

Cyborg Couplings In a Multi-User Dungeon
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The popular imaginary surrounding virtual worlds has been suffused with, what Chris Gray and Mark Driscoll have called "the glandular imagination of male adolescence" (Grey and Driscoll 1992: 42) and "The Colonial Gaze" (Grey and Driscoll 1992: 42) and Alluquere Stone has described as "The Myth of the Hero" (Stone 1990: 37). In this slide, one can see classic images of colonial conquest transposed onto a horizon of digitality, resonating with the trope of the "electronic frontier." This image¹ is a promotional poster for the virtual worlds center in Walnut Creek, California, a networked combat simulator that enables one to control military mechs in virtual space. If one looks closely at this image, one sees that the red line of discovery disappears over a horizon with the words "Beyond Here, There Be Dragons," floating above it in icy blue. Rearing up above the horizon to greet our brave travelers is an ethereal dragon rimmed in stars and blue mist.

This image is of interest to me in that appears to transparently reinscribe a classic male adolescent hero story and the idea of the virtual as a mapping of the real. And yet, at the same time, the fantastic dragon leaping out over the horizon subverts the seriousness of this claim, it's real life consequentiality, by placing the image within a fictional construct. After all, it is just a game, and clearly not to be confused with violence, colonialism or sexism in real life. It is this dynamic, between the fantasy constructs in virtual worlds and their nontransparent relationships to biological bodies and "real" social structure, that I would like to explore in this paper.

¹A fictional map with a colonial boat traversing a red line through its center. Half of the map is old, yellow and faded, while the other half is black with blue lines of futuristic, digital imaging.

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. The particular kinds of muds that I study concretize the sort of hero stories commonplace in popular fantasy novels and video games as depicted in images of this sort. I will provide more detail on the actual mud interface in a moment.

The interest that I bring to muds is an amazement at the complexity of the relationship between, on one hand, the biological bodies that mudders bring to their screens and keyboards, and on the other hand, their avatars that populate the virtual world. I use the term biological body, of course, somewhat ironically, with quotes, and with reservation, to talk about what some mudders might call "flesh"; the use of the term avatar in this way was popularized in Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel, *Snow Crash*, to describe a persona as it is built online (Stephenson 1992). While certainly there is something problematic in the imagery of an animating spirit from on high inhabiting the more transient world of the flesh, in the context of virtual communities, I do like what the imagery of an avatar does in that it describes disjunctive worlds that are partially bridged through an entity that is neither here nor there, and might be linked to numerous different bodies within the material world. I also like, in this image, the partial invisibility and yet vital necessity of the "animating spirit" from the point of view of others in the material world. It is this sense of a connection that is vitally necessary, yet at times rendered invisible, that I would like to bring to my study of muds.

While I begin by querying the relation between the two kinds of bodies -- the biological and the virtual -- as commonsensically separate entities, my hope in this paper is to demonstrate the ways in which the two couple and decouple, leak, fuse, and redifferentiate -- not in simple and holistic collapses and separations, but in very partial, located and context dependent ways. In other words, to borrow Donna Haraway's imagery, I would like to look at mudders as cyborgs that are never whole (Haraway 1991), 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. The questions that I bring to this work is first, "How do we get there?" and secondly, "What is in view once we are there?"

Since what I describe is a process of negotiating the boundary between the native categories of the "real" and the "virtual," the material and the symbolic, I would like to engage in the tricky enterprise of trying to explicate these oppositions as effective cultural categories, at the same time as I demonstrate their leakages and breakage points. Muds are worlds that are profoundly material, and yet commensensically symbolic. Within the context of these worlds, mudders ironically play on the meanings of "real life," versus "just a game" and somewhere in between, the "real" becomes a contested domain. Here I would like to attempt to locate consequentiality, or what one might call the visible and salient relationships, in these complex folds of what counts as the real, the connections that matter, addressing Joan Fujimura's question of "Where do We Stand?" (Fujimura 1991) and a play on both Lucy Suchman's sense of located accountability (Suchman 1994) and Haraway's notion of situated knowledges (Haraway 1986). I would like to look at connectivity not only as mudders are located and embedded in complex networks of power, meaning and materiality, but also with a recognition of the work that goes into authorizing or seeing particular connections over others. While connectivity may be limitless, vision, and experience, is not.

Before I go any further with this discussion, however, I'd like to present a brief picture of muds, and the particular muds 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. 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 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.

[figure 2]

As a player on an lpmud, what you see is text that describes the environment, and other people in the environment, as well as the actions that you and others perform. Your avatar has certain attributes and assets that improve as one accumulates more treasure and kills monsters and other players, and solves quests on the mud.

[figure 3]

By typing certain commands you can see your current attributes and possessions.

[figure 4]

The who command gives you a list of other participants, and their titles. One can talk to other players in private, or using public chat channels.

[figure 5]

Lps usually support a variety of what are called soul commands that enable your avatar to express activity such as smiling, frowning, waving, pouting, blushing, etc.

The point of the game is to gain experience points and treasure by killing monsters and looting corpses. There are also quests to solve, that also guide you up the mud hierarchy.

[figure 6]

Above players 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. 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.

Within the context of the virtual world, well-articulated virtual bodies, social structures and environments come into being through the wizards that

design the material resources, and the players that construct their own characters and social lives. Thus it differs from other remote presence technologies such as telephone, or Internet Relay chat, because there is substantial embodiment within the virtual world. It also differs from fantasy environments depicted in literature, TV, film, or video games in that it is a social environment with real time, ftf interaction.

Thus within the context of a mud, particular kinds of activity are enabled and disabled because of different kinds of possibilities arising from the system's configuration -- what might be called alternative virtual embodiment, or what Stone has called optional embodiment (Stone 1992). Certain social configurations and fantasy constructs are concretized through the medium of the mud, with particular consequences both within the mud context, and with particular connections with what mudders call "real life."

Mudders use the category of "real life" to refer to existence that is not computationally contingent. In other words, as mudder Howard Hsieh defines it in his mudder dictionary, real life is "the stuff that interrupts your mudding" (hhsieh 9.18.94). The statement, "It's just a game," followed by the injunction, "Get a life," is a claim made occasionally by mudders in order to chastise somebody that is overly invested in mudding, or to diffuse the wrath of a colleague that finds their mud activity reprehensible. And yet while these categories of "real life" versus "the game" are ubiquitous oppositional categories within mudder conversation, what counts as the real is hotly contested. Here I use the term "real life" as a native category that only partially describes the slippery terrain of the real.

Immersion in the mud context, whether for purely social or gaming purposes, always requires a partial bracketing of "real life," a stilling of most motion of the physical body, and a turning of attention to the text on the screen. And while all mudders that I have spoken to point to this sensation of immersion or bracketing, often in intense sessions that last many hours at a time, the degree to which and the ways in which the virtual world is considered a reality that matters, that has consequentiality in their real lives, is widely divergent. For example, Sherry Turkle, in her work on identity construction in muds, describes the ways in which mudders use muds as spaces in which to work through problems they are having in their real lives, with significant and diverse results (Turkle 1994).

The flavor of the controversy surrounding the reality or real life consequences of muds is captured in the following statement in the document of MUD faqs written by Jennifer Smith, published periodically in the newsgroup rec.games.mud.misc. Question 13 reads:

Is MUDding a game, or an extension of real life with gamelike qualities?

It's up to you. Some jaded cynics like to laugh at idealists who think it's partially for real, but we personally think they're not playing it right. Certainly the hack-'n-slash stuff is only a game, but the social aspects may well be less so (Smith 6.1.94).

So while a vague sentiment exists among mudders that there are certainly elements of muds that are fantastic, silly, trivial, and just for fun, other aspects, most notably the social, have a reality to them that is not easily denied. The precise nature of this reality, the specific consequences of mud activity for "real life" is always up for grabs.

Here I would like to look at the specific case of mudmarriage and mudsex as a vehicle to explore some of the ways in which my mud colleagues navigate the linkages between muds and real life, the ways in which certain connections are made partially visible or invisible through their couplings and decouplings with the virtual world.

Different muds institutionalize marriage in different ways, but in the lps that I study, overall, predictable norms of monogamous heterosexuality are reproduced, albeit playfully. There is generally a chapel, with a priest, a marriage of a heterosexual couple, with various props such as rings, wedding dresses, and bouquets. Couples might subsequently pool bank accounts, talk on a special private channel enabled by their wedding rings, and sometimes even adopt other players as their children. It is rare to have things such as sex and pregnancy coded into the mud system, but one of the muds that I play did have a simple, but bizarre concretization of sexuality. To be sexually active, one must first purchase genitalia, after which it will note in your character description that you are sexually mature. A simple command will enable you to have sex with another character of the opposite gender, providing that they too are sexually mature, and frequent sexual acts may eventually lead to pregnancy

of the female character. After a period of time, she will have a child, who is described, by the system, as a slave that follows the mother around. The slave, a simple AI, has character attributes such as strength, and dexterity, equal to that of the mother.

These gaming components of marriage and kinship are relatively simple, and are used by mudders as resources to structure social interaction. While it is possible to "read" this text, this concretization of social relations in virtual environments, as simple reinscriptions of hegemonic notions of gender, kinship, and sexuality, to end there would miss the peculiarities of mud materiality, placing muds as a commentary on or reflection of real life, rather than as an alternative space with radically different material conditions and consequentiality. To read a mud as a text about real life would be to ignore the travel that takes place through the prostheses of networking technologies and the profoundly embodied nature of experience in virtual worlds. One is not "in" real life reading the mud, one is, as Stone might say, elsewhere (Stone 1991). The elements that I have described are merely the structural elements of the gaming system -- the reality, so to speak, of mudsex and mudmarriage is a bit more complex.

In describing a particular case, I will be focusing on a woman's experience on muds, as a deliberate attempt to subvert some of the dominant, more masculinist themes in muds. My hope is that this will not be read as an erasure of male-dominated realities in muds, but rather as a presentation of an alternative reading.

My partner in real life often eyes me suspiciously as I sit in front of my terminal -- "You're not mudmarried are you?" "Are you having netsex?" We both laugh, and yet I scrupulously avoid mud romance because of a sort of uncomfortable guilty twinge; clearly a result of his only partially serious questions. My bracketing of the two worlds is clearly incomplete.

By contrast, one of my mud friends, despite protestations from her jealous real life mate, is married to a number of different mudders on different muds. Though her real life mate is also a mudder, Tenar, or Melissa in real life, refuses to mudmarry him, or even to have netsex with him. She is a powerful and well-liked figure on a number of different muds, and no doubt has little trouble in maintaining numerous romantic net liasons. She describes netsex as akin to an interactive romance novel. The metaphor is crucial. The fantasy "text" is paramount, the real bodies nonexistent. She explains: "It is how you describe

yourself and how you act (on the net) that makes up the 'real you'.... real life persons looks mean so little to me.." She explains to me, additionally, that the real life gender of her mudspouse would be of little concern to her. See," she explains to me, patient, "to me there is no real body."

What is at stake here is not the immediacy or reality, if you will, of experience on a mud. Both my friend and I are equally embedded within the mud environment; we are both effective travelers. What is at stake, rather, is the visibility of certain relationships from our respective points of view. For her, the appeal of the virtual world lies in the relative invisibility of real life consequences and relationships. "Too much reality in virtual reality kills it all."

And yet her navigation of these disjunctive worlds is nimble. She describes herself as constructing an online description of herself that recalls her svelte eighteen year old body. And she tells me, with disarming honesty, how "I don't bring Melissa into the game, but I bring Tenar back with me." In other words, Melissa is invisible from the point of view of Tenar, but Melissa sees Tenar as a more positive self image that animates her real life.

I left our conversation baffled at my inability to experience immersion in the virtual as freedom from real life. While I could speculate as to the real life contingencies that enable and disable our respective visions, this seems less crucial than the recognition of the difference of our points of view, the clear case of reality as a question, and definitely not a fact. And while I don't want to attribute too much agency to our respectively different interpretive visions, I did leave this encounter with a sense that we were each authorizing our own vistas.

Clearly there is danger in selective vision. Critical theorists have repeatedly revealed previously invisible structures of oppression and opportunistic erasures of agency. And in many ways, prosthetic technologies can amplify the ways in which we magnify, as well as limit our vision. As Julian Bleecker has suggested, virtual worlds often reproduce a sort of "absent mindedness" toward distasteful social inequities (Bleecker 1994). And yet, I think this particular boundary crossing just might be a hopeful one, with possibilities for creative bodily reconfiguration, or what Haraway points to as "materialized refiguration" (Haraway 1994). So while issues of access and masculinist origins of virtual worlds need to be foregrounded, one might point to the nimbleness of mudder travel, and the creative and empowering partiality of vision, for hints in navigating the dangerous waters of difference and multiplicity in the disjunctive spaces of the so called virtual and the real.

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Figure 2: 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 3: 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 4: 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 vengeance)

[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 5: Emotive Commands

> help feelings

Soul commands (currently 209)

=====

ack	accuse	agree	ah	ankletap	apologise
applaud	beep	beg	bite	blbl	bleed
blink	blush	bodyslam	bogglebop	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
grobe	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	pile	drive	pinch	ping
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 6: Farside Power Hierarchy



As of March 2, 1993