

## CHAPTER 8

## TINYSEX AND GENDER TROUBLE

The United States copyright law (Title 17 of the US Code) governs the making of copies of copyrighted material. A person making a copy in violation of the law is liable for any copyright infringement. Copying includes electronic distribution of the reserve materials by the user. The user should assume that any works in the reserve items are copyrighted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### GENDER TROUBLE<sup>4</sup>

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

hard" to pass in a room on a commercial network service that was advertised as a meeting place for gay men.

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

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

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

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

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

Can a person exist w/out a gender?

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

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

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

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

#### ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

if it was true that people would be nasty and kill me on sight and other stuff I'd heard about on *r.g.m.* [an abbreviation of *rec.games.mud*]. But, no, everyone was helpful (I was truly clueless and needed the assistance); someone gave me enough money to buy a weapon and armor and someone else showed me where the easy-to-kill newbie [a new player] monsters were. They definitely went out of their way to be nice to a male-presenting newbie. . . . (These were all male-presenting players, btw [by the way].)

One theory is that my male character [named Argyle and described as "a short squat fellow who is looking for his socks"] was pretty innocuous. Maybe people are only nasty if you are "a broad-shouldered perfect specimen of a man" or something of that nature, which can be taken as vaguely attacking.

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

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

## VIRTUAL SEX

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

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



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

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

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

Look, I've got to say the thing that bothers me most is that he wants to do it in the first place. In some ways, I'd have an easier time understanding why he would want to have an affair in real life. At least there, I could say to myself, "Well, it is for someone with a better body, or just for the novelty." It's like the first kiss is always the best kiss. But in MUDding, he is saying that he wants that feeling of intimacy with someone else, the "just talk" part of an encounter with a woman, and to me that comes closer to what is most important about sex.

First I told him he couldn't do it anymore. Then, I panicked and figured that he might do it anyway, because unlike in real life I could never find out. All these thousands of people all over the world with their stupid fake names... no way I would ever find out. So, I pulled back and said that talking about it was strictly off limits. But now I don't know if that was the right decision. I feel paranoid whenever he is on the computer. I can't get it off my mind, that he is cheating, and he probably is tabulating data for his thesis. It must be clear that this sex thing has really hurt our marriage.

This distressed wife struggles to decide whether her husband is unfaithful when his persona collaborates on writing real-time erotica with

another persona in cyberspace. And beyond this, should it make a difference if unbeknownst to the husband his cyberspace mistress turns out to be a nineteen-year-old male college freshman? What if "she" is an infirm eighty-year-old man in a nursing home? And even more disturbing, what if she is a twelve-year-old girl? Or a twelve-year-old boy?

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

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

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

It's not the infidelity. It's the gnawing feeling that my girlfriend—I mean, I was thinking of marrying her—is a dyke. I know that everyone is bisexual, I know, I know... but that is one of those things that I knew but it never had anything to do with me... It was just intellectual.

What I hate about the rooms on America Online is that it makes it so easy for this sort of thing to become real. Well, in the sense that the rooms are real. I mean, the rooms, real or not, make it too easy for people to explore these things. If she explored it in real life, well, it would be hard on me, but it would have been hard for her. If she really wanted to do it, she would do it, but it would have meant her going out and doing it. It seems like more of a statement. And if she had really done it, I would know what to make of it. Now, I hate her for what she does online, but I don't know if I'm being crazy to break up with her about something that, after all, is only words.

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

who  
is  
sex?



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

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

### CHILDREN AND NETSEX

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### DECEPTION

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

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

In most versions of the story, Joan's handicap plays an important role. Not only did it provide her with an alibi for restricting her contacts to online communication, but it gave focus to her way of helping other people. Joan's fighting spirit and ability to surmount her handicaps served as an inspiration. She was married to a policeman and their rela-

tionship gave other disabled women hope that they, too, could be loved. Despite her handicaps, Joan was lusty, funny, a woman of appetites.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In a MUD, or chat room, or on IRC, it might be OK to have different flings with other people hiding behind other handles. But this man was coming on to these women as though he was interested in them really—I mean he said he was falling in love with them, with the real women. And he even did

meet—and dump—some. Do you see the difference, from the beginning he didn't respect that online is its own place.

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

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

### BEING DIGITAL

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

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

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

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

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