Cybernetic Fantasies:
Extensions of Selfhood In a Multi-User Dungeon

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Virtual, or online spaces constitute new sites for anthropological inquiry, technosocial geographies of interconnected, computer mediated spaces, crisscrossing the globe in distributed informational networks. These new technosocial contexts enable constitutions of identity that are alternatively embodied in cyberspace, that are only partially connected to identities localized by the biological body. I use the term biological body ironically and with reservation, to talk about what some hackers would call "flesh." I'm going to use the term "character," with similar irony, to describe identities localized by virtual bodies. But the interest that I bring to online worlds is really in the complexity of the interrelationships between biological bodies, machines and machine networks, fantasy worlds and virtual bodies.

For the past few years, I have been conducting research in virtual worlds focusing on multi-user dungeons, or muds for short. Muds are text-based multi-user virtual worlds run over the Internet I will provide more detail on the actual mud interface in a moment.

I have been intrigued by muds as sites in which fantasy worlds and identities are made concrete through certain media technologies. As text-based fantasy worlds, muds are commonsensically symbolic, and seem to contrast to the materiality of biological bodies coupled with screens and keyboards. But rather than positing a dichotomy of disembodied, and deterritorialized virtual personas versus embodied and located biological bodies, I see virtual identities as very particular, contingent and embodied through the prosthetic technologies of computers and computer networks. Thus I would like to focus on virtual characters as alternative re-embodiments rather than disembodiments, and

virtual worlds as neo or re-territorializations rather than only translocal deterritorializations. It is for this reason that in this discussion of mudder identity, I would like to examine the symbolic content of the virtual as it is located in particular and concrete processes of technological enunciation. In other words, extensions of mudder selfhood are contingent on couplings with enabling technological prostheses, which include computers, technical proficiency and discursive practices. Through these couplings, mudder subjectivity is distributed across different technosocial worlds.

I don't want to lose sight of the power dynamics at work that enable certain empowered people to engage with these technologies as an expansion and extension of agency, but I would like to do this not be describing these moves as unconstrained freedom of motion, but rather has highly dependent on local and material conditions.

The Internet seems unique in being an interactive, social, relatively distributed system for engagine with information technology, but I am not positing the Internet as a radical break with previous media technologies. Rather, I see it as an intriguing permutation that accentuates certain tendencies in other forms of media. Thus I find suggestive the moves in mass media studies to take seriously the active and multiple contexts of reception and production, seeing fantasy texts as interactive objects that operate within heterogeous social, political, and material contexts (i.e. Appadurai 1991; Bambara 1993; Gledhill 1994; Gupta 1993; Mankekar 1993a, 1993b; Mercer 1991).

I borrow, here, from Donna Haraway's image of the cyborg that is never whole (Haraway 1991), "compounds of the organic, technical, mythic, textual and political" (Haraway 1992: 42), Alluquere Stone's "multiple personality" (Stone: 1992), or what Marilyn Strathern might call circuits of partial connections (Strathern 1991). In describing "partial connections," Strathern describes a process by which one can "travel without motion" (Strathern 1991: 55), a kind of remote presence through coupling with prosthetic devices. In muds, the fantasy text, as it is enunciated through networked machines, is the prostheses that enables travel to immersive fantasy environments, providing opportunities for extensions of selfhood to alternative virtual characters.

What I would like to do, now, is to turn to the details of the particular online worlds that I study. As I mentioned, muds are text-based virtual worlds run over the Internet. The first muds were built in the early 80s around fantasy

role playing themes reminiscent of Dungeons and Dragons, concretizing heroic fantasy stories in an interactive, social, distributed form. Currently, there are a proliferation of different types of muds with different themes and purposes, moos, muses, mushes, tinymuds, dikumuds, and lpmuds, to name a few. The muds that I study are lp[1] muds, which are "traditional" and "mainstream" muds in the sense that they are combat and role-playing game oriented, and tend to use mediaeval metaphors. These combat oriented muds would contrast to "talkers" that are primarily social, muds that cater to professional communities or educational purposes, or muds with other role-playing themes such as futuristic, or around particular fantasy or science fiction novels. There are currently hundreds of muds running worldwide with tens of thousands of users. The sorts of tropes around violence, conquest, and colonzation operating in many of these worlds, as well as in the discourse around the Internet more general, is rich material for a more explicitly critical analysis, and I would just like to point at these dimensions operating in the worlds that I study. In this brief presentation, however, what I would like to focus on are the technosocial contingencies that structure and enable character development, looking at some examples of multiple character construction.

As a player on an lpmud, what you see on your computer monitor is text that describes the environment, and other people in the environment, as well as the actions that you and others perform [Figure 1]. The who command gives you a list of other participants, and their titles [Figure 2]. You can talk to other players in private, or using public chat channels [Figure 3]. Lps usually support a variety of what are called soul commands that enable your character to express activity such as smiling, frowning, waving, pouting, blushing, etc [Figure 4].

When first creating a permanent character, you are asked to choose a character name, a gender (usually male or female), and a race (such as elf, dwarf, human etc.), and begin playing as a first level player. Your character has certain attributes and assets that improve as you accumulate more treasure and kill monsters and other players, and solve quests on the mud. By typing certain commands you can see your current attributes and possessions [Figure 5]. Gaining experience points, loot and levels, as well as social recognizability and connections, is an extremely time-consuming process, thus commitment to a

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[1]Lp are the initals of the creator of the operating system.

particular character and mud are solidified as one's character develops. While the first two or three levels might be gained in the first few days of playing, achieving the higher ranks of levels fifteen and above, out of a usual twenty to thirty or so levels, can take months of very active engagement. Sense of presence and location in the virtual world is strengthened through a progressive customization of social position and material accumulation. Higher level players construct elaborate residences, costumes, and social cliques.

Above players in the mud hierarchy are wizards, who have gained the highest levels and accomplished all the quests, and are responsible for actually building the mud environment and administering the mud [Figure 6]. Lp muds are unabashedly hierarchical. Highest level wizards are often called Gods, and as the name implies, have near absolute power to implement decisions on their muds. It is often the idiosyncratic visions of particular wizards that become coded into the mud environment as concrete, structuring resources.

When I first started playing Farside, the primary mud that I have been studying, it resided on a machine at an English university, where it had been set up by some computer science doctoral students in their free time. Since then, it has changed sites to a couple of different machines in the US. The files that contain all the information about the mud operating system, the world, and every character resides in the server unless there are backups made on other machines, or unless particular wizards are building areas on their own local machines. Muds are anathema to many universities because they take up valuable space on computers, slow down network responsiveness, and tie up terminals in computer labs. They have been banned at various universities across the country, yet they continue to proliferate.

Connectivity to the mud server is enabled by the Internet, and for the particular mud that I have been following, access is open for anyone that has telnet capabilities on the net. Technically speaking, if one has the right kind of Internet access, it is possible to have multiple connections either to the same mud or to a number of different muds open at the same time. There is generally little restriction on the number of characters that one can create or the number of muds that one can be logged on to concurrently. What is restricted, however, is the number of characters that one can run concurrently on a particular combat mud. Otherwise, a number of virtual characters connected with a particular biological body could collectively gain unfair advantage, ganging together to attack a monster or another player. Dispensable adjunct characters could die

sacrificial deaths in order to consolidate experience points and treasure in a single primary character, creating a monstrous collective organism that defies established subject boundaries. In other words, most combat muds require multiple characters of a single physically located self to be either spatially or temporally distanced from each other.

While most players abide by this rule, in the cases of occasional rule transgression, virtual bodies are difficult to discipline. The technical capability for unlimited self proliferation sits in uneasy tension with the social more of one body per person. Pakka, the sheriff of Farside, explained to me the difficulties he has had in disciplining characters on muds. "Multiple characters are extremely hard to catch. Something has to set off in your mind -- this person, these two are always on together. They call in from the same location. They always run together. You've got to notice that, and when you've got 3 or 400 characters who go on at least once every 3 or 4 months, it's real hard to notice those things." Once he does catch somebody breaking the rules, punishment is also extremely difficult to enforce.

One of the disadvantages of being a mud is I can't say, okay you're Paul who lives in X place, you can't play the game any more. I can only banish his character until he says oh, okay, and comes back with another character name a second later and starts laying into me with all kinds of language... things.... some of them are even more ingenious and will do things like log on, with a program running in the background, that tells me, to be impolite, to eat shit and die, because I have had that happen, continuously..... Eventually I'll get the command through to force that person to either quit or be banished, and then once again then character Y shows up and starts doing it, and soon as I get rid of him, Z and on through. We've had that on several occasions occur. When that happens, generally what we'll have to do is ban the entire site, which would mean everybody from that computer can no longer play. All that generally does on most systems is slow that person down, because most schools have 3-300 IP ports, and I can only banish one port at a time.

In other words, the freedom of travel enabled by computer networks makes it extremely difficult to fix a singular subject position to a particular virtual body. Even though investment of time and energy promotes identification with a particular online character, the ability to connect to unmarked newbie characters is unimpeded.

The rule on multiple synchronous characters on a single mud does not, however, limit the range of intriguing possibilities around multiple virtual identities more generally. Different muds provide different pleasures, fantasies,

capabilities, and features, and different social positions within muds provide opportunities for experiencing different social locations. Most mudders navigate a number of different muds with different virtual bodies, and distribute their subjectivity across multiple sociotechnical worlds. Some mudders have confided in me the pleasures and difficulties of gender swapping, and occasionally a story circulates about a chagrined mudder's discovery of the unexpected biological gender of a mud intimate. Wizards, who have to act as responsible administrators or coders on their home muds often create player characters on other muds to revisit the pleasures of combat and play. Or sometimes they will log onto their home mud check out the environment and social scene from the point of view of a low-level player, checking rooms and interface elements that could contain bugs. Unmarked newbie or guest characters also provide opportunities for anonymous lurking, enabling freedom from a socially recognizable virtual body.

In closing, I would like to underscore the very local material contingencies that qualify the freedom of mudder travel, with a sad epilogue to my story of Farside. In August, the machine that Farside was living in experienced a system failure, and all player files and interface elements were lost. There were no backups. Soon after, the university that Farside was residing at announced a ban on mudding. Farsidians immigrated en masse to, among other muds, Kerovnia, a mud that many Farsidians also had characters on, and Marius, the administrator of Farside, would post occasional notes on Kerovnia as to his efforts at reconstructing files, or trying to find a new site. Farsidians waited in helpless distress for some good news. I pined at the loss of my fieldsite, not to mention the character that, for me, was quite an accomplished ninth level. I created a newbie character on Kerovnia, and began conducting interviews with former Farsidians there, happy to see old friends using the same names on a mud that had many shared elements with Farside. Shedding all pretense of scientific distance, I offered Marius a site on a machine that I had access to, but unfortunately, I lacked the computational power and support systems to sustain Farside.

Just a few weeks ago, I received a letter from Marius, forwarded through many email boxes around the world, that he had tried his best, but had to conclude that all was lost for Farside. I have not yet had a chance to discuss with many fellow Farsidians about the loss, so I can only speculate as to their reactions. I do recall, however, a number of years ago, when I was a newbie on

Farside, there was a mud called Sushi that was often used as an alternate by Farsidians. Some months later, Sushi, for reasons unknown to me, was expired. There was a sudden influx of new characters on Farside with the tag "Sushiite" appended to their titles. For a few months, they comprised a highly visible enclave within the Farside social and political scene, a displaced but proud sub-community.

Perhaps Farsidians will similarly rally around an imagined community in a displaced locale, or perhaps they will quietly disperse and assimilate to other worlds, virtual or otherwise. Or perhaps they will try to reonstruct their world out of fragmentary code and collective memory. I wonder if a Farsidian can still be considered a Farsidian if their virtual body has been decimated into unreadable bits in an unfriendly hard drive? While mudders are free to couple and decouple from different virtual bodies, one body is not as good as any other.

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Figure 1: MUD Interface Environmental Text

This is the main thoroughfare in Dambarsham. Even though this is a small village, you notice some very useful shops, and of course the usual grotty touristy shops. These gifty shops by some good fortune happen to be shut, which shows how much the villagers like tourists. A big impressive looking building is south, it has the words 'Adventurers Guild' chiseled above the entrance archway, in large letters. To the north is an old, nearly dilapidated building, which you suspect is the shop, due to the sign creaking in the wind stating 'Ye Olde Shoppe'.

There are five obvious exits: west, east, south, down and north

> w

You are near the centre of the little village of Dambarsham. To the north, along Kite Row, you can hear laughter and merry-making. East the road continues into the centre of Dambarsham. A street named Wildman's Walk is south, from which you can hear a loud 'clanking' noise. You quickly come to the conclusion, that this is not a quiet little country village. The only peace is to the west, where the starts to make its way out of Dambarsham.

There are four obvious exits: west, north, south and east

> w

This small track leads to Dambarsham, it turns into a road further to the east. A green lawn can be seen in a westerly direction. You notice a NEWBIE area to the south!

There are three obvious exits: west, east and south

> s

This is a well worn bricked path leading to the south; there are many large trees that line this road, you feel as if they are watching your every move.

There are two obvious exits: north and south

Figure 2: Who Command

```
who
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
      There are 14 people currently logged onto Farside:
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
[Gm]    Eternity of a Dark League (Demonic)  <Collecting Souls...>
[Lord]  Pakka the Paladin (Very Good)  <Beanie's Husband>
[Elder] Robocop (Back with a vengence)
[Wizd]  A twisted figure of Wart frozen by time
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
      Adric the grand master sorcerer (neutral)
      Blackwood An Accomplished Spell Caster of the Magi (neutral)  <ARGH Thi>
      Justice for 3 (neutral)  <Maiden Vermont>
      A twisted figure of Guitardude frozen by time  <[censored]>
      Tenar the statue molester! (nice)  <leave me alone!>
      Psychochild the small adventurer (neutral)  <Tenar's love>
      Quanta leap (nice)
      Mimi the Humble Beginning Student of the Way of the Wind (nice)
      Lunamond the simple wanderer (neutral)  <the gentle monster>
      Oderen the utter novice (neutral)  <<Looking sad>>
         --------------------------------------------------------------------------
```

Figure 3: Example of Social Interaction

Merlin says: I have to go now - *SOB*

Ottis grins evilly.

Rina giggles.

Merlin says: now now none of that children.

Ottis throws his head back and cackles with glee!

Rina hugs Merlin.

Merlin sobs inconsolably.

Ottis says: ok grandad

Merlin hugs Rina.

Joichi says: bye merlin thanks

Ottis licks Merlin.

Rina smiles at Merlin.

Rina kicks Ottis.

Ottis hugs Rina.

Ottis grins evilly.

You say: thanks Merlin...

Merlin says: bye bye

Merlin left the game.

Figure 4: Emotive Commands

> help feelings
Soul commands (currently 209)
==========

ack	accuse	agree	ah	ankletap	apologise	
applaud	beep	beg	bite	blbl	bleed	
blink	blush	bodyslam	boggle	bop	bored	
bounce	bow	breathe	burp	cackle	caress	
cheer	chew	choke	chortle	chuckle	clap	
comfort	comp	congrat	cough	cower	cringe	
cross	cry	cuddle	curtsey	curious	dance	
daydream	die	disagree	dream	drool	duck	
duh	expect	eyes	faint	fart	flash	
flex	flip	fluster	flutter	fondle	freak	
french	frown	fume	gasp	gaze	gibber	
giggle	glare	grab	grimace	grin	groan	
grope	grovel	growl	grumble	grunt	guffaw	
headbutt	hiccup	hide	high5	hi5	hold	
homer	hop	howl	hug	hum	ignore	
insult	ising	jump	kick	kiss	knee	
kneel	lag	laugh	leak	lick	love	
massage	melvin	mgrin	moan	mock	mourn	
mumble	mutter	nack	nibble	nod	nudge	
oh	ouch	panic	pant	pat	peck	
peer	pick	piledrive	pinch	ping	point	
poke	ponder	pout	pucker	puke	punch	
purr	puzzle	raise	razz	recoil	rock	
roll	rub	ruffle	scratch	scream	shake	
shiver	shrug	shudder	sigh	simper	sing	
slap	slice	smack	smile	smirk	snap	
snarl	sneer	sneeze	snicker	sniff	snore	
snort	snuggle	sob	sorry	spank	spit	
squeeze	stare	start	steam	stifle	storm	
strangle	strut	stumble	suck	sulk	swear	
tackle	tantrum	tap	taunt	thank	hink	
threat	throw	tickle	tongue	tug	twiddle	
twirl	understand	wave	waggle	whimper	whine	
whistle	wiggle	wince	wink	wobbly	worship	
wry	yawn	yodel	yuck	help		

Use 'trs' to toggle your susceptibility to remote soul commands.
You can use 'help feelings' or 'examine soul' to see this info.

Figure 5: Score and Inventory Commands

> score
You are Mimi the lowrank ranger (nice).
You have 5276 experience points, 3405 gold coins, 74 hit points(74).
66 spell points.
Wimpy mode.
Age: 13 hours 32 minutes 52 seconds.
Dexterity: 3 Strength: 4
Constitution: 4 Intelligence: 3
Power : 4 Agility: 4
As of now you are level 3.

> i
You are carrying:
Cola bottle.
Cola bottle.
Cloak.
A Hawk (perched on shoulder).
A hawk's quicktyper.
A White Sash (worn).
The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy.
Mimi's house key.
Permanent invitation to visit Joichi's house.

Figure 6: Farside Power Hierarchy

Gods:		Merlin, Alvin		
GM's:	Eternity	Doar	Beebop	Zaph
Lord's:	Nick	Pakka	Maverick	Ford
Arch's	Morgoth	Candlemass	Cletus	Agentq
Wiz's:	Again	Batman	Basilisk	Boots
	Burble	Calico	Brynn	Morgein
	Otto	Obo	Beanie	Spiderman
	Malikto	Rosencrantz	Isageau	Vuluptua
	Rast	Manny	Ottis	Wart
	Sunder	Rina	Silvanus	Zargon
	Tiger	Zoltair	Atlas	Cataclysm
	Daimyo	Robo		

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