VIRTUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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BY SHERRY TURKLE

SEARCHING FOR COMMUNITY IN CYBERSPACE

The anthropologist Ray Oldenberg has written about the "great good place"—the local bar, the bistro, the coffee shop—where members of a community can gather for easy company, conversation, and a sense of belonging. Oldenberg considers these places to be the heart of individual social integration and community vitality. Today we see a resurgence of coffee bars and bistros, but most of them do not serve, much less recreate, coherent communities and, as a result, the odor of nostalgia often seems as strong as the espresso.

Some people are trying to fill the gap with neighborhoods in cyberspace. Take Dred's Bar, for example, a watering hole on the MUD LambdaMOO. MUDs, which originally stood for "multi-user dungeons," are destinations on the Internet where players who have logged in from computers around the world join an on-line virtual community. Through typed commands, they can converse privately or in large groups, creating and playing characters and even earning and spending imaginary funds in the MUD's virtual economy.

In many MUDs, players help build the virtual world itself. Using a relatively simple programming language, they can make "rooms" in the MUD, where they can set the stage and define the rules. Dred's Bar is one such place. It is described as having a "castle decor" and a polished oak dance floor. Recently I (here represented by my character or persona "ST") visited Dred's Bar with Tony, a persona I had met on another MUD. After passing the bouncer, Tony and I encountered a man asking for a $5 cover charge, and once we paid it our hands were stamped.

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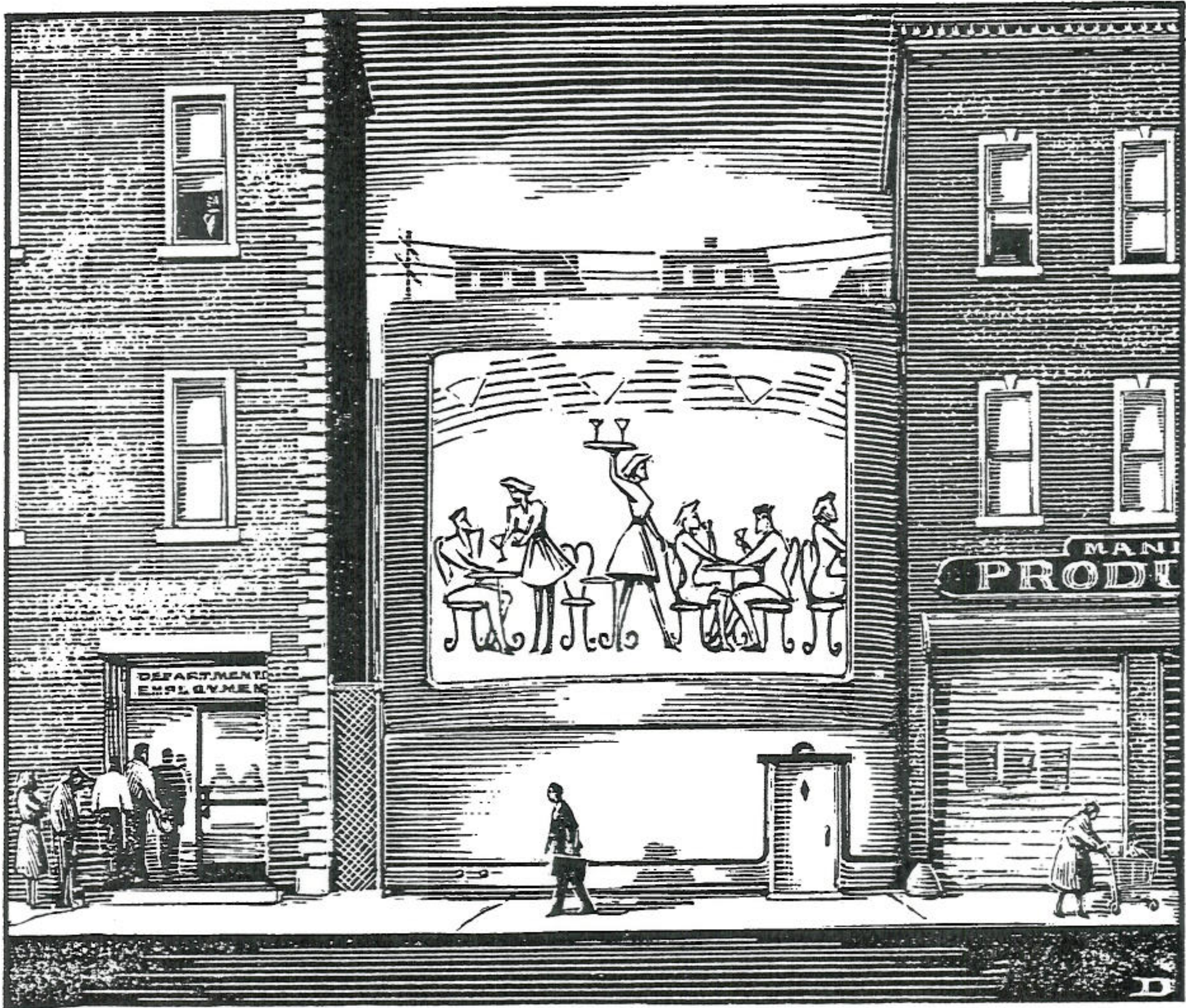

The crowd opens up momentarily to reveal one corner of the club. A couple is there, making out madly. Friendly place . . .

You sit down at the table. The waitress sees you and indicates that she will be there in a minute.

[The waitress here is a bot–short for robot–that is, a computer program that presents itself as a personality.]

The waitress comes up to the table, "Can I get anyone anything from the bar?" she says as she puts down a few cocktail napkins.

Tony says, "When the waitress comes up, type order name of drink."

Abigail [a character at the bar] dries off a spot where some drink spilled on her dress.

The waitress nods to Tony and writes on her notepad.

[I type "order margarita," following Tony's directions.]

You order a margarita.

The waitress nods to ST and writes on her notepad.

Tony sprinkles some salt on the back of his hand.

Tony remembers he ordered a margarita, not tequila, and brushes the salt off.

You say, "I like salt on my margarita too."

The DJ makes a smooth transition from The Cure into a song by 10,000

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Maniacs.
  The drinks arrive. You say,
"L'chaim."
  Tony says, "Excuse me?"
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After some explanations, Tony says, "Ah, . . ." smiles, and introduces me to several of his friends. Tony and I take briefly to the dance floor to try out some MUD features that allow us to waltz and tango, then we go to a private booth to continue our conversation.

Main Street, Mall, and Virtual Café

What changes when we move from Oldenberg's great good places to something like Dred's Bar on LambdaMOO? To answer this question, it helps to consider an intermediate step—moving from a sidewalk café to a food court in a suburban shopping mall. Shopping malls try to recreate the Main Streets of yesteryear, but critical elements change in the process. Main Street, though commercial, is also a public place; the shopping mall is entirely planned to maximize purchasing. On Main Street you are a citizen; in the shopping mall, you are customer as citizen. Main Street had a certain disarray: the town drunk, the traveling snake-oil salesman. The mall is a more controlled space; there may be street theater, but it is planned—the appearance of serendipity is part of the simulation. If Dred's Bar seems plausible, it is because the mall and so much else in our culture, especially television, have made simulations so real.

On any given evening, nearly eighty million people in the United States are watching television. The average American household has a television turned on more than six hours a day, reducing eye contact and conversation. Computers and the virtual worlds they provide are adding another dimension of mediated experience. Perhaps computers feel so natural because of their similarity to watching TV, our dominant social experience for the past forty years.

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

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

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

The Loss of the Real

Which would you rather see—a Disney crocodile robot or a real crocodile? The Disney version rolls its eyes, moves from side to side, and disappears beneath the surface and rises again. It is designed to command our attention at all times. None of these qualities is necessarily visible at a zoo where real crocodiles seem to spend most of their time sleeping. And you may have neither the means nor the inclination to observe a real crocodile in the Nile or the River Gambia.

Compare a rafting trip down the Colorado River to an adolescent girl's use of an interactive CD-ROM to explore the same territory. A real rafting trip raises the prospect of physical danger. One may need to strain one's resources to survive, and there may be a rite of passage. This is unlikely to be the experience of an adolescent girl who picks up an interactive CD-ROM called "Adventures on the Colorado." A touch-sensitive screen allows her to explore the virtual Colorado and its shoreline. Clicking a mouse brings up pictures and descriptions of local flora and fauna. She can have all the maps and literary references she wants. All this might be fun, perhaps useful. But in its uniformity

and lack of risk, it is hard to imagine its marking a transition to adulthood.

But why not have both—the virtual Colorado and the real one? Not every exploration need be a rite of passage. The virtual and the real may provide different things. Why make them compete? The difficulty is that virtuality tends to skew our experience of the real in several ways. First, it makes denatured and artificial experiences seem real—let's call it the Disneyland effect. After a brunch on Disneyland's Royal Street, a cappuccino at a restaurant chain called Bonjour Café at an Anaheim shopping mall may seem real by comparison. After playing a video game in which your opponent is a computer program, the social world of MUDs may seem real as well. At least real people play most of the parts and the play space is relatively open. One player compares the roles he was able to play on video games and on MUDs. "Nintendo has a good [game] where you can play four characters. But even though they are very cool," he says, "they are written up for you." They seem artificial. In contrast, on the MUDs, he says, "There is nothing written up." He says he feels free. MUDs are "for real" because you make them up yourself.

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

Third, virtual experience may be so compelling that we believe that within it we've achieved more than we have. Many of the people I have interviewed claim that virtual gender-swapping (pretending to be the opposite sex on the Internet) enables them to understand what it's like to be a person of the other gender, and I have no doubt that this is true, at least in part. But as I have listened to this boast, my mind has often travelled to my own experiences of living in a woman's body. These include worry about physical vulnerability, fears of unwanted pregnancy and infertility, fine-tuned decisions about how much make-up to wear to a job interview, and the difficulty of giving a professional seminar while doubled over with monthly cramps. Some knowledge is inherently experiential, dependent on physical sensations.

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

The Politics of Virtuality

When I began exploring the world of MUDs in 1992, the Internet was open to a limited group, chiefly academics and researchers in affiliated commercial enterprises. The MUDders were mostly middle-class college students. They chiefly spoke of using MUDs as places to play and escape, though some used MUDs to address personal difficulties. By late 1993, network access could easily be purchased commercially, and the number and diversity of people on the Internet had expanded dramatically. Conversations with MUDders began to touch on new themes. To some young people, "RL" (real life) was a place of economic insecurity where they had trouble finding meaningful work and holding on to middle-class status. Socially speaking, there was nowhere to go but down in RL, whereas MUDs offered a kind of virtual social mobility.

Josh is a 23-year-old college graduate who lives in a small studio apartment in Chicago. After six months of looking for a job in marketing, the field in which he recently received his college degree, Josh has had to settle for a job working on the computer system that maintains inventory records at a large discount store. He considers this a dead end. When a friend told him about MUDs, he gave them a try and within a week stepped into a new life.

Now, eight months later, Josh spends as much time on MUDs as he can. He belongs to a class of players who sometimes call themselves Internet Hobos. They solicit time on computer accounts the

way panhandlers go after spare change. In contrast to his life in RL, Josh's life inside MUDs seems rich and filled with promise. It has friends, safety, and space. "I live in a terrible part of town. I see a rat hole of an apartment, I see a dead-end job, I see AIDS. Down here [in the MUD] I see friends, I have something to offer, I see safe sex." His programming on MUDs is far more intellectually challenging than his day job. Josh has worked on three MUDs, building large, elaborate living quarters in each, and has become a specialist at building virtual cafés in which "bots" serve as waiters and bartenders. Within MUDs, Josh serves as a programming consultant to many less experienced players and has even become something of an entrepreneur. He "rents" ready-built rooms to people who are not as skilled in programming as he is. He has been granted wizard privileges on various MUDs in exchange for building food service software. He dreams that such virtual commerce will someday lead to more—that someday, if MUDs become commercial enterprises, he could build them for a living. MUDs offer Josh a sense of participating in the American Dream.

MUDs play a similar role for Thomas, 24, whom I met after giving a public lecture in Washington, D.C. After graduating from college, Thomas entered a training program at a large department store. When he discovered that he didn't like retailing, he quit the program, thinking that he would look for better opportunities. But things did not go well for him; he couldn't find a job that would give him the middle-class life he knew as a child. Finally, he took a job as a bellhop in the hotel where I had just spoken. "MUDs got me back into the middle class," Thomas tells me. He has a group of MUD friends who write well, program, and read science fiction. "I'm interested in MUD politics. Can there be democracy in cyberspace? Should MUDs be ruled by wizards or should they be democracies? I majored in political science in college. These are important questions for the future. I talk about these things with my friends. On MUDs."

Thomas moves on to what has become an obvious conclusion. He says, "MUDs make me more what I really am. Off the MUD, I am not as much me." Tanya, also 24, a college graduate working as a nanny in rural Connecticut, expresses similar aspirations. She says of the MUD on which she has built Japanese-style rooms and a bot to offer her guests a kimono, slippers, and tea, "I feel like I have more stuff on the MUD than I have off it."

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

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

Sex and Violence in Cyberspace

If real business increasingly gets done in cyberspace, what kinds of rules will govern it? And how will those rules be made, democratically or by fiat? The issue arises starkly in connection with sex and violence.

Consider the first moments of a consensual sexual encounter between the characters Backslash and Targa. The player behind Backslash, Ronald, a mathematics graduate student in Memphis, types "emote fondles Targa's breast" and "say You are beautiful Targa" and Elizabeth, Targa's player, sees on her screen:

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Backslash fondles Targa's breast.
Backslash says, "You are beautiful
Targa."
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Elizabeth responds with "say Touch me again, and harder. Please. Now. That's how I like it." Ronald's screen shows:

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Targa says, "Touch me again, and
harder. Please. Now. That's how I like
it."
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But consensual relationships are only one facet of virtual sex. Virtual rape can occur within a MUD if one player finds a way to control the actions of another player's character and can thus "force" that character to have sex. The coercion depends on being able to direct the actions and reactions of characters independent of the desire of their players. So if Ronald were such a culprit, he would be the only one typing, having gained control of Targa's character. In this case 15-year-old Elizabeth, who plays Targa, would sit at her computer, shocked to find herself or rather her "self" begging Backslash for more urgent caresses and ultimately violent intercourse.

Some might say that such incidents hardly deserve our concern, as they involve "only words," nothing more. But can a community that exists entirely in the realm of communication ignore sexual aggression that takes the form of words?

> 'Down here [in the MUD] I see friends, I have something to offer, I see safe sex.'

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

The next day, legba took the matter up on a widely read mailing list within LambdaMOO called *social-issues. Legba called both for "civility" and "virtual castration." A journalist chronicling this event, Julian Dibbell, contrasts the cyberspace description of the event with what was going on in real life. The woman who played the character of legba told Dibbell that she cried as she wrote those words, but he points out that her mingling of "murderous rage and eyeball-rolling annoyance was a curious amalgam." According to the conventions of virtual reality, legba and Starsinger were brutally raped, but here was the victim legba scolding Mr. Bungle only for a breach of "civility." According to the conventions of real life, the incident was confined to the realm of the symbolic—no one suffered any physical harm—but here was the player legba calling for Mr. Bungle's dismemberment. Dibbell writes: "Ludicrously excessive by RL's lights, woefully understated by VR's, the tone of legba's response made sense only in the buzzing, dissonant gap between them."

Virtual rape—of which the incident on LambdaMOO was only one example—raises the question of accountability for the actions of virtual personae who have only words at their command. Similar issues of accountability arise in the case of virtual murder. If your MUD character erases the computer database on which I have over many months built up a richly described character and goes on to announce to the community that my character is deceased, what exactly have you, the you that exists in real life, done? What if my virtual apartment is destroyed along with all its furniture, VCR, kitchen equipment, and stereo system? What if you kidnap my virtual dog—my beloved bot Rover, which I have trained to perform tricks on demand? What if you destroy him and leave his dismembered body in the MUD?

The problem of civil order has come up sharply in the history of a MUD called Habitat, initially built to run on Commodore 64 personal computers in the early 1980s. It had a short run in the United States before it was bought and transferred to Japan. Its

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

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

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

Some participants have devoted much energy to the political life of MUDs. LambdaMOO, like Habitat, has undergone a major change in its form of governance. Instead of the MUD wizards (or system administrators) making policy decisions, there is a complex system of grassroots petitions and collective voting. Thomas, the bellhop I met in Washington, goes on at length about the political factions with which he must contend to "do politics" on LambdaMOO. Our conversation is taking place in fall 1994. His home state has an upcoming race for the U.S. Senate, hotly contested, ideologically charged, but he hasn't registered to vote and doesn't plan to. I bring up the Senate race. He shrugs it off: "I'm not voting. Doesn't make a difference. Politicians are liars."

Resistance or Escape?

In *Reading the Romance,* the literary scholar Janice Radaway argues that when women read romance novels they are not escaping but building realities less limited than their own. Romance reading becomes a form of resistance, a challenge to the stultifying categories of everyday life. If we take Radaway's perspective, we can look at MUDs and other kinds of virtual communities as places of resistance to the many forms of alienation and to the silences they impose.

But what resistance do virtual communities really offer? Two decades ago, computer hobbyists saw personal computers as a path to a new populism. They imagined how networks would allow citizens to band together to run decentralized schools and governments. Personal computers would create a more participatory political system, the hobbyists believed, because "people will get used to understanding things, to being in control of things, and they will demand more." The hobbyists I interviewed then were excited, enthusiastic, and satisfied with what they were doing with their machines. But I worried about the limits of this enthusiasm, and in my earlier book about personal computers, *The Second Self,* I wrote: "People will not change unresponsive political systems or intellectually deadening work environments by building machines that are responsive, fun, and intellectually challenging."

My misgivings today are similar. Instead of solving real problems—both personal and social—many

of us appear to be choosing to invest ourselves in unreal places. Women and men tell me that the rooms and mazes on MUDs are safer than city streets, virtual sex is safer than sex anywhere, MUD friendships are more intense than real ones, and when things don't work out you can always leave.

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

If the politics of virtuality means democracy online and apathy off-line, there is reason for concern. There is also reason for concern when access to the new technology breaks down along traditional class lines. Although some inner-city communities have used computer-mediated communication as a tool for real community building, the overall trend seems to be the creation of an information elite.

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

The overheated language that surrounds current discussion of computer-mediated communications falls within a long tradition of American technological optimism. The optimists today tend to represent urban decay and class polarization as out-of-date formulations of a problem that could be solved with the right technology—for example, technology that could enable every schoolchild to experience "being digital." Are our streets dangerous? Not to worry: The community will be "wired" so children can attend school without having to walk there! This way of thinking about cyberspace substitutes life on the screen for life in our bodies and physical communities.

But there is another way of thinking, one that stresses making the virtual and the real more permeable to each other. We don't have to reject life on the screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either. Virtual personae can be a resource for self-reflection and self-transformation. Having literally written our on-line worlds into existence, we can use the communities we build inside our machines to improve the ones outside of them. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to the real world better able to understand what about it is abitrary and can be changed.❑

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