not wasting objects, not building too much.

Matthew and Julee nurtured themselves "in displacement." By helping others they were able to take care of themselves. Robert, too, gave others on MUDs what he most needed himself: a sense of structure and control.

Prior to taking on this job in a MUD, Robert had been known as something of a cut up on MUDs and elsewhere, someone accustomed to thumbing his nose at authority. He had gotten the administrative job on the MUD primarily because of the amount of time he was willing to commit. Robert says his MUD responsibilities gave him new respect for authority ("everyone should get to be a higher-up for a day," he says) and taught him something about himself. Robert discovered that he excels at negotiation and practical administration.

But despite the intensity and gratification of being online, at the end of the school year, Robert's MUDding was essentially over. When I met him in the summer after his freshman year, he was working as a sales clerk, had gotten his first apartment, and had formed a rock band with a few friends. He says that one week he was MUDding "twelve hours a day for seven days," and then the next week he was not MUDding at all.

How had Robert's MUDding ended? For one thing, a practical consideration intervened. At the end of the school year, his college took back the computer they had leased him for his dorm room. But Robert says that by the time his computer was taken away, MUDding had already served its emotional purpose for him.

Robert believes that during the period he was MUDding most intensively, the alternative for him would have been partying and drinking, that is, getting into his father's kind of trouble. He says,"I remember a lot of Friday and Saturday nights turning down parties because I was on the computer.... Instead of drinking I had something more fun and safe to do." During his high school years Robert drank to excess and was afraid that he might become an alcoholic like his father. MUDding helped to keep those fears at bay.

MUDding also gave Robert a way to think about his father with some sympathy but reassured him that he was not like his father. Robert's behavior on MUDs reminded him of his father's addictions in a way that increased his feelings of compassion.

It made me feel differently about someone who was addicted. I was a different person on the MUD. I didn't want to be bothered when I was on the MUD about other things like work, school, or classes.... I suppose in some way I feel closer to my Dad. I don't think he can stop himself from drinking.... maybe with a lot of help he could. But I don't think he can. It's just like I had a hard time stopping MUDs.

Like Stewart, Robert acted out certain of his troubles on the MUDs—the fascination with pushing an addiction to a limit, for example. But unlike Stewart, after he was confident that he could function responsibly and competently on MUDs, Robert wanted to try the same behavior in real life. And unlike Stewart, he was able to use MUDding as an environment in which he could talk about his feelings in a constructive way. In the real world Robert found it painful to talk about himself because he often found himself lying about such simple things as what his father did for a living. Because it was easier to "walk away" from conversations on the MUD, Robert found that it was easier to have them in the first place. While Stewart used MUDs to "tell all," Robert practiced the art of talking about himself in measured doses: "The computer is sort of practice to get into closer relationships with people in real life.... If something is bothering me, you don't have to let the person know or you can let the person know."

MUDs provided Robert with what the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called a psychosocial moratorium.[13] The notion of moratorium was a central aspect of Erikson's theories about adolescent identity development. Although the term implies a time out, what Erikson had in mind was not withdrawal. On the contrary, the adolescent moratorium is a time of intense interaction with people and ideas. It is a time of passionate friendships and experimentation. The moratorium is not on significant experiences but on their consequences. Of course, there are never human actions that are without consequences, so there is no such thing as a pure moratorium. Reckless driving leads to teenage deaths; careless sex to teenage pregnancy. Nevertheless, during the adolescent years, people are generally given permission to try new things. There is a tacit understanding that they will experiment. Though the outcomes of this experimentation can have enormous consequences, the experiences themselves feel removed from the structured surroundings of one's normal life. The moratorium facilitates the development of a core self, a personal sense of what gives life meaning. This is what Erikson called identity.

Erikson developed his ideas about the importance of a moratorium to the development of identity during the late 1950s and early 1960s. At that time, the notion corresponded to a common understanding of what "the college years" were about. Today, thirty years later, the idea of the college years as a "time out" seems remote, even quaint. College is preprofessional and AIDS has made sexual experimentation a potentially deadly game. But if our culture no longer offers an adolescent moratorium,

virtual communities do. They offer permission to play, to try things out. This is part of what makes them attractive.

Erikson saw identity in the context of a larger stage theory of development. Identity was one stage, intimacy and generativity were others. Erikson's ideas about stages did not suggest rigid sequences. His stages describe what people need to achieve before they can easily move ahead to another developmental task. For example, Erikson pointed out that successful intimacy in young adulthood is difficult if one does not come to it with a sense of who one is. This is the challenge of adolescent identity building. In real life, however, people frequently move on with incompletely resolved stages, simply doing the best they can. They use whatever materials they have at hand to get as much as they can of what they have missed. MUDs are striking examples of how technology can play a role in these dramas of self-repair. Stewart's case makes it clear that they are not a panacea. But they do present new opportunities as well as new risks.

Once we put aside the idea that Erikson's stages describe rigid sequences, we can look at the stages as modes of experience that people work on throughout their lives. Thus, the adolescent moratorium is not something people pass through but a mode of experience necessary throughout functional and creative adulthoods. We take vacations to escape not only from our work but from our habitual social lives. Vacations are times during which adults are allowed to play. Vacations give a finite structure to periodic adult moratoria. Time in cyberspace reshapes the notion of vacations and moratoria, because they may now exist in always-available windows. Erikson wrote that "the playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward into new stages of mastery."[14] In MUDs, adults can do both; we enter another reality and have the opportunity to develop new dimensions of self-mastery.

Unlike Stewart, Robert came to his emotional difficulties and his MUDding with a solid relationship with a consistent and competent mother. This good parenting enabled him to identify with other players he met on the MUD who had qualities he wished to emulate. Even more important, unlike Stewart, Robert was able to identify with the better self he played in the game. This constructive strategy is available only to people who are able to take in positive models, to bring other people and images of their better selves inside themselves.

When people like Stewart get stuck or become increasingly self-critical and depressed on MUDs, it is often because deficits in early relationships have made it too hard for them to have relationships that they can turn to constructive purposes. From the earliest days of his life, Stewart's illness and his parents' response to it, his mother's migraines and his father's withdrawals, made him feel unacceptable. In his own words, "I have always felt like damaged goods."

Life in cyberspace, as elsewhere, is not fair. To the question, "Are MUDs

good or bad for psychological growth?" the answer is unreassuringly complicated, just like life. If you come to the games with a self that is healthy enough to be able to grow from relationships, MUDs can be very good. If not, you can be in for trouble.

Stewart attended a series of pizza parties I held for MUDders in the Boston area. These were group sessions during which players had a chance to meet face to face and talk about their experiences. There Stewart met a group of people who used the games to role-play characters from diverse cultures and time periods. They played medieval ladies, Japanese warriors, Elizabethan bards. Stewart told me he felt little in common with these players, and he also seemed uncomfortable around them. Perhaps they called into question his desire to see MUDding as a simple extension of his real life. Stewart repeatedly insisted that, despite the fact that his character was "technically" named Achilles, he was in fact playing himself. He reminded the group several times that when he MUDded he actually asked other players to call him Stewart. But during one group session, after insisting for several hours that he plays no role on MUDs, a member of the role-playing contingent casually asked Stewart if he was married. Stewart immediately said, "Yes," and then blushed deeply because he was caught in the contradiction between his insistence that he plays no roles in Gargoyle and his deep investment in his MUD marriage. Paradoxically, Stewart was kept from fully profiting from Achilles' social successes, not because he fully identified with the character as he insisted, but because he ultimately saw Stewart as too unlike Achilles.

In some computer conferences, the subject of the slippage between online personae and one's real-life character has become a focal point of discussion. On the WELL, short for the "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link," a San Francisco–based virtual community, some contributors have maintained that they enjoy experimenting with personae very different from their RL selves. Others have insisted that maintaining an artificial persona very different from one's sense of oneself in RL is what one called "cheap fuel," a novelty that wears thin fast because of the large amount of "psychic energy" required to maintain it. These people note that they want to reveal themselves to the members of a community that they care about.[15] Yet other contributors take a third position: They stress that cyberspace provides opportunities to play out aspects of oneself that are not total strangers but that may be inhibited in real life. One contributor finds that online experience "seems to interface with the contentious, opinionated, verbal, angry, and snide aspects of my personality beautifully but not with many of the other aspects. My electronic id is given wing here. I'm having a hard time balancing it."[16]

The electronic discussion on the WELL circled around the therapeutic potential of online personae and touched on a point that was very important to many of the people I interviewed: The formats of MUDs, elec-

tronic mail, computer conferences, or bulletin boards force one to recognize a highly differentiated (and not always likable) virtual persona, because that persona leaves an electronic trace. In other words, the presence of a record that you can scroll through again and again may alert you to how persistent are your foibles or defensive reactions. One New York City writer told me ruefully, "I would see myself on the screen and say, 'There I go again.' I could see my neuroses in black and white. It was a wake-up call."

Intimacy and Projection

Robert had a virtual girlfriend on the MUD, a character played by a West Coast college senior named Kasha. Women are in short supply in MUDs and his friendship with Kasha made Robert the envy of many other male players. In the MUD universe, Kasha built a private planet whose construction took many weeks of programming. On the planet, Kasha built a mansion with flowers in every room. As a special gift to Robert, Kasha designed the most beautiful of these rooms as their bedroom.

Robert traveled cross-country to visit Kasha and, completely smitten, Kasha made plans to move to New Jersey at the end of the academic year. But as that time approached, Robert pulled away.

> I mean, she had a great personality over the computer. We got along pretty well. And then I went to see her. And then—I don't know. Every day I had less and less feeling toward her. And I was thinking of my mom more and more. I'm so confused about what I am doing in college. I just didn't want someone coming to live with me in New Jersey and all. That's what she was talking about. It was all much too fast.

Relationships during adolescence are usually bounded by a mutual understanding that they involve limited commitment. Virtual space is well suited to such relationships; its natural limitations keep things within bounds. So, from one point of view, Robert's pulling back from Kasha was simply a sign that he was ready for commitment in the virtual but not in the real. But Robert and Kasha were also playing out a characteristic pattern on MUDs. As in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which takes place in the isolation of a sanatorium, relationships become intense very quickly because the participants feel isolated in a remote and unfamiliar world with its own rules. MUDs, like other electronic meeting places, can breed a kind of easy intimacy. In a first phase, MUD players feel the excitement of a rapidly deepening relationship and the sense that time itself is speeding up. One player describes the process as follows:

> The MUD quickens things. It quickens things so much. You know, you don't think about it when you're doing it, but you meet somebody on the MUD, and within a week you feel like you've been friends forever. It's notorious. One of the notorious things that people who've thought about it will say is that MUDs are both slower because you can't type as fast as you can talk, but they're faster because things seem to move so much faster.

In a second phase, players commonly try to take things from the virtual to the real and are usually disappointed. Peter, a twenty-eight-year-old lecturer in comparative literature, thought he was in love with a MUDding partner who played Beatrice to his Dante (their characters' names). Their relationship was intellectual, emotionally supportive, and erotic. Their virtual sex life was rich and fulfilling. The description of physical actions in their virtual sex (or TinySex) was accompanied by detailed descriptions of each of their thoughts and feelings. It was not just TinySex, it was TinyLovemaking. Peter flew from North Carolina to Oregon to meet the woman behind Beatrice and returned home crushed. "[On the MUD] I saw in her what I wanted to see. Real life gave me too much information."

Since it is not unusual for players to keep logs of their MUD sessions with significant others, Peter had something that participants in real-life relationships never have: a record of every interaction with Beatrice.[17] When he read over his logs, he remarked that he could not find their relationship in them. Where was the warmth? The sense of complicity and empathy?[18]

When everything is in the log and nothing is in the log, people are confronted with the degree to which they construct relationships in their own minds. In Peter's case, as he reflected on it later, his unconscious purpose was to create a love object, someone who reminded him of an idolized and inaccessible older sister.

MUDs encourage projection and the development of transferences for some of the same reasons that a classical Freudian analytic situation does. Analysts sit behind their patients so they can become disembodied voices. Patients are given space to project onto the analyst thoughts and feelings from the past. In MUDs, the lack of information about the real person to whom one is talking, the silence into which one types, the absence of visual cues, all these encourage projection. This situation leads to exaggerated likes and dislikes, to idealization and demonization. So it is natural for people to feel let down or confused when they meet their virtual lovers in person. Those who survive the experience best are the people who try to understand why the persona of a fellow MUDder has evoked such a powerful response. And sometimes, when the feelings evoked in transferences on MUDs are reflected upon, MUD relationships can have a positive effect on self-understanding.

Jeremy, a thirty-two-year-old lawyer, says this about MUDding:

> I dare to be passive. . . . I don't mean in having sex on the MUD. I mean in letting other people take the initiative in friendships, in not feeling when I am in character that I need to control everything. My mother controlled my whole family, well, certainly she controlled me. So I grew up thinking, "Never again!" My real life is exhausting that way. I'm always protecting myself. On MUDs I do something else. . . . I didn't even realize this connection to my mother and the MUDding until [in the game] somebody tried to boss my pretty laid-back character around and I went crazy. . . . I hated her. . . . And then I saw what I was doing. When I looked at the logs I saw that . . . this woman was really doing very little to boss me around. But I hear a woman with an authoritative tone and I go crazy. Food for thought.

To the question, "Are MUDs psychotherapeutic?" one is tempted to say that they stand the greatest chance to be so if the MUDder is also in psychotherapy. Taken by themselves, MUDs are highly evocative and provide much grist for the mill of a psychodynamic therapeutic process. If "acting out" is going to happen, MUDs are relatively safe places, since virtual promiscuity never causes pregnancy or disease. But it is also true that, taken by themselves, virtual communities will only sometimes facilitate psychological growth.

French Sherry

MUDs provide dramatic examples of how one can use experiences in virtual space to play with aspects of the self. Electronic mail and bulletin boards provide more mundane but no less impressive examples. There, role playing may not be as explicit or extravagant, but it goes on all the same.

On America Online, people choose handles by which they are known on the system. One's real name need only be known to the administrators of the service itself. One forty-two-year-old nurse whose real name is Annette calls herself Bette on the system. "Annette," she says, "for all my life that will be sweet, little perky Annette from the *Mickey Mouse Club*. I want to be a Bette. Like Bette Davis. I want to seem mysterious and powerful. There is no such thing as a mysterious and powerful Mouseketeer." On America Online, "Bette" is active on a poetry forum. "I've always wanted to write poetry. I have made little fits and starts through the years. I don't want to say that changing my name made it possible, but I can tell you it made it a whole lot easier. Bette writes poems. Annette just fools around with it. Annette is a nurse. Bette is the name of a writer, more moody, often more morose." When she types at her computer, Annette, who has become a skillful touch typist, says:

> I like to close my eyes and imagine myself speaking as Bette. An authoritative voice. When I type as Bette I imagine her voice. You might ask whether this Bette is real or not. Well, she is real enough to write poetry. I mean it's poetry that I take credit for. Bette gives courage. We sort of do it together.

Annette does not suffer from multiple personality disorder. Bette does not function autonomously. Annette is not dissociated from Bette's behavior. Bette enables aspects of Annette that have not been easy for her to express. As Annette becomes more fluent as Bette, she moves flexibly between the two personae. In a certain sense, Annette is able to relate to Bette with the flexibility that Stewart could not achieve in his relationship with Achilles. Achilles could have social successes but, in Annette's terms, the character could not give courage to the more limited Stewart.

Annette's very positive Bette experience is not unusual in online culture. Experiences like Annette's require only that one use the anonymity of cyberspace to project alternate personae. And, like Annette, people often project underdeveloped aspects of themselves. We can best understand the psychological meaning of this by looking to experiences that do not take place online. These are experiences in which people expand their sense of identity by assuming roles where the boundary between self and role becomes increasingly permeable. When Annette first told me her story, it reminded me of such an experience in my own life.

My mother died when I was nineteen and a college junior. Upset and disoriented, I dropped out of school. I traveled to Europe, ended up in Paris, studied history and political science, and worked at a series of odd jobs from housecleaner to English tutor. The French-speaking Sherry, I was pleased to discover, was somewhat different from the English-speaking one. French-speaking Sherry was not unrecognizable, but she was her own person. In particular, while the English-speaking Sherry had little confidence that she could take care of herself, the French-speaking Sherry simply had to and got on with it.

On trips back home, English-speaking Sherry rediscovered old timidities. I kept returning to France, thirsty for more French speaking. Little by little, I became increasingly fluent in French and confortable with the persona of the resourceful, French-speaking young woman. Now I cycled through the French- and English-speaking Sherrys until the movement seemed natural; I could bend toward one and then the other with increasing flexibility. When English-speaking Sherry finally returned to college in the United States, she was never as brave as French-speaking Sherry. But she could hold her own.

Chapter 8

TINYSEX AND GENDER TROUBLE

From my earliest effort to construct an online persona, it occurred to me that being a virtual man might be more comfortable than being a virtual woman.

When I first logged on to a MUD, I named and described a character but forgot to give it a gender. I was struggling with the technical aspects of the MUD universe—the difference between various MUD commands such as "saying" and "emoting," "paging" and "whispering." Gender was the last thing on my mind. This rapidly changed when a male-presenting character named Jiffy asked me if I was "really an it." At his question, I experienced an unpleasurable sense of disorientation which immediately gave way to an unfamiliar sense of freedom.

When Jiffy's question appeared on my screen, I was standing in a room of LambdaMOO filled with characters engaged in sexual banter in the style of the movie *Animal House*. The innuendos, double entendres, and leering invitations were scrolling by at a fast clip; I felt awkward, as though at a party to which I had been invited by mistake. I was reminded of junior high school dances when I wanted to go home or hide behind the punch bowl. I was reminded of kissing games in which it was awful to be chosen and awful not to be chosen. Now, on the MUD, I had a new option. I wondered if playing a male might allow me to feel less out of place. I could stand on the sidelines and people would expect *me* to make the first move. And I could choose not to. I could choose simply to "lurk," to stand by and observe the action. Boys, after all, were not called prudes if they were too cool to play kissing games. They were not categorized as wallflowers if they held back and didn't ask girls to dance. They could simply be shy in a manly way—aloof, above it all.

Two days later I was back in the MUD. After I typed the command that joined me, in Boston, to the computer in California where the MUD

resided, I discovered that I had lost the paper on which I had written my MUD password. This meant that I could not play my own character but had to log on as a guest. As such, I was assigned a color: Magenta. As "Magenta_guest" I was again without gender. While I was struggling with basic MUD commands, other players were typing messages for all to see such as "Magenta_guest gazes hot and enraptured at the approach of Fire_Eater." Again I was tempted to hide from the frat party atmosphere by trying to pass as a man.[1] When much later I did try playing a male character, I finally experienced that permission to move freely I had always imagined to be the birthright of men. Not only was I approached less frequently, but I found it easier to respond to an unwanted overture with aplomb, saying something like, "That's flattering, Ribald_Temptress, but I'm otherwise engaged." My sense of freedom didn't just involve a different attitude about sexual advances, which now seemed less threatening. As a woman I have a hard time deflecting a request for conversation by asserting my own agenda. As a MUD male, doing so (nicely) seemed more natural; it never struck me as dismissive or rude. Of course, my reaction said as much about the construction of gender in my own mind as it did about the social construction of gender in the MUD.

Playing in MUDs, whether as a man, a woman, or a neuter character, I quickly fell into the habit of orienting myself to new cyberspace acquaintances by checking out their gender. This was a strange exercise, especially because a significant proportion of the female-presenting characters were RL men, and a good number of the male-presenting characters were RL women. I was not alone in this curiously irrational preoccupation. For many players, guessing the true gender of players behind MUD characters has become something of an art form. Pavel Curtis, the founder of LambdaMOO, has observed that when a female-presenting character is called something like FabulousHotBabe, one can be almost sure there is a man behind the mask.[2] Another experienced MUDder shares the folklore that "if a female-presenting character's description of her beauty goes on for more than two paragraphs, 'she' [the player behind the character] is sure to be an ugly woman."

The preoccupation in MUDs with getting a "fix" on people through "fixing" their gender reminds us of the extent to which we use gender to shape our relationships. Corey, a twenty-two-year-old dental technician, says that her name often causes people to assume that she is male—that is, until she meets them. Corey has long blonde hair, piled high, and admits to "going for the Barbie look."

> I'm not sure how it started, but I know that when I was a kid the more people said, "Oh, you have such a cute boy's name," the more I laid on the hairbows. [With my name] they always expected a boy—or at least a tomboy.

Corey says that, for her, part of the fun of being online is that she gets to see "a lot of people having the [same] experience [with their online names that] I've had with my name." She tells me that her girlfriend logged on as Joel instead of Joely, "and she saw people's expectations change real fast." Corey continues:

> I also think the neuter characters [in MUDs] are good. When I play one, I realize how hard it is not to be either a man or a woman. I always find myself trying to be one or the other even when I'm trying to be neither. And all the time I'm talking to a neuter character [she reverses roles here] . . . I'm thinking "So who's behind it?"

In MUDs, the existence of characters other than male or female is disturbing, evocative. Like transgressive gender practices in real life, by breaking the conventions, it dramatizes our attachment to them.

Gender-swapping on MUDs is not a small part of the game action. By some estimates, Habitat, a Japanese MUD, has 1.5 million users. Habitat is a MUD operated for profit. Among the registered members of Habitat, there is a ratio of four real-life men to each real-life woman. But inside the MUD the ratio is only three male characters to one female character. In other words, a significant number of players, many tens of thousands of them, are virtually cross-dressing.[3]

Gender Trouble[4]

What is virtual gender-swapping all about? Some of those who do it claim that it is not particularly significant. "When I play a woman I don't really take it too seriously," said twenty-year-old Andrei. "I do it to improve the ratio of women to men. It's just a game." On one level, virtual gender-swapping is easier than doing it in real life. For a man to present himself as female in a chat room, on an IRC channel, or in a MUD, only requires writing a description. For a man to play a woman on the streets of an American city, he would have to shave various parts of his body; wear makeup, perhaps a wig, a dress, and high heels; perhaps change his voice, walk, and mannerisms. He would have some anxiety about passing, and there might be even more anxiety about not passing, which would pose a risk of violence and possibly arrest. So more men are willing to give virtual cross-dressing a try. But once they are online as female, they soon find that maintaining this fiction is difficult. To pass as a woman for any length of time requires understanding how gender inflects speech, manner, the interpretation of experience. Women attempting to pass as men face the same kind of challenge. One woman said that she "worked hard" to pass in a room on a commercial network service that was advertised as a meeting place for gay men.

> I have always been so curious about what men do with each other. I could never even imagine how they talk to each other. I can't exactly go to a gay bar and eavesdrop inconspicuously. [When online] I don't actually have [virtual] sex with anyone. I get out of that by telling the men there that I'm shy and still unsure. But I like hanging out; it makes gays seem less strange to me. But it is not so easy. You have to think about it, to make up a life, a job, a set of reactions.

Virtual cross-dressing is not as simple as Andrei suggests. Not only can it be technically challenging, it can be psychologically complicated. Taking a virtual role may involve you in ongoing relationships. In this process, you may discover things about yourself that you never knew before. You may discover things about other people's response to you. You are not in danger of being arrested, but you are embarked on an enterprise that is not without some gravity and emotional risk.

In fact, one strong motivation to gender-swap in virtual space is to have TinySex as a creature of another gender, something that suggests more than an emotionally neutral activity. Gender-swapping is an opportunity to explore conflicts raised by one's biological gender. Also, as Corey noted, by enabling people to experience what it "feels" like to be the opposite gender or to have no gender at all, the practice encourages reflection on the way ideas about gender shape our expectations. MUDs and the virtual personae one adopts within them are objects-to-think-with for reflecting on the social construction of gender.

Case, a thirty-four-year-old industrial designer who is happily married to a coworker, is currently MUDding as a female character. In response to my question, "Has MUDding ever caused you any emotional pain?" he says, "Yes, but also the kind of learning that comes from hard times."

> I'm having pain in my playing now. The woman I'm playing in MedievalMUSH [Mairead] is having an interesting relationship with a fellow. Mairead is a lawyer. It costs so much to go to law school that it has to be paid for by a corporation or a noble house. A man she met and fell in love with was a nobleman. He paid for her law school. He bought my [Case slips into referring to Mairead in the first person] contract. Now he wants to marry me although I'm a commoner. I finally said yes. I try to talk to him about the fact that I'm essentially his property. I'm a commoner, I'm basically property and to a certain extent that doesn't bother me. I've grown up with it, that's the way life is. He wants to deny the situation. He says, "Oh no, no, no. . . . We'll pick you up, set you on your feet, the whole world is open to you."

> But everytime I behave like I'm now going to be a countess some day, you know, assert myself—as in, "And I never liked this wallpaper anyway"—I get pushed down. The relationship is pull up, push down. It's an incredibly psychologically damaging thing to do to a person. And the very thing that he liked about her—that she was independent, strong, said what was on her mind—it is all being bled out of her.

Case looks at me with a wry smile and sighs, "A woman's life." He continues:

> I see her [Mairead] heading for a major psychological problem. What we have is a dysfunctional relationship. But even though it's very painful and stressful, it's very interesting to watch myself cope with this problem. How am I going to dig my persona's self out of this mess? Because I don't want to go on like this. I want to get out of it. . . . You can see that playing this woman lets me see what I have in my psychological repertoire, what is hard and what is easy for me. And I can also see how some of the things that work when you're a man just backfire when you're a woman.

Case has played Mairead for nearly a year, but even a brief experience playing a character of another gender can be evocative. William James said, "Philosophy is the art of imagining alternatives." MUDs are proving grounds for an action-based philosophical practice that can serve as a form of consciousness-raising about gender issues. For example, on many MUDs, offering technical assistance has become a common way in which male characters "purchase" female attention, analogous to picking up the check at an RL dinner. In real life, our expectations about sex roles (who offers help, who buys dinner, who brews the coffee) can become so ingrained that we no longer notice them. On MUDs, however, expectations are expressed in visible textual actions, widely witnessed and openly discussed. When men playing females are plied with unrequested offers of help on MUDs, they often remark that such chivalries communicate a belief in female incompetence. When women play males on MUDs and realize that they are no longer being offered help, some reflect that those offers of help may well have led them to believe they needed it. As a woman, "First you ask for help because you think it will be expedient," says a college sophomore, "then you realize that you aren't developing the skills to figure things out for yourself."

All the World's a Stage

Any account of the evocative nature of gender-swapping might well defer to Shakespeare, who used it as a plot device for reframing personal and

political choices. *As You Like It* is a classic example, a comedy that uses gender-swapping to reveal new aspects of identity and to permit greater complexity of relationships.[5] In the play, Rosalind, the Duke's daughter, is exiled from the court of her uncle Frederick, who has usurped her father's throne. Frederick's daughter, Rosalind's cousin Celia, escapes with her. Together they flee to the magical forest of Arden. When the two women first discuss their plan to flee, Rosalind remarks that they might be in danger because "beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold." In response, Celia suggests that they would travel more easily if they rubbed dirt on their faces and wore drab clothing, thus pointing to a tactic that frequently provides women greater social ease in the world—becoming unattractive. Rosalind then comes up with a second idea—becoming a man: "Were it not better,/Because that I am more than common tall,/That I did suit me all points like a man?"

In the end, Rosalind and Celia both disguise themselves as boys, Ganymede and Aliena. In suggesting this ploy, Rosalind proposes a disguise that will be both physical ("A gallant curtle-axe on my thigh,/A boar-spear in my hand") and emotional ("and—in my heart,/Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will"). She goes on, "We'll have a swashbuckling and martial outside,/as many other mannish cowards have/That do outface it with their semblances."[6]

In these lines, Rosalind does not endorse an essential difference between men and women; rather, she suggests that men routinely adopt the same kind of pose she is now choosing. Biological men have to construct male gender just as biological women have to construct female gender. If Rosalind and Celia make themselves unattractive, they will end up less feminine. Their female gender will end up deconstructed. Both strategies —posing as men and deconstructing their femininity—are games that female MUDders play. One player, a woman currently in treatment for anorexia, described her virtual body this way:

> In real life, the control is the thing. I know that it is very scary for me to be a woman. I like making my body disappear. In real life that is. On MUDs, too. On the MUD, I'm sort of a woman, but I'm not someone you would want to see sexually. My MUD description is a combination of smoke and angles. I like that phrase "sort of a woman." I guess that's what I want to be in real life too.

In addition to virtual cross-dressing and creating character descriptions that deconstruct gender, MUDders gender-swap as double agents. That is, in MUDs, men play women pretending to be men, and women play men pretending to be women. Shakespeare's characters play these games as well. In *As You Like It,* when Rosalind flees Frederick's court she is in

love with Orlando. In the forest of Arden, disguised as the boy Ganymede, she encounters Orlando, himself lovesick for Rosalind. As Ganymede, Rosalind says she will try to cure Orlando of his love by playing Rosalind, pointing out the flaws of femininity in the process. In current stagings, Rosalind is usually played by a woman who at this point in the play pretends to be a man who pretends to be a woman. In Shakespeare's time, there was yet another turn because all women's parts were played by boys. So the character of Rosalind was played by a boy playing a girl playing a boy who plays a girl so she can have a flirtatious conversation with a boy. Another twist occurs when Rosalind playing Ganymede playing Rosalind meets Phebe, a shepherdess who falls passionately in love with "him."

As You Like It, with its famous soliloquy that begins "All the world's a stage," is a play that dramatizes the power of the theater as a metaphor for life. The visual pun of Rosalind's role underscores the fact that each of us is an actor playing one part or many parts. But the play has another message that speaks to the power of MUDs as new stages for working on the politics of gender. When Rosalind and Orlando meet "man to man" as Ganymede and Orlando, they are able to speak freely. They are able to have conversations about love quite different from those that would be possible if they followed the courtly conventions that constrain communications between men and women. In this way, the play suggests that donning a mask, adopting a persona, is a step toward reaching a deeper truth about the real, a position many MUDders take regarding their experiences as virtual selves.

Garrett is a twenty-eight-year-old male computer programmer who played a female character on a MUD for nearly a year. The character was a frog named Ribbit. When Ribbit sensed that a new player was floundering, a small sign would materialize in her hand that said, "If you are lost in the MUD, this frog can be a friend."

When talking about why he chose to play Ribbit, Garrett says:

> I wanted to know more about women's experiences, and not just from reading about them.... I wanted to see what the difference felt like. I wanted to experiment with the other side.... I wanted to be collaborative and helpful, and I thought it would be easier as a female.... As a man I was brought up to be territorial and competitive. I wanted to try something new. ... In some way I really felt that the canonically female way of communicating was more productive than the male—in that all this competition got in the way.

And indeed, Garrett says that as a female frog, he did feel freer to express the helpful side of his nature than he ever had as a man. "My competitive side takes a back seat when I am Ribbit."

Garrett's motivations for his experiment in gender-swapping run deep.

Growing up, competition was thrust upon him and he didn't much like it. Garrett, whose parents divorced when he was an infant, rarely saw his father. His mother offered little protection from his brother's bullying. An older cousin regularly beat him up until Garrett turned fourteen and could inflict some damage of his own. Garrett got the clear idea that male aggression could only be controlled by male force.

In his father's absence, Garrett took on significant family responsibility. His mother ran an office, and Garrett checked in with her every day after school to see if she had any errands for him to run. If so, he would forgo the playground. Garrett recalls these days with great warmth. He felt helpful and close to his mother. When at ten, he won a scholarship to a prestigious private boarding school for boys, a school he describes as being "straight out of Dickens," there were no more opportunities for this kind of collaboration. To Garrett, life now seemed to be one long competition. Of boarding school he says:

> It's competitive from the moment you get up in the morning and you all got to take a shower together and everyone's checking each other out to see who's got pubic hair. It's competitive when you're in class. It's competitive when you're on the sports field. It's competitive when you're in other extracurricular activities such as speeches. It's competitive all day long, every day.

At school, the older boys had administrative authority over the younger ones. Garrett was not only the youngest student, he was also from the poorest family and the only newcomer to a group that had attended school together for many years. "I was pretty much at the bottom of the food chain," he says. In this hierarchical environment, Garrett learned to detest hierarchy, and the bullies at school reinforced his negative feelings about masculine aggression.

Once out of high school, Garrett committed himself to finding ways to "get back to being the kind of person I was with my mother." But he found it difficult to develop collaborative relationships, particularly at work. When he encouraged a female coworker to take credit for some work they had done together—"something," he says "that women have always done for men"—she accepted his offer, but their friendship and ability to work together were damaged. Garrett sums up the experience by saying that women are free to help men and both can accept the woman's self-sacrifice, "but when a man lets a woman take the credit, the relationship feels too close, too seductive [to the woman]."

From Garrett's point of view, most computer bulletin boards and discussion groups are not collaborative but hostile environments, characterized by "flaming." This is the practice of trading angry and often *ad hominem* remarks on any given topic.

> There was a premium on saying something new, which is typically something that disagrees to some extent with what somebody else has said. And that in itself provides an atmosphere that's ripe for conflict. Another aspect, I think, is the fact that it takes a certain degree of courage to risk really annoying someone. But that's not necessarily true on an electronic medium, because they can't get to you. It's sort of like hiding behind a wall and throwing stones. You can keep throwing them as long as you want and you're safe.

Garrett found MUDs different and a lot more comfortable. "On MUDs," he says, "people were making a world together. You got no prestige from being abusive."

Garrett's gender-swapping on MUDs gave him an experience-to-think-with for thinking about gender. From his point of view, all he had to do was to replace male with female in a character's description to change how people saw him and what he felt comfortable expressing. Garrett's MUD experience, where as a female he could be collaborative without being stigmatized, left him committed to bringing the helpful frog persona into his life as a male, both on and off the MUD. When I met him, he had a new girlfriend who was lending him books about the differences in men's and women's communication styles. He found they reinforced the lessons he learned in the MUD.

By the time I met Garrett, he was coming to feel that his gender-swapping experiment had reached its logical endpoint. Indeed, between the time of our first and second meeting, Garrett decided to blow his cover on the MUD and tell people that in RL he was really male. He said that our discussions of his gender-swapping had made him realize that it had achieved its purpose.

For anthropologists, the experience of *dépaysement* (literally, "decountrifying" oneself) is one of the most powerful elements of fieldwork. One leaves one's own culture to face something unfamiliar, and upon returning home it has become strange—and can be seen with fresh eyes. Garrett described his decision to end his gender-swapping in the language of *dépaysement*. He had been playing a woman for so long that it no longer seemed strange. "I'd gotten used to it to the extent that I was sort of ignoring it. OK, so I log in and now I'm a woman. And it really didn't seem odd anymore." But returning to the MUD as a male persona *did* feel strange. He struggled for an analogy and came up with this one:

> It would be like going to an interview for a job and acting like I do at a party or a volleyball game. Which is not the way you behave at an interview. And so it is sort of the same thing. [As a male on the MUD] I'm behaving in a way that doesn't feel right for the context, although it is still as much me as it ever was.

When Garrett stopped playing the female Ribbit and started playing a helpful male frog named Ron, many of Garrett's MUDding companions interpreted his actions as those of a woman who now wanted to try playing a man. Indeed, a year after his switch, Garrett says that at least one of his MUD friends, Dredlock, remains unconvinced that the same person has actually played both Ribbit and Ron. Dredlock insists that while Ribbit was erratic (he says, "She would sometimes walk out in the middle of a conversation"), Ron is more dependable. Has Garrett's behavior changed? Is Garrett's behavior the same but viewed differently through the filter of gender? Garrett believes that both are probably true. "People on the MUD have . . . seen the change and it hasn't necessarily convinced them that I'm male, but they're also not sure that I'm female. And so, I've sort of gotten into this state where my gender is unknown and people are pretty much resigned to not knowing it." Garrett says that when he helped others as a female frog, it was taken as welcome, natural, and kind. When he now helps as a male frog, people find it unexpected and suspect that it is a seduction ploy. The analogy with his real life is striking. There, too, he found that playing the helping role as a man led to trouble because it was easily misinterpreted as an attempt to create an expectation of intimacy.

Case, the industrial designer who played the female Mairead in MedievalMUSH, further illustrates the complexity of gender swapping as a vehicle for self-reflection. Case describes his RL persona as a nice guy, a "Jimmy Stewart–type like my father." He says that in general he likes his father and he likes himself, but he feels he pays a price for his low-key ways. In particular, he feels at a loss when it comes to confrontation, both at home and in business dealings. While Garrett finds that MUDding as a female makes it easier to be collaborative and helpful, Case likes MUDding as a female because it makes it easier for him to be aggressive and confrontational. Case plays several online "Katharine Hepburn–types," strong, dynamic, "out there" women who remind him of his mother, "who says exactly what's on her mind and is a take-no-prisoners sort." He says:

> For virtual reality to be interesting it has to emulate the real. But you have to be able to do something in the virtual that you couldn't in the real. For me, my female characters are interesting because I can say and do the sorts of things that I mentally want to do, but if I did them as a man, they would be obnoxious. I see a strong woman as admirable. I see a strong man as a problem. Potentially a bully.

In other words, for Case, if you are assertive as a man, it is coded as "being a bastard." If you are assertive as a woman, it is coded as "modern and together."

My wife and I both design logos for small businesses. But do this thought experiment. If I say "I will design this logo for $3,000, take it or leave it," I'm just a typical pushy businessman. If she says it, I think it sounds like she's a "together" woman. There is too much male power-wielding in society, and so if you use power as a man, that turns you into a stereotypical man. Women can do it more easily.

Case's gender-swapping has given him permission to be more assertive within the MUD, and more assertive outside of it as well:

There are aspects of my personality—the more assertive, administrative, bureaucratic ones—that I am able to work on in the MUDs. I've never been good at bureaucratic things, but I'm much better from practicing on MUDs and playing a woman in charge. I am able to do things—in the real, that is—that I couldn't have before because I have played Katharine Hepburn characters.

Case says his Katharine Hepburn personae are "externalizations of a part of myself." In one interview with him, I use the expression "aspects of the self," and he picks it up eagerly, for MUDding reminds him of how Hindu gods could have different aspects or subpersonalities, all the while having a whole self.

You may, for example, have an aspect who is a ruthless business person who can negotiate contracts very, very well, and you may call upon that part of yourself while you are in tense negotiation, to do the negotiation, to actually go through and negotiate a really good contract. But you would have to trust this aspect to say something like, "Of course, I will need my lawyers to look over this," when in fact among your "lawyers" is the integrated self who is going to do an ethics vet over the contract, because you don't want to violate your own ethical standards and this [ruthless] aspect of yourself might do something that you wouldn't feel comfortable with later.

Case's gender-swapping has enabled his inner world of hard-bitten negotiators to find self-expression, but without compromising the values he associates with his "whole person." Role playing has given the negotiators practice; Case says he has come to trust them more. In response to my question, "Do you feel that you call upon your personae in real life?" Case responds:

Yes, an aspect sort of clears its throat and says, "I can do this. You are being so amazingly conflicted over this and I know exactly what to do. Why don't you just let me do it?" MUDs give me balance. In real life, I tend to be extremely diplomatic, nonconfrontational. I don't like to ram my ideas down anyone's throat. On the MUD, I can be, "Take it or leave it." All of my

Hepburn characters are that way. That's probably why I play them. Because they are smart-mouthed, they will not sugarcoat their words.

In some ways, Case's description of his inner world of actors who address him and are capable of taking over negotiations is reminiscent of the language of people with multiple personality. In most cases of multiple personality, it is believed that repeated trauma provokes a massive defense: An "alter" is split off who can handle the trauma and protect the core personality from emotional as well as physical pain. In contrast, Case's inner actors are not split off from his sense of himself. He calls upon their strengths with increasing ease and fluidity. Case experiences himself very much as a collective self, not feeling that he must goad or repress this or that aspect of himself into conformity. To use Marvin Minsky's language, Case feels at ease in his society of mind.

Garrett and Case play female MUD characters for very different reasons. There is a similar diversity in women's motivations for playing male characters. Some share my initial motivation, a desire for invisibility or permission to be more outspoken or aggressive. "I was born in the South and I was taught that girls didn't speak up to disagree with men," says Zoe, a thirty-four-year-old woman who plays male and female characters on four MUDs.

We would sit at dinner and my father would talk and my mother would agree. I thought my father was a god. Once or twice I did disagree with him. I remember one time in particular when I was ten, and he looked at me and said, "Well, well, well, if this little flower grows too many more thorns, she will never catch a man."

Zoe credits MUDs with enabling her to reach a state of mind where she is better able to speak up for herself in her marriage ("to say what's on my mind before things get all blown out of proportion") and to handle her job as the financial officer for a small biotechnology firm.

I played a MUD man for two years. First I did it because I wanted the feeling of an equal playing field in terms of authority, and the only way I could think of to get it was to play a man. But after a while, I got very absorbed by MUDding. I became a wizard on a pretty simple MUD—I called myself Ulysses—and got involved in the system and realized that as a man I could be firm and people would think I was a great wizard. As a woman, drawing the line and standing firm has always made me feel like a bitch and, actually, I feel that people saw me as one, too. As a man I was liberated from all that. I learned from my mistakes. I got better at being firm but not rigid. I practiced, safe from criticism.

Zoe's perceptions of her gender trouble are almost the opposite of Case's. Case sees aggressiveness as acceptable only for women; Zoe sees it as acceptable only for men. Comparison with Garrett is also instructive. Like Case, Garrett associated feminine strength with positive feelings about his mother; Zoe associated feminine strength with loss of her father's love. What these stories have in common is that in all three cases, a virtual gender swap gave people greater emotional range in the real. Zoe says:

> I got really good at playing a man, so good that whoever was on the system would accept me as a man and talk to me as a man. So, other guys talked to Ulysses "guy to guy." It was very validating. All those years I was paranoid about how men talked about women. Or I thought I was paranoid. And then, I got a chance to be a guy and I saw that I wasn't paranoid at all.[7]

Zoe talked to me about her experiences in a face-to-face interview, but there is a great deal of spontaneous discussion of these issues on Internet bulletin boards and discussion groups. In her paper "Gender Swapping on the Internet," Amy Bruckman tracks an ongoing discussion of gender issues on the electronic discussion group rec.games.mud.[8] Individuals may post to it, that is, send a communication to all subscribers. Postings on specific topics frequently start identifiable discussion "threads," which may continue for many months.

On one of these threads, several male participants described how playing female characters had given them newfound empathy with women. One contributor, David, described the trials and tribulations of playing a female character:

> Other players start showering you with money to help you get started, and I had never once gotten a handout when playing a male player. And then they feel they should be allowed to tag along forever, and feel hurt when you leave them to go off and explore by yourself. Then when you give them the knee after they grope you, they wonder what your problem is, reciting that famous saying, "What's your problem? It's only a game."

Carol, an experienced player with much technical expertise about MUDs, concurred. She complained about male players' misconception that "women can't play MUDs, can't work out puzzles, can't even type 'kill monster' without help." Carol noted that men offered help as a way to be ingratiating, but in her case this seduction strategy was ineffectual: "People offering me help to solve puzzles *I* wrote are not going to get very far."

Ellen, another contributor to the rec.games.mud discussion, tried gender-bending on an adventure-style MUD, thinking she would find out:

> if it was true that people would be nasty and kill me on sight and other stuff I'd heard about on r.g.m. [an abbreviation of rec.games.mud]. But, no, everyone was helpful (I was truly clueless and needed the assistance); someone gave me enough money to buy a weapon and armor and someone else showed me where the easy-to-kill newbie [a new player] monsters were. They definitely went out of their way to be nice to a male-presenting newbie.... (These were all male-presenting players, btw [by the way].)
>
> One theory is that my male character [named Argyle and described as "a short squat fellow who is looking for his socks"] was pretty innocuous. Maybe people are only nasty if you are "a broad-shouldered perfect specimen of a man" or something of that nature, which can be taken as vaguely attacking.

Ellen concluded that harassment relates most directly to self-presentation: "People are nice if they don't view you as a threat." Short, squat, a bit lost, in search of socks, and thus connoting limpness—Argyle was clearly not a threat to the dominant status of other "men" on the MUD. In the MUD culture Ellen played in, men tended to be competitive and aggressive toward each other; Argyle's nonthreatening self-presentation earned him kind treatment.

For some men and women, gender-bending can be an attempt to understand better or to experiment safely with sexual orientation.[9] But for everyone who tries it, there is the chance to discover, as Rosalind and Orlando did in the Forest of Arden, that for both sexes, gender is constructed.[10]

VIRTUAL SEX

Virtual sex, whether in MUDs or in a private room on a commercial online service, consists of two or more players typing descriptions of physical actions, verbal statements, and emotional reactions for their characters. In cyberspace, this activity is not only common but, for many people, it is the centerpiece of their online experience.

On MUDs, some people have sex as characters of their own gender. Others have sex as characters of the other gender. Some men play female personae to have netsex with men. And in the "fake-lesbian syndrome," men adopt online female personae in order to have netsex with women.[11] Although it does not seem to be as widespread, I have met several women who say they present as male characters in order to have netsex with

men. Some people have sex as nonhuman characters, for example, as animals on FurryMUDs. Some enjoy sex with one partner. Some use virtual reality as a place to experiment with group situations. In real life, such behavior (where possible) can create enormous practical and emotional confusion. Virtual adventures may be easier to undertake, but they can also result in significant complications. Different people and different couples deal with them in very different ways.

Martin and Beth, both forty-one, have been married for nineteen years and have four children. Early in their marriage, Martin regretted not having had more time for sexual experimentation and had an extramarital affair. The affair hurt Beth deeply, and Martin decided he never wanted to do it again. When Martin discovered MUDs he was thrilled. "I really am monogamous. I'm really not interested in something outside my marriage. But being able to have, you know, a Tiny romance is kind of cool." Martin decided to tell Beth about his MUD sex life and she decided to tell him that she does not mind. Beth has made a conscious decision to consider Martin's sexual relationships on MUDs as more like his reading an erotic novel than like his having a rendezvous in a motel room. For Martin, his online affairs are a way to fill the gaps of his youth, to broaden his sexual experience without endangering his marriage.

Other partners of virtual adulterers do not share Beth's accepting attitude. Janet, twenty-four, a secretary at a New York law firm, is very upset by her husband Tim's sex life in cyberspace. After Tim's first online affair, he confessed his virtual infidelity. When Janet objected, Tim told her that he would stop "seeing" his online mistress. Janet says that she is not sure that he actually did stop.

> Look, I've got to say the thing that bothers me most is that he wants to do it in the first place. In some ways, I'd have an easier time understanding why he would want to have an affair in real life. At least there, I could say to myself, "Well, it is for someone with a better body, or just for the novelty." It's like the first kiss is always the best kiss. But in MUDding, he is saying that he wants that feeling of intimacy with someone else, the "just talk" part of an encounter with a woman, and to me that comes closer to what is most important about sex.
>
> First I told him he couldn't do it anymore. Then, I panicked and figured that he might do it anyway, because unlike in real life I could never find out. All these thousands of people all over the world with their stupid fake names . . . no way I would ever find out. So, I pulled back and said that talking about it was strictly off limits. But now I don't know if that was the right decision. I feel paranoid whenever he is on the computer. I can't get it off my mind, that he is cheating, and he probably is tabulating data for his thesis. It must be clear that this sex thing has really hurt our marriage.

This distressed wife struggles to decide whether her husband is unfaithful when his persona collaborates on writing real-time erotica with another persona in cyberspace. And beyond this, should it make a difference if unbeknownst to the husband his cyberspace mistress turns out to be a nineteen-year-old male college freshman? What if "she" is an infirm eighty-year-old man in a nursing home? And even more disturbing, what if she is a twelve-year-old girl? Or a twelve-year-old boy?

TinySex poses the question of what is at the heart of sex and fidelity. Is it the physical action? Is it the feeling of emotional intimacy with someone other than one's primary partner? Is infidelity in the head or in the body? Is it in the desire or in the action? What constitutes the violation of trust? And to what extent and in what ways should it matter who the virtual sexual partner is in the real world? The fact that the physical body has been factored out of the situation makes these issues both subtler and harder to resolve than before.

Janet feels her trust has been violated by Tim's "talk intimacy" with another woman. Beth, the wife who gave her husband Martin permission to have TinySex, feels that he violated her trust when he chose to play a female character having a sexual encounter with a "man." When Beth read the log of one of these sessions, she became angry that Martin had drawn on his knowledge of her sexual responses to play his female character.

For Rudy, thirty-six, what was most threatening about his girlfriend's TinySex was the very fact that she wanted to play a character of the opposite sex at all. He discovered that she habitually plays men and has sex with female characters in chat rooms on America Online (like MUDs in that people can choose their identities). This discovery led him to break off the relationship. Rudy struggles to express what bothers him about his ex-girlfriend's gender-bending in cyberspace. He is not sure of himself, he is unhappy, hesitant, and confused. He says, "We are not ready for the psychological confusion this technology can bring." He explains:

> It's not the infidelity. It's the gnawing feeling that my girlfriend—I mean, I was thinking of marrying her—is a dyke. I know that everyone is bisexual, I know, I know . . . but that is one of those things that I knew but it never had anything to do with me. . . . It was just intellectual.
>
> What I hate about the rooms on America Online is that it makes it so easy for this sort of thing to become real. Well, in the sense that the rooms are real. I mean, the rooms, real or not, make it too easy for people to explore these things. If she explored it in real life, well, it would be hard on me, but it would have been hard for her. If she really wanted to do it, she would do it, but it would have meant her going out and doing it. It seems like more of a statement. And if she had really done it, I would know what to make of it. Now, I hate her for what she does online, but I don't know if I'm being crazy to break up with her about something that, after all, is only words.

Rudy complained that virtual reality made it too easy for his girlfriend to explore what it might be like to have a sexual relationship with another

woman, too easy for her to experience herself as a man, too easy to avoid the social consequences of her actions. MUDs provide a situation in which we can play out scenarios that otherwise might have remained pure fantasy. Yet the status of these fantasies-in-action in cyberspace is unclear. Although they involve other people and are no longer pure fantasy, they are not "in the world." Their boundary status offers new possibilities. TinySex and virtual gender-bending are part of the larger story of people using virtual spaces to construct identity.

Nowhere is this more dramatic than in the lives of children and adolescents as they come of age in online culture. Online sexual relationships are one thing for those of us who are introduced to them as adults, but quite another for twelve-year-olds who use the Internet to do their homework and then meet some friends to party in a MUD.

Children and Netsex

From around ten years of age, in those circles where computers are readily available, social life involves online flirting, necking, petting, and going all the way. I have already introduced a seventeen-year-old whose virtual affair was causing him to think more about the imaginative, emotional, and conversational aspects of sex. His experience is not unusual. A thirteen-year-old girl informs me that she prefers to do her sexual experimentation online. Her partners are usually the boys in her class at school. In person, she says, it "is mostly grope-y." Online, "They need to talk more." A shy fourteen-year-old, Rob, tells me that he finds online flirting easier than flirting at school or at parties. At parties, there is pressure to dance close, kiss, and touch, all of which he both craves and dreads. He could be rejected or he could get physically excited, and "that's worse," he says. If he has an erection while online, he is the only one who will know about it.

In the grownup world of engineering, there is criticism of text-based virtual reality as "low bandwidth," but Rob says he is able to get "more information" online than he would in person.

> Face to face, a girl doesn't always feel comfortable either. Like about not saying "Stop" until they really mean *"Stop there! Now!"* But it would be less embarrassing if you got more signals like about more or less when to stop. I think girls online are more communicative.

And online, he adds, "I am able to talk with a girl all afternoon—and not even try anything [sexual] and it does not seem weird. It [online conversation] lends itself to telling stories, gossiping; much more so than when you are trying to talk at a party."

A thirteen-year-old girl says that she finds it easier to establish relationships online and then pursue them offline. She has a boyfriend and feels closer to him when they send electronic mail or talk in a chat room than when they see each other in person. Their online caresses make real ones seem less strained. Such testimony supports Rob's descriptions of online adolescent sexual life as less pressured than that in RL. But here, as in other aspects of cyberlife, things can cut both ways. A twelve-year-old girl files this mixed report on junior high school cyberromance:

> Usually, the boys are gross. Because you can't see them, they think they can say whatever they want. But other times, we just talk, or it's just [virtual] kissing and asking if they can touch your breast or put their tongue in your mouth.

I ask her if she thinks that online sexual activity has changed things for her. She says that she has learned more from "older kids" whom she wouldn't normally have been able to hang out with. I ask her if she has ever been approached by someone she believes to be an adult. She says no, but then adds: "Well, now I sometimes go online and say that I am eighteen, so if I do that more it will probably happen." I ask her if she is concerned about this. She makes it very clear that she feels safe because she can always just "disconnect."

There is no question that the Internet, like other environments where children congregate—playgrounds, scout troops, schools, shopping malls—is a place where they can be harassed or psychologically abused by each other and by adults. But parental panic about the dangers of cyberspace is often linked to their unfamiliarity with it. As one parent put it, "I sign up for the [Internet] account, but I can barely use e-mail while my [fourteen-year-old] daughter tells me that she is finding neat home pages [on the World Wide Web] in Australia."

Many of the fears we have for our children—the unsafe neighborhoods, the drugs on the street, the violence in the schools, our inability to spend as much time with them as we wish to—are displaced onto those unknowns we feel we can control. Fifteen years ago, when children ran to personal computers with arms outstretched while parents approached with hands behind their backs, there was much talk about computers as addicting and hypnotic. These days, the Internet is the new unknown.

Parents need to be able to talk to their children about where they are going and what they are doing. This same commonsense rule applies to their children's lives on the screen. Parents don't have to become technical experts, but they do need to learn enough about computer networks to discuss with their children what and who is out there and lay down

some basic safety rules. The children who do best after a bad experience on the Internet (who are harassed, perhaps even propositioned) are those who can talk to their parents, just as children who best handle bad experiences in real life are those who can talk to a trusted elder without shame or fear of blame.

Deception

Life on the screen makes it very easy to present oneself as other than one is in real life. And although some people think that representing oneself as other than one is is always a deception, many people turn to online life with the intention of playing it in precisely this way. They insist that a certain amount of shape-shifting is part of the online game. When people become intimate, they are particularly vulnerable; it is easy to get hurt in online relationships. But since the rules of conduct are unclear, it is also easy to believe that one does not have the right to feel wounded. For what can we hold ourselves and others accountable?

In cyberculture, a story that became known as the "case of the electronic lover" has taken on near-legendary status. Like many stories that become legends, it has several versions. There were real events, but some tellings of the legend conflate several similar incidents. In all the versions, a male psychiatrist usually called Alex becomes an active member of a CompuServe chat line using the name of a woman, usually Joan. In one version of the story, his deception began inadvertently when Alex, using the computer nickname Shrink, Inc., found that he was conversing with a woman who assumed he was a female psychiatrist. Alex was stunned by the power and intimacy of this conversation. He found that the woman was more open with him than were his female patients and friends in real life.[12] Alex wanted more and soon began regularly logging on as Joan, a severely handicapped and disfigured Manhattan resident. (Joan said it was her embarrassment about her disfigurement that made her prefer not to meet her cyberfriends face to face.) As Alex expected, Joan was able to have relationships of great intimacy with "other" women on the computer service. Alex came to believe that it was as Joan that he could best help these women. He was encouraged in this belief by his online female friends. They were devoted to Joan and told her how central she had become to their lives.

In most versions of the story, Joan's handicap plays an important role. Not only did it provide her with an alibi for restricting her contacts to online communication, but it gave focus to her way of helping other people. Joan's fighting spirit and ability to surmount her handicaps served as an inspiration. She was married to a policeman and their relationship gave other disabled women hope that they, too, could be loved. Despite her handicaps, Joan was lusty, funny, a woman of appetites.

As time went on and relationships deepened, several of Joan's grateful online friends wanted to meet her in person, and Alex realized that his game was getting out of control. He decided that Joan had to die. Joan's "husband" got online and informed the community that Joan was ill and in the hospital. Alex was overwhelmed by the outpouring of sympathy and love for Joan. Joan's friends told her husband how important Joan was to them. They offered moral support, financial assistance, names of specialists who might help. Alex was in a panic. He could not decide whether to kill Joan off. In one account of the story, "For four long days Joan hovered between life and death."[13] Finally, Alex had Joan recover. But the virtual had bled into the real. Joan's "husband" had been pressed for the name of the hospital where Joan was staying so that cards and flowers could be sent. Alex gave the name of the hospital where he worked as a psychiatrist. One member of the bulletin board called the hospital to confirm its address and discovered that Joan was not there as a patient. The ruse began to unravel.

All the versions of the story have one more thing in common: The discovery of Alex's deception led to shock and outrage. In some versions of the story, the anger erupts because of the initial deception—that a man had posed as a woman, that a man had won confidences as a woman. The case presents an electronic version of the movie *Tootsie,* in which a man posing as a woman wins the confidence of another woman and then, when he is found out, her fury. In other versions, the anger centers on the fact that Joan had introduced some of her online women friends to lesbian netsex, and the women involved felt violated by Joan's virtual actions. These women believed they were making love with a woman, but in fact they were sharing intimacies with a man. In other accounts, Joan introduced online friends to Alex, a Manhattan psychiatrist, who had real-life affairs with several of them.[14] In these versions, the story of the electronic lover becomes a tale of real-life transgression.

The con artist is a stock character who may be appreciated for his charm in fictional presentations, but in real life is more often reviled for his duplicity and exploitiveness. In this sense, Alex was operating as part of a long tradition. But when familiar phenomena appear in virtual form, they provoke new questions. Was the reclusive, inhibited Alex only pretending to have the personality of the sunny, outgoing, lusty Joan? What was his real personality? Did Joan help her many disabled online friends who became more active because of her inspiration? When and how did Alex cross the line from virtual friend and helper to con artist? Was it when he dated Joan's friends? Was it when he had sexual relations with them? Or was it from the moment that Alex decided to pose as a woman?

At a certain point, traditional categories for sorting things out seem inadequate.

In the past fifteen years, I have noticed a distinct shift in people's way of talking about the case of the electronic lover. In the early 1980s, close to the time when the events first took place, people were most disturbed by the idea that a man had posed as a woman. By 1990, I began to hear more complaints about Joan's online lesbian sex. What most shocks today's audience is that Alex used Joan to pimp for him. The shock value of online gender-bending has faded. Today what disturbs us is when the shifting norms of the virtual world bleed into real life.

In 1993, the WELL computer network was torn apart by controversy over another electronic lover where the focus was on these shifting norms and the confusion of the real and the virtual. The WELL has a "Women's Only" forum where several women compared notes on their love lives in cyberspace. They realized that they had been seduced and abandoned (some only virtually, some also in the flesh) by the same man, whom one called a "cyber-cad." As they discussed the matter with more and more women, they found out that Mr. X's activities were far more extensive and had a certain consistency. He romanced women via electronic mail and telephone calls, swore them to secrecy about their relationship, and even flew across the country to visit one of them in Sausalito, California. But then he dropped them. One of the women created a topic (area for discussion) on the WELL entitled "Do You Know this Cyber ScamArtist?" Within ten days, nearly one thousand messages had been posted about the "outing" of Mr. X. Some supported the women, some observed that the whole topic seemed like a "high-tech lynching."[15]

At the time of the incident and its widespread reporting in the popular media, I was interviewing people about online romance. The story frequently came up. For those who saw a transgression it was that Mr. X had confused cyberworld and RL. It was not just that he used the relationships formed in the cyberworld to misbehave in RL. It was that he treated the relationships in the cyberworld as though they were RL relationships. A complex typology of relationships began to emerge from these conversations: real-life relationships, virtual relationships with the "real" person, and virtual relationships with a virtual other. A thirty-five-year-old woman real estate broker tried hard to make clear how these things needed to be kept distinct.

> In a MUD, or chat room, or on IRC, it might be OK to have different flings with other people hiding behind other handles. But this man was coming on to these women as though he was interested in them really—I mean he said he was falling in love with them, with the real women. And he even did meet—and dump—some. Do you see the difference, from the beginning he didn't respect that online is its own place.

Mr. X himself did not agree that he had done anything wrong. He told the computer network that although he had been involved in multiple, simultaneous consensual relationships, he believed that the rules of cyberspace permitted that. Perhaps they do. But even if they do, the boundaries between the virtual and real are staunchly protected. Having sex with several characters on MUDs is one thing, but in a virtual community such as the WELL, most people are creating an electronic persona that they experience as coextensive with their physically embodied one. There, promiscuity can be another thing altogether.

Once we take virtuality seriously as a way of life, we need a new language for talking about the simplest things. Each individual must ask: What is the nature of my relationships? What are the limits of my responsibility? And even more basic: Who and what am I? What is the connection between my physical and virtual bodies? And is it different in different cyberspaces? These questions are framed to interrogate an individual, but with minor modifications, they are equally central for thinking about community. What is the nature of our social ties? What kind of accountability do we have for our actions in real life and in cyberspace? What kind of society or societies are we creating, both on and off the screen?

BEING DIGITAL

In the last two chapters we have seen people doing what they have always done: trying to understand themselves and improve their lives by using the materials they have at hand. Although this practice is familiar, the fact that these materials now include the ability to live through virtual personae means two fundamental changes have occurred in our situation. We can easily move through multiple identities, and we can embrace—or be trapped by—cyberspace as a way of life.

As more and more people have logged on to this new way of life and have experienced the effects of virtuality, a genre of cultural criticism is emerging to interpret these phenomena. An article in *The New York Times* described new books on the subject by dividing them into three categories: utopian, utilitarian, and apocalyptic.[16] Utilitarian writers emphasize the practical side of the new way of life. Apocalyptic writers warn us of increasing social and personal fragmentation, more widespread surveillance, and loss of direct knowledge of the world. To date, however, the utopian approaches have dominated the field. They share the technological optimism that has dominated post-war culture, an optimism cap-

tured in the advertising slogans of my youth: "Better living through chemistry," "Progress is our most important product." In our current situation, technological optimism tends to represent urban decay, social alienation, and economic polarization as out-of-date formulations of a problem that could be solved if appropriate technology were applied in sufficient doses, for example, technology that would link everyone to the "information superhighway." We all want to believe in some quick and relatively inexpensive solution to our difficulties. We are tempted to believe with the utopians that the Internet is a field for the flowering of participatory democracy and a medium for the transformation of education. We are tempted to share in the utopians' excitement at the prospect of virtual pleasures: sex with a distant partner, travel minus the risks and inconvenience of actually having to go anywhere.

In the next two chapters I try to capture some of what is most challenging about the new way of life, what Nicholas Negroponte, the director of the MIT Media Lab, refers to as being digital.[17] The new practice of entering virtual worlds raises fundamental questions about our communities and ourselves. My account challenges any simple utilitarian story. For every step forward in the instrumental use of a technology (what the technology can do for us), there are subjective effects. The technology changes us as people, changes our relationships and sense of ourselves. My account also calls into question the apocalyptic and utopian views. The issues raised by the new way of life are difficult and painful, because they strike at the heart of our most complex and intransigent social problems: problems of community, identity, governance, equity, and values. There is no simple good news or bad news.

Although it provides us with no easy answers, life online does provide new lenses through which to examine current complexities. Unless we take advantage of these new lenses and carefully analyze our situation, we shall cede the future to those who want to believe that simple fixes can solve complicated problems. Given the history of the last century, thoughts of such a future are hardly inspiring.

Chapter 9

VIRTUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The culture of virtuality

The anthropologist Ray Oldenberg has written about the "great good place," a place where members of a community can gather for the pleasure of easy company, conversation, and a sense of belonging.[1] He considers these places—the local bar, bistro, and coffee shop—to be at the heart of individual social integration and community vitality. Today, we see a resurgence of interest in coffee shops and bistros, but most often the new structures are merely nostalgic because they have not grown out of coherent communities or neighborhoods. Some people are trying to fill the gap with neighborhoods in cyberspace. Take Dred's Bar, for example, a watering hole on the MUD LambdaMOO. It is described as having a "castle decor" and a polished oak dance floor. Recently I (here represented by my character or persona "ST") visited Dred's Bar with Tony, a persona I had met on another MUD. After passing the bouncer, Tony and I encountered a man asking for a $5 cover charge, and once we paid it our hands were stamped.

> The crowd opens up momentarily to reveal one corner of the club. A couple is there, making out madly. Friendly place. . . .
> You sit down at the table. The waitress sees you and indicates that she will be there in a minute.
> The waitress comes up to the table, "Can I get anyone anything from the bar?" she says as she puts down a few cocktail napkins.
> Tony says, "When the waitress comes up, type order name of drink."
> Abigail [a character at the bar] dries off a spot where some drink spilled on her dress.
> The waitress nods to Tony and writes on her notepad.
> Order margarita [I type this line, following Tony's directions].
> You order a margarita. [This is the result of the line I typed, causing this line

to appear on my screen and "ST orders a margarita" to appear on the screens of everyone else in the room.]
The waitress nods to ST and writes on her notepad.
Tony sprinkles some salt on the back of his hand.
Tony remembers he ordered a margarita, not tequila, and brushes the salt off.
. . .
You say, "I like salt on my margarita too."
The DJ makes a smooth transition from The Cure into a song by 10,000 Maniacs.

After the arrival of the drinks comes the following interchange:

You say, "L'chaim."
Tony says, "Excuse me?"

After some explanations, Tony says, "Ah . . . ," smiles, and introduces me to several of his friends. Tony and I take briefly to the dance floor to try out some MUD features that allow us to waltz and tango,[2] then we go to a private booth to continue our conversation.

Main Street, Mall, and Virtual Café

What changes when we move from Oldenberg's great good places to something like Dred's Bar on LambdaMOO? To answer this question, it helps to consider some intermediate steps, for example, the steps implied in moving from a sidewalk café to a food court in a suburban shopping mall[3] or from Main Street in an American small town to Disneyland's Main Street USA.

"Disneyland," writes the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard, "is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland."[4] Baudrillard means that once we experience the re-creations of Disneyland, Los Angeles will strike us as real. Once Disneyland's Main Street, USA, is the standard for artifice, Los Angeles's shopping malls seem authentic, even though they, too, are re-creations. The shopping malls enclose another dream: a golden age that never was of idyllic small-town life. What we have are dreams within dreams.

But as the shopping malls try to recreate the Main Streets of yesteryear, critical elements change in the process. Main Street is a public place; the shopping mall is planned to maximize purchasing. On Main Street you are a citizen; in the shopping mall, you are customer as citizen. Main Street had a certain disarray: there was a drunk, a panhandler, a traveling

snake-oil salesman. In the mall, you are in a relatively controlled space; the street theater is planned and paid for in advance; the appearance of serendipity is part of the simulation.

Disneyland and shopping malls are elements of a way of life I have called the culture of simulation. Television is a major element as well. On any given evening, nearly eighty million people in the United States are watching television. The average American household has a television turned on more than six hours a day, reducing eye contact and conversation to a minimum.[5] Computers and the virtual worlds they provide are adding another dimension of mediated experience. Perhaps computers and virtuality in its various forms feel so natural because of their similarity to watching TV, our dominant media experience for the past forty years.

The bar featured for a decade in the television series *Cheers* no doubt figures so prominently in the American imagination at least partly because most of us don't have a neighborhood place where "everybody knows your name." Instead, we identify with the place on the screen, and most recently have given it some life off the screen as well. Bars designed to look like the one on *Cheers* have sprung up all over the country, most poignantly in airports, our most anonymous of locales. Here, no one will know your name, but you can always buy a drink or a souvenir sweatshirt.

In the postwar atomization of American social life, the rise of middle-class suburbs created communities of neighbors who often remained strangers. Meanwhile, as the industrial and economic base of urban life declined, downtown social spaces such as the neighborhood theater or diner were replaced by malls and cinema complexes in the outlying suburbs. In the recent past, we left our communities to commute to these distant entertainments; increasingly, we want entertainment (such as video on demand) that commutes right into our homes. In both cases, the neighborhood is bypassed. We seem to be in the process of retreating further into our homes, shopping for merchandise in catalogues or on television channels, shopping for companionship via personals ads.

Technological optimists think that computers will reverse some of this social atomization, touting virtual experience and virtual community as ways for people to widen their horizons. But is it really sensible to suggest that the way to revitalize community is to sit alone in our rooms, typing at our networked computers and filling our lives with virtual friends?[6]

The Loss of the Real

Which would you rather see—a Disney crocodile robot or a real crocodile? The Disney version has a certain vividness. It rolls its eyes, it moves from side to side, it disappears beneath the surface and rises again. It is

designed to thrill us, to command our attention at all times. None of these qualities is necessarily visible in a real crocodile in a zoo, which seems to spend most of its time sleeping. And you may have neither the means nor the inclination to observe a real crocodile in the Nile or the River Gambia.

Compare a rafting trip down the Colorado River to an adolescent girl using an interactive CD-ROM to explore the same territory. In the physical rafting trip, there is likely to be physical danger and with it, a sense of real consequences. One may need to strain one's resources to survive. There might be a rite of passage. What might await the girl who picks up an interactive CD-ROM called "Adventures on the Colorado"? A touch-sensitive screen lets her explore the virtual Colorado and its shoreline. Clicking a mouse brings up pictures and descriptions of local flora and fauna. She can have all the maps and literary references she wants. All this might be fun, perhaps useful. But it is hard to imagine it marking a transition to adulthood. But why not have both—the virtual Colorado and the real one? Not every exploration need be a rite of passage. The virtual and the real may provide different things. Why make them compete?

This question recalls the controversy about simulation that divided the MIT faculty during Project Athena. Those who wanted to keep their students away from simulations argued that once students have seen an experiment unfold perfectly in a simulation, the messiness of a real experiment—the imperfections of measurement, the crack in the equipment that means you have to repeat it, the rough edges on a hand sketch of a building site—all these come to seem like a waste of time. The seductiveness of simulation does not mean that it is a bad thing or something to be avoided at all cost, but it does mean that simulation carries certain risks. It is not retrograde to say that if we value certain aspects of life *off* the screen, we may need to do something to protect them.[7]

Searching for an easy fix, we are eager to believe that the Internet will provide an effective substitute for face-to-face interaction. But the move toward virtuality tends to skew our experience of the real in several ways. One way is to make denatured and artificial experiences seem real. Let's call it the Disneyland effect. After a brunch on Disneyland's Royal Street, a cappuccino at a restaurant chain called Bonjour Café may seem real by comparison. After playing a video game in which your opponent is a computer program, the social world of MUDs may seem real as well. At least there are real people playing most of the parts and the play space is relatively open. One player compares the roles he was able to play on video games and MUDs. "Nintendo has a good one [game] where you can play four characters. But even though they are very cool," he says, "they are written up for you." They seem artificial. In contrast, on the MUDs, he says, "There is nothing written up." He says he feels free. MUDs are "for real" because you make them up yourself.

Such sentiments remind me of a comment by a high-school junior who was upset by what she described as the flight of her friends to the Internet. She complained, "Now they just want to talk online. It used to be that things weren't so artificial. We phoned each other every afternoon." To this young woman, phone calls represented the natural, intimate, and immediate. We build our ideas about what is real and what is natural with the cultural materials available. When I was in college and living in Paris, I stayed with a family who avoided the telephone for everything but emergency communications. An intimate communication would go by a *pneumatique*. One brought (or had delivered) a handwritten message to the local post office. There, it was placed in a cannister and sent through a series of underground tubes to another post office. It would then be hand delivered to its destination. I was taught that the *pneumatique* was the favored medium for love letters, significant apologies, or requests for an important meeting. Although mediated by significant amounts of technology, the handwritten *pneumatique* bore the trace of the physical body of the person who sent it; it was physically taken from that person's hand and put into the hand of the person to whom it was sent. The *pneumatique*'s insistence on physical presence may have ill-prepared me for the lessons of postmodernism, but it has made e-mail seem oddly natural.

Another effect of simulation, which I'll call the artificial crocodile effect, makes the fake seem more compelling than the real. In *The Future Does Not Compute: Warnings from the Internet,* Stephen L. Talbott quotes educators who say that years of exciting nature programming have compromised wildlife experiences for children. The animals in the woods are unlikely to perform as dramatically as those captured on the camera.[8] The world of direct, unmediated experience is thus devalued. I have a clear memory of a Brownie Scout field trip to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens where I asked an attendant if she could make the flowers "open fast." For a long while, no one understood what I was talking about. Then they figured it out: I was hoping that the attendant could make the flowers behave as they did in the time-lapse photography I had seen on *Walt Disney*.

I was reminded of this incident when several years ago I interviewed children about their experiences role-playing in the game Dungeons and Dragons. One ten-year-old boy explained that Dungeons and Dragons was like history, except that Dungeons and Dragons "is more complicated. . . . There are hundreds and hundreds of books about Dungeons and Dragons." As far as this boy knew, there was only one book about history, his textbook.

A similar point about the devaluation of direct experience is familiar to those who have followed the discussion about the effect of television on our sensibilities, including the developing sensibilities of children. Media

critics have suggested that quick cuts, rapid transitions, changing camera angles, all heighten stimulation through editing, a hyperactive style that is shared by *Sesame Street* and MTV. For some, this rapid cycling of events spoils us for the real: "One can only guess at the effect upon viewers of these hyperactive images, aside from fixating attention on the television set. . . . They must surely . . . contribute to the . . . inability to absorb information that comes muddling along at natural, real-life speed."[9] Direct experience is often messy; its meaning is never exactly clear. Interactive multimedia comes already interpreted. It is already someone else's version of reality.

A third effect is that a virtual experience may be so compelling that we believe that within it we've achieved more than we have. Many of the people I interviewed claimed that virtual gender-swapping enabled them to understand what it's like to be a person of the other gender, and I have no doubt that this is true, at least in part. But as I listened to this boast, my mind often traveled to my own experiences of living in a woman's body. These include worry about physical vulnerability, fears of unwanted pregnancy and of infertility, fine-tuned decisions about how much make-up to wear to a job interview, and the difficulty of giving a professional seminar while doubled over with monthly cramps. To a certain extent, knowledge is inherently experiential, based on a physicality that we each experience differently.

Pavel Curtis, the founder of LambdaMOO, began his paper on its social dimensions with a quote from E. M. Forster: "The Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people—an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes."[10] But what are practical purposes? And what about impractical purposes? To the question, "Why must virtuality and real life compete—why can't we have both?" the answer is of course that we *will* have both. The more important question is "How can we get the best of both?"

The Politics of Virtuality

When I began exploring the world of MUDs in 1992, the Internet was open to a limited group of users, chiefly academics and researchers in affiliated commercial enterprises. The MUDders were mostly middle-class college students. They chiefly spoke of using MUDs as places of play and escape, though some used MUDs to address personal difficulties.

By late 1993, network access could easily be purchased commercially, and the number and diversity of people on the Internet had expanded dramatically. With many more people drawn to social virtual reality (MUDs, chat lines, bulletin boards, etc.) conversations with MUDders

began to touch on new themes. Earlier interviews with participants in MUDs had touched on them as recreation and as an escape from RL experiences of broken homes, parental alcoholism, and physical and sexual abuse. While those earlier themes were still present, I heard about a new one. This was RL as a place of economic insecurity for young people trying to find meaningful work and trying to hold on to the middle-class status they had grown up in. Socially speaking, there was nowhere to go but down in RL, whereas MUDs were seen as a vehicle of virtual social mobility.

Josh is a twenty-three-year-old college graduate who lives in a small studio apartment in Chicago. After six months of looking for a job in marketing, the field in which he recently received his college degree, Josh has had to settle for a job working on the computer system that maintains inventory records at a large discount store. He considers this a dead end. When a friend told him about MUDs, he thought the games sounded diverting enough to give them a try. Josh talked the friend into letting him borrow his computer account for one evening, and then for another. Within a week, MUDs had become more than a diversion. Josh had stepped into a new life.

Now, Josh spends as much time on MUDs as he can. He belongs to a class of players who sometimes call themselves Internet hobos. They solicit time on computer accounts the way panhandlers go after spare change. In contrast to his life in RL, which he sees as boring and without prospects, Josh's life inside MUDs seems rich and filled with promise. It has friends, safety, and *space*. "I live in a terrible part of town. I see a rat hole of an apartment, I see a dead-end job, I see AIDS. Down here [in the MUD] I see friends, I have something to offer, I see safe sex." His job taking inventory has him using computers in ways he finds boring. His programming on MUDs is intellectually challenging. Josh has worked on three MUDs, building large, elaborate living quarters in each. In addition, he has become a specialist at building virtual cafés in which bots serve as waiters and bartenders. Within MUDs, Josh serves as a programming consultant to many less-experienced players and has even become something of an entrepreneur. He "rents" ready-built rooms to people who are not as skilled in programming as he is. He has been granted wizard privileges on various MUDs in exchange for building food-service software. He dreams that such virtual commerce will someday lead to more —that someday, as MUDs become commercial enterprises, he will build them for a living. MUDs offer Josh a sense of participation in the American dream.

MUDs play a similar role for Thomas, twenty-four, whom I met after giving a public lecture in Washington, D.C. As I collected my notes, Thomas came up to the lectern, introduced himself as a dedicated MUD

player and asked if we could talk. After graduating from college, Thomas entered a training program at a large department store. When he discovered that he didn't like retailing, he quit the program, thinking that he would look for something in a different area of business. But things did not go well for him:

> My grades had not been fantastic. Quitting the training program looked bad to people. . . . I would apply for a job and two hundred other people would be there. You better bet that in two hundred people there was someone who had made better grades and hadn't quit his first job.

Finally, Thomas took a job as a bellhop in the hotel where I had just given my lecture. "I thought that working evening hours would let me continue looking for something that would get me back into the middle class," Thomas says. "I haven't found that job yet. But MUDs got me back into the middle class."

Thomas sees himself as someone who should be headed for a desk job, a nice car, and life in the suburbs. "My family is like that," he says, "and they spent a lot of money sending me to college. It wasn't to see me bellhop, I can promise you that." During the day Thomas carries luggage, but at night on MUDs he feels that he is with and recognized by his own kind. Thomas has a group of MUD friends who write well, program, and read science fiction. "I'm interested in MUD politics. Can there be democracy in cyberspace? Should MUDs be ruled by wizards or should they be democracies? I majored in political science in college. These are important questions for the future. I talk about these things with my friends. On MUDs."

Thomas moves on to what has become an obvious conclusion. He says, "MUDs make me more what I really am. Off the MUD, I am not as much me." Tanya, also twenty-four, a college graduate working as a nanny in rural Connecticut, expresses a similar aspiration for upward mobility. She says of the MUD on which she has built Japanese-style rooms and a bot to offer her guests a kimono, slippers, and tea, "I feel like I have more stuff on the MUD than I have off it."

Josh, Thomas, and Tanya belong to a generation whose college years were marked by economic recession and a deadly sexually transmitted disease. They scramble for work; finances force them to live in neighborhoods they don't consider safe; they may end up back home living with parents. These young people are looking for a way back into the middle class. MUDs provide them with the sense of a middle-class peer group. So it is really not that surprising that it is in virtual social life they feel most like themselves.

If a patient on the antidepressant medication Prozac tells his therapist he feels more like himself with the drug than without it, what does this do to our standard notions of a real self?[11] Where does a medication end and a person begin? Where does real life end and a game begin? Is the real self always the naturally occurring one? Is the real self always the one in the physical world? As more and more real business gets done in cyberspace, could the real self be the one who functions best in that realm? Is the real Tanya the frustrated nanny or the energetic programmer on the MUD? The stories of these MUDders point to a whole set of issues about the political and social dimension of virtual community. These young people feel they have no political voice, and they look to cyberspace to help them find one.

ESCAPE OR RESISTANCE

In *Reading the Romance,* the literary scholar Janice Radaway argues that when women read romance novels they are not escaping but building realities less limited than their own.[12] Romance reading becomes a form of resistance, a challenge to the stultifying categories of everyday life. This perspective, sensitive to the ways people find to resist constraints of race, class, and gender, is widely shared in contemporary cultural studies. In a similar spirit, the media researcher Henry Jenkins has analyzed the cultures built by television fans as a form of resistance and as enriching for people whose possibilities for fulfillment in real life are seriously limited.

Jenkins quotes a song written by a science fiction fan, which describes how her "Weekend-Only World" at science fiction conventions has more reality for her than her impoverished "real-time life."

> In an hour of make-believe
> In these warm convention halls
> My mind is free to think
> And feel so deeply
> An intimacy never found
> Inside their silent walls
> In a year or more
> Of what they call reality.[13]

Jenkins writes that this song "expresses the fans' recognition that fandom offers not so much an escape from reality as an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society." The author of the song, in Jenkins's view, "gains power and identity from the time she spends within fan culture; fandom allows her to maintain her sanity in the face of the indignity and alienation of

everyday life."[14] A similar perspective can be heard in the many online discussions of addictions to virtuality.

On an Internet mailing list discussing MUDding, one player reported on a role-playing conference in Finland that debated (among other things) whether "the time spent in [the] computer (yeah, IN it, not in front of it)" was

> a bad thing or what; the conclusion was, that it is at least better than watching "The Bald [sic] & The Beautiful" for 24H a day—and here we talked about MUDs or such mostly where people communicate with real people through the machine. . . . Well, hasty judging people might say that the escapists are weak and can't stand the reality—the truly wise see also the other side of the coin: there must be something wrong with Reality, if so many people want to escape from it. If we cannot change the reality, what can we do?[15]

One of the things that people I've interviewed have decided to do is change the reality of virtual reality. An example of this can be found in the history of the MUD LambdaMOO. LambdaMOO has recently undergone a major change in its form of governance. Instead of the MUD wizards (or system administrators) making policy decisions, there is a complex system of grass-roots petitions and collective voting. Thomas, the Washington, D.C., bellhop who sees himself as a yuppie manqué, says he is very involved in this experiment. He goes on at length about the political factions with which he must contend to "do politics" on LambdaMOO. Our conversation is taking place in the fall of 1994. His home state has an upcoming senatorial race, hotly contested, ideologically charged, but he hasn't registered to vote and doesn't plan to. I bring up the Senate race. He shrugs it off: "I'm not voting. Doesn't make a difference. Politicians are liars."

One might say that MUDs compensate individuals like Thomas for their sense of political impotence. Or, if we take the perspective sketched by Radaway and Jenkins, we can look at MUDs as places of resistance to many forms of alienation and to the silences they impose. Chat lines, e-mail, bulletin boards, and MUDs are like a weekend-only world in which people can participate every day. Are these activities best understood in terms of compensation or resistance? The logic of compensation suggests that the goal of virtual experience is to feel better; the logic of resistance suggests that it is political empowerment.

The question of how to situate users of seductive technology on a continuum between psychological escape and political empowerment is reminiscent of a similar question posed by the enthusiasm of personal computer hobbyists of the late 1970s. MUDders like Josh, Thomas, and

Tanya—out of college and not yet in satisfying work—have much in common with these early computer hobbyists. Both groups express unfulfilled intellectual and political aspirations within computer microworlds. In the case of the home hobbyists, programmers who no longer had a sense of working with a whole problem on the job demanded a sense of the whole in their recreational computing. In the case of the MUDders, people who feel a loss of middle-class status find reassurance in virtual space. Although the MUDs' extravagant settings—spaceships and medieval towns—may not seem likely places to reconstruct a sense of middle-class community, that is exactly the function they serve for some people who live in them. Many have commented that one appeal of LambdaMOO may be due to its being built as a home, modeled after the large, rambling house where its designer actually lives.

There is a special irony in bringing together the stories of pioneer personal computer owners and pioneer MUDders. The politics of the hobbyists had a grass-roots flavor. To their way of thinking, personal computers were a path to a new populism. Networks would allow citizens to band together to run decentralized schools and local governments. They thought that personal computers would create a more participatory political system because "people will get used to understanding things, to being in control of things, and they will demand more." Hobbyists took what was most characteristic of their relationships with the computer—building safe microworlds of transparent understanding—and turned it into a political metaphor. When nearly twenty years later, another group of people has turned to computation as a resource for community building, the communities they are thinking of exist on and through the computer. When Thomas talks to me about his passion for politics, about his undergraduate political science major, and how being politically involved makes him feel more like himself, he is talking about the MUD, not about life in Washington, D.C.[16]

Yet the Internet has become a potent symbol and organizational tool for current grass-roots movements—of both right and left. The hobbyists dreamed that the early personal computers would carry a political message about the importance of understanding how a system worked. The Internet carries a political message about the importance of direct, immediate action and interest-group mobilization. It is the symbol and tool of a postmodern politics.

The hobbyists I interviewed nearly two decades ago were excited, enthusiastic, and satisfied with what they were doing with their machines. As an ethnographer I thought it appropriate to report this enthusiasm and try to capture a sense of the pleasures and satisfactions that these individuals were deriving from their "non-alienated" relationships with their computers. In the same sense, it seems appropriate to report the enthusiasm

of most MUD users. They take pleasure in building their virtual friendships and virtual spaces and taking on responsibility for virtual jobs. However, fifteen years ago, when reflecting on hobbyists' deeply-felt populism, I also worried about a darker side:

> Will the individual satisfactions of personal computation (which seem to derive some of their power from the fact that they are at least in part responsive to political dissatisfactions) take the individual away from collective politics? People will not change unresponsive political systems or intellectually deadening work environments by building machines that are responsive, fun, and intellectually challenging. They will not change the world of human relations by retreating into a world of things. It would certainly be inappropriate to rejoice at the holistic and humanistic relationships that personal computers offer if it turns out that, when widespread, they replace religion as an opiate of the masses.[17]

These words can easily be transposed into the current context, substituting MUDs for personal computers. My misgivings are similar: Instead of solving real problems—both personal and social—are we choosing to live in unreal places? Women and men tell me that the rooms and mazes on MUDs are safer than city streets, virtual sex is safer than sex anywhere, MUD friendships are more intense than real ones, and when things don't work out you can always leave.[18]

It is not hard to agree that MUDs provide an outlet for people to work through personal issues in a productive way; they offer a moratorium that can be turned to constructive purpose, and not only for adolescents. One can also respect the sense in which political activities in a MUD demonstrate resistance to what is unsatisfying about political life more generally. And yet, it is sobering that the personal computer revolution, once conceptualized as a tool to rebuild community, now tends to concentrate on building community inside a machine.

If the politics of virtuality means democracy online and apathy offline, there is reason for concern. There is also reason for concern when access to the new technology breaks down along traditional class lines.[19] Although some inner-city communities have used computer-mediated communication as a tool for real-life community building,[20] the overall trend seems to be the creation of an information elite at the same time that the walls around our society's traditional underclass are maintained. Perhaps people are being even more surely excluded from participation, privilege, and responsibility in the information society than they have been from the dominant groups of the past.

Today many are looking to computers and virtual reality to counter social fragmentation and atomization; to extend democracy; to break

down divisions of gender, race, and class; and to lead to a renaissance of learning. Others are convinced that these technologies will have negative effects. Dramatic stories supporting both points of view are always enticing, but most people who have tried to use computer-mediated communication to change their conditions of life and work have found things more complex. They have found themselves both tantalized and frustrated.

Vanessa, thirty-four, is one of the founding wizards of a large and successful MUD. She is a skilled computer programmer whose talents and energy have always enabled her to earn good money. But she has never been happy in the computer industry because she found little support for her creative style, which she characterizes as "thinking along with people." She is the kind of person whose creativity emerges in conversation. Things went from bad to worse for her when she was forced to telework from home for a period of time. "I was going crazy. Now there was no one. I was so lonely I couldn't get myself to work." But then, a MUD-like chat window gave Vanessa some of what she wanted:

> There was one woman I was working with . . . on a project and we would always have a chat on a talk window on our machines. There we could talk about the project and the testing we were doing and say, "OK, type this," "OK, see if it works," "OK, you know I've changed this file now." . . . That talk window was an important piece of support to me.

That project and the chat sessions are over. When I meet her, Vanessa has no such intellectual companionship in her job. But she has it when she collaborates with others in MUDs. She comments, "So I think that's why I spend so much time on the MUD. . . . I am looking for environments with that sort of support." Vanessa has not yet been able to take the work style she has carved out in a virtual world and use it to enlarge her real-world job. She does not find room for "that sort of support" in the company where she works. There, she describes the highly productive people as driven individualists while her preferred work style is seen as time-wasting.

Vanessa's story would not read as an escape into MUDs if she had found a way to use her experiences there to model a more fulfilling style of RL work. Her story points toward new possibilities for using MUDs to foster collaboration in work settings. These are early days for such experiments, but they are beginning. For example, Pavel Curtis, the designer of LambdaMOO, is creating a new virtual space—enhanced with audio and video—for Xerox PARC in Palo Alto, California, a research facility funded by the Xerox Corporation. The MUD is called Jupiter, and Xerox PARC employees will step in and out of it depending on whom they want to

talk to and what tools they want to use. Jupiter is meant to pick up where the physical workplace leaves off. Smooth transitions back and forth are a key design principle.

Xerox PARC is not the only workplace where MUDs are either in operation or being planned. The MIT Media Lab has MediaMOO, a MUD built and maintained by Amy Bruckman and dedicated to collaboration and community building among media researchers all over the world. Some veteran MUDders are building similar environments for members of international corporations, to make it easier for them to participate in meetings with their colleagues. What these situations have in common is the permeable border between the real and the virtual.

On a more widespread level, chat windows in which collaborators "talk" while editing shared documents, take notes on shared "white boards," and manipulate shared data are becoming increasingly common. Three doctors at three different physical locations, all looking at the same CAT scan images on their screens, consult together about a young child with a tumor, but the subsequent conversation about the recommended treatment will take place at the child's bedside with the family members present. Similarly permeable are virtual communities such as the WELL. In *The Virtual Community,* Howard Rheingold describes how WELL members have been able to support one another in real life. They have elicited information and contacts that saved lives (for example, of an American Buddhist nun in Katmandu who developed an amoebic liver infection). They have brought electronic consolation and personal visits in times of grief (for example, to a WELL member dying of cancer). Rheingold himself believes that this permeability is essential for the word "community" to be applied to our virtual social worlds. To make a community work "at least some of the people [must] reach out through that screen and affect each other's lives."[21]

Panopticon

Much of the conversation about electronic mail, bulletin boards, and the information superhighway in general is steeped in a language of liberation and utopian possibility. It is easy to see why. I write these words in 1995. To date, a user's experience of the Internet is of a dizzyingly free zone. On it information is easily accessible. One can say anything to anyone. Bulletin boards and information utilities are run by interested and motivated people—a graduate student in comparative literature here, an unemployed philosopher there, as well as insurance salesmen, housewives, and bellhops. These people obviously have something in common, access to the Internet and enough money or connections to

buy or borrow a computer and modem, but they are a diverse enough group to foster fantasies about a new kind of social power. People who usually think of the world in materialist terms play with the idea that the somehow immaterial world of computer networks has created a new space for power without traditional forms of ownership. People who think of the world in bureaucratic terms play with the ways in which electronic communities undermine traditional forms of organization and status. Such musings are no longer restricted to professional social theorists. The August 1995 issue of *NetGuide,* a monthly magazine written for beginning Internet users, carries the cover story "Take Charge: Create Your Own Online Service."[22]

I am talking with Ray, an MIT freshman who is discussing his first Internet experiences (an Internet account comes as part of MIT's registration package). Ray quickly turns the conversation to the issue of power and access. He is thrilled with how much there is to explore and about being able to connect with people who would otherwise be inaccessible. He says he would never dare to make an appointment to see one of his professors without something very specific to say, but would send off an e-mail to inquire about a difficult assignment. Ray is on an electronic mailing list with one of his intellectual heroes. "They say Marvin Minsky is actually on this list they let me join. He hasn't posted anything yet. But as soon as he does, I feel like I could comment on something he said." Ray comments that the idea that he and Marvin Minsky are receiving the same e-mail makes him feel like "the two of us are sharing a *New York Times* over coffee and bagels on Sunday." Ray has also discovered LambdaMOO and is impressed with its efforts at self-governance. He says, "This is what American democracy should be."

Despite many people's good intentions, there is much in recent social thought that casts a sobering light on such enthusiasms. Michel Foucault's work, for example, elaborates a perspective on information, communication, and power that undermines any easy links between electronic communication and freedom.[23] He argues that power in modern society is imposed not by the personal presence and brute force of an elite caste but by the way each individual learns the art of self-surveillance. Modern society must control the bodies and behaviors of large numbers of people. Force could never be sufficiently distributed. Discourse substitutes and does a more effective job.

The social philosopher Jeremy Bentham, best known for his espousal of utilitarianism, proposed a device called the Panopticon, which enabled a prison guard to see all prisoners without being seen. At any given moment, any one prisoner was perhaps being observed, perhaps not. Prisoners would have to assume they were being observed and would therefore behave according to the norms that the guard would impose, if

watching. Individuals learn to look at themselves through the eyes of the prison guard. Foucault has pointed out that this same kind of self-surveillance has extended from the technologies of imprisonment to those of education and psychotherapy. We learn to see ourselves from a teacher's or a therapist's point of view, even in their absence.

In our day, increasingly centralized databases provide a material basis for a vastly extended Panopticon that could include the Internet. Even now there is talk of network censorship, in part through (artificially) intelligent agents capable of surveillance. From Foucault's perspective, the most important factor would not be how frequently the agents are used or censorship is enforced. Like the threat of a tax audit, what matters most is that people know that the possibility is always present.

Ray's attitude about being online is totally positive. But Andy and Daniella, two other MIT freshmen, express reservations about computer-mediated communication. Neither knows about Foucault's work, but their ideas resonate with his on the way social control operates through learned self-surveillance. Andy hangs out on a MUD on which wizards have the power to enter any room without being seen. This means that they can "overhear" private conversations. He is organizing a petition to put a stop to this practice. Although he has been successful in marshaling support, he does not think his efforts will succeed. "We need the wizards. They are the ones willing to do the work. Without them, there would be no MUD." His comment provokes the following remark from Daniella: "Do you know that if you type the finger command, you can see the last time someone got online? So you are responsible for your e-mail if you log on to your computer, because everybody can know that you got your messages. But you don't know who asked about [that is, who has fingered] you." Andy nods his assent and replies, "I don't think that's the worst." He continues:

> I subscribed to a list about cyberpunk and I wrote every day. It was such a release. My ideas were pretty wild. Then I found out that the list is archived in three places. E-mail makes you feel as though you are just talking. Like it will evaporate. And then what you say is archived. It won't evaporate. It's like somebody's always putting it on your permanent record. You learn to watch yourself.

Such considerations about power, discourse, and domination have been the province of social theorists. The experience of the Internet, that most ephemeral of objects, has made these considerations more concrete. Of course, people have known for decades that each time they place an order from a mail-order catalogue or contribute to a political cause, they are adding information to a database. New catalogues and

new requests for political contributions arrive that are more and more finely tuned to the profile of the electronic personae they have created through their transactions. But people are isolated in their reflections about their electronic personae. On the Internet, such matters are more likely to find a collective voice.

In discussing the parallels between hobbyists and MUDders, I have balanced a language of psychological compensation (people without power and resources in the real find a compensatory experience in the virtual) with a language of political criticism (the satisfactions that people experience in virtual communities underscore the failures of our real ones). Both approaches give precedence to events in the real world. Do MUDs oblige us to find a new language that does not judge virtual experiences purely in terms of how far they facilitate or encumber "real" ones? Perhaps the virtual experiences are "real enough."

When people pursue relationships through letter writing, we are not concerned that they are abandoning their real lives. Relationships via correspondence seem romantic to people for whom MUDding seems vaguely unsavory. Some envisage letter writing as a step toward physical presence rather than as an alternative to it. Some imagine the letter writers speaking in their own voice rather than role playing. But neither of these ideas is necessarily true of letter writing or untrue of MUDding. In MUDs it is hard not to play an aspect of oneself, and virtual encounters often lead to physical ones. What makes an eighty-hour work week in investment banking something a parent can be proud of while Robert's eighty hours a week building and administering his MUD raises fears of addiction? Would Robert seem less addicted to his MUD activities if he were being paid for them? Would they have a different feel if his relationship with Kasha—the fellow-MUDder he traveled cross-country to meet—had blossomed, as some MUD friendships do, into marriage and family? In an electronic discussion group on virtual community, Barry Kort, one of the founders of a MUD for children, argued in a similar vein: "I don't think anyone would have said that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were addicted to the Agora. The computer nets are the modern Agora, serving a role similar to talk radio and tabloid journalism, but with more participation, less sensationalism, and more thinking between remarks."[24]

What are the social implications of spinning off virtual personae that can run around with names and genders of our choosing, unhindered by the weight and physicality of embodiment? From their earliest days, MUDs have been evocative objects for thinking about virtuality and accountability.

Habitat was an early MUD, initially built to run on Commodore 64 personal computers in the early 1980s. It had a short run in the United States before it was bought and transferred to Japan.[25] Its designers, Chip

Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer, have written about how its players struggled to establish the rights and responsibilities of virtual selves. On Habitat, players were originally allowed to have guns and other weapons. Morningstar and Farmer say that they "included these because we felt that players should be able to 'materially' affect each other in ways that went beyond simply talking, ways that required real moral choices to be made by the participants."[26] However, death in Habitat had little in common with the RL variety. "When an Avatar is killed, he or she is teleported back home, head in hands (literally), pockets empty, and any object in hand at the time dropped on the ground at the scene of the crime."[27] This eventuality was more like a setback in a game of Chutes and Ladders than real mortality, and for some players thievery and murder became the highlights of the game. For others, these activities were a violent intrusion on their peaceful world. An intense debate ensued.

Some players argued that guns should be eliminated, for in a virtual world a few lines of code can translate into an absolute gun ban. Others argued that what was dangerous in virtual reality was not violence but its trivialization. These individuals maintained that guns should be allowed, but their consequences should be made more serious; when you are killed, your character should cease to exist and not simply be sent home. Still others believed that since Habitat was just a game and playing assassin was part of the fun, there could be no harm in a little virtual violence.

As the debate continued, a player who was a Greek Orthodox priest in real life founded the first Habitat church, the "Order of the Holy Walnut," whose members pledged not to carry guns, steal, or engage in virtual violence of any kind. In the end, the game designers divided the world into two parts. In town, violence was prohibited. In the wilds outside of town, it was allowed. Eventually a democratic voting process was installed and a sheriff elected. Participants then took up discussion on the nature of Habitat laws and the proper balance between law and order and individual freedom. It was a remarkable situation. Participants in Habitat were seeing themselves as citizens; and they were spending their leisure time debating pacifism, the nature of good government, and the relationship between representations and reality. In the nineteenth century, utopians built communities in which political thought could be lived out as practice. On the cusp of the twenty-first century, we are building MUDs, possible worlds that can provoke a new critical discourse about the real.

MUD Rape: Only Words?

Consider the first moments of a consensual sexual encounter between the characters Backslash and Targa. The player behind Backslash, Ronald,

a mathematics graduate student in Memphis, types "emote fondles Targa's breast" and "say You are beautiful Targa." Elizabeth, Targa's player, sees on her screen:

> Backslash fondles Targa's breast.
> You are beautiful Targa.

Elizabeth responds with "say Touch me again, and harder. Please. Now. That's how I like it." Ronald's screen shows:

> Targa says, "Touch me again, and harder. Please. Now. That's how I like it."

But consensual relationships are only one facet of virtual sex. Virtual rape can occur within a MUD if one player finds a way to control the actions of another player's character and can thus "force" that character to have sex. The coercion depends on being able to direct the actions and reactions of characters independent of the desire of their players. So if Ronald were such a culprit, he would be the only one typing, having gained control of Targa's character. In this case Elizabeth, who plays Targa, would sit at her computer, shocked to find herself, or rather her "self," begging Backslash for more urgent caresses and ultimately violent intercourse.

In March 1992, a character calling himself Mr. Bungle, "an oleaginous, Bisquick-faced clown dressed in cum-stained harlequin garb and girdled with a mistletoe-and-hemlock belt whose buckle bore the inscription 'KISS ME UNDER THIS, BITCH!' " appeared in the LambdaMOO living room. Creating a phantom that masquerades as another player's character is a MUD programming trick often referred to as creating a voodoo doll. The "doll" is said to possess the character, so that the character must do whatever the doll does. Bungle used such a voodoo doll to force one and then another of the room's occupants to perform sexual acts on him. Bungle's first victim in cyberspace was legba, a character described as "a Haitian trickster spirit of indeterminate gender, brown-skinned and wearing an expensive pearl gray suit, top hat, and dark glasses." Even when ejected from the room, Bungle was able to continue his sexual assaults. He forced various players to have sex with each other and then forced legba to swallow his (or her?) own pubic hair and made a character called Starsinger attack herself sexually with a knife. Finally, Bungle was immobilized by a MOO wizard who "toaded" the perpetrator (erased the character from the system).

The next day, legba took the matter up on a widely read mailing list within LambdaMOO about social issues. Legba called both for "civility" and for "virtual castration." When chronicling this event, the journalist

Julian Dibbell contrasted the cyberspace description of the event with what was going on in real life. The woman who played the character of legba told Dibbell that she cried as she wrote those words, but he points out their "precise tenor," mingling "murderous rage and eyeball-rolling annoyance was a curious amalgam that neither the RL nor the VR facts alone can quite account for."

> Where virtual reality and its conventions would have us believe that legba and Starsinger were brutally raped in their own living room, here was the victim legba scolding Mr. Bungle for a breach of "civility." Where real life, on the other hand, insists the incident was only an episode in a free-form version of Dungeons and Dragons, confined to the realm of the symbolic and at no point threatening any player's life, limb, or material well-being, here now was the player legba issuing aggrieved and heartfelt calls for Mr. Bungle's dismemberment. Ludicrously excessive by RL's lights, woefully understated by VR's, the tone of legba's response made sense only in the buzzing, dissonant gap between them.[28]

Dibbell points out that although the RL and the VR description of the event may seem to "march in straight, tandem lines separated neatly into the virtual and the real, its meaning lies always in that gap." He describes the way MUD players tend to learn this lesson during their early sexual encounters in MUDs.

> Amid flurries of even the most cursorily described caresses, sighs, and penetrations, the glands do engage, and often as throbbingly as they would in a real-life assignation—sometimes even more so, given the combined power of anonymity and textual suggestiveness to unshackle deep-seated fantasies. And if the virtual setting and the interplayer vibes are right, who knows? The heart may engage as well, stirring up passions as strong as many that bind lovers who observe the formality of trysting in the flesh.

The issue of MUD rape and violence has become a focal point of conversation on discussion lists, bulletin boards, and newsgroups to which MUD players regularly post. In these forums one has the opportunity to hear from those who believe that MUDs should be considered as games and that therefore virtual rape should be allowed. One posting defending MUD rape was from someone who admitted to being a MUD rapist.

> MUDs are Fantasy. MUDs are somewhere you can have fun and let your "hidden" self out. Just to let you all in on what happened, here is the story:
>
> On a MUD (who's [sic] name I will not release, like I said, you know who you are) a friend of mine and myself were reprimanded for actions we took. We have a little thing we do, he uses emote . . . to emote "<his name> holds <victim's name> down for <my name> to rape." Then I use emote and type "<my name> rapes the held down <victim's name>."
>
> Now this may be an odd thing to do, but it is done in a free non-meaningful manner. We don't do it to make people feel victimized, (like this GOD said we were doing) we do it for fun. OK, it is plain out sick, but that isn't the point. On this MUD the victim isn't the one who complained. It was several other PCs who complained about what we did. Let the victim complain about it. It happened to the victim, not the bystanders. The victim didn't actually mind, she thought it was somewhat humorous. Well, along comes Mr. GOD saying "raping the Player's character, is the same as raping the player."
>
> BULL SHIT
>
> This is a GAME, nothing more. This particular GOD needs to chill out and stop being so serious. MUDs are supposed to be fun, not uptight. I will never return to this MUD of my own choice. There are other MUDs where we have done the same thing and even though the victim didn't like it, the GODs told the victim "too bad. it's not like they Pkilled you." [This refers to "player killing," in which one player kills another player. It is often considered different in nature from being "toaded."][29]

There was a postscript after the signature on this communication. The author asks his readers to "Please excuse my grammer [sic] as I am a Computer Science Major, not an English Major. Also excuse the no indenting as our netnews poster eats posts that have indents in them. Argh." Rape was not all that was on this MUDder's mind. Grammar and the limitations of his text formatting system also loomed large.

Discussion of the MUD rape occupied LambdaMOO for some time. In one of a series of online meetings that followed it, one character asked, "Where does the body end and the mind begin? Is not the mind a part of the body?" Another answered, "In MOO, the body is the mind." MUD rape occurred without physical contact. Is rape, then, a crime against the mind? If we say that it is, we begin to approach the position taken by the feminist legal theorist Catharine MacKinnon, who has argued that some words describing acts of violence toward women are social actions. Thus some pornography should be banned because it is not "only words." Dibbell says that he began his research on MUDs with little sympathy for this point of view but admits that "the more seriously I took the notion of virtual rape, the less seriously I was able to take the notion of freedom of speech, with its tidy division of the world into the symbolic and the real."[30] While legal scholars might disagree that any such "tidy division" is to be found in American law, no one can doubt that examples of MUD rape—of which the incident on LambdaMOO was only one—raise the

question of accountability for the actions of virtual personae who have only words at their command.

Similar issues of accountability arise in the case of virtual murder. If your MUD character erases the computer database on which I have over many months built up a richly described character and goes on to announce to the community that my character is deceased, what exactly have *you,* the you that exists in real life, done? What if my virtual apartment is destroyed along with all its furniture, VCR, kitchen equipment, and stereo system? What if you kidnap my virtual dog (the bot Rover, which I have trained to perform tricks on demand)? What if you destroy him and leave his dismembered body in the MUD?

In the physically embodied world, we have no choice but to assume responsibility for our body's actions. The rare exceptions simply prove the rule as when someone with multiple personality disorder claims that a crime was committed by an "alter" personality over which he or she has no control or we rule someone mentally incompetent to stand trial. The possibilities inherent in virtuality, on the other hand, may provide some people with an excuse for irresponsibility, just as they may enable creative expressions that would otherwise have been repressed. When society supported people in unitary experiences of self, it often maintained a narrowness of outlook that could be suffocating. There were perhaps great good places, but there was also a tendency to exclude difference as deviance. Turning back provides no solutions. The challenge is to integrate some meaningful personal responsibility in virtual environments. Virtual environments are valuable as places where we can acknowledge our inner diversity. But we still want an authentic experience of self.

One's fear is, of course, that in the culture of simulation, a word like authenticity can no longer apply. So even as we try to make the most of virtual environments, a haunting question remains. For me, that question is raised every time I use the MUD command for taking an action. The command is "emote." If while at Dred's bar on LambdaMOO, I type "emote waves," the screens of all players in the MUD room will flash "ST waves." If I type "emote feels a complicated mixture of desire and expectation," all screens will flash "ST feels a complicated mixture of desire and expectation." But what exactly do I *feel?* Or, what exactly do *I* feel? When we get our MUD persona to "emote" something and observe the effect, do we gain a better understanding of our real emotions, which can't be switched on and off so easily, and which we may not even be able to describe? Or is the emote command and all that it stands for a reflection of what Fredric Jameson called the flattening of affect in postmodern life?

Chapter 10

IDENTITY CRISIS

Every era constructs its own metaphors for psychological well-being. Not so long ago, stability was socially valued and culturally reinforced. Rigid gender roles, repetitive labor, the expectation of being in one kind of job or remaining in one town over a lifetime, all of these made consistency central to definitions of health. But these stable social worlds have broken down. In our time, health is described in terms of fluidity rather than stability. What matters most now is the ability to adapt and change—to new jobs, new career directions, new gender roles, new technologies.

In *Flexible Bodies,* the anthropologist Emily Martin argues that the language of the immune system provides us with metaphors for the self and its boundaries.[1] In the past, the immune system was described as a private fortress, a firm, stable wall that protected within from without. Now we talk about the immune system as flexible and permeable. It can only be healthy if adaptable.

The new metaphors of health as flexibility apply not only to human mental and physical spheres, but also to the bodies of corporations, governments, and businesses. These institutions function in rapidly changing circumstances; they too are coming to view their fitness in terms of their flexibility. Martin describes the cultural spaces where we learn the new virtues of change over solidity. In addition to advertising, entertainment, and education, her examples include corporate workshops where people learn wilderness camping, high-wire walking, and zip-line jumping. She refers to all of these as flexibility practicums.

In her study of the culture of flexibility, Martin does not discuss virtual communities, but these provide excellent examples of what she is talking about. In these environments, people either explicitly play roles (as in

using the language," he reports, "children invariably put one of the agents 'in charge' of the others. One student explicitly referred to the agent in charge as 'the teacher.' Another referred to it as 'the mother.'" See Mitchel Resnick, "MultiLogo: A Study of Children and Concurrent Programming," *Interactive Learning Environments* 1, no. 3 (1990): 153–70.

47. Cited in Resnick, *Termites, Turtles, and Traffic Jams*, p. 122.
48. Michael Bremer, *SimAnt User Manual* (Orinda, Calif.: Maxis, 1991), p. 163.
49. Bremer, *SimAnt User Manual*, p. 164. The game manual talks about Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, in which an ant colony is explicitly analogized to the emergent properties of the brain. See Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). SimAnt wants to make the same point by giving people something concrete to play with.
50. Michael Bremer, *SimLife User Manual* (Orinda, Calif.: Maxis, 1992), p. 2.
51. Bremer, *SimLife User Manual*, p. 6.
52. Bremer, *SimLife User Manual*, pp. 6–7.
53. In Philip K. Dick's science fiction classic, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—the novel on which the film *Blade Runner* was based—a devastating war destroys most biological life. In the aftermath highly developed androids do much of the work. "Natural" biology takes on new importance. In this world, a real insect or frog or fish becomes a valuable and cherished pet. The police are occupied with preserving the boundary between real and artificial life.
54. This term refers not just to Power Rangers but to a computer program that metamorphosed one pictorial image, usually a face, into another.
55. Mitchel Resnick, "Lego, Logo, and Life," in Langton, ed., *Artificial Life I*, p. 402.
56. Levy, *Artificial Life*, pp. 6–7.
57. Peter Kramer, *Listening to Prozac: A Psychiatrist Explores Antidepressant Drugs and the Remaking of the Self* (New York: Viking, 1993), p. xii.
58. Kramer, *Listening to Prozac*, p. xiii.

Chapter 7 Aspects of the Self

1. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).
2. David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1950).
3. Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).
4. In a March 24, 1992, posting to a WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link computer bulletin board system) conference called "On Line Personae: Boon or Bête Noire?" F. Randall Farmer noted that in a group of about 50 Habitat users (Habitat is a MUD with a graphical interface), about a quarter experienced

their online persona as a separate creature that acted in ways they do in real life, a quarter experienced their online persona as a separate creature that acted in ways they do not in real life. A quarter experienced their online persona not as a separate creature but as one that acted like them; and another quarter experienced their online persona not as a separate creature but as one which acted in ways unlike them. In other words, there were four distinct and nonoverlapping groups.

5. Katie Hafner, "Get in the MOOd," *Newsweek*, 7 November 1994.
6. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965).
7. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1963 [1950]), p. 52.
8. This communication was signed "The Picklingly herbatious one."
9. For more material making the contrast with traditional role playing see Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). Henry Jenkins's study of fan culture, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), illuminates the general question of how individuals appropriate fantasy materials in the construction of identity.
10. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), cited in Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, p. 113.
11. Players may take out Internet accounts under false names in order to protect their confidentiality. One male player explains that he has created a female persona for the character who "owns" the Internet account from which he MUDs. This way, when he plays a female character and someone finds out the name of the person behind it, that person is a woman. He feels that given the intimacy of the relationships he forms on the MUDs with male-presenting characters, the deception is necessary. "Let's say my MUD lover [a man playing a man] finds out I am really a man. We might still continue our relationship but it would never be the same."
12. Defenses are usually born of situations where they were badly needed, but they can take on a life of their own. Our situations may change but the defense remains. For example, while Stewart was growing up it may have been functional for him to avoid dwelling on his difficulties, but the wholesale denial of his feelings is not serving him well. Therapy aims to give patients greater flexibility in dealing with the world as it is and a sense of distance, even a sense of humor about their particular ways of distorting things. If one can look at one's behavior and say, "There I go again," adjustments and compensations become possible, and one can see one's limitations but maintain one's self-esteem.
13. "The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of the *moratorium*. . . ." Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, p. 262. For the working out of the notion of moratorium in individual lives, see Erikson's psychobiographical works, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958) and *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton, 1969).
14. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, p. 222.
15. This point about the advantage of keeping RL and virtual personae close

together has been made by many people I spoke with. It illustrates the diversity of ways people use online personae to "play" other selves or aspects of themselves. In a WELL conference called "Online Personae: Boon or Bête Noire?" Paul Belserene noted, both for himself and for others,

> that this conscious persona-building tends to be cheap fuel. After a few months, some things happen that tend to moderate these personae toward your "real" personality. For one thing, the psychic energy required gets expensive. And for another, if you're like most people, you begin to care about the community and people here, and you tend to want to express yourself, to be seen.

But this author felt somewhat differently about what he called "personae-shading from conference-to-conference." About that he said, "We are all many people, and like to express parts of our wholes when we can. But the creation of extreme, artificial personae is, I think, very hard to maintain on a system like the WELL. (Maybe other systems are easier to fool—harder to care about.)"

For some people, however, it is precisely because they care that they want to be very different from what they feel themselves to be. They may not, however, have as much success with integrating their online personae with their sense of an off-line self. Belserene went on to note, "The persistence of my online persona's behavior makes it easier to learn from experience. I've learned a lot about manners, diplomacy, and so on from the WELL. Much of that has spilled over into my 'real-life' persona, which is good." (paulbel [Paul Belserene], The WELL, conference on virtual communities [vc.20.10], 6 April 1992).

16. jstraw (Michael Newman), The WELL, conference on virtual communities (vc.20.26), 25 May 1992.
17. Keeping logs of conversations in which you participate for your own purposes is socially acceptable on MUDs. Sharing them publicly without permission is considered bad manners.
18. In his influential essay "Thick Description," Clifford Geertz argued that the anthropologist never reports raw social discourse. Geertz comments that even reporting a wink implies interpretation, because it means one has already decided that a given contraction of the eyelid was a wink rather than a twitch. And since any wink can be ironic or suggestive, the way in which one reports the wink constitutes an interpretation. In MUDs, the exact form of every communication can be captured in a log file. But the elusiveness of social discourse to which Geertz referred is not pinned down by this technological possibility. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3–30.

CHAPTER 8 TINYSEX AND GENDER TROUBLE

1. At the time, I noted that I felt panicky when female or female-presenting characters approached the gender-neutral "me" on the MUD and "waved seductively." And I noted this with considerable irritation. Surely, I thought, my many years of psychoanalysis should see me through this experience with greater equanimity. They did not.
2. Pavel Curtis, "Mudding: Social Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Realities," available via anonymous ftp://parcftp.xerox.com/pub/MOO/papers/DIAC92.*. Cited in Amy Bruckman, "Gender Swapping on the Internet," available via anonymous ftp://media.mit.edu/pub/asb/paper/gender-swapping.*.
3. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, Presentation at "Doing Gender on the 'Net Conference," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass., 7 April 1995.
4. The term "gender trouble" is borrowed from Judith Butler, whose classic work on the problematics of gender informs this chapter. See Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
5. My thanks to Ilona Issacson Bell for pointing me to this rich example.
6. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It.* Act I, Scene 3. Lines 107–18.
7. Zoe does not MUD any more. She gave me two reasons. First, her MUDding succeeded in making her more assertive at work. Second, she doesn't want her MUDding to succeed in making her "too much" more assertive at home.

> I guess I got what I wanted out of MUDs. When I go to work I try to act like my MUD character, but that character is really a part of me now. Well, more like a role model that I've had as a roommate. Not just as a teacher, but [someone] I actually lived with. For two years I did Ulysses for thirty hours a week, so it isn't so hard to do it for a few hours a week during meetings at work or on the phone with clients. But I didn't go all the way with Ulysses. It started to feel dangerous to me. My marriage is still pretty traditional. I am better at talking about my feelings and I think my husband respects me, but he still is Southern. He still likes the feeling of being superior. We need the money so my husband doesn't mind my working. But I do treat my husband more or less the way my father would have wanted me to. I want to have children. If I brought Ulysses home, it would upset my marriage. I don't want that to happen. I'm not ready for that now. Maybe someday, but not now.

8. With the increasing popularity of MUDding, this group has split up into many different groups, each looking at different aspects of MUDding: administrative, technical, social.
9. People feel different degrees of "safety." Most MUDders know responsibility involves not logging sexual encounters and then posting them to public bulletin boards.

   On an Internet bulletin board dedicated to MUDding, a posting of "Frequently Asked Questions" described TinySex as "speed-writing interactive erotica" and warned players to participate with caution both because there might be some deception in play and because there might be the virtual equivalent of a photographer in the motel room:

> Realize that the other party is not obligated to be anything like he/she says, and in fact may be playing a joke on you (see 'log' below).
>
> "What is a log?"

> Certain client programs allow logs to be kept of the screen. A time-worn and somewhat unfriendly trick is to entice someone into having TinySex with you, log the proceedings, and post them to rec.games.mud and have a good laugh at the other person's expense. Logs are useful for recording interesting or useful information or conversations, as well. [Jennifer "Moira" Smith, MUDFAQ, 1 December 1992. This document posted regularly on rec.games.mud.tiny.]

This last response refers to a client program. This is one of a class of programs that facilitate MUDding. A client program stands between a user's computer and the MUD, performing helpful housekeeping functions such as keeping MUD interchanges on different lines. Without a client program, a user's screen can look like a tangle of MUD instructions and player comments. With a client program a user's screen is relatively easy to read.

10. One of the things that has come out of people having virtual experiences as different genders is that many have acquired a new sense of gender as a continuum. In an online discussion the media theorist Brenda Laurel noted that media such as film, radio, and television advertised the idea that sex and gender were identical and that the universe was bi-gendered. Brenda Laurel, The WELL, conference on virtual reality (vr.47.255), 14 January 1993.
11. Since many more men adopt a female persona than vice versa, some have suggested that gender-bending is yet another way in which men assert domination over female bodies. I thank my student Adrian Banard for his insights on this question. The point was also made by Allucquere Rosanne Stone, Presentation at "Doing Gender on the 'Net Conference," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass., 7 April 1995.
12. Lindsay Van Gelder, "The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover," in *Computerization and Controversy: Value Conflicts and Social Choices,* eds. Charles Dunlop and Rob Kling (Boston: Academic Press, 1991), pp. 366–67.
13. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, Presentation at "Doing Gender on the 'Net Conference," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass., 7 April 1995.
14. Lindsay Van Gelder, "The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover," p. 372.
15. John Schwartz of *The Washington Post* reported that:

> In a telephone conversation, Mr. X (who spoke on the condition of anonymity) again tried to put events in perspective. "The cycle of fury and resentment and anger instantaneously transmitted, created this kind of independent entity. . . . These people went after me with virtual torches and strung me up. The emotional response is entirely out of proportion to what actually happened. It involved distortions and lies about what I did or did not do." "I was wrong," he said. "The cyber world is the same as the real world. . . . I should have realized that the exact same standards should have applied." Mr. X later announced that he would be leaving the WELL. He had already been shunned. [John Schwartz, "On-line Lothario's Antics Prompt Debate on Cyber-Age Ethics," *The Washington Post,* 11 July 1993: A1.]

I thank Tina Taylor of Brandeis University for pointing out to me in this case, as in others, the complex position of the virtual body. The virtual body is not always the same. It, too, is constructed by context. A virtual body in a MUD is not the same as a virtual body on IRC or on the WELL.

16. Steve Lohr, "The Meaning of Digital Life," *The New York Times,* 24 April 1995.
17. Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

Chapter 9 VIRTUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

1. Ray Oldenberg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
2. The dance sequence on LambdaMOO proceeds as follows:

> Tony hands you a rose which you place between your teeth. Then Tony leads you through a rhythmic tango, stepping across the floor and ending with Tony holding you in a low dip.
> Tony smiles.
> You say, "I love the tango."
> Tony says, "Type @addfeature #5490"
> [I do so].
> Tony holds his arm out to you, taking you by the hand, and leads you through a graceful waltz with all the style of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

3. I thank my student Jennifer Light for this helpful analogy.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings,* ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 171–72.
5. Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: William Morrow, 1978), p. 24.
6. This critical comment appeared in a discussion group on The WELL:

> On the one hand, like most everyone else here, my life has been very positively impacted by my on-line experiences (I've been on-line in one form or another since 1983—remember 300 baud?). I think of this technology as a kind of mental and social amplifier, giving me access to a far wider range of people, viewpoints, and knowledge than I would have otherwise. Yet, on many, perhaps most, days, I feel that the costs are greater than the benefits.
>
> For example, virtuality seems to me to represent the culmination of a several-thousand-year-old trend in Western culture to separate the mind from the body, thought from physicality, man from nature. This trend lies behind the environmental problems we're facing right now, IMO [online slang for "in my opinion"]. Virtuality seems to portend an even greater disregard for the physical environment which nevertheless still does sustain us, and I don't think that's good at all.
>
> Virtuality also implies to me a privileging of the global at the expense of the local. Yes, it's great to be able to get to know people from all over the planet, without regard for their actual geographic location. I really do think that's good. But it seems to me that in the process of creating virtual "neighborhoods" we are withdrawing from our own very real localities. To me this is a continuation of a several-decades-long trend in American society toward the withdrawal of the upper and middle classes from the public sphere, i.e. the streets and parks of our cities and towns. At the same time the on-line community is growing, real communities

are collapsing. Most people don't even know their neighbors. The streets are controlled by thugs. Municipalities become more and more dependent upon, and powerless to control, multinational corporations, because local self-reliance, which originates in real-world interactions and organization among local residents, is atrophying. This is not good for democracy or the people of this country as a whole, IMO.

Nor do I think that this medium, while it is great as a *supplement* to f2f [face-to-face] interactions, would be a very healthy, or emotionally satisfying way to conduct *most* of our interactions—which seems to be a goal of at least some of the more rabid VR [virtual reality] advocates. I mean, I don't want to see my friends over a real-time video system, I want to be with them personally.

Virtual sex? How repugnant—even the most intimate of human experiences now mediated through a machine? Not for me, thanks. The ultimate in alienation. . . .

If anyone's up to it I would like to see some discussion about the "dark side" of information technology—and perhaps in the process we can develop some insight into how we might avoid such pitfalls, while still deriving the very real benefits which it potentially provides. [nao, The WELL, conference on virtual communities (vc.121.1), 29 May 1993.]

7. With a growing sensitivity to the importance of "Main Street" to community life, there is some movement to build new housing that plans for Main Streets and front stoops. See, for example, "Bye-Bye Suburban Dream," the cover story of *Newsweek*, 15 May 1995. These are not conceived of as postmodern "appropriations" but as using architecture that once supported community to help create community.
8. Stephen L. Talbott, *The Future Does Not Compute: Warnings from the Internet* (Sebastopol, Calif.: O'Reilly & Associates, 1995), pp. 127–28.
9. Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, p. 304.
10. E. M. Forster, "The Machine Stops," in *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, ed. Ben Bova, Vol. IIB (New York: Avon, 1971). Originally in E. M. Forster, *The Eternal Moment and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1928). Cited in Pavel Curtis, "Mudding: Social Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Realities," available via anonymous ftp://parcftp.xerox.com/pub/MOO/papers/DIAC92.*.
11. Peter Kramer, *Listening to Prozac: A Psychiatrist Explores Antidepressant Drugs and the Remaking of the Self* (New York: Viking, 1993).
12. Janice A. Radaway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
13. T. J. Burnside Clap, 1987, Fesarius Publications, quoted in Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 277.
14. Jenkins, pp. 280–81.
15. From CyberMind electronic mailing list, 29 March 1993.
16. Sherry Turkle, "The Subjective Computer: A Study in the Psychology of Personal Computation," *Social Studies of Science* 12 (1982): 201.
17. Turkle, "The Subjective Computer": 201.
18. The sense that virtual is better and safer and more interesting has extended even to those usually most concerned about how we *look*. The editor of *Mademoiselle* magazine, a publication chiefly concerned with fashion and beauty advice, introduces a special section on electronic communication by declaring that if she "could live anywhere, it would be in Cyberia," i.e. cyberspace. (Gabé Doppelt, *Mademoiselle*, October 1993: 141.)
19. A Spring 1995 special issue of *Time* magazine devoted to cyberspace reported:

> The fact is that access to the new technology generally breaks down along traditional class lines. Wealthy and upper-middle-class families form the bulk of the 30% of American households that own computers. Similarly, wealthier school districts naturally tend to have equipment that is unavailable to poorer ones, and schools in the more affluent suburbs have twice as many computers per student as their less-well-funded urban counterparts. [p. 25]

20. See, for example, the work of Alan Shaw of MIT's Media Laboratory. Alan Clinton Shaw, "Social Construction in the Inner City: Design Environments for Social Development and Urban Renewal" (Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Media Laboratory, Epistemology and Learning Group, 1995).
21. *Time*, Spring 1995 (special issue): 24; and Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993), pp. 17–37. SeniorNet, founded in 1986 by Mary Furlong, is designed to be permeable to the real. SeniorNet offers its members practical tips on home repair and advice on problems such as how to handle bouts of depression associated with aging. Members say it has given them a sense that their "world is still expanding." The organization sponsors regional face-to-face meetings, and its members regularly visit each other in person. See John F. Dickerson, "Never Too Old," *Time*, Spring 1995 (special issue): 41.
22. Daniel Akst and James Weissman, "At Your Service," *NetGuide*, August 1995: 35–38.
23. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977). See also Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 69–98.
24. kort (Barry Kort), The WELL, conference on virtual communities (vc.52.28), 18 April 1993.
25. After a brief test period in the United States, Habitat was bought by the Fujitsu Corporation and became a successful commercial venture in Japan, with over one-and-a-half million paid subscribers.
26. Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer, "The Lessons of Lucasfilm's Habitat," in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 289.
27. Morningstar and Farmer, "The Lessons of Lucasfilm's Habitat," p. 289.
28. Julian Dibbell, "Rape in Cyberspace," *The Village Voice*, 21 December 1993: 38.
29. The message was signed by Wonko the Sane.
30. Dibbell, "Rape in Cyberspace": 42.