

## CHAPTER 7

# ASPECTS OF THE SELF

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 ner-

vously 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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?<sup>4</sup> 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 *Dungeons 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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?"<sup>8</sup>

### 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 Win-

terlight, 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 sight-seeing. 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.<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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?<sup>18</sup>

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 timidi- ties. I kept returning to France, thirsty for more French speaking. Little by little, I became increasingly fluent in French and comfortable 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.