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Pleasures of the Player:

Flow and Control in Online Games

Doctoral thesis

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Foreword on names, play and public domains

In the following pages I have several interviews with players, builders and creators of MUDs and games, logs from playing, references to play situations and to conversations and interviews with the players. I have, as far as possible, changed the names of the participants. There are a few names I have not changed. One is the name of the one interviewee who develops computer games professionally, at the time he worked for Sierra Online. The others are the nicknames of immortal characters, administrators and implementers, or their full names in the cases when they have announced these on the title-page of the MUD or in web-pages where they make their names known as players or creators. In these cases I have found it correct to acknowledge their right to be known as the owners of their intellectual property, and I have used the names under which they built and administrated. In the cases where the administrators acted as normal players, I have changed their names, and I have also changed the real names of those administrators I interviewed who did not use their real name in conjunction with their administrative work. I hope this will protect those who might not wish to be identified from their player past, while the people who invested much time and creativity in creating environments for the pleasure of others can have some reward through having their names or their nicknames mentioned here.

In this work I refer to characters whose players might not have been aware that their interactions with my character were logged in order to be used in research at a later date. I hope that the name-changes will protect these players. When that is said: I consider a MUD a public domain, and the players were routinely alerted by the administrators and other players that they had to consider everything they said in the MUD environment to be public, and that they should be careful with what information they gave out. This included information given in 'private' areas.

I have included the interviews with the players as attachments, but I have not included the logs of the game other than as short illustrations in the main body of this work, in some of the 'interludes'. One of the most complicated tasks as I was finishing this work was choosing and then editing the logs from the role-play. The many different situations were loaded with memories of wonderful experiences, but they were not really exiting reading for the uninvolved. I hope the selection I made at least illustrates the play.

Chapter 1: Playing Games: Consumption or Creation?

Perched on the brink of becoming immersed in a new game, the confusion and insecurity is greater than that which I experience with other media, such as when I slide a video into the slot of the VCR or put on a CD. It is more reminiscent of the first time I did these things: when I had to figure out each move and find the right buttons to push before I could see the film or listen to the music. After connecting the VCR to the television, I had to find out how to put a video-cassette into the player and learn to interpret the symbols on the buttons, only to discover that a video almost never started immediately. The picture required adjustment, but first I had to learn how. In other words, playing my first video was a nuisance!

With computer games I go through a similar process every time I want to play. Even when I return to game-platforms where the interface is familiar, I expect to find that the administrators have altered how the game works; improving it, perhaps, but rendering it subtly unfamiliar. The feeling of insecurity increases with the complexity of the games, and climaxes when I play online multi-user games. In online games, one has the added pressure and unpredictability of playing with, or at least in the same online area, as other people – rather than ever-patient programmed figures. Even when I play offline single-user sequels of previously played games, the game may start at a new point in the process. In *Relentless: Twinsen's Adventure* (LBA I) (Adeline Software International 1995), the game started with the main character breaking out of prison. *Twinsen's Odyssey*, *Little Big Adventure II* (LBA II) (Adeline Software International 1997) began with the main character safely at home with the girl he won in *LBA I*. Still, I insist on playing games, attempting repeatedly to enter and make progress in a game-world, whether this involves playing 10 minutes of mine-sweeper or spending two years on a role-playing game.

Fascination with computer games and the will to pursue them has caused online games to grow into one of the few net-businesses which has escaped the recession experienced by most of the ICT industry following the millennium shift. Online graphic 3D games are a rapidly expanding niche, and they are technically much more sophisticated than the text-based multi-user games which preceded them: the MUDs

Homo Ludens, Johan Huizinga's work from 1950, should prepare us for the immense popularity of computer games. Games, according to him, are a force older and more basic than human civilisation: "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing (1950:1)." Play is used for many purposes: to allow children to anticipate the adult world, to build a sense of unity in a group, or as a ritualised method of dissipating aggression. Roger Caillois (1979:4) points out that Huizinga's work is not "a study of games, but an inquiry into the creative quality of the play principle in the domain of culture." Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) takes the comments upon the study of games a step further in his paragraph on the Diversity of Play Scholarship:

Although most people throughout history have taken for granted their own play, and in some places have not even had a word for it, since about 1800 in Western society, intellectuals of various kinds have talked more or less systematically and more or less scientifically about play, and have discovered that they have immense problems in conceptualizing it. Presumably this is in part because there are multiple kinds of play and multiple kinds of players, as described above. Different academic disciplines also have quite different play interests. Some study the body, some study behavior, some study thinking, some study groups or individuals, some study experience, some study language – and they all use the word *play* for these quite different things (1997:6).

Brian Sutton-Smith describes in this passage one of the diverse traditions of scholarship in relation to which this study is positioned – the study of games and play. Of the types mentioned in the above quote, my work is most heavily dependent upon thinking and language, with touches of behaviour and experience. But since the object of my study is computer games, I am adding technology to this mix, to study how the information and communication technology influences and accommodates games, and how the games take advantage of the technology.

If we view the World Wide Web as the new territory to be explored and conquered, new games are part of the expansion of human consciousness and human control. Computer games are unavoidable and ubiquitous, as is the commercial exploitation of our need to play. We need technology in order to access the web, and computer games are a major component of the toy market. Even the types of games are repeated, and we will see how easily the categories of Roger Caillois (1979:14-26) can be adjusted to accommodate the electronic age. But just as it is possible to play football in a dusty street with a ball made of rags, rather than with an exclusive, hand-sewn ball on an expensive artificial lawn, one may still find online games which are not dependent upon heavy graphics, broadband connections and the fastest processors. The games I have studied in this project are the street-and-rag ball versions of online computer games, intended for those with low bandwidth, slow processors and analogue phone-lines. These predate *Ultima Online*, the first of the graphic multiplayer online role-playing games, and can be said to be the fathers of *Everquest* and *Anarchy Online*; the MUDs.

The Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) have developed into a major business since 1998, when I started this work. Not only have the games developed into big business; as I write this four years later commercial interests have become involved in ways that were only rumoured in 1999, when I began interviewing players. Today the characters and objects of the games have developed into an independent market (Castronova 2001). I will not directly address the most recent and very interesting developments, but will remain with the now less-popular and almost arcane text-based games. *Anarchy Online* and *Dragon Realms* have much in common, despite the eye-candy which sets them apart. They are both social and fantastic quest-environments: constructions not of stories, but of the potential for stories to develop. They are fictitious environments, simulations of worlds existing nowhere but in fiction, both created from the same segment of popular culture, to accommodate the same target groups, with roughly the same game-elements. For the user and producer both, the aspect that really changes the dynamic is not dependent on the game, or even on the technology, but certainly on the players: the difference between having a large

player base for a MUD: hundreds of players, and a massive player base: one counted in tens or hundreds of thousands.

In this work I will describe the fascination of online multi-user computer games, how they are played and what is considered a good game. I will attempt to define a framework of game aesthetics. This has developed into a study of the aesthetics and functionality of online, text-based multi-user games, rather than of the players and their mutual relationships in the online culture. Nevertheless, some of my methods and theoretical approaches are directed towards the players and draw heavily upon culture-sociology and ethnography.

Games are an arena for learning how to function in a society. By looking seriously, and hopefully without prejudice or fear, at the computer games, we might learn something of value about, not what the future will hold, but what skills future generations will be encouraged to develop. My father could throw a stone with the precision necessary to kill a bird in flight. I can set a table and invite all my dolls for tea. My son calculates attack angles and the need for defence, protecting and caring for his population, his fingers dancing over the keyboard with a speed and precision to match that stone thrown in another millennium. Our play is just play – but it also heralds the skills of future adults.

Textual environments and fascination

The intellectual problem identified at the outset was: *How would a textual environment in which the texts were continuously created by several users of the same environment differ from the idea of a constant cognitive or inner activity in which a text is recreated by each single user as it is read?* Several other questions arise from the nature of these environments: Would they be social, as well as intellectual and imaginary meeting-places? Would the creation of characters and an imaginary environment have any function beyond entertainment? Would these be places of escape or development? I treat these questions as pertinent to the main one about the relationship between a dynamic environment built for *ergodic* activity and a static environment built for reading; that is, between a game and a book (as the most writing-dependent of the linear media).

The textual environment of my choice is a computer game, and I associate the question of the relationship between the user and the game with the fascination with games: *Why are computer games so attractive that they can cause people to commit all their spare time and resources to playing?* Since there are a rapidly growing number of game-types and at least as many individual reasons for playing the different types of games, the answer would be pointless generalisation, and so I narrow the area of search down by defining genre (text-based play-MUDs), object (*Dragon Realms*) and methodology (participant observation, active observation, textual analysis and qualitative interviews).

Firstly, in order to start work on the study, I need to decide which computer games I will discuss, from the wide range available. These range from board games coded into computer formats, where a single player plays against the machine, to graphic, online, multiplayer, mixed role-playing games and hack'n'slash games.¹

¹ Hack'n'slash means conquering mobs ("mobile units": representations of monsters, people or animals which were not played by other players) in the game through fight-imitation. The reward for this behaviour is experience points and levels.

I use the concept “role-playing” in the manner used by the players I interview and play with: as an interaction between the players through their characters, where the players use the technology to act the parts of the characters they have created. This should not be confused with the related meanings, such as the sociological term used by Ervin Goffman (1959) or role-playing as it is popularly understood in games where hack’n’slash, gaining levels and testing the “strength” of the character is the main and often sole objective of playing. Role-playing as I use it here is a carnevalesque interaction within the limits of the fictitious universe of the game, in order to maintain an overlapping and partly shared fantasy. Hack’n’slash can be included in this fantasy, but it’s not required.

My choice at the time I started this study was a role-playing MUD (Multi User Dungeon) game, a text-based, online, multi-user role-playing game. Time and place was significant in the choice of subject. The speed with which computer games are modified has turned a four-year research project into a documentation of history being made. In 1996 Andrew and Christopher Kirmse released *Meridian 59* and in 1997 Richard Garriott and Origin released *Ultima Online*, two important events in the development of the 3D graphic online worlds and the subsequent MMORPGs. This has changed the nature and structure of online games since 1998, a change which occurred after I had made my commitment to the choice of games for this study.

Secondly, I had to decide which game in the genre of my choice I wished to study. I chose *Dragon Realms*, which at the time was an active, established, role-playing MUD. This choice was due to the wide geographic spread of the player base, which ensured activity at all times and from all timezones, the dedication of the administrators and the players, which made it easy to do long-term research where in-play situations and character development could be studied regularly. My choice was also influenced by the stimulating fiction which gave the players structure, rules and a challenging arena for their varied types of play.

Thirdly, I had to decide which aspect of that game I would emphasise: the appearance, the code-base, the players’ options, the style of playing or perhaps the fiction the game-play took place within. My choice was to emphasise the style of playing, the fiction, the player interaction and the players’ relationship to the game and to playing.

Fourthly, after isolating the subject of study, what would be the method of study - how would I search for the answers to my questions? I needed to make a choice of method and theory; and with each new step, the original question was altered.

Important words and how they are used here

MUD is derived from the expression Multi User Dungeon². This acronym was made by the creators of the first MUD, Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw. Bartle explains the origins of the acronym:

I am WELL aware what “MUD” stands for, and maybe once every two months have to tell someone. The “D” does stand for “Dungeon”, but not because the original MUD (which

² MUDs are also frequently known as Multiple User Dungeons, and in Richard Bartle’s “MUD FAQ part 1” (1999), both Multiple and Multi is used for the first part of the acronym.

I co-wrote) had a dungeon in it; rather it was because there was a hacked-p version of Zork going the rounds at the time, which bore the name “Dungeon”. We thought that this program would act as the archetype for single-player adventure games, so we called our game “Multi-user Dungeon” in an effort to convey some feeling of what the program did. As it happened, the genre was promptly called “Adventure games” after the Colossal Caves game “Adventure”, so we were wrong in that aspect. By then, though, we had our acronym. (Bartle 1999)

Some have attempted to exchange the word Dungeon for Domain or Dimension, in order to make the phrase sound more dignified. However, since I am speaking of role-playing games, where I see nothing wrong with a good dungeon, I prefer to keep this original definition of the acronym MUD. There are different types of MUDs, such as TinyMUDs, MOOs, MUSHes and MUCKs. Each describes a multi-user dungeon, but with a different focus. MOO, for instance, means Multi User Dungeon, Object-Oriented. When I speak of MUDs, I generally mean play-MUDs (basically LPMUD and DIKUMUD), or MUDs that have not been modified so that they could be classified as a TinyMUD, MOO, MUSH or MUCK.

Avatar, handle, character, player character or PC (as opposed to NPC - non-player character) is how the person at the keyboard refer to his, or her, representation on the different sites where communication takes place. These differ from the different personae, which is the term both Alluquère Roseanne Stone (1996) and Sherry Turkle (1995) chose to use. The term ‘Personae’ is based upon the Latin *per sonae* (Turkle 1995:182) and includes, among other things, a person’s emotions, knowledge and skills. An avatar, is the result of the code of the game or site, and the way this code is utilised, rather than the personality of the player. However, while an avatar at the moment of creation is nothing but a combination of attributes and skills, the player may invest time, emotion and creativity into developing an avatar into a character and perhaps even into something resembling a person, or even acting as the representation of a personae.

Richard Bartle distinguishes quite clearly between these different levels of immersion in the representative for the player in a MUD:

First, we have *players*. Players are real-world people who are sitting at a computer connected to some virtual world (usually a game, hence the term “player”).

An *avatar* is a player’s representative in a world. It’s really just a puppet. It does as it’s told, it reports what happens to it, and it acts as a general conduit for the player and the world to interact. It may or may not have some graphical representation, it may or may not have a name. It refers to itself as a separate entity and communicates with the player as such: “I can’t open the door”. It’s a mere convenience, a tool.

Contrast this with a *character*. A character is a player’s representation in a world. It’s a whole level of immersion deeper. Your character is an extension of yourself, a personality that you don when entering the world. The game reports things that happen to the character as if they were happening to you: “you can’t open the door”. You can feel quite upset if one of your characters dies. “Aw no, they killed Huey! Poor little guy...”.

Many of the people who write about avatars actually mean characters, but they don't understand there's a difference. Avatars are dolls, characters are simulacra. Neither avatars nor characters, though, are people. Neither are anything to do with what makes online worlds so completely absorbing. There's a level of immersion beyond that of the character: the *persona*.

A persona is a player, in a world. Any separate distinction of character has gone - the player *is* the character. You're not role-playing a being, you *are* that being; you're not assuming an identity, you *are* that identity. If you lose a fight, you don't feel that your character has died, you feel that *you* have died. There's no level of indirection: *you are there*. (Bartle 2001)

Avatars and characters can be exchanged or sold, despite the drawbacks which might result from buying a character rather than developing it yourself (Castronova 2001:32). For special occasions in role-play games, it also happens that PCs are designed to fulfil particular roles, so that a player may be assigned a ready-made character with skills and abilities normally acquired over a long period of playing. Even if these PCs come with complete backgrounds, fitting into the events of the game with assumed social position, wealth, and all the outwards signs of being an individual, they are still not characters until the player has made them an extension of his/her self, and they will require a lot more from the player in order to become a persona(e). The persona cannot change hands as it does not reside in the code, but in the player's mind; and it gains life through the player's knowledge and experience.

This fact is recognised by some of the role-play MUDs, and explains why there are very often rules against allowing others to play your character. In *Dragon Realms*, these rules are legitimised by the need to know the social image of one's character. You cannot play a character well in a role-playing game if you have lost touch with its social arena (Levi, *DR* 1998). According to Castronova's estimate of the value of an Avatar measured in time invested in its creation (2001:32), this is the reason for the relatively low price of avatars in Everquest: one buys the social standing of the avatar as well as its skills and abilities, and one does so blindly. In *DR*, each character had to relate to a complex structure of clans locked in conflict, a version of the traditional, but always fresh battle of good and evil. All acts committed while in character (IC) became part of the reality of the world. Who the player let his character speak with, what player-controlled characters the character interacted with, and all interactions with non-player characters³ became a part of how the character was perceived, reacted to and related to. One's knowledge of the character's personal relationships became part of the personae. This knowledge about the character's place in society, their activities, background and the ways in which they rationalised their actions represent a type of knowledge which cannot be sold.

Immortals are the administrators of the MUDs. They are also called wizards or simply administrators. In some online computer games it is possible to gain the rank of wizard or immortal by gaining skills and reaching levels. In the role-playing games I have explored,

³ Occasionally an immortal would inhabit an NPC and play the "role" of this character, in which case play with NPCs would go beyond triggering programmed responses.

the instigators have handpicked the immortals, and new immortals are added only through consensus between the existing immortals or IMMs. Sometimes there is confusion around the IMM concept. The immortals perform many OOC tasks, such as maintaining the game, troubleshooting, building and coding, but in some games the immortal characters also have IC roles, where they act as deities or entities with godlike powers.

Virtual Community is a popular way of describing the fellowship experienced by the groups which meet in MUDs, MOOs, chat-groups or other sites. To deserve the title “community”, they must have regular users who go beyond simply exchanging messages with random participants, to the point where they expect to meet and share information, chat and spend time with a steady group of personae. Howard Rheingold describes the kind of electronic meeting spaces I am referring to in his book *Virtual Community* (1993/1999), in a very personal report of *the WELL*, “Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link”. *The WELL* is an “online gathering place”, as they coin themselves, which has existed since 1985. It can be reached at <http://www.well.com/>, and is still a lively site for electronic communication as I write this.

I will try, however, to avoid the term **virtual** about the online communities, since a community is not made “virtual” by the lack of geographic presence. This can be attested by several groups, which have formed communities regardless of distance and space, such as religions, idealistic or political groups; interest groups such as the Freemasons and not least Academia. The sites where people meet regularly, relate to one another, share friendliness as well as aggression, get to know each other and depend on each other, are simply communities, in a very real and non-virtual sense, and they are independent of geography. If they must be distinguished from other communities, one might follow the naming traditions of the “flesh” (physical) world, and refer to the communities by their site, that is, by the name of the MUD, a URL, or the address of a mailing-list or IRC-channel.

Cyberspace, as coined by William Gibson in 1982 in his short story “Burning Chrome”⁴ (Gibson 1986), is a popular and almost mythic word. It refers to the sense of an actual place which can only be reached by way of the internet, and as such, is descriptive of the way many online gathering places or digital spaces are structured in relation to our physical means of navigation. The metaphors used to navigate in MUDs and MOOs are very often directions, such as ‘north’ or ‘south’, ‘up’ or ‘down’, ‘in’ or ‘out’, ‘enter <whatever>’, or ‘goto <wherever>’. This makes the reference to a ‘space’ somewhere beyond the physical location quite tantalising, and creates a powerful tool for visualizing the online arenas where people meet.

The term Cyberspace does, however, also carry layers of loaded meanings from novels and short stories. To avoid the many layers of meaning that myth and romance have associated with this word, I will frequently use the term “digital place” or the *WELL*’s own term for itself, “online gathering place”. Both relate to the metaphor of a constructed landscape, accessed with the aid of computers. The idea of “places” is a popular way to relate to the different sites you open up to access the information stored there. This concept of

⁴ “Burning Chrome” was nominated for best Novelette for the Nebula Award in 1982. That year it was printed in the *First Omni Book of Science Fiction*, edited by Ellen Datlow. I refer to the 1986 edition of *Mirrorshades* edited by Bruce Sterling.

moving through a landscape forms a background for several terms which have become common in accessing and searching for files containing information: “surfing”, “visiting rooms” or “sites”, “going to” and “leaving”. The geographic metaphors also give meaning to other rhetorical images turned cliché, such as “the information super-highway”. When entering MUDs, they are often built to be traversed through “going” in “directions”. This supports the mental image of moving through space; a space made not of dirt and clay as is the “flesh world” (Ricardo 1998), but of electronic signals and imagination. The concept of geography, place and space online is too complex to be cut short and abandoned here. To explore this further I will return to this discussion in chapter 10.

Levels occur in game-oriented MUDs as an attribute of the character or avatar, and as a goal for the player. They normally range from 1, or the easiest level, to a higher number, often nice, round numbers like 50, 100 or 150; and are achieved by gathering various kinds of points, often known as XP (experience points). How does one gain points? As a rule, by ‘killing’ things; beginning with ‘killing slugs’, and ending up with ‘killing’ Dragons or other players’ characters.

Hack’n’slash is an activity closely connected to gaining levels, or “levelling”. It’s the word for the killing of the monsters that give the experience in order to gain levels. It’s also used to describe a playing style that is aimed at gaining points and conquering opponents: either playing against the game by conquering non-playing characters, NPCs, or playing against other players: Player Killing, or PK.⁵

Role-playing is a way to use the different communication channels in the game in order to create an illusion of movement, speech and atmosphere in order to maintain the pretense of communicating as the characters and not the players. This is how the personality of the character is developed and maintained.

Narrowing the search: Which games?

The development of computer games in all forms has been more daunting than the Loral Company could possibly have imagined in 1949, when they gave engineer Ralph Baer the task of building the best television set in the world. To make it special, he proposed that they add a simple game to it; a tennis-type of game; but Loral did not like the idea, and lost the opportunity to patent the first video game (Herman et.al. 1995-2001). The next engineer reported to have neglected to patent a tennis-like game was William Higinbotham. In 1958, he created a game called *Tennis for Two* while working at Brookhaven National Laboratory; a nuclear research lab in the US. Using technology developed to track the trajectories of bombs, he built the first version of pong together with technical specialist Robert V. Dvorak (Pong-story) (Player1, Stage 1). The multi-player game SpaceWar was developed by Steve Russell in 1962 for the PDP-1 at MIT (Stern 2002), and “was a two-player game of dueling spaceships firing photon torpedoes against a field of electronic stars.” (Herz 1997).

⁵ In later multi-user games where the competition between players takes other shapes than battle, for instance “capture the flag” they also use the term PvP – Player versus Player. This is not the same as PK, and derives from a different gameplay.

From this point on, the complexity, graphics and the number of player options of the games have constantly expanded, to a point where they seem to have little in common with the first electronic computer games. The Net generated entirely new opportunities. A major genre of computer games opened with text-based games. These were the Adventure games. Perhaps the most influential adventure game was *Adventure*, built by William Crowther⁶ and Don Woods in 1976 (Aarseth 1997:99, Adams 2002). It was developed as series of text-based dungeons and labyrinths. *Adventure* featured text and made the players navigate the described caves or dungeon through words, rather than through pointing arrows. *Adventure* was accessible to download online, was installed at local computers or in local networks, and could be played by one player at the time (Adams 2002).

Inspired by single-player games featuring problemsolving, exploration and action *Zork*, *Adventure* and the dice-and-map based role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle created the first MUD in 1980 (Aarseth 1997:13). A text-based game, it was designed to entertain more than one user at the time, and was accessible through dial-up modem connections. Twenty years later it is still possible to play on MUDs with the original design, using telnet to log on to a world of written adventure. The code-base of the original MUD (also known as MUD1) is used in the game *British Legends*, which can still be reached and played by way of <http://www.british-legends.com/>, according to Viktor T. Toth, author of the *British Legends* homepage and wizard in the game.

The table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons*, originally developed by E. Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren and first published by Tactical Studies Rules in 1974 (Sones 2001) provided the roll of the dice: the system for how to make the game decisions which MUDs leave to the game platform rather than to the game-master. MUDs permitted social interaction: real time interactions between people, rather than simply reactions from programs. This opened for the social playing with identities and roles, which could be added to the game, and role-playing MUDs were born. Richard Bartle reports on the first instance of MUD cross-dressing which he knows about, just after he had coded genders (male and female) into the MUD:

So, I started work on a secondary character called “Polly”, ostensibly named for a stereotypical parrot. If I just wanted a second persona to test the game (and it happened I DID want one anyway) then a parrot who just stood around and repeated what it was told was a reasonable enough approach. After a while, I announced that I was going to add gender to the game, and, because Polly was a female name, I’d make Polly the first female persona. Everyone knew it was me, and everyone knew I was male, but I had sufficient kudos from being the best hacker and the person who was writing MUD that they accepted it as OK. “If Richard is playing a female persona, well hey, maybe it might be fun to try it myself?”. Thus, people began to act with a freedom in MUD that they couldn’t have in real life. (Bartle 1998)

Bartle did not use his female character mainly to cross the gender barrier and show that crossdressing was accepted, but in order to emphasis role-playing:

⁶William Crowther started working on *Adventure* in 1972, inspired by his exploits in flesh-world caves. (Adams 2002)

I'd like to emphasise that crossing gender was not done as a means in itself: I was attempting to show what role-playing was, and that it was OK; gender was just the mechanism I used to do it. The fact that researchers always write about crossing gender as if it was something amazingly special (whereas playing a 90-year-old ninja elf is something people have no trouble with) continues to bemuse me. (Bartle 1998)

This brings us to the object of this study: role-playing games, and MUDs in particular. By coincidence, the type of MUDs I learned role-playing on were all of a particular breed. They were DIKUMUDs, developed at DIKU (The Department of Computer Science at the University of Copenhagen). Though MUDs have diversified into many forms, a DIKUMUD is never referred to as a MUSH, MOO or MUCK. Like the LPMUD, it continues to simply be referred to as a Multi User Dungeon, or MUD⁷.

Among the many MUDs available, I have chosen to focus on one, now closed, called *Dragon Realms*. It was implemented and maintained by three people who called themselves *Topaz*, *Scarabae* and *Elwyn*. It was an enhanced DIKUMUD; a combined hack'n'slash and role-play game where role-play was enforced. I played *Dragon Realms* from January 1998 until February 28th, 1999, when the game was closed to the public⁸. I will also refer to and compare *Dragon Realms* with *World's End*, *Aarinfel*, *Lu'Tamohr* and *Azhad*, of which only *World's End* was still open to visitors and new players as I wrote this introduction.

Dragon Realms or *DR* is a world with a well-developed fantasy setting. Fantasy as a genre is becoming constantly more prominent and accepted in mainstream popular culture, if the popularity of television series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Other Side* and, not least, *X-Files* is a reliable indicator. The subculture of books, games, movies and fantasy clubs has not only become more widespread, but also better accepted, as the earlier nerds now have jobs and form significant consumer groups.

Dragon Realms was technically an old-fashioned game. In the age of Pentium processors and high-speed connections, people were playing a text-based game, where a dial-up modem and a 286 processor was quite sufficient for the minimum requirements for playing. Computer games in the late 90s were evolving towards more and more advanced graphics, and pretty pictures, "eye-candy", were often enough to capture the attention of players, if not always to hold them and convince them to buy subsequent instalments. This raises a version of the original, very general question, one that relates to the object of my study: *What are the qualities of Dragon Realms and the related online, multi-player, role-playing games which make them attractive and desirable and captures the attention of the players?*

⁷ Even *World's End*, which is described as a ROM MUD, and does not acknowledge the many steps of development with any public link, is based on the DIKUMUD base, as ROM is an alteration of DIKU.

⁸ *Dragon Realms* was maintained by the implementers for quite a while after it was closed to the public. Some months after it closed down, the implementers arranged a smaller, pre-planned role-play session, bearing more resemblance to an offline campaign closely monitored by a games-master, than the fairly free-form role-playing game it had once been. It might still be maintained online by Topaz, Scarabae and Elwyn, but at date (Feb. 2003) I do not know.

What are those players really doing?

When they attempt to explain to non-players about role-play games, most “addicts” give up and claim that it has to be experienced. Although there is a technical side to online role-playing, the sensation that makes it fun and almost habit-forming is very difficult to explain. When players explain what attracted them, they point to widely divergent aspects of the game. Some are programmers or obsessed with structures and systems, and are fascinated by the technical challenges. *Dragon Realms* was heavily modified from the original DIKUMUD. Its complex system of balanced skills, abilities, character and object attributes and scenes combined to form a complex arena for exploration and adventuring. The game offered wide and varying challenges for the player who liked to be able to compute his or her odds, and learn how to control and meet the surprises of the game; mastering combinations which perhaps even the immortals or administrators had not considered.

For those who were not Explorers or Achievers, as Bartle (1996) called those who searched for their challenges in the variety of the game, there was the option of testing oneself against another player in a more direct type of competition, or of becoming more socially oriented and emphasising interactions with other players above the actual playing of the game. This often led to role-playing.

Role-playing means pretending to be something or somebody that you are not. In *Dragon Realms*, this might involve pretending to be an orc or an elf, or of a different gender, and choosing your appearance, within the given limitations of the chosen creature. Players created their own character’s backgrounds. This meant they had to make up their own families, hometowns and histories. This was enforced by the immortals through stages of character development. Since DR still contained an element of hack’n’slash (various types of violent actions aimed at gaining levels or getting items), the role-play was linked to the possibility for advancement. At every fifth level, the players were forced to stop killing slugs, fish, bunny-rabbits or bandits, and join some part of the game where they could role-play.

Though some players resented being forced into role-playing rather than making their character stronger and more dangerous, other players made a virtue out of this requirement, to the point that the hack’n’slash required to reach a level was considered an effort, and role-play became the main attraction. My challenge was to understand the complex interaction of different player-styles and goals, where some were playing to win through strength, levels, abilities etc., while others were playing to achieve something else. I needed, in short, to determine what play meant in this context; what the players actually did while playing a MUD and what rewards the players received that made playing seem worthwhile?

It is not difficult to realise that beating the system is rewarding in itself. That is a motivating factor whenever we play games of numbers and combinations, where chance can determine the outcome, such as in throwing dice. Since I am not a mathematician or computer scientist, checking the algorithms of the gaming part of the MUD code was not an option (or particularly interesting). I concentrated on the aspects of playing which fell within my areas of knowledge and understanding. Ruling out the code-base, I explored player styles and preferences, game aesthetics and game fictions. Narrowing down my question again, at this point I asked: *What are the features which distinguish a good online, multi-user role-playing game from other games in the fantasy genre (such as Table-Top or Board-games or Live Action Role-Playing Games); what do the players experience as pleasurable in the game; what distinguishes a good game, and last but not least; what distinguishes good playing?*

This is not a story

Part of my study focuses on how these fictitious personalities, the players' avatars or characters, become integrated with the fiction within which they exist, and how the player, through his or her character, participates in the development of the fiction through creating individual tales and stories, as well as through playing. I claim that this is one of the distinctions that makes *Dragon Realms* a narrative environment rather than a story.

Role-playing MUDs encourage their players to write histories, tales and poems, and they require that the players accept the limitations of the fictitious world in which the game is played. These games require that the players have the ability to let their imaginations roam, within the framework of the fictitious world, the game-universe. Simultaneously, the games have technical game-play functions which are integrated into the framework of the fiction, and which introduce an element of competition into the game.

Dragon Realms, the role-playing MUD which I use in this study, relied on several tiers of fiction:

- 1: the constructed, fictional environment with a make-belief history and timeline.
- 2: a major conflict which took place within this fictional universe, a variety of the battle of good and evil.
- 3: the fiction of the different groups that took part in this struggle: mainly the clans.
- 4: the individual fictions: the level where it was all played out, the individual level. At this level the fiction was expressed as emotes, says, notes on the board, objects and renames, conflict and alliances between the different active individuals and more or less formal groups, as well as through levelling and hack'n'slash.

All of these tiers were constructed through stories or worked to support stories, but were not narratives. The actions of the players were not story-telling: except in the cases when the game demanded story-telling, such as a performance by the character for the other characters, or a note on the board, where telling a story was a way to cover ground in the arena, to introduce a new angle to the play, to announce a forthcoming event or make a previous event public. This permeates the entire gaming environment with narratives, but does not equate the role-playing to story-telling, not even interactive story-telling as it's sometimes called. Janet Murray's notion of the digital narrative (1997:51) is not the kind of narrative I am referring to in this case. There's nothing to the stories constructed in and for *Dragon Realms* which makes them particularly digital. The stories themselves are traditional to the point that they frequently rely on the structure, the thematics and the actors of a fairy-tale. It's the medium which is digital: and it's the medium which makes it possible to create an environment dependent to such a high degree on fiction, where the rules and laws all depend on and relate to fiction. When I dare to use the concept narrative environment on a role-playing MUD, it points back to the narratives embedded in the fictitious world of the game, the fiction which it simulates and the fiction the characters produce, not to any new form of story-telling or a sudden change in how humans relate to stories. I am also not convinced that all games are narrative environments, but I find that stories and story-telling is such an important part of *DR* that it's useful to use this expression for this particular game.

Role-playing games are more closely related to story-telling than any other games. Whereas chess is understood as a metaphor of war, a role-playing game more closely resembles a re-enactment. It is not, however, a re-enactment, because the story of the game

is not developed in advance. Where a re-enactment involves a predetermined outcome, a role-playing game has the potential for several plots and different outcomes, depending on what abilities and options the different players activate. The closest simile is perhaps a jazz improvisation; although it is not a tune, it is created within a specific musical environment. Afterwards, if it is successful, it can be written down or memorised and become a fixed piece of music. In the same way, a story can be created from the premises of a role-playing game, as the many books resulting from the game *Dungeons & Dragons* can testify⁹.

The game-world delivers the background and the rules, the limitations and the universe. The plots as the immortals introduce them to the players must be populated with both NPCs and PCs, and contain a high potential for conflict.

When we study these games it is necessary to understand the complexity and the wide variety of options available; how the various aspects of the games are integrated, and which strategies the different players use to achieve a satisfactory game-experience. The games not only challenge the players, they also challenge the analyst, and so the characteristics of a 'player' must also be defined. The common terms in academic literature for active users of fictitious creations do not cover the players of games. I will address this deficiency here, and return to a discussion of terms in subsequent chapters. A player is not solely a reader¹⁰, a consumer or a viewer. The player is more than a listener, member of an audience¹¹ or performer. Neither is he simply a competitor or a mere participant.

The term *player* can, however, incorporate most of these concepts. A player will at some point, whether through the written text or a picture, 'read' the progress of the game or simply the rules. This, of course, makes the player a reader; capable of the sophisticated reading processes required of him. The player also consumes. Many players are very 'good' consumers who buy and play video and computer games at a high rate, supporting the industry and feeding their own need for entertainment and escape in the best tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer¹². The player will change positions during the play, from viewing, sometimes with a truly voyeuristic attitude¹³, to performing. *Participant* might be the term which comes closest to the meaning of *player*. Players participate, but a participant can do so without understanding or knowing the rules of the game. I can obey orders and carry an item for another player without understanding the significance of the item, or even the reason why

⁹ A story can, of course, be created from all situations, mundane or fantastic. Still some cultural objects or perhaps some media are more stimulating to untrained writers and story-tellers than others, such as the computer to the young adults.

¹⁰ Not even an active reader who creates the text through his or her reading, as reader-response theory postulates.

¹¹ Neither the active audience of uses and gratifications research, nor the playfully ironic audience of post-modern theory.

¹² Adorno and Horkheimer (1993:34): "The stunting of the mass-media consumer's powers of imagination and spontaneity does not have to be traced back to any psychological mechanisms; he must ascribe the loss of those attributes to the objective nature of the products themselves, especially to the most characteristic of them, the sound film."

¹³ What you might view in a MUD is the interaction of distinct personalities played out by real people and based on their skills, attitudes and emotions. The MUD can give you the option of viewing this unobserved, protected and in secret.

the other player asks me to carry it. I can hold an object of power without knowing that I hold this power, how to release it, or what impact it might have on the game. In this role, I become a prop for the other players, with no independent influence on the game. Although I participate, I do not play. A player would be conscious of his or her limitations, and an important part of the game is learning these limitations. Within such limitations a player may or may not compete, but within role-play the competition can be difficult to discern. Not all players have the same goals. This would normally imply that the players were playing different games, but role-playing games allow a much higher degree of freedom in the selection of different strategies and particularly goals, than most other gaming contexts.

My next task is to specify who the player is, what she does and how she acts within and in relation to the game. One of the important questions I try to answer here will be: *To what extent are role-playing MUDs dependent on narratives, and what is the role and function of the player and the play in an environment thus permeated with narrativity?*

How to check for taste, style and preferences?

The question at this point concerns personal preferences, styles and tastes. There are not many reliable, objective ways to measure this. While Pierre Bourdieu (1984) makes taste an object of his research, the scope of his work ensures that the results can be applied to a large segment of society, not only with respect to variations in taste, but also in social status, economic situation, education and culture. In the study of a single role-playing game, quantitative methods would have produced answers that could not have been generalised into valid truths about a larger public. The players were socially and culturally a very homogeneous group, and represented only a narrow segment of society, although they were often numerous. Although quantitative methods might have given important information about methodologies for doing large scale research online, in this case they would have provided very little in the way of known factors to test my various findings against. That is even if I had been able to formulate short and simple questions, or single out cultural markers to symbolise a barbaric or a refined taste.

The best option for a small, in-depth study like mine is qualitative research - the simple approach of using interviews and conversations to ask the players themselves what they like is a particularly efficient method of acquiring information. The interviews were part of my main study, rather than a pilot study with the purpose of *identifying variables and frame hypotheses for quantitative research* (Weiss 1994:10-11). I did not intend to address this question on a larger scale in order to obtain more sociologically-valid information in a future quantitative study. An initial problem was that I needed to find out what questions to ask. To do so, I had myself to learn what playing the game involved. I needed to immerse myself in the world of the game and comprehend what the players were doing in order to be able to ask why they were doing it.

This immersion became an ethnographic journey. Like a stranger in a strange land, I logged into *Dragon Realms*. In the words of José Gil (1998:IX), I became primitive. With the advantage over the traditional ethnographer that the software I used for playing would record everything that took place on my screen, I began to play. The result was months of logs and an addiction to what one of the interviewees (Jack) called “the role-play high”. I experienced the same difficulty in putting my new-found insight into words that I had

encountered with players who had attempted to explain role-play to me. Observation and participation were, however, effective ways of learning, and provided the additional benefit of enabling me to freely ask questions of the other players.

Throughout the period of playing and subsequent interviews, I wondered whether I would learn what I needed to know through these methods. What I was searching for was not simply what a role-playing game was, or how it was played. I was also looking for *why* they were played, and this is a very difficult question to answer. At some half-forgotten lecture in philosophy, I was once told that the answer to “why” is always, in its final, absolute form: “because I want to be happy”. If this is the genuine answer to the whys I am asking in this study, then I certainly have a formidable task: that of revealing what makes people happy.

While I do not think that the key to happiness can be discovered through the simple methods that I have outlined here, I do believe that there might be a key to pleasure. There was, however, a large potential for error in the methods I used. By immersing myself in the game and taking part in it, I learned only one game-playing strategy - my own. This made it very probable that I would fabricate my own material. I would watch other players from my own viewpoint and study their responses to my way of playing, and my understanding would be limited by my style of relating to the game. While I studied the game and the game-play, I also fabricated game-play, wrote texts to the game and influenced the game – becoming one of my own subjects for study. This meant that I had to find some less personal and subjective way to supplement the study, and I needed to give the players a chance to express themselves easily and freely and with as little potential for my own influence on their words as possible.

To give the players a voice of their own rather than the imaginative one playing in my head while I read their responses, I travelled to meet and interview as many as possible, face to face. As a result, they were on their own home ground, and were able to speak rather than type. Since I strove to make the interviews open rather than rigid in form, and organised the questions according to topics, the interviewees had considerable control over the information they provided. The object of study became the structure of the game itself, not the code, but the fictitious framework and the aspects of the game, which comprised the game world.

To answer my questions about computer games, I studied the game structure from the player's point of view. I interviewed and questioned players and the builders of Dragon Realms, The Infinite Point and Aarinfel, and I participated in the game, observing the game-play and the game-experience from the standpoint of a player.

What do we already know about online multi-user role-play computer games?

Since the beginning of this study in 1998, there has been a rapid development and increased interest in role-play computer games. Up until 1997, when Aarseth published his book *Cybertext*, the area of artistic online texts, criticism of computer-mediated literature and renewal through the digital media had been dominated by the concept of the hypertext. George P. Landow, Janet Murray, Stuart Moulthrop and Michael Joyce were among the best-known of those who claimed that the new text of the computer was the hypertext, and that a hypertext narrative was the ultimate narration. With *Cybertext*, Aarseth challenged this view, and outlined a theory of the game as a different type of entertainment text, independent

of the structure of the story. Writing about MUDs, and telling the history of the development of online games, he launched the idea of the *ergodic* text, and most particularly *cybertext*, as another direction through which texts would develop, using the computer as a tool for writing and for experiencing:

As we have seen [...], the computer as literary agent ultimately points beyond narrative and toward ergodic modes – dialogic forms of improvisation and free play between the cyborgs that today’s literate computer users (and their programs) have become. What we need in order to achieve this is not an automated playwright or narrator but simulated worlds with emergent intriguants, interesting enough to make real people want to spend time and creative energy there.”(1997:141)

Role-playing games captured many different kinds of academic interest, as demonstrated in the social psychology of Amy Bruckman, Sherry Turkle. Amy Bruckman pioneered the field and wrote on the concept of online identities in 1992, and has continued working on MOOs as educational tools (Bruckman 1992, 1997, 2002). Sherry Turkle published *Life on the Screen* in 1995, which discussed identity and playing with identity online. The topics of Bruckman’s and Turkle’s studies were MUDs, and particularly MOOs, as social laboratories, where the players were given freedom from the restraints of their real lives and could live alternate lives on the screen (Turkle 1995). While the approach to games as hyper or cybertexts had lacked the human agent perspective and the human pleasure of playing a game, focusing on the structure of texts and narration, the social-psychological approach of looking at the online role-play as a kind of self-therapy removed the game-aspect from MUDDing. Amy Bruckman rejected the gaming MUDs entirely in her thesis *MOOSE Crossing*: “However, not all MUDs share qualities with samba schools. Most are violent adventure games that share few of these qualities (Bruckman 1997:49).” While it might be correct that a gaming MUD isn’t a technological samba school, (as it is described in Bruckman’s thesis, p.47), I would claim that all of the role-playing MUDs I have played are self-motivating, richly connected to popular culture, focused on personally meaningful projects, community-based and an activity in which people of all ages can engage. As for them being a life-long activity, role-playing online has a relatively short history, but theoretically it can be indulged in for as long as one has access to the net, and in my experience it involves novices learning from experts, and experts learning from novices.

These were my most important influences at the time when I started this work. There were other people working with MUDs, some of whom published in *The Journal of MUD Research*. This online journal later renamed *JOVE: The Journal of Virtual Environments*,¹⁴ published an already well-known article in their first number in 1997, Richard Bartle’s “Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs”. This is the only article in this journal which is directly concerned with play and players in MUDs. The others are more concerned with MUDs as arenas for learning or for education, with a few interesting exceptions such as James Sempsey’s (1998) commentary on GUI’s – Graphical User Inter-

¹⁴ The Journal of Virtual Environments (JOVE), at
<http://www.brandeis.edu/pubs/jove/index.html>

faces – in MUDs and Alan Schwartz’ (1999) discussion of internal labor markets based on administrative hierarchies in MUDs. An early description of a role-play event in LambdaMOO, Dibbell’s (1993) article on the acts of the character Mr. Bungle, was important to my understanding of the intense emotional impact the acts of a character upon an other character could have on the person playing, while Curtis’ (1992) became central to my understanding of the importance of the social aspect of MUDs.

To this date I have not been able to locate any research which is comparable to what I am doing, or based on a similar theoretical or methodological base. While this means that I have no established theory to test my observations against, it also allows me the freedom of choice. To the point that there might be such a thing as a paradigm of MUD-research, I do not operate within it, and have no obligation to prove or disprove the deeds of past masters. This also means, however, that I have no safety net. If I cannot describe a phenomenon precisely, I cannot describe it by demonstrating how it varies from what others have observed. Working with such academic freedom forces me to search for words and descriptions, and I have chosen to explore a wide range of theory and descriptive studies in order to locate approximate terms.

The MUDs are text-based, and as such can be read, which makes literary theory one obvious field to explore for phenomena and theories related to the object of my study. With my emphasis on the user, reader-response theory could seem a logical place to begin my search. Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco can serve as examples. Iser’s (1974, 1978) theory of interaction between text and user appears to be well suited for analysing text-based games, but the suitability is a deception. As I will demonstrate in chapter three, reader-response theory would need to be heavily supplemented or modified before it would be useful in analysing computer games of any type.

Computer games are not read or experienced linearly, and they might be conceived of as non-linear texts. With the hypertext interest in non-linear texts, and the forked path of reading and telling, there has been an emphasis on discussing games as interactive fiction and narratives (Buckles 1985, Landow 1992 & 1994, Murray 1997, Jenkins 2002b). Jesper Juul (2001) points out that games are not experienced linearly, but in fragments, and with the knowledge that the game can be adjusted if the outcome is not satisfactory. He argues further that games come with the reassurance that they can be played again with a somewhat different outcome, while a narrative will not change if it is retold (if it does, it will become a different narrative). While this is true of most computer games, the role-play games I concentrate on contain a mixture of action-games that are reminiscent of (or perhaps the predecessors of) the single-user versions of *Doom* and *Quake*. Both of these games allow the option of repeating an action sequence, but certain sequences will never be played again in precisely the same manner, because they can never be re-created. I will expand on this in later chapters, but I will provide a brief example here.

The part of computer games controlled by the game engine can often be experienced repeatedly, as Jesper Juul describes, but even at this point the MUDs can be programmed to react differently to your character as it progresses. On *Aarinfel* there was a simple little money-earning quest where characters walked into a shop and were asked if they would like to run an errand for the elf woman behind the desk, Thayla. If the answer was “yes”, the character was given a package of herbs and told where to deliver it. If somebody had just picked up the package, you had to wait a while before you were given the opportunity to

execute the quest. In other words, the presence of other people in the game had changed the situation, and you could no longer assume that the sequence could be replayed at your convenience. If your character advanced in the game and went over a certain rank in a court, Thayla the herbalist would respond to your efforts by saying that she was shocked that someone with your rank in a distinguished court would accept such a menial task, and you would be turned away, unable to replay the quest. There were other quests: doormen would stop the “riffraff” (those with no court or of the wrong race) but bow deeply to player-characters (PCs) with high rank, while the Khigatin Underground would be impossible to reach for the high-ranking courtiers of certain courts.

The above situations are simply automatic, pre-programmed responses by some of the non-playing characters (NPCs). Strictly speaking, one could have repeated the experiences by simply deleting his old character and creating a new one, but the uniqueness of every situation became more obvious when PCs were involved. When role-playing with another person, the outcome of the interaction was much more unpredictable than when playing against the automated responses. Once the interaction was completed, there was no way back. In such a case, one could not delete his character and go back and repeat the episode, for if he returned, he would be playing a different role. There were examples of people who tried to do just that: delete the original character, make a new character with the same name and then post a note saying XXX was a new character and everybody should disregard the errors committed by his predecessor. However, these errors had already become part of the *history* of the other characters, and this history could not be deleted or reset, as it was stored in the memory of living human beings. The episode thereby permanently influenced the relationships between the characters.

This puts role-play MUDs into a category among game-studies which needs to include the study of the players as well as the games. They are games where the random nature of the actions of the characters can be unrelated to the preprogrammed choices based on the games’ fictitious structure, or not obviously associated with any storyline of fictional background at all. On the other hand, they are environments where history is produced and stories are told and retold, plotted, planned and executed. Telling stories is, as mentioned, a major part of role-playing: it’s a tool, used when people post fragments of stories, or stories about an event seen from the viewpoint of their characters. But in a MUD, the role-playing itself is immediate, ready but improvised, and without the structure of stories. There is no introduction and no resolution, each event leads to the next, regardless of narrative structure or the need to create a story. Role-play MUDs are environments, areas created to accommodate interactions. Playing in them does not have to result in the creation of stories. Just as life accommodates the creation of stories and produces history, real-life events do not become narratives until we organise and re-tell them.

This leads to several questions I will be addressing in later chapters:

What kind of experiences are text-based online computer role-play games? How does the role-play game differ from other online computer games in the way it relates to stories or narrativity? To what extent can I use the existing theory of texts and stories to analyse role-playing MUDs?

Some kind of performance

The temporary nature of the online role-play experiences makes them similar to theatre, particularly improvisation, or improv theatre. Gonzalo Frasca made an interesting point in his presentation at the conference *Digital Arts and Culture 2001* in Providence:

One of the most original applications of Freire's pedagogy is Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, which uses theatre as a laboratory for social and political experimentation. Boal's techniques involve the creation of models of social and personal behaviour. Participants of the Theatre of the Oppressed are encouraged to question these models' ideological assumptions and present alternative strategies to deal with the problems they stage. Boal techniques fit perfectly the third alternative envisioned by Turkle, even if its simulations are created on the stage rather than on the computer. (Frasca 2001)

Augusto Boal's techniques aim at using theatre as therapy, using improvisation to raise the level of consciousness of the participants involved in the improvisation. The description of his techniques include, among other methods, re-improvisations. The improvisation sessions are repeated from the same basic script, and then reworked as many times as the participants deem necessary. In the examples Boal (1995) gives in *The Rainbow of Desire*, the re-improvisation takes place once.

While the psychodrama lies temptingly close to online role-play, when compared to Sherry Turkle's description of what takes place in MUDs, the role-play game is not a "Theatre of the Oppressed". It is some sort of performance, but what kind? I find that it is a performance placed outside of most traditional forms, perched as it is between games and improvisation theatre. I will address this question fully in chapter nine, attempting to place the role-play game in relation to several related and overlapping phenomena, answering the question: *Is role-playing in online, multi-user games comparable to theatre, improvisation or ritual?*

Agency or seduction?

When I return to the original question, after I have discussed what MUDs are, dissected them and attributed their many different functions to the composite nature of computer-mediated texts, the question of *why the games are so attractive* will still not be answered. There are many related explanations, but the steady and lasting appeal of computer games can only be theorised. This is what I will be doing in the conclusion to this work. In answering this I will try to analyse the aesthetics of multi-user, online, role-playing games revealed by the players in their choices and criteria for a good game, as well as the logs of "good" play-sessions, to see what a highly rewarding session of role-play entails.

I will relate to and use certain theories, such as the play-theories of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Brian Sutton-Smith, in an attempt to answer this question. Pulling all the threads together in a conclusion, however, will involve going beyond all the theories and descriptions of related phenomena, which I have used up to this point, to place the online role-play games.

A role-playing MUD is an independent cultural mode of expression, one which combines the pleasure of writing, the rewards of playing and the sensation of being able to

control the environment as we find it in games and in sport. Technologically, it is simple enough that the barriers to using it are low, and as such it is an arena for expressing cultural rather than economic capital, functioning as a leveller of status as well as offering a chance to display and gain status through a wide range of knowledge and skills.

The combination of consumption and creation makes it different from other media productions, and comes close to Brecht's vision for the radio as a multi-vocal medium where the boundary between sender and receiver is being erased. Computer games exist in this land between, between watching and participating, between writing and reading. The player is and is not a reader; is and is not an author; is and is not a performer or the performer's audience. Playing text-based games transcends these distinctions, while at the same time approaching them, providing my study with a rich and convoluted example of what it means to be a player of games.

First interlude - The Dance of Joy

Xeziar the bard of Arcana has promised to teach the very young and naïve assassin Erinn how to dance, before her first ball as a member of Arcana. Rilliath of Arcana has agreed to assist as Xeziar's partner, as Eristeth Veridiatix, the healer and the mysterious stranger, asked for lessons as well. Follim of Noble, Erinn's admirer, sends her a telepathic message, asking to join her, but he's neglected as she is distracted. While they dance, Eristeth reveals that he's familiar with a quest which is only known to a few of the characters of the game, and Xeziar, who wonders about Eristeth's identity, gets a clue. Erinn, however, is still clueless.

Xeziar whispers something to Rilliath.

Rilliath looks comfortable with this step, not bothering to look down. She nods, looking ready.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'You two can watch it first, or try it right away...'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'Try not to watch your feet...Though, I can understand if you do need to'

Erinn glances up at Eristeth and her body relaxes a tiny bit, as if expecting to be led.

Xeziar begins slowly, his brow is still creased a little.

Eristeth nods, then takes his gaze off of his feet and looks Erinn in the eyes.

Erinn looks back, as if watching for a clue.

Rilliath follows along easily with this one, stepping back, to the left, forward and then right...doing the box thing.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'Quite good...Do you feel comfortable?'
Xeziar voices to everyone.

Erinn lets the pattern carry her, following fluidly.

Rilliath smiles, nodding. "It is the fast and very complicated stuff I have trouble with."

(Fey) You say 'Yes, this seems simple enough this far'

Eristeth nods, his eyes still looking at Erinn's. He moves in the repetitions as fluidly as water, now that the first several are behind him.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'Lets add a little dimension then...One can turn into the step how they wish, making it less stationary..'

Eristeth takes the step to the right a little farther back and the one on the left a little forward, so that he and Erinn turn clockwise.

Erinn follows lightly, reading the motions intently, her body concentrating all attention on Eristeth.

Xeziar continues the simple step with Rill, prompting small turns, that create a sort of wave.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'These, are really the basics for most dances...Though there are some other simple steps....Rarely used though'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'There are a few other things though that are worth knowing, though somewhat instinctive....'

Erinn glances at Xeziar, listening attentively again.

Eristeth slows the box step down then stops, his head turning to look at Xeziar.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'Letting the lady twirl, and moving with a hand apart...'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'There are a two main ways to spin a lady....In both you first move your hand at their side a little bit away.'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'The more difficult one...The gentleman raises their right hand higher..'

Eristeth keeps his previous position, even though Erinn has let go of his hand. He still looks at Xeziar with his head turned over his shoulder.

Xeziar demonstrates, and carefully expands the demonstration, leading Kyte's arm around in a circle, a half step back.

Rilliath twirls, going with the demonstration, not too much sure of herself.

Xeziar fluidly takes a quarter step forward as the hands return to their normal position and Rilliath is returned to previous distance, his left hand lays at her side again..

Eristeth smiles, then steps forwards again, extending his hand to right hand to Erinn.

Rilliath looks over at Eristeth and Erinn and grins, then quickly turns her attention back to the lesson.

Xeziar's eyes deviate to watch Erinn and Eristeth, though he comments to Rilliath, 'Well done'

Erinn takes Eristeth's hand and moves into position, smiling her small smile.

Eristeth starts with a simple box-step, then takes his left hand from Erinn's side. He raises his right hand and moves it in a circle.

Rilliath relaxes a bit with relief and seems a tad more confident now.

Erinn moves lightly from the pattern of the box-step and twirls under Eristeth's arm.

Erinn moves out of the turn with deadly precision, knowing exactly where Eristeth is.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'Quiet impressive...I almost think you don't need the lessons.'

Rilliath follows gracefully along with the simple steps, waiting for indications to do something different.

(Fey) You say 'It is not unlike something I am working hard at learning.....'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'The second type of spin, is much easier...again your hand at the side slides away, but both take a step back, and when then the other hand lets go, allowing a simple turn, to be rejoined'

Eristeth falls back into the box-step, then turns his gaze away from Erinn and looks at the other couple. He shrugs lightly, then returns his gaze to Erinn.

Follim tells you 'Will you be in Haven anytime soon?'

Erinn is watching Eristeth's grey eyes, taking clues from the small movements.

Xeziar lets his hand slide away from the side, and begins the back step, a slight spin felt in his arms, and hand as it leaves.

You tell Follim 'Hmmm? Oh, no, I think not'

Follim tells you '*small voice, Oh, alright, well, nevermind.'

Eristeth holds his hands out towards Erinn, catching her left hand with his right, and returning his left hand to her side as she completes the spin.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'You can do a lot with those simple things...'

Erinn relaxes into Eristeth's hold, body flowing lightly towards him, tension gone in the concentration of the dance.

Xeziar applies a good share of pressure, indicating a large turn in the step, guiding kyte into a spin with him.

Follim tells you '*In a happy voice Can I join you?'

Rilliath follows along in the spin, doing things now more instinctively to prompts and doing a bit better like that.

You tell Follim 'Umm? Oh, I think it would not be suitable

Follim tells you '*dejectedly Oh, alright. Good travels, My Love.'

You tell Follim '*absentmindedly* Um, oh, thank you Follim'

Eristeth dances with Erinn in a slow box-step as he watches Xeziar and Rilliath.

Erinn glances at Xeziar and Rilliath, memorising the movements, nodding lightly to the music.

Rilliath twirls along smoothly, looking as if she really gets it...for once.

Xeziar's brow actually has some beads of sweat on it now. Slowly the music dies, and stops dancing.

Eristeth slows down, then stops also as the music dies. He looks into Erinn's golden eyes, then slowly lets go.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'I could manage some more music, if you wish to use your knowledge..Not while dancing though.'

(Fey) Eristeth says 'I have a question, Xeziar, although I am not sure whether it relates to this dance or not.'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'Ask what you will goodsir Eristeth'

Eristeth glances over at Erinn, then smiles, and looks back at Xeziar.

Rilliath looks over at Eristeth, listening with a smile, flushed from the dance.

(Fey) Eristeth says 'I should also thank you for your efforts. But in my travels, I have seen... a certain step done. I was wondering if it was part of this dance'

(Fey) Eristeth says 'Shall I show it to you?'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'I'd be glad to see the step...'

(Fey) Eristeth says 'If I recall correctly, it is done like this...'

Eristeth struts proudly, his head held high while his legs move in time to some unheard music. He stops moving forward after a few steps.

Rilliath watches Eristeth's demonstration curiously.

Eristeth wiggles his bottom, bending his knees as he does this. He keeps his head rock still, however. Then he extends his left hand upwards.

Xeziar eyes light with a swirl of silver and green, he's grinning.

Eristeth twirls in a graceful pirouette, his left hand held high above him, just as before. He comes out of the pirouette, then looks at Xeziar.

Erinn tilts her head and watches curiously, trying to make sense of the pattern.

Rilliath covers her mouth to muffle the laughter.

(Fey) Eristeth says 'Have you seen that before?'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'I've performed it before.'

(Fey) Eristeth says 'Is it part of this dance, or another?'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'It's a step fitting for dreams and delight...It tends to lack the sense of other dances performed across the realm'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'I've rarely seen the dance done with such...dignity either...Most rush into it like fools.'

(Fey) Eristeth says 'A step fitting for dreams and delight, you say? Do you happen to recall where it was from?'

Erinn looks curiously at Eristeth, then at Xeziar's and Rilliath's smiles.

(Fey) Xeziar says 'I believe, a woman with a bird mask created it'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'She hails from a palace of silver, the domain of the Prince of Masks, and silver dreamer.'

(Fey) Eristeth says 'Does this have anything to do with a bridge that comes out of the sky? I think it's called something like a "moon bridge", or something like that.'

(Fey) Xeziar says 'Indeed, it does. That bridge leads to the palace'

Rilliath nods, shifting her weight.

Erinn listens carefully, flicking golden eyes from the one to the other.

Eristeth pauses for a moment, looking lost in thought. He then glances over at Erinn and, smiling, extends his left hand towards her.

Erinn smiles her small smile and puts her right hand in Eristeth's left.

(Dragon Realms April 4th 1998)

Chapter 2: Redefining Reading, or Rediscovering Play?

In the field of computer game studies, it is often said that computer games conform to particular theories, can be understood in relation to specific contexts or may be compared with other media such as literature, film or television. Yes, we *do* achieve greater insight in a phenomenon through studying it in relation to other, better-known subjects. At some point, however, when we study a subject indirectly through associated phenomena we will encounter limitations. Ascertaining that computer games are not books, films or television series is not very useful unless we can isolate the features or combinations of features which are unique to computer games and absent in other media. The computer has the potential of being not only a channel for the existing media, but also a tool for editing images, text, audio and video as if they were the same medium. Add to that the liberty of the user to sort, adjust, modify, hack and control the information, and the computer stands out as an independent medium and not just another channel for familiar media.

This chapter primarily deals with isolating the computer-specific features of computer games. I must resolve why recognized and enticingly useful-looking theories are inadequate for studying the field of computer games and I must isolate the characteristics that are unique to such games. This is a prerequisite for the following efforts to construct theories which will pertain directly to games.

Some approaches to game studies

Computer games, especially MUDs organised as games, have been studied from several different angles. Some areas which have been subject to methodical research are the social psychology of MUDs, discussed by Sherry Turkle (1984, 1996); computer games (specifically *Adventure*) as interactive fiction discussed by Mary Ann Buckles (1985); and the explorations of texts and theory, in Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997). More commercial single-player games distributed on disks or CD-ROM have received less attention, although there has been a rapid development in the field of game-studies since 1998, when I started this work. An expression of this development can be found online in the peer-reviewed journal *Gamestudies* (Aarseth, ed). In the group associated with this journal there are several others who research computer games, such as Gonzalo Frasca, who submitted his Masters thesis *Videogames of the Oppressed* (2001), and Jesper Juul (2001), who explored the relationship between games and narrative in games such as, *Space Invaders* (Taito 1977), *Tetris* (Pazhitnov 1985) and *Doom* (ID Software 1993). Both Frasca and Juul point out that the study of computer games is a rapidly changing field; Jesper Juul goes to the extent of reassuring his readers that "today I may not completely agree with all conclusions or presuppositions of the text (2001)," acknowledging the fluid nature of knowledge and the rapid changes in the study of computer-mediated messages. The more formal aspects of the games have been subject to study in writings with roots in media- and literary theory, such as *Cybertext* by Espen Aarseth, and Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.

Normative studies of video games

The screen becomes an increasingly important conveyor of meaning in the modern home. Kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms - the television, is already there, the video-game consoles and the computer following close behind.

The concluding argument of Eugene F. Provenzo in *Video Kids - Making Sense of Nintendo* (1991) is that the cultural impact of the screen is not just a matter of television in every home, as Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) describes it in *No sense of Place*, but that video games, such as Nintendo in all its different shapes, need to be taken more seriously and considered as a matter for discussion and research. Provenzo argues convincingly, displaying the different aspects of the contents on the screen as proof of the need for serious attention by critical readers, researchers, teachers and parents.

The book is a comprehensive presentation of several games, with emphasis on the topics, which, traditionally, are areas of concern in relation to the upbringing of children. Placing the games within the area of media-philosophy, Provenzo (1991) quotes Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding Media, the Extensions of Man*, 1964), and questions his vision:

For Marshall McLuhan, games can function in much the same way as the fairy-tale does for Bettelheim - as a way of bringing meaning to life. According to him "Games are a sort of artificial paradise like Disneyland, or some Utopian vision by which we interpret and complete the meaning of our daily lives. In games we devise means of nonspecialised participation in the large drama of our time." But what if the games we play are corrupt? What if, instead of ennobling the individual, as great literature does, the games debase our humanity? What if our games cheat our children in their quest for deeper meaning? (1991:30)

This normative question sets the theme for the entire argument of the book. The categories of games chosen and presented by Provenzo, the topics and the meanings all prove that yes, the games are a danger to the tender souls that approach them, in no manner to be compared to the varied and ennobling influence of great literature. Provenzo shows this through an accessible discourse, disclosing the story-lines and meanings of game after game, which according to him basically exploit the commercial value of violence, sexual ambiguity and genderised chauvinism.

I will not even attempt to argue against the actual findings of flat and overly simplified stories, of biased representations of gender, and of the constant return to the simple solutions of violence. For an extended discussion of these topics, I refer the reader to the works of among others Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul. Particularly the work of Jesper Juul (2001) takes seriously the content and possibility for role-models offered by Nintendo-games, discussing the content and stories of the games. In his most recent work he questions whether games should be expected to tell stories at all, a question that would leave Provenzo's complaint about shallow stories irrelevant.

What I would like to question in this context is whether or not the video games steal time from children, time which they might have spent enjoying the 'ennobling influence' of great literature. Would the children have spent their time reading great books instead of playing; and, is "great literature" such an important influence on children's lives? As with most other work that is aimed at drawing up lines for media consumption with suggestions for what

children should or should not be subjected to, the dream of 'lost literature' is not half as well-based as the documentation of the use of the present "trash", no matter its source. The quality of literature stands as the norm all other media is measured against, and there seems to be in the minds of scholars a theoretical 'ideal state', where absence of modern media would lead to the eager consumption of great literary works. This remains only a theory, however, as the unpolluted mind does not exist; and to isolate a child from the influence of modern media for the sake of experiment would also mean to isolate it from so much of our culture that the experiment would no longer be valid, not to mention the fact that it would also probably be harmful and socially crippling.

Stephen Kline (1999) surveys a large number of studies of the effect of video games on children, as well as similar surveys to his own, in a study of media panics and their connection to the study of violence in video games. His conclusion is that there is no clear evidence that the new generation have had their behaviour altered outside of media-use patterns as a result of their consumption of the games. There are some observations of increased short-term violence, but nothing conclusive such as of the consumption of children's time shown in Provenzo's work (1991:70); in other words, the only certain behavioural change is the fact that the children spend an increasing amount of time on a new medium.

For the children who grew up in the 1980 and 1990s, there was a wide variation of media accessible for viewing as an alternative to video games. Norwegian media scholar Anita Werner (1994: 86) describes a large Swedish study, *Mediapanelundersökelsen*¹, which was conducted over a period of 10 years; it followed the same group of children and compared their use of media and their behaviour. The study did detect a certain connection between the use of television and video with violent content and aggressive behaviour. This occurred in children who had other signs of or reasons for aggressive behaviour. The conclusion of this long-term project was that interacting with social causes, violence in media could be part of a spiral movement where the different factors reinforce each other. There was a correlation between watching television/feeling fear and watching television/aggression in the study, but this connection was found in a minority of the children participating and in conjunction with other factors that would dispose them towards feeling fear or exhibiting aggression.

A different view of the study of children and electronic games is suggested by Henry Jenkins (1998). Rather than arguing that video games cause isolation, passivity and social withdrawal among modern children, he points out that the physical environment adjusted to the needs of adults is hostile to children. There is no room left for children to explore. Combined with the often well-founded fear of letting children out in this hostile, adult environment without constant supervision, this leaves children with very few spaces left for

¹ Werner refers to Inga Sonesson (1989): "Vem fostrar våra barn – videon eller vi? TV, video och emotionell och social anpassning." *Mediapanel Rapport* nr 36, Esselte Studium, Stockholm. (Who fosters our children – the video or we? TV, video and emotional and social adjustment.) and Sonesson, Inga (1993): "TV och videovåldets innverkan på barn och ungdomar." I C von Feilitzen et al. *Våld från alla håll, forskningsperspektiv på våld i rörliga bilder*, Brutus Oestlings Bokförlag Symposium, Stockholm/Stehag.

play. Jenkins points out that the confinement of a single room, no matter how spacious and well equipped, is not the same as being able to roam freely outdoors. His is a different view on what causes the interest for computer games: not some formula of the medium which numbs the brain and causes addiction, but the restraints of society which leaves children no private space for play or exploration but that of the electronic games. This is a theory of children's media consumption that deserves to be considered.

There seems to be a general consent that the world of popular culture does not allow for the richness of good literature, and as such is not suitable as food for the imagination of children. If computer games are to be studied without such prejudice, they need to be analysed not through the filter of media panics on behalf of the coming generation, but, rather, through first mastering the games, which might give us a different vision of their value and content.

The text, the work and the player

The act of reading has been broadened into an act of perception which involves much more than the perusal of a written text. Roland Barthes demonstrates in his classic essay, *Rhetoric of the Image* (Barthes 1977:37), how a picture can be read and may thereby function as a text. In a series of articles, he discusses different texts and introduces the concept of a *work* as opposed to a *text* (Barthes 1977:155). The *work* in Barthes' definition is the unrealised text, the writing *before* the reader has accessed it and begun the act of reading: the book on the shelf, the piece of music on the sheet, the game in the CDrom. The *text* is the *realised* work. When the reader reads the book he *creates* the text. When the music is heard or played, it is created through the performance *and* by the listener. This opens for an understanding of the text as a much broader concept than the written word. The concept links the text to the user, the reader or the performer. Unused and unperformed, the work is not a text at all; it simply has the potential for becoming a text. This approach empowers the user, the reader, to a thought-provoking extent.

In my work I will study the computer game as a text. This means that I will evaluate the computer game and how it is realised through the actions of the players. Barthes could not discuss computer games because he never lived to see them become a common feature of popular culture; but in his discussion of the *Musica Practica* (1977:149), he points out a way of experiencing a text which are not trivial, and might be said to make the texts ergodic (Aarseth 1997). Distinguishing between the music one listens to and the music one plays, Barthes shows how the activity of the player (in this case the "player" is a musician) makes his or her experience of music into something different than the experience a passive listener would have experienced:

The music one plays comes from an activity which is very little auditory, being above all manual (and thus, in a way, much more sensual). It is the music which you or I can play alone or among friends; with no other audience than its participants (that is, with all risk of theatre, all temptation of hysteria removed); a muscular music in which the part taken by the sense of hearing is one only of ratification, as though the body were hearing - and not 'the soul'; a music which is not played 'by heart': seated at the keyboard or the music stand, the body controls, conducts, co-ordinates, having itself to transcribe what it

reads, making sound and meaning, the body as inscriber and not just transmitter, simple receiver. (Barthes 1977:149)

The player's body when playing a computer game adopts the position of the body as coordinator and controller. Seated before the keyboard, mouse or joystick in hand, the body acts and reacts to what is being read, transcribes the impulses from the screen and creates - not music to be heard, but still an event to savour alone or to share with others. Barthes mourns the disappearance of the performance of music from daily life. Music has gradually altered into a passively-received commodity most frequently experienced through technology, while a computer game turns works of words and pictures into "texts" which can be actively used and played. Barthes writes: "playing has ceased to exist: musical activity is no longer manual, muscular, kneadingly physical, but merely liquid, effusive, 'lubrificating', to take up a word from Balzac" (Barthes 1977:150). The "manual, muscular, kneadingly physical" position today has returned to the realm of human experience through the activities of the computer game-player, whether online or offline, alone or with others. It is manifested in the intensely physical experience of actions that need to be rehearsed and learned by body as well as mind, to be performed and then to be experienced, not for the public but for the group of friends or acquaintances.

Speaking silently

Still, the texts performed in computer games are no more oral, in the sense of being physical, than the written texts in other media, and do not approach what Barthes calls *writing aloud*:

Writing aloud is not expressive; it leaves expression to the pheno-text, to the regular code of communication; it belongs to the geno-text, to significance; it is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of an art: the art of guiding one's body (whence its importance in far Eastern theatres). Due allowance being made for the sounds of the language, *writing aloud* is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theatre of emotions, what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language. (Barthes 1975:66-67)

It is in this direction that the reading is being skewed by the computer-mediated texts, towards the active performance and experience of the text, rather than towards the "trivial reading". But the MUDs do not contain a *writing aloud*. If anything, they make the player do the exact opposite; I will call it *speaking silently*, in order to emphasise the converse nature of the term. Barthes' *writing aloud* is a purely physical act, where the content disappears behind the execution of the words, like a spoken calligraphy, each word more present than what it signifies: "... to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss" (Barthes 1975:67). In a MUD, the words are free from

this trace of the body. They are even liberated from handwriting. By exploiting the moment of delay before posting to proofread, it is possible to make the words independent of the insecure hand, the hasty choice of words, the trace of dyslexia or even the anger or fear of the mind.

Everything corporeal has to be recreated and expressed not through the physical presence of the words, but through their meanings. The *signified* must be instantly recognisable.

When Barthes distinguishes between the text of *pleasure* and the text of *bliss*, this trace of the body, the physical creation of the words, is important in making the distinction: "Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" (Barthes 1975:14). This is the well-written and "proper" text, but not the text of bliss that Barthes takes such delight in. Pleasing, but not a text for rapture. While literary style holds its own pleasure, given the choice of understandable, corporeal or elegant, the MUD player cannot rely on the timbre of his voice to assist in making the difference unless the nature of the voice is expressed in writing (put into words). The speech itself must be described if it is to convey this kind of meaning.

Is this *speaking silently* simply writing in an oral tradition? No, it is not oral at all, just as *writing aloud* is not written. An oral tradition never needs to explain in words that which a MUD-player needs to describe. The performer paints images with the voice as well as with the words. In a MUD, words must be used to convey every tiny detail. To distinguish between a shout and a whisper, typing in "shout HELP ME" is reported as "Rill yells: HELP ME". If the player who controls Rill writes "whisper Etuim help me", the caption will say "Rill whispers to you: help me" (if you are Etuim. If you are a third part, the caption will read: Rill whispers something to Etuim). The descriptive words are necessary for informing the game-code what kind of communication this is. The code of the game will reflect this information about whether the communication was a shout or a whisper. The code is written in a language that the machines can understand. It uses words to communicate words, all with symbolic significance. There can never be a discrepancy between the signified and the signifier, as each symbol is instantly interpreted and recognised, given meaning or rejected.

The alternative is to utilise the syntax of the game as well as language to write emotes to describe what the body would have communicated if it could make itself known in a more direct manner than through strokes on a keyboard: "Olaru's lips curve slightly upwards, his voice emerging thick and a little throaty, 'Perhaps not, but pride has little place in my life...I am content simply to do as well as I may'" (Olaru, Azhad, 19 September 2001). Here, *speaking silently*, Olaru's player describes the movement of the lips, the texture of the voice and the rhythm and pause of the speech.

Can this produce bliss? To Barthes, bliss was more than the delight at the creation of sound. He refers to: "The asocial character of bliss: it is the abrupt loss of sociality, and yet there follows no recurrence to the subject (subjectivity), the person, solitude, everything is lost, integrally. Extremity of the clandestine, darkness of the motion-picture theatre" (Barthes 1975:39). Bliss, according to this description, is a state of mind. When the subject experiences total solitude, there are no external distractions to define and thereby trap one.

The experience of being able to choose an avatar, to shed the shell of the body that defines you as a subject and enter into another representational dimension – where you are defined

not by what you were born with but what you create – can be seen as this “extremity of the clandestine”. Nowhere can you interact with others as anonymously as online. A motion-picture theatre allows you to view without being seen, but online you can interact without being “seen” (or perhaps “found out”). The avatar you choose acts on your behalf, *it is you*, but secretly and mysteriously. You can play games of hide-and-seek or just hide. Cloaked, you may choose to carry a dagger or a doll to your interactions, start a flame-war or observe the most intimate of acts being described.

Yet it remains a very social text. Barthes calls the text “a fetish object”, claiming: “this fetish desires me”:

The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*. The text chooses me, by a whole new disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc; and, lost in the midst of the text (not *behind* it, like a *deus ex machina*) there is always the other, the author. (Barthes 1975:27)

The multi-user text, such as the text on a MUD, truly desires you. The author in Barthes’ text is somewhere in the middle of the written word. In a MUD, the person creating the text you read is close by (although perhaps not physically). She is close enough to respond immediately, with just a tiny pause which signifies *speaking silently*, the moment of hesitation, of composition, typing and proofreading. Only a little hesitation is between you, the reader, and you, the writer, and this tiny hesitation is a moment of confessed desire: “The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing. Writing is: the science of the various blisses of language, its Kama Sutra (this science has but once treatise: writing itself)” (Barthes 1975:6). Writing back and forth to the others is confessed desire; and in the online interaction between players this desire is what urges the role-playing game on.

The computer-mediated text is perhaps not as dependent on the user’s skill in performing as a sheet of music might be. With the spread of intuitive user-interfaces and the public’s increasing familiarity with computers, the amount of training and experience required to play a given piece of music on the piano or the cEristethet will far supersede that necessary for accessing and using a text on the computer. The playing-levels on some computer games, however, demand training as rigorous as any musical instrument.

Tournaments are held for computer games, in which gamers practice for endless hours before performing in competitions. There are also coding competitions, with specialised rules and strategies, where the contestants not only must possess the required level of skill, but must also demonstrate that they can act in teams. They must function as a single unit, in order to achieve a flawless process of coding as intense as any musical performance.

Computer games place the emphasis on the user, or the player, rather than on the creator of the work. The computer allows the player or user to exercise more influence on the text than is possible in most other channels of reproduction and distribution. Even in the cases where the influence of the player/reader on the text is a quasi-influence, as in Michael Joyce’s hypertext novel *Afternoon* or in the story-game *Myst* (Cyan Worlds 1993), the computer offers the opportunity to “play around” and make a few decisions about which satellites to explore, as opposed to actually changing the story or the conclusion by manipulating kernels (Chatman 1978:53). In literature theory, such emphasis on the user is found in

Reader-Response Theory, where Wolfgang Iser speaks of the interaction between reader and text: "Central to the Reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient" (Iser 1978:20). His ideas are tantalisingly close to a way in which we can understand computer games being used as they have been described in academic literature. The following quote from Iser is seductively close to a description of the interaction between a player and a game: "the dynamic interaction between text and reader has the character of an event, which helps to create the impression that we are involved in something real" (Iser 1978:67).

Flexible texts

What unique characteristics in the structure of text-based, online, multi-user computer games qualify them as objects for independent scrutiny, and how do they differ from other written communication? As Mary Ann Buckles (1985:171-172) shows, even a technologically 'simple' computer game contains virtually unlimited options for varying the unfolding events. Espen Aarseth (1997) focuses on this quality of computer-mediated texts in *Cybertext*, which is one characteristic of what he calls ergodic texts.

The assertion that hypertext inhabits a position portraying a dynamic act of experiencing rather than a static act of consuming holds a certain promise in the search for a theory which can be used to chart the interactions between game and player. This theory, however, should not be adopted without reservations, as Aarseth demonstrates (1997).

The ergodic text is a key to understanding Aarseth's concept of *Cybertext*, which he describes in this manner:

Cybertext, as it should now be clear, is the wide range (or perspective) of possible textualities seen as a typology of machines, as various kinds of literary communication systems where the functional differences among the mechanical parts play a defining role in determining the aesthetic process. (Aarseth 1997:22)

I will try to expand on how I understand Aarseth's definition. *Cybertext* differs from hypertext in more than the name and the ideological statements of a new and different approach to analysis. A hypertext is basically a structure that connects nodes of information either through hyperlinks on a computer, or through links such as footnotes in a book, details in a picture or different structures of structuring texts: trees, nets or loops. A cybertext is a text which does something other than wait to be consumed; it is active in its own creation. A cybertext is like a game, where the text is created anew as it's being traversed.

"The game plays the user just as the user plays the game, and there is no message apart from the play" (Aarseth 1997:162). With this statement, Aarseth expresses one of his major objections to the adaptation of a theory developed for understanding literature into a theory for understanding ergodic texts, particularly those in computer games. Using the adventure game as an example, he demonstrates how the vocabulary native to the theory of literary criticism cannot be easily adapted, despite some tempting similarities. One of the concepts of Reader-response theory which he discusses is Wolfgang Iser's *blanks* (gaps) (Iser 1974, 1978). These are semantic gaps left for the reader to fill in during the process of reading. Aarseth points out how this concept has been used with a low degree of precision by a

number of critics to describe the “narrative vacancies” of computer games (the points of decision where the player has to act in order for the “narration” of the game to continue).

The “openings” of determinate cybertexts are not gaps, in Iser’s sense, since they are not used to complement the written parts in a game of imagination; rather, they are used as a filter, in which only the “correct” response lets the user proceed through the text. To use another metaphor, they are keyholes, fitted by the text for very specific keys. However, even if the key fits (i.e. the command, such as open the balcony door, is successfully executed), the strategic progression of the game may not be affected at all. (Aarseth 1997:110-111)

Aarseth proceeds to explain how these gaps do not have any discernible effect on the narrative, but on phenomena related to the structure of the game outside the narrative level. To complete the confusion about the nature of gaps when speaking of computer games, Iser claims that there is *interaction* between the reader and the text, an interaction which takes place in the gaps. “Interactive” is a word that has been embraced by the software industry and used so much in advertising campaigns and the description of games and interfaces that it no longer points to interaction between equal human partners, but is as easily used about the way software reacts to input. This “interactivity” of the computer games often coincides with the gaps of cybertexts, the “keyholes” Aarseth describes. I will venture to claim that this is both the source of some of the seductive nature of *blanks* when it’s used in the criticism of games, as well as an expansion to what these gaps actually are: room for thought and inner activity.

Games and literature: the difference that makes a difference

To understand one of the significant differences between computer games and traditional literary work, I must refer to Barthes’ discussion of the amateur’s use of music, “the kneadingly physical” (1977:150) aspect of playing as opposed to the physically passive act of reading or watching a film or television. The interaction between the reader and the text in a gap is not a physical interaction. Perhaps it could be called an *inner action*, a mental leap as opposed to a physical movement. In playing computer games, the interaction with the text enters the realm of the physical, as in the pianist’s treatment of his keyboard. A game player plays the game with the same intense concentration and more or less skilled control of the keyboard as a pianist. I sometimes think of such actions as *enter actions*, because the enter key is so frequently used. The computer program does not interact with the player as a response to the command entered, it *re-acts*. I will return to this point in subsequent chapters, but I wish to emphasise that what is commonly referred to as *interaction* in “interactive video”, “interactive software”, “interactive literature” is, in my opinion, a *reaction* to the command entered.

How, then, shall we treat a text-based computer game, if not as a work of literature? Perhaps the game has no message beyond itself, but it contains signs which can be combined to form expressive and meaningful “messages” in the context of the game event. It is fictitious, and can be used as a basis for creating or experiencing events that can be understood as stories. Aarseth approaches this question in his discussion of the computer

game as fiction:

A successful fiction must, therefore, in one sense be interactive, just as a lie needs a believer in order to work. This mutual construction of fiction as an interactive object, however, is intrinsic to narrative literature, but less so to forms such as poetry or drama, which are not usually thought of as fiction. This alone should make us suspicious. Such interactive fiction as an adventure game is less fictive than a staged drama, since the user can explore the simulated world and establish causal relationships between the encountered objects in a way denied to the readers of *Moby Dick* or the audience of *Ghosts*. The adventure-game user cannot rely on imagination (and previous experience) alone, but must deduce the non-fictive laws by way of trial and error in order to complete the game. And a fiction which must be tested to be consumed is no longer a pure fiction, it's a construction of a different kind. This empirical dimension makes ergodic works of the adventure-game variety stand out from other types of literature and renders the term interactive fiction meaningless in this context. It is a purely ideological term, projecting an unfocused fantasy rather than a concept of any analytical substance. (Aarseth 1997:51)

The distinction Aarseth draws is not between fiction and realism, but between fiction and a simulation or "simulated fiction", a realm where causal relationships rule the actions of the user of the set of signs. The signs are not necessarily connected through the author's pre-planned dramatic curve, but through the logic of the user and the restraints of the system. In discussing John Cayley's *Book Unbound* (1995), Aarseth describes a work produced, as in a computer game, through the machinations of a program, one word at a time representing more-or-less complete sentences.

This text is an impurity, a site of struggle between medium, sign and operator. The fragments produced are clearly not authored by anyone. They are pulverized and reconnected echoes of meaning, that once existed. *Book Unbound* is an extreme paragon of cyborg aesthetics, an illustration of the issue of communicative control. The pleasure of this text is far from accidental; it belongs not to the illusion of control but to the suggestive reality of unique and unrepeatable signification. It would be a grave mistake to see this text as a metaphor of the "impossibility of perfect communication" or as the embodiment of the gap between sign and meaning in the texts. Instead, it shows how meaning struggles to produce itself through the cyborg activity of writing. (Aarseth 1997:57)

The games and cybertexts in Aarseth's examples are mainly restricted to the meaning "constructed within the limits of the program." *Book Unbound* and *Adventure* can both be explored and experienced in an individual manner, but they cannot be altered significantly through supplementation. The individual experience must fall within the limitations of what is pre-programmed. Playing *Adventure* alters which pre-programmed responses you get. Reading or "playing" *Book Unbound* alters the order in which the original text is presented, dependent on the editing of the user. In this manner, they represent two steps towards user development. As Aarseth points out in his discussion of the political position of the reader, there are several levels of users and developers. To be a "developer on the

highest level”, you must be able to write the program itself: “If, on the other hand, I had access to Hypercard’s source code in C, I could reprogram Hypercard and become a developer on the highest level. And so we have both user strata and developer strata, overlapping each other but still in a hierarchical relationship” (Aarseth 1997:174).

An adventure game bought on a CD-ROM does not usually invite this re-programming, although some games, such as *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare 2002), have acknowledged the power of creativity among its users and have opened for the independent development of areas. Other games invite the players to develop the game environment or the fictitious environment as a part of the game. We find such games among the MUDs. Room for user creativity can also be seen in the potential for creating “objects”, or small programs to perform actions or to simply imitate objects in MOOs. Other games allow improvisations in the verbal communication between players, which Aarseth claims resembles a jazz jam-session rather than prose narratives or adventure-game schemes (Aarseth 1997:158).

Aarseth’s MUD samples are mainly social meeting-places in the digital world: Tiny-MUDs and other meeting-spaces for research and cooperation, MUDs directed towards programming, or all of the above, which is an easily conceivable mix. The play-MUDs, upon which my work is based, take a step away from free improvisation in the direction of the structured narrative-like schemes of adventure games.

Espen Aarseth describes the rules of the game which are coded into the game-engine, or other restraints due to the software and hardware available to the gamer, as non-fictive laws: “The adventure game user cannot rely on imagination (and previous experience) alone, but must deduce the non-fictive laws of the simulated world by trial and error in order to complete the game” (Aarseth 1997:50). Rather than these non-fictive laws, a role-playing MUD has a set of ‘fictive’ or perhaps rather fictitious laws, which must also be deduced. When I discuss this I will not use the term non-fictive laws, as this points to rules which are not made up, but have some kind of root in reality. This belongs in the realm of simulations understood as simulations of real structures or systems (for instance aerodynamic simulations) or simulations of the flesh world, and not to the simulation of possible worlds. *Dragon Realms* is a MUD where the rules do not bend to what is possible in the flesh world but in some possible or fictive world.

But which rules hold precedence in the game? Within the fictitious framework of the game, the play proceeds according to rules. Some of these rules are enforced by the game: attempting violence in *Haven* in the MUD *Dragon Realms* led to instant reprisal from the invisible guardian floating in the area. But attempting emoted violence (that is, role-playing the violence) within the same area, which supposedly is protected by the gods, carried no danger of retribution unless it was discovered by one of the immortals². Thus, there were two types of ‘laws’. The first became obvious by deduction (related to the kind of laws Aarseth would call non-fictive laws); the other had to be learned through interaction with other players, with the immortals, or by reading about Haven in the help-files, a conventional code

² Haven was the city where all newbies (new beginners) had to start. This rule was both a means of protecting beginners in the game from having to experience the dangers and inconveniences of potential aggression from older players, and to ensure that the newbies could do no damage to others before they had learned the game. It was also part of the fictitious framework of the game, as the good god Elwyn protected the city.

of conduct.

This places a MUD closer to the adventure game as genre, but it differs from the adventure game in the degree of freedom the players are allowed in improvising the play, and it is more of a performance than a puzzle. While parts of *Dragon Realms* were quests containing puzzles, other parts were environments created for performance. But most of all, *Dragon Realms* was a strange land, a foreign country.

Entering the unfamiliar

Entering an online, multi-user computer game for the first time results in a state of disorientation and bewilderment. Even with familiar commands, your perception is suddenly limited to the text on a single screen, which you read as you play. Your arrival in the game-world is abrupt, and leaves you with an odd feeling of disembodiment. The game world does not supply the sensation of movement and orientation that is a major part of physical departure and arrival. In some ways, one's arrival in a game-world can be compared to being born: One arrives with no reference to one's earlier location, unless one counts the sometimes very complicated and agonising act of "creation" as a process of arrival and adjustment.

Orienting yourself within the game is an act of anthropology. The exploration of different commands and different means of navigation, and the realisation of the need to re-orient is what Jose Gil calls "becoming primitive": "Becoming-primitive is to understand oneself experiencing - and grasping in theoretical images - the circuits of intensity that emerge as one leaves, via a kind of methodological breakthrough, the domains mapped out by our signs" (1998:ix). This is how Jose Gil describes an essential, conscious act for an anthropologist attempting to understand an unfamiliar culture. The sign is the intermediate between the signified and the culturally-based signifier which we continually interpret and use in order to navigate through our culture. In order to become "primitive" and fully immersed in the culture of study, we need to find a method which allows us to forget what the signs mean in our familiar settings and learn to navigate according to a different map.

The act of becoming primitive in a game is essential to the game experience. Acting and reacting in a role-play MUD allow little time for rational thought or analytical questions such as: what is this phenomena, how does it affect me, what can I do about it? To experience the game, the mind must accept the nature of the game, and react to the nature of the game rather than to the nature of the familiar domain of reality.

A game such as *Dragon Realms* can, of course, be studied through its structure, the written text of each room (room descriptions) and its aesthetic qualities. The acts of the participants can then be mimicked, as one might copy tribal art in an attempt to be primitive. But by mimicking the acts of another or approaching the game as we think it is supposed to be approached from the standpoint of our own "domain of signs", we stand the risk of not *experiencing* the game. The nature of a game, be it online, offline, board-game or computer game, resists analysis. Of course strategies, structures and logic can be studied and described. However, *the reason for games* lies not in the logic, but in the pleasure of mastering, playing, controlling and submitting to them. The intangible pleasure of the game lies beyond the logically structured rules and within the area of "play" in all senses. This is a domain not easily mapped out by the signs of any culture. Becoming primitive

within the computer game makes it painfully obvious that as researcher and explorer I need to reach for new theoretical images. This is because the world of the game is by its very nature structured as something apart from the domain of the familiar. It is the nature of the game to impose on its players a new logic, a new domain within which the experiences take place, be it a football-field or a monopoly board.

Even after learning the structures of the game and appropriating the signs of this new domain, there is something just beyond the grasp of analysis which makes the game entertaining, or perhaps desirable.

A successful game, be it online or otherwise, leaves something to be desired. It holds back the final release, leaving it forever tantalisingly beyond reach. Drawing a parallel to another type of “play”, the play of sexuality and power which is Baudrillard’s focus in *Seduction* (1990), we can say a game in this manner is making itself seductive rather than pornographic, or if I borrow some of the vocabulary from Baudrillard: not the hyper-reality of the desired body over-exposed, but the seductive intangibility of the lack of release, lack of catharsis.³

Seduction is stronger than production. It is stronger than sexuality, with which it must never be confused. It is not something internal to sexuality, though this is what it is generally reduced to. It is a circular, reversible process of challenges, one-upmanship and death. It is, on the contrary, sex that is the debased form, circumscribed as it is by the terms of energy and desire. (Baudrillard 1990:47)

To be able to discuss, if not to pin down, the seduction of the game, we need to locate the signs which do not belong to the domain of the familiar, or which do, but which we for different reasons do not always consciously recognise, only react to. I am talking of the floating signifiers (Gil 1998:93). These are signs which “remain free-floating, without being anchored in signifieds.”

How can a sign avoid being anchored in signifieds? How can there be a sign - particularly in language, which the MUDs in my study are created through and by - without signifying something? Even the MmmHmmm of conversation has signification, something like: “I hear your voice, I am present, I am aware that you are talking.” Still, Gil shows how a signifier can be floating, there is *some* meaning but not *a* meaning. Gil claims that the presence of floating as opposed to fixed signifiers is created in certain pathological states where the breakdown of the boundary between the sign and the signified is translated into language, where the signified becomes vague, hidden in myths, tales, visions and almost forgotten religions. I assert that the floating signifiers are the signifiers of seduction. A game may be said to be like a *trompe l’oeil*; an enchanted simulation, not just a direct simulation:

³ In Bergen in August 2002, at the conference Digital Arts and Culture 2000 Susana Pajares Tosca participated in a panel with Jill Walker, Lisbeth Klastrup and Elin Sjørnsen, where she mentioned the role of catharsis in computer games. No paper is available from this presentation, but this is from her notes: “Catharsis in literature works because the things happen to “someone else” and so we can be cleansed, but in a computer game we are the main actors (even if there is no character representing us on screen), whatever happens, happens “to us”, so we cannot call it catharsis” (email: Susana Pajares Tosca, March 2002).

Enchanted simulation: the trompe-l'oeil - false than false, the secret of appearances. Neither fable, story or composition, nor theatre, scene or action. The trompe l'oeil forgets all this and bypasses it by the low-level representation of second-rate objects. (...) Suddenly they no longer "represent", they are no longer objects, no longer anything. They are blank, empty signs that bespeak a social, religious or artistic anti-ceremony or anti-representation. Scraps of social life, they turn against the latter and parody its theatricality; this is why they are scattered, juxtaposed at random. The implication being that *these objects are not objects*. They do not describe a familiar reality, as does a still life. They describe a void, and absence, the absence of every representational hierarchy that organizes the elements of a tableau, or for that matter, the political order. (Baudrillard 1990:60)

Computer games do this by deliberately making the game-reality not hyper-realistic, but beyond realism. The fantastic computer games related to *Dragon Realms* by topic, theme and structure are not simulations of this world (the way a simulation of golf, football or a flight-simulator is), but of a possible world. The objects it refers to are not flesh world objects but potential objects from a reality where hierarchy, structure and politics is all conventional, independent of physical laws.

A formal aspect that underlines this is how modern technology makes it possible to use actors and video in games, which would be quicker and ultimately cheaper than drawing animated recreations of video-clips, even with the use of computer animation. One reason why this is not common is that directing people is exhausting and presents considerable potential for error or misunderstanding (Mark Seibert, interview 1999). Another reason why this method is uncommon might be the common aesthetic of games: Games present the "false than false". The producers of games not only stage a video-shot (imitation of reality) for the game; they oversee the drawing and animation of the imitation of a staged video-shot. This "false than false" empties the signs of the game of meaning:

One of the perceived elements fantasy role-playing computer games utilise for their seduction of the player is the floating signifier. An example of a floating signifier within a MUD might be the Silver Rose, which became a major quest object at *Dragon Realms* throughout 1998. The Silver Rose was given to one of the players and thought to come from the deity of madness and illusion: Azhanith, as it appeared in the Silver Palace. The Rose had initially no known meaning. It was an object created in a role-playing situation by one of the immortals in the game, and not a quest-object as Ragnhild Trondstad describes it: "Objects that the player finds in the quest area act as such *promises of meaning*. When the player finds a new object she will try to decode its significance in relation to the quest, to come closer to the quest's solution. To find the meaning of an object and determine its significance, the player must try out different ways of interacting with the object." (2001:4.2). Players could not make the Silver Rose do anything or make any other item react on it: it was effectively a piece of trash. But as the Rose became known it gained meaning: it was stolen, Player Characters were murdered for it, and it was said to signify everything from the corruption of sanity to the light of Elwyn (the good deity). The Silver Rose had no 'real meaning' – it was a floating signifier as it didn't signify anything but what the players put into it, but control of the meaning of the Silver Rose became a matter of political and social status.⁴ In Gil's

argument, his example of a floating signifier is the body – it has no real meaning, but control of it gives status and political power:

Fixing the floating signifier. How can this be done? Whoever holds the potencies of bodies, in the social domain, holds power and, in particular, political power. So all one has to do is make bodies work under another regime of signs to monopolize power, to transform the floating signifier that governs the circulation of energies among codes into a supreme signifier and frame it in another system to which all signs are submitted, in order to have control of the bodies. (Gil 1998:178)

Approaching games through the concept of seduction and the ethnological idea of becoming primitive necessitates a different approach to their study than through the analysis of structure and logic. If only the structure and logic of a game is considered, the game will not appear not to be fixed in meaning, but to be devoid of meaning. Similar to the emptiness of the floating signifier or of the *trompe l'oeil*, it is an emptiness with potential, it is a lack of import which permits the player to fill the game with meaning. If I wish to know what pleasure the players derive from a game, I have to become what I study. I must “become primitive,” go native. I have to immerse myself in the game and play as do the other players, in the hope of recognising the floating or the fixed signifiers long enough to record their presence and their functions. This immersion is not simply a matter of reading. It differs from immersing oneself in the literature of an author in order to understand his or her work, it is a matter of becoming not just part of the audience, but one of the participants as meaning develops.

There are certain methods which I can use in this process. One is the definition of a goal, and extensive reporting of the experiences I have recorded while in the game. The anthropological journal is easy to keep, through the electronic logging of the game-sessions. A year's worth of game-time is logged onto one handy little CD-ROM. The log, however, is useless without my notes upon its significance. Together with my notes and references, it provides evidence of a game played through a certain strategy, a record of my strategy and that of the people I played with, and a log of the goals we chose and the means we used to achieve them. The log, in conjunction with a series of interviews of players from *Dragon Realms*, *Aarinfel*, *The Infinite Point* and *World's End*, constitutes a material that provides varied insights from many different approaches to my online experience. It remains, however, a documentation of what happened in my presence, often as the result of prodding, plotting, or direct enquiries.

This personal participation represents a problem in the understanding of games. It makes any attempt at understanding, interpreting and defining the understanding into a process that carries a significant risk of influencing the object of the study. This is, in part,

⁴ One of the most common complaints towards the end of *Dragon Realms*, and later *Aarinfel*, was that the game had become so much more restricted than in the early days. Can it be that this complaint reflected that the battle of meaning had been fought, and the many little details of the game had been assigned meaning: the floating signifiers had become fixed, and the flow of power slower and more static?

a question of reflexivity, which I will deal with extensively in the next chapter. For the present, I will address this question briefly in the context of performance.

As with performance, computer games demand the presence of the analyst at the site when the event happens. Games and performances, however, differ in one important aspect: traditional performances are events which aspire to becoming a part of cultural history. The performance of a game, be it a board-game, role-playing game or any other computer game, is not played for its impact upon an audience or the shared memory of anybody outside the participants. While a large-scale staged battle such as a football game is both a performance and a game, it remains essentially the same game as the one played by two improvised teams of 12 year old boys kicking a ball around the school-yard for the sheer fun of it.

While computer RP games have the self-contained aspect of football-matches and monopoly-games, they also tend to become less real and more virtual, or even theoretical. While a football-match can become a public event and have non-participatory spectators, a role-playing computer game is not open to the scrutiny of non-participants. It is as self-contained as a private life. The best reference point I have found for role-playing games is in a discussion of the relationship between performance and anthropology. In *Between Theater and Antropology* Richard Schechner introduces a table which I find permits me to place role-play games in relation to performance (Schechner 1985:40):

This table demonstrates how a phenomenon without a name or a fixed position in one theoretical field can turn out to be already theorised in another field. The unpublicly restored non-event : an event which never happened, which is restored but never made public, could

Table 1, chap. 2

	Past	Future
Subjunctive ¹⁹ Virtual Mythic Fictional	Subjunctive sources Nonevent	Subjunctive performances workshops that are never shown publicly paratheaters and nonpublic happenings Unpublicly restored nonevents
Indicative Actual	Indicative sources	Indicative performances Someone else
Historical	Event	Restored events Restored nonevents

¹⁹ Subjunctive: a verb used for subjective, doubtful, hypothetical or grammatically subordinate statements (*Webster's Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*)

there be a better description of a role-playing game? When it is restored online, in what we so willingly think of as “virtual” space, it becomes even less tangible: An event which never happened restored to be performed for nobody, in a space which does not exist. The layers of unreality become irresistible to someone with a penchant for both theory and fantasy.

Schechner discusses the relationship between anthropology and performance. He also examines problems one encounters in studying behaviour, particularly in reproducing behaviour through the reproduction of certain rituals or events where the presence of the researchers make the event possible. He also touches on the relationship between play, games, theatre, and ritual (1977:6). In this attempt at applying game-theory to dramas, he shows that stories can definitely be based upon game-structures. The error in his logic, in claiming that plays are games, appears when he speaks of games as generators of theatrical situations: “The story yields to the game as the generative matrix of the theatrical situation. Thus we have the game of ‘waiting for Godot,’ the game of ‘killing Madame’ in *The Maids*, and so forth” (Schechner 1977:22). The flaw in this logic seems to be the ‘chicken and the egg’ problem. Which came first, the play (in theatre) or the game? The plays Schechner refer to have only one outcome and one story, while a role-playing game can have several different outcomes and stories that vary significantly; more so than the differences one finds between several performances of the same play.

A game and a play might have time, objects, non-productivity and rules in common, but the play is not a competition. There might be much at stake for the performers, but they do not receive their reward from within the play, the reward comes from outside. Not even Boal’s approach, with the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, aspires to a reward which is related exclusively to the play. A game, however, can be played for rewards included in the game itself, whether they consists of points in a score-sheet in a hack-‘n-slash or increased trust, privilege and influence in a role-playing game. Theatrical plays and performances are directed towards the audience, and are played for the spectators. While the reaction of spectators might be a partial reward for playing a good game, the game can be enjoyed without the presence of an audience, whereas a play is considered a failure if it has not been seen. Game players also exercise personal influence on a game, since they do not step into each other’s roles, but create their own. Consequently, in an online, multiplayer game where I take part in the game in order to study it, my presence is necessary for the event to take place. The event, performance, or object of my study is at all times influenced by my presence and my activities. There is no manner in which I could conduct the study from outside the game. This places me in a most painful and most delightful dilemma, in itself quite seductive, a antinomy which turns the act of studying this domain of appearances into an enthusiastic journey into seduction.

Finding yourself in the MUD

The other principal approach to the study of computer games such as MUDs is based upon psychology and the development of identity. Amy Bruckman (1992, 1997) and Sherry Turkle (1996) are known advocates of this view, along with Allucquere Roseanne Stone (1996). Bruckman worked with Turkle on her early work on online identity, while Stone has a deep interest in identity, particularly identity and gender. This discourse led her into discussions of culture, identity and technology.

A frequently recurring argument about encounters in digital space concerns the fluid identities which derive from the ease with which a player or chatter can change avatar. There are two opposing viewpoints towards this freedom. One group worries about the fact that it is often impossible to know for certain who is behind the avatar. The person your fifteen-year-old daughter holds lengthy conversations with every evening on some IRC-site, they claim, might be a convicted rapist who will shortly be released from wherever he has been locked up. At the other end of the scale, one can find those who happily advocate exploring different aspects of self through the opportunities for anonymous presentation provided by digital sites. They will argue that one may use these explorations to gain knowledge and understanding about oneself and learn how to become a resourceful and positively contributing member of society.

In her discussion of the fluidity of identity in a world where desire meets technology, Allucquere Roseanne Stone (1996) describes the case of multiple personalities, and how they appear outside of digital space, as well as in it. In the case of the Cross Dressing Psychiatrist (1996:69), she describes a well-known and rather interesting example or popular myth; that of a man whom she calls Sanford Lewin, who discovered his female self, Julie, in virtual space. When he discovered incidentally that women use a different language, revealing personal information and relating more intimately to others, when they believe themselves to be communicating with other women, this male psychiatrist chose for himself a female handle, a name under which he chose to appear in different chat-groups (areas for conversation and discussion). Stone retells the mythic Lewin's tale about how his female character triggered a female personae much more interesting than the masculine counterpart. The female avatar made friends more easily, and related to others on a much more intimate level. This is a sad tale, because 'Lewin' in the tale became envious of the success of his female personae, and started to desire the more intimate contacts, reactions and relationships on the part of his male self.

In Stone's retelling of this myth from "the early days of virtual communities", she treats this as a tale of conflicting or overlapping personae:

Because of the limited bandwidth mode of the net, both of Lewin's personae had equal presence - but sufficient presence that participants in the chat conferences had no difficulty in distinguishing between them and in making sophisticated distinctions regarding possible friendships and mutual interests. There was no politically apprehensible citizen, but there were certainly socially legible personae. (Stone 1996:79)

When I read this after spending considerable time intensively playing role-play MUDs, this occurrence of socially legible multiple personae seems no longer a mystery, but a natural phenomenon. In a role-play terminology, the story of Sanford Lewin is about the difference between *IC* and *OOC* - In Character and Out Of Character. *IC* and *OOC* is an important distinction in role-playing, and these concepts will be discussed repeatedly throughout this work. When his character, the crippled woman Julie, was exposed as a fiction, the aggression from her 'net-friends' as described by Stone was very similar - from the opposite end of the scale - to the aggression and frustration which occurs when the two spheres are mixed in a game. Rather than let the real personality intrude on the game, Lewin had let the game intrude on other people's real personalities.

In the anonymous sphere of a role-play game, a player can come across information about another player which does not belong to the character the other player controls. If this first player then allows his or her role-play character (PC) to harass or favour the other PC because its player has admitted to being homosexual, black, old, young or otherwise in conflict with the first player's biases, this player is crossing the line between IC and OOC behaviour. At this point, the player no longer acknowledges the existence of separate personas (or even role-playing characters) or a distinction between the person and the persona, and transgresses the preconditions of the game by insisting that the character should be the person and the person the character. The rule of keeping IC and OOC apart is one of the most sacred in role-playing games, enforced by the immortals or the game-masters and administrators of the game in order to make the game an enjoyable digital place for all participants. Within the game, the players are not only allowed to, but *required* to explore their own multiple personae.

I will illustrate this with an example which will be further elaborated upon in Chapter Five. David, an experienced player and a valuable source in this study, played a character in *Dragon Realms* which began as a neuter serpent-humanoid and was changed by its deity into a male human in order to deceive another character. He became involved in some very emotional role-play extending over a long period, which influenced several parties with its intensity. When asked how he related to this, he admitted that the emotions had indeed been his own. Eristeth (the character), according to David, was a part of himself, and his emotions and his experiences were personal. He was, nevertheless, perfectly aware that neither he nor the other parties involved in the RP were actually the characters they played. The player is not the character, or limited to that one persona. But the character is part of the player, and the scope of a character is limited by the player's skills, emotional register, intelligence and experience.

When playing a female, a man is no longer expected to or rewarded for letting his true male self shine through. The most admired role-players, those who become legends of the game-universes, are those who can easily immerse themselves in characters as different from themselves as Julie in Stone's example was from Sanford Lewin.

In the framework of a multi-user RPG, or role-play game, it is possible to reveal as much or as little of your real self as you wish. Your degree of success depends upon your skill in creating characters and giving them a background, a system of reference and credibility. Games in which the quality of RP was reputed to be high, such as *Dragon Realms* (DR), *Aarinfel* (Aa-started by players from DR), or *World's End* (WE), all had one requirement in common. They demanded that the player was capable of distinguishing between the reactions of the PC's (Player Characters), and personal reactions which belonged in other contexts. This, again, demanded a consciousness lacking in discussion lists, chat-rooms or the social MUDs which were not particularly devoted to role-playing. These were the digital spaces where Stone found her mythical example, Julie/Sanford. To believe that one 'is' the same as one's handle – that Lewin was Julie, and was not just Julie's puppet-master – allows Stone's point about the constructed 'self' to stand out clearly. It displays how we all, without the trappings of social information which would be communicated with a broader bandwidth, actually have to create our 'selves'. The homogenic 'self' becomes more fragile when the discrepancies between our different modes of communicating become more visible, and we appear as different 'selves' whether we acknowledge this or not.

Reaching for a deeper understanding of these selves, and possibly for a way to utilise their increased visibility in the narrow bandwidth of computer media, Sherry Turkle explores the fate of “Identity in the Age of the Internet” (Turkle 1995). She takes up the challenge of the games, discussing them as outlets for exploring the pluralism of identity. Referring to Lacan, she points to the connection to post-modern thinking, where the self is a realm of discourse, rather than a permanent structure of the mind (Turkle 1995:178).

This sheds some light on the conflicts of Stone’s surprised ‘chatters’, who tried to tackle the different selves of Sanford Lewin. In relation to the concept of the self as a permanent structure, a core, the only secure reference point in a shifting world and a point of balance one is expected to find and hold on to, the fluidity of the shifting personae offered in the digital arenas can be regarded as a contradiction or even a threat. Stone quotes one of the people who tried to become friends with Lewin after it was revealed that he was Julie, or that Julie was himself: “But whether he’s Julie or Sanford, man or woman, there’s an inner person that must have been there all along. That’s the person I really like” (1996:80). Stone questions this core person at the end of the chapter, referring to the parable of the world resting on the back of an elephant standing on the back of a turtle. In the parable, when the question about what the turtle stands on is posed, the answer is that there are turtles all the way down. According to Turkle’s presentation of postmodernist thinking on the nature of personal identity, the ‘self’ becomes very much a case of ‘turtles all the way down’, where one’s identity does not contain any core, but rather layers upon layers of different personae.

Cycling identities

Sherry Turkle uses the metaphor “Cycling of identities” to describe the rapid shifts and the many digital faces of the physically individual being. She claimed that the physical restraints of communities and families kept the opportunities for cycling under strict control, while the Internet opened for “constructions and reconstructions of self that characterise post-modern life. In its virtual reality we self-fashion and self-create” (1995:180).

Turning to another scholar who discusses the existence and utility of roles, Ervin Goffman (1959), we see that the problems of different identities or *fronts* as he calls them have been discussed long before the Internet was discovered as an arena for everyday-life presentations. Goffman is particularly suitable to take into this discussion, as he is interested not in the formalised and ritualised acts of professional actors, but in the more-or-less conscious constructions of everyday selves. I will return to Goffman in subsequent chapters. The question of why we are so troubled by characters like Sanford Lewin and his Julie, might be answered by Goffman in this quote:

Society is organised on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation, and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value or treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also

implicitly foregoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be, and hence foregoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they ought to see as the “is”. (1959:13)

The story of Sanford Lewin, be it a myth of the net of the same calibre as the myth of the alligators in the London sewers, or a true story, is an illustration of how this new arena is suited to the creation and misuse or misunderstanding of fronts. By creating a character and choosing a description, taking actions to personalise your character, perhaps building a room where you can receive guests and choosing clothes to wear or items to hold, you create a front, with a setting and different insignia to hint at rank. “Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (Goffman 1959:22). In the flesh world, the fronts are often already in place, with their many subtle demands and pre-ordained agreements. A front may exist independently of the individual’s introduction into it, as a social construction, a “collective representation” and a fact in its own right (Goffman 1959:27). The “teacher”, the “doctor”, the “carpenter”, the “student”; all these are fronts that already hold a certain agreement, and this agreement is communicated and upheld through props and role-play, through performance.

Goffman cites several detailed descriptions of how fronts are constructed and maintained. His descriptions do, however, make it clear that Stone’s argument about bandwidth is indeed significant when one shifts the construction of self from the dirt-world to digital spaces. We must learn to convey the subtle hints read from stance, clothes or personal grooming by other means when entering an arena for interaction not defined by our physical presence. To slip, to fiddle, to let the body intrude on the conversation, things we look for when making up our minds about a person’s qualities, have to be translated into interpretations of texts, and of a new set of actions (Goffman 1959: 52). The body is not present other than as reflected in the way the avatar acts or speaks. Sometimes, however, it does intrude. A slip of the finger on the enter-button can send the same message two or more times. Typographic errors occur frequently, sometimes hilarious, sometimes simply embarrassing or revealing. We also have the infamous *mischannel*: choosing the wrong channel and broadcasting a message intended for a particular receiver to the wrong person or persons.

All of us, however, are more-or-less well-trained in reading and mastering the signals of the body in the flesh world. We know how to dress for certain occasions, how to handle a fork or chopsticks in a relatively polite manner, how to signal interest, acceptance, anger or arrogance without words. In the digital world, these means of communication disappear. We lack even the tone of voice to guide us as we struggle to decipher the true meanings of the messages we receive. In addition, we must struggle to encode our own meanings into the messages we send⁶.

Some fronts do exist, and more are being constructed as the digital arenas open up to an ever-increasing number of users. Still, much of the frustration expressed in the interviews Stone and Turkle have conducted can most likely be traced to the lack of mutually-accepted

⁶ Quarrels among the users of the different digital arenas are not unusual or infrequent. The players argue with each other and with the immortals (administrators). The immortals quarrel with

fronts rather than the fact that digital space offers such a wide range of personae with predetermined conventions for behaviour, value, rank and expectations.

Sherry Turkle moves on from discussing the cycling of identities to examining how different uses exploit the possibility of becoming an “other” within digital spaces without investigating how game-culture is constructed in order to make the games work. In doing so, her discussion left out the very conscious side of the online act of constructing selves, and the groups which are perhaps most aware of the subject she addresses, the theme of the self and its many personae. Presenting an interesting example of a young man who in most situations seemed to be socially disabled, and who remained so without learning from the role-playing experience he had, she did not pause to question the ideals and rules of the group she confronted him with. After inviting him as one of a group of several MUDders from the Boston area, she referred to a confrontation where she read his reaction as a contradiction rather than a confirmation of his statements, and where she did not follow up the emotional value of what she had unearthed by discussing the quality of invested emotion with the group she claimed ‘challenged’ him.

Stewart repeatedly insisted that, despite the fact that his character was “technically” named Achilles, he was in fact playing himself. He reminded the group [of role-players playing games from different periods in time] that when he MUDded he actually asked other players to call him Stewart. But during one group session, after insisting for hours that he plays no role on MUDs, a member of the role-playing contingent casually asked Stewart if he was married. Stewart immediately said, “Yes,” and then blushed deeply because he was caught in the contradiction between his insistence that he plays no roles in Gargoyle and his deep investment in his MUD marriage. (Turkle 1995:205).

At this point, from the view of an almost addicted role-player, I find it interesting that Turkle assumes that the blush is connected to the contradiction, and not to his very real emotions concerning his MUD partner. For Stewart, this reaction might well be a confirmation that he lived as he claimed. He immediately answered “yes” when asked if he was married. To him, the ‘marriage’ may have been much more genuine than any contradiction Turkle could read into his emotions. From Turkle’s description, I would assume that his MUD marriage was not a role he acted out, but an emotional bond which he freely admitted, and that his blush in the interview confirmed both of his statements. Although a MUD marriage holds no legal obligations, Stewart appears to have felt strong emotional commitments. I also wonder why Turkle makes a point out of this blush without questioning the role-players about their emotional investments. She would probably have found that strong emotion and deep investment in the role you play is very common. If the role includes a partner, the “bond of role-play”⁷ can be both stronger and more enduring than many a real-life affair. In that setting, where it is ‘just a role’, the contradiction between the very real emotion and the

players and among themselves. Sometimes the discussions can become very heated. One problem that quickly becomes obvious is the number of misunderstandings. Things which would otherwise be revealed through stance, appearance or tone of voice have to be communicated through the written medium. In this manner, disagreements tend to become quarrels, and result in the famous flame-wars, named after the temperature of the exchanges.

knowledge of it being play-acting is potentially quite embarrassing, more so for role-players than for Stewart, who freely admits that his emotions are stimulated by his shared online experiences. In the role-play environments that I have encountered, both on- and off-line, this phenomenon is openly acknowledged and treated gently and with understanding.

Sherry Turkle proceeds to discuss how gender is constructed or de-constructed in MUDs, depending on the effect the player wishes to achieve. With the observations of Bartle, Dibbell and Reid in mind, it is interesting to note the awareness of the construction of self in her subjects. Where we have previously seen the actions of the constructed characters recorded, Turkle reads meaning into them with the gaze of an analyst. She questions the way digital media creates new arenas for social action and conflict, and how these arenas carry with them new ethical problems. Quoting one woman, angered by being betrayed by a man she met at in discussion group, she points to a central aspect of the digital arenas:

In a MUD, or a 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. (1995:231).

The subjects in Turkle's study repeatedly question the ethical boundaries. Common questions both among her subjects and in online conversation are, for example: When are you cheating on your spouse? Are you cheating when writing erotic fiction together with another? Are you cheating when meeting with another person to have physical contact? Are you cheating when sharing the intimate dreams and thoughts which should be reserved for your husband or wife? What is rape? What is abuse? Can we call it abuse when there has been no other exchange than the exchange of signals, words flashing across a screen? When are you married? How do you express commitment? These are not legal questions. The laws and the rules of virtual space are fairly simple to relate to. Online shopping, such as buying books from Amazon.com, has been made simple and relatively safe through the use of various encryption protocols. This form of exchange is a very clear matter of: "you mail a book to me, I allow you to tap my account for the payment."

Problems begin to appear in the digital arenas when the many-faceted splendour of human interaction intrudes. In most media, communicators are trained to utilise redundancy and simple expressions to convey the gist of a message. In the chat-groups on Internet, we approach people with very different views on how they appear online: some who believe in a unified physical "self", which they expect to be natural and un-constructed, mixed with people who believe in a fragmented or constructed self and yet others who do not attempt to be anything like themselves at all. There are very few cues as to which kind of "self" is behind the different online representations, hence the potential for confusion and misunderstanding.

The digital arenas become very good places for questioning and testing out the borderline between the natural and the naturalised. The 'naturalised': what we accept as natural

⁷ As used by Levi in one of several conversations on *LinguaMoo* after the closing of *DR*.

without questioning, is challenged by the possibility for identities to be fluid and shifting. When one feels 'cheated', the sensation often arises from unfulfilled assumptions about the natural. This is a reaction which often causes sexualised chat-spaces to flare up in angry flames, for example when a 'personae' having an affair as a woman turns out to be a man, or vice-versa. The naturalised sphere here is the gendered imagination, and the assumption that one can only have his imagination stimulated by someone with the sexual preferences and a sexual identity in the flesh world that correspond with these preferences. The fact that transgender personae occur and can even be sexually stimulating, shows how powerful this assumption of the naturalised sexuality still is.

A central aspect of many of Turkle's descriptions revolves around the problems of "online as its own place". This 'place' is very much constructed. The actions do not actually take place, they simply appear 'real' at the moment we decode the signals on the screen. One question appears repeatedly in this work: what kind of "place" is online? For that discussion, see chapter ten, "The Geography of a Non-Place".

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed some theoretical approaches to the study of MUDs, placing them in relation to some predominant views in the current debate: MUDs as literary works, MUDs as performances or plays, and MUDs as a metaphorical laboratory for experimenting with identities. My conclusion is that an online, multi-player, role-playing game is a different beast: It is related to literature, and it can provide an arena for telling or inventing stories, but it is not a story or a narrative. It is related to performances and has many aspects in common with plays, but it is not a play. It allows for experimentation, but the environment is too unpredictable and difficult to control for it to serve as a laboratory. The intentions, cultures, skills and approaches of the different players are too diverse to act as the reproducible environment of a laboratory.

Despite the valuable information about the structure and culture of games which may be gleaned from diverse theoretical approaches, an online, multi-player, role-playing game is still a game, and should not be discussed and explored from the prejudice of any theoretical position, but from how it is used and played. While Turkle, Bruckman and Stone touch upon this approach in their discussions of use and identity, they are still primarily interested in how the computer games can be useful, either for teaching or for the exploration of identity. Only by looking at the MUDs themselves and their empirical use is it possible to determine their nature, and establish what a game actually is, rather than what it resembles.

Second interlude - Hanging out in Opal

Not all visits to the MUD were complicated role-playing session. A lot of time was spent learning to navigate the different areas, on levelling, and on considering the IC and OOC sides of playing. The first thing I did when entering the game was read notes. These were arranged in different categories, such as messages from the immortals, stories, background, bugs or messages concerning the clans. In this example I have kept the screen with all the different messages from the game, from other players and in response to my own actions as it would look as I moved through Dragon Realms. I have however cut away some of the rooms as I walk through, so a reader who knows Opal from *Dragon Realms* will find that the walks are not complete. I have also cut down the fights – they were long and spam-generating. Short fights are the sign of a better fighter than what Erinn was at this point: May 22nd, 1998. I have also removed the names from the who-lists and changed the names in the notes, in order to protect players who might not have consented to have their character mentioned in this study.

This session contains a discussion in notes about player killing (PK), always a problematic topic, some messages to the clan members of Arcana, movement through the magic city Opal, a visit into the Tower of Arcana in Opal, and hack'n'slash in the elemental tower. I have also kept the OOC channels, but this was one of the less OOCly active days. Since this was a quiet day there were also no tells, no clan-chat, and no grouping for the hack'n'slash.

There are a lot of messages which appear distracting and annoying at first, but as I played I learned to distinguish between them. A really good player has no problems following and interpreting all of the different messages given, including the arrivals and departure of the NPC's as they wander more or less at random about the areas into the RP.

The prompt-line contains information which is vital to the player:

517hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 83% visible Common
517 hp: my character has 517 hit points, when they are at 0 she's dead.
190 ma: She has 190 mana points – this is energy for spells.
620mv: 620 movement points, when they are 0 she must rest.
Opp <None>: she isn't fighting, otherwise opponent hp would show.
Leader 83 %: she's following herself, and is hurt, down to 83% hp
Visible: not sneaking, lurking, hiding or invisible
Common: she speaks the default language, common. Erinn knew four languages.

517hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 83% visible Common

note read

You have no unread notes on this board.

Switching to Bugs & Typos (board 3).

519hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 83% visible Common

note read

[100] Ella: Plague, the void

Wed May 20 13:06:58 1998

To: all

One would note that it's a little strange, that one can contract the plague, sitting alone in one's own living room. If there's an easy way to fix it, might it be made impossible to contract the plague in the void? Sitting around is surprisingly fatal.

-Ellai

521hp 190ma 603mv opp <None> leader 83% visible Common
w

A Shadowy Alcove

[Exits: east]

Almost unnoticeable from the street, this is little more than a small space between buildings, with a few stone benches carved from the walls. The lighting here is rather poor, and it doesn't look as though visitors come here often. You can see why - there is nothing to see here.

522hp 190ma 616mv opp <None> leader 83% visible Common rest

INFO: Halimon has gained a level!

522hp 190ma 616mv opp <None> leader 83% visible Common
You rest.

526hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 84% visible Common note read

[87] Indira: The recent pking spree

Wed May 20 16:58:52 1998

To: all

*** OOC ***

Okay, I just popped in to find a lot of people are angry, we have lost yet another area, things are looking bad. A great start to the day.

Anyway, from what I can gather, Magrath is getting hassled by a lot of people for his pking. I cannot believe this at all. In a war, there is no such thing as excessive pk.

Although the mud is not reality, we all make an attempt at being somewhat realistic. In real wars, are all but the strongest soldiers spared? No, not at all. In fact, the weaker side adopts whatever tactic necessary to survive. If this involves killing civilians or diplomats, so be it. Perhaps they may actually do something toward peace.

So, Magrath, being the strongest pker I have with Iello around sparingly, gets passed all the pking jobs, basically because I can not do as much myself. i.e. I TELL him who and what to kill. A lot of the time, he does it because he is ordered to. And with our lands being taken left and right, what other option do we have since we can't take any in return. We pk in the hope that it will slow them down, and at best make them think twice about continuing.

So, if you disagree with my philosophy, that is a shame. Many may say that they would prefer to be captured. I would rather be pked, because then I get another shot at doing something. I got captured and tortured for a couple of hours while the Farm was taken. I was not impressed.

So, that is pretty much my spiel. If you don't want to be pked, either say something so you clan doesn't war, join a clan who doesn't war, or hide in Haven because if it comes to pking someone or losing all my areas one by one, be assured someone will die, whether it is them or me. It is part of the game,

If you want to abuse someone for Fear's pking of late, abuse me. I don't want Magrath having to deal with people oocly hating him and giving him hell all the time just because he has to do Fear's dirty work.

Indira

562hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 90% visible Common
note read

You have no unread notes on this board.

Switching to Announcements (board 1).

562hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 90% visible Common
who

[Hob Fem]

[Hum Fem]

[Elf Mal]

[Ser Mal]

[Dwa Mal]

[Elf Fem] Erinn

[Dro Mal] (Outlaw)

[Hum Mal]

You see 8 players in the game (highest 10).

566hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 90% visible Common
stand

You stand up.

570hp 19oma 612mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Common
n

A Wide Plaza

[Exits: north east south west]

You are crossing a wide plaza, along with many others who are dashing about some important errand. The plaza is crafted of fine white stone, its centerpiece a fountain of crystal.

570hp 19oma 604mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Common
exit

Obvious exits:

North - Maegril's Books

East - Talisman Way

South - Erasmus's Filters And Potions

West - A Wide Plaza

570hp 190ma 580mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Commons

Erasmus's Filters And Potions

[Exits: north]

You have entered an impossibly cluttered store. Above you, behind you, and all around you are dozens of shelves, stacked to the ceiling with odd items and potions. You find yourself wondering when these shelves will collapse, and spill their frog brains and dragon spittle all over an unlucky customer -- maybe you!

In voluminous robes, a Citizen of Opal sweeps past.

A Squat Homonculus waddles past.

(Shopkeeper) From the back of the shop, Erasmus appears.

570hp 190ma 577mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Commonslist

[Lvl Price] Item

[9 2100] A purple colored potion.

[6 1400] A pearly potion.

[10 1680] A clear potion.

[8 1680] A green herbal potion.

[9 1680] A yellow potion.

[4 7000] An ocean blue potion.

571hp 190ma 596mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Commons

A squat homonculus leaves north.

571hp 190ma 596mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Commons

You are carrying:

a clear potion

a holy wafer

a waterskin

(Glowing) mithril boots

a long pipe

571hp 190ma 596mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Commons

The Town Crier yells '12 O'Clock and All's Well!'

571hp 190ma 596mv opp <None> leader 91% visible Commons

exa box

The box is quite beautiful, with an elaborately-decorated lid, and hinges at once delicate and durable. Looking inside, you find that you cannot see the bottom.

When you look inside, you see:

A silver box is about half full, and contains:

- an elegant green silk evening gown
- a green silk gossamer stole
- a lovely pair of green silk slippers
- a silver shield
- some silverbell flowers

(2) a clear potion

(3) a grey mushroom

- a rabbit's foot
- a ring set with lovely diamonds
- a diploma
- a circle of turquoise

573hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 92% visible Common

AUCTION: Reemer is auctioning a loaf of bread with a reserve of o.

574hp 190ma 609mv opp <None> leader 92% visible Common

get grey box

AUCTION: a loaf of bread, going once at o gold.

574hp 190ma 609mv opp <None> leader 92% visible Common

You get a grey mushroom from a silver box.

574hp 190ma 609mv opp <None> leader 92% visible Common

eat grey

You eat a grey mushroom.

Your eyes tingle.

You no longer feel hungry.

575hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 92% visible Common

sneak

AUCTION: a loaf of bread, going twice at o gold.

575hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 92% visible Common

You attempt to move silently.

You learned something about sneak...

577hp 190ma 620mv opp <None> leader 92% hidden sneaking Common

talk smoke

A statue of Smoke smiles at you.

A statue of Smoke says 'Arcane One, you are granted admission to the Unseen Tower'

A statue of Smoke laughs and dark smoke fills the alcove for a moment.
Your vision is obscured and you feel disoriented.

579hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 93% sneaking Common
n

A Spotless Kitchen

[Exits: south]

Unnaturally precise, every inch of this kitchen seems planned, layed out carefully. Everything is parallel, or set at right angles, with unnerving accuracy. This kitchen couldn't possibly be used by mere mortals, it wouldn't be this spotless. Who cooks here, anyhow?

(White Aura) Garamond the Arcane cook floats bowls and pots about here.

579hp 19oma 618mv opp <None> leader 93% sneaking Common
'could I have some milk please?

You say 'could I have some milk please?'

Garamond the Arcane cook drops a mug of milk.

580hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 93% sneaking Common
get milk

You get a mug of milk.

582hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 93% sneaking Common
s

The Great Hall Of Arcana

[Exits: north east up]

This large, round chamber, is surrounded by statues of the Ten Lords of Arcana, each one carefully carved from a different color stone. The statues also glow, though only faintly, most of the room's light comes from the magical fire burning in its center. Positioned around the fire are a number of chairs and tables, of antique style but new in appearance. A spiralling staircase begins its ascent here, from between Orefons and Lucien, and Erland and Clearbrook bracket an arched opening to the east.

A large blue flame burns atop a marble pedestal.

An enormous Owl, with plumage of silvery white, watches you closely.

582hp 19oma 618mv opp <None> leader 93% sneaking Common
drink milk

INFO: Zerga has left the game.

You drink milk from a mug of milk.

You no longer feel hungry.

You no longer feel thirsty.

You feel bloated.

583hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 93% sneaking Common
speak fey

Ok, you are now speaking Fey.

588hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 94% sneaking Fey
open e
Ok.

The College Of Elemental Arcana

[Exits: north east south west]

You are standing in a grand hall, with high, arching ceilings. Light pours down upon you from many luminescent globes hanging (or is it floating?) from the ceiling. Robed magi rush about the hall, intent on their business. A few even have their elemental servants following them about, magical creatures made up of little more than wisps of wind or clay and stone.

588hp 19oma 617mv opp <None> leader 94% sneaking Fey
close w
Ok.

588hp 19oma 617mv opp <None> leader 94% sneaking Fey
scan

Right here you see:

Erinn

An apprentice elemental

1 north you see:

A nervous student

A white-bearded wizard

An apprentice elemental

2 north you see:

The Librarian

A flying student

There is a pair of jade green doors to the west.

588hp 19oma 617mv opp <None> leader 94% sneaking Fey
auction

AUCTION: Uthix bids 100 gold for a pair of loose, black leather trousers.

588hp 19oma 617mv opp <None> leader 94% sneaking Fey
A pair of loose, black leather trousers is a piece of armor.
It is easily usable at your level of experience.
The material from which it is mainly composed is leather.
It is in a perfect condition.

Vendor: Halimon

Buyer: Uthix

Bid: 100

593hp 190ma 618mv opp <None> leader 95% sneaking Fey

u

Top Of The Stair

[Exits: east down]

You have reached the top flight of stairs. Below you, the staircase seems to spiral on and on until infinity. A small platform here leads to an open air balcony built on the side of the tower, offering a majestic view of the city of Opal in all its glory.

(2) An Earthen Man, small but bulky, trudges across the floor.

593hp 190ma 614mv opp <None> leader 95% sneaking Fey

AUCTION: a pair of loose, black leather trousers sold to Uthix for 100 gold.

593hp 190ma 614mv opp <None> leader 95% sneaking Fey

backstab earthen

Your backstab *** ANNIHILATES *** an earthen man!

An earthen man dodges your attack.

Your pierce MUTILATES an earthen man!

An earthen man dodges your attack.

593hp 190ma 603mv opp 79% leader 95% sneaking Fey

An earthen man dodges your attack.

Your pierce MUTILATES an earthen man!

598hp 190ma 610mv opp 49% leader 96% sneaking Fey

An earthen man dodges your attack.

Your pierce MUTILATES an earthen man!

603hp 190ma 620mv opp 37% leader 96% sneaking Fey

An earthen man dodges your attack.

603hp 190ma 618mv opp 37% leader 96% sneaking Fey

Your pierce MUTILATES an earthen man!

Your pierce ELIMINATES an earthen man!

603hp 190ma 614mv opp 30% leader 96% sneaking Fey

An earthen man dodges your attack.

You dodge an earthen man's attack.

603hp 190ma 612mv opp 30% leader 96% sneaking Fey

An earthen man parries your attack.

Your pierce ELIMINATES an earthen man!

AUCTION: No bids received, a pair of loose, black leather trousers passed in.

608hp 19oma 616mv opp 6% leader 97% sneaking Fey
Your pierce ELIMINATES an earthen man!
Your pierce ELIMINATES an earthen man!
An earthen man is DEAD!!
You receive 365829 experience points.
The corpse of an earthen man contains:
Nothing.

608hp 19oma 612mv opp <None> leader 97% sneaking Fey
look

Top Of The Stair

[Exits: east down]

You have reached the top flight of stairs. Below you, the staircase seems to spiral on and on until infinity.
A small platform here leads to an open air balcony built on the side of the tower, offering a majestic view
of the city of Opal in all its glory.

The corpse of an earthen man is lying here.

608hp 19oma 612mv opp <None> leader 97% sneaking Fey
sac corpse

You sacrifice the corpse of an earthen man to the Gods.

613hp 19oma 620mv opp <None> leader 98% sneaking Fey
em flicks the dirt of her dagger and looks about
Erinn flicks the dirt of her dagger and looks about.

570hp 14oma 500mv opp 49% leader 84% sneaking Fey
sc

ERINN, 38th Level Elf Assassin

Adept of the Outer Circle (Rank 4) in clan [ARCANA]

Hit Points 570/677 Mana 140/140 Movement 500/520

[Strength] 21 (max 21)	[Sex] Female
[Intelligence] 15 (max 24)	[Age] 161 (Young)
[Wisdom] 16 (max 21)	[Size] 0 (Medium)
[Dexterity] 19 (max 27)	[Alignment] 19 (Neutral)
[Constitution] 13 (max 21)	[Items] 31/42
	[Weight] 271/400
[Armor Class] -144	[Gold Carried] 13260
[Hit Roll] 11	[Bank Balance] 140690
[Damage Roll] 32	[Exp Total] 215499880
[Wimpy] 106	[Exp Needed] 15844220
[Favor Points] 6	[Practices] 217

You are fighting.

You are affected by:

Skill: 'sneak' modifies none by 0 for 25 hours.

Spell: 'detect invis' modifies none by 0 for 28 hours.

Item: 'infravision' modifies none by 0 in permanence.

575hp 140ma 492mv opp 1% leader 84% sneaking Fey
hold pipe

You stop using a silver box.

You hold a long pipe in your hands.

Your pierce ELIMINATES an earthen man!

An earthen man is DEAD!!

You receive 468520 experience points.

The corpse of an earthen man contains:

Nothing.

Chapter 3: Reflexivity and participation in Online Games

In order to study the nature of MUDs, I needed to find a methodology that would eliminate as far as possible my own prejudice towards computer games and the tempting pet project of displaying how my preferred theories would be useful in order to discuss and analyse the games. I also needed to be wary of the many normative questions it is so easy to ask when studying media. To avoid this I wanted to interview the users of games. In the tradition of studies of users, a very common approach is to consider what effect games have on users and why, often with a strong focus on the so-called 'harmful effects'. In this chapter, though, I will show why this perspective does not suit my purpose, as it provides little real knowledge about online role-playing computer games.

Instead, I will turn the question around and ask: How do players influence games? And since I assume that the subject has power to influence a MUD, I also assume that I, the researcher, have power to influence the subject of the study. This chapter discusses, then, the importance of reflexivity and co-operation in research, and the complications of being immersed in the material of study, working somewhere in the borderland between media analysis and anthropology; it is devoted to a discussion of which methods can be used to shed light on the use of online multi-user role-playing games.

Searching for a methodology

A main problem in researching computer games is finding a workable methodology. It is possible to study aspects of the games, such as animation (in graphic games) or the written texts; or to study games from one perspective, such as a learning tool. But these approaches are reductive and include studying games in relation to what they might be, rather than looking at what they are. However, when pinpointing what computer games are, in order to study them, it is also necessary to include what they are not. Because of the composite nature of computer games, it is very simple to find theories that **might** be suitable or methodologies that **could** be useful. However, it is exactly this composite nature and flexibility of the game that is problematic.

The fact that a computer game resembles many different things: a book, films, plays and communities, does not make it any one of these, but rather a thing apart. This is one problem when conceptualising computers as "multimedia"; the illusion that they are constructed from other already existing media, and that it is just a matter of digitising what already exists and making it accessible through the World Wide Web¹. The Internet works very well

¹ Newspapers struggle to make this approach work, the lack of online economic success has forced such resourceful newspapers as the New York Times to reduce their staff considerably during the year 2000. Although the years 2000-2001 will most likely go into history as a dividing line of online

transferring or transporting books, images, film or music; but none of these media or the simple combination of them successfully utilise the full range of the computer and the network. Computer games, however, are created for and on computers, and adapt to the Internet with amazing success.

Computer games can't be studied without some kind of participation that goes beyond observing. The study of a game invites playing, as the rules, functions and the many possible ways to use the game unfold with the experience of playing the game, rather than through non-participatory observation. While reading since "The death of the author" has been considered an active participation in the construction of the text, playing demands what Aarseth calls nontrivial effort (1997:1).

The MUDs in this study are complex, intricate multi-user environments, "stone-age" technology in terms of the net, but still actively used and played. *Dragon Realms*, my main source of data, is a role-playing game created for a MUD; to be precise, a version of DIKUMUD's adapted to/by Envy and modified by Elwyn, the coder of this particular site.

In a role-playing game the intent of the communication between the characters is not directed towards getting to know the other person behind the computer, the "real person" (as discussed in chapter 2). The characters or role-figures only exist within the fictitious universe of the game. These characters have complex and varied personalities, to be understood as more complex than the common handle in a chat-room.

The Game: text, work or event?

Being based on written texts, MUDs are seductively textual and easily thought of as *texts*. And of course they are, if we use a definition such as Espen Aarseth's: "A text, then, is any object with the primary function to relay verbal information (1997:62)." But when working with images and sound, the concept of text needs to be expanded, and I rely on Barthes' distinction between work and text, as discussed in the previous chapter. Within this paradigm, computer games that are more dependent on graphics and sound are texts as well. The potential the games possess for being described as a *work* is on one level easy considering a work's potential as a text (Barthes 1977:155). The activity of the reader in accessing a book through reading appears to be comparable to the activity of a player approaching a game. But when stepping deeper into the use of reader-response theory the vocabulary fails when trying to treat computer games simply as texts.

As Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco develop their theories of reader-response, the *reader* has several different names, or there are different readers: the model reader (Eco 1981:7), the intended reader (Iser 1978:33), the implied reader (Iser 1978:38, 1974:xii). Each concept indicates a position between the text and the actual reader. These are the readers of the text, constructions, albeit stable, since nothing in the book-as-work changes between each time it is being realised into a *text*. Espen Aarseth challenges the concept of the reader in Cybertext (1997:74):

economy, the fact that the traditional 'newspaper into bytes' approach has such hard times at present should not be dismissed as a result of the tightening of the economy, but be considered for what it might reveal about the nature of the computer and computer-mediated communication.

The reader is (and always has been) a necessary part of the text, but one that we now realize can (or must) perform more than one function. If these are all texts, perhaps the word *reader* no longer has any clear meaning. However, if the answer is no, we still have to construct a viable terminology to describe the literary games and rhetorical rituals we can observe both in the new media and in the old papery ones.

A cybertext, according to Aarseth “is the wide range (or perspective) of possible textualities seen as a typology of machines, as various kinds of literary communication systems where the functional differences among the mechanical parts play a defining role in determining the aesthetic process (1997:22).” According to this definition, if computer games are texts, they are cybertexts.

In a computer game, the well-known reader-positions can be found, but in addition to this, each player will create his or her individual text and in this process her own reader. The character of the player becomes a part of the game, thus a part of what others read and experience, as well as a major part of the player’s experience in the game. In this manner, the player creates her own text, and through the interaction between the player and the game/text she also creates her own reader. The player is active beyond the act of reception, and has the power of influencing the parameters of the narrative environment, thus expanding or limiting the acts of the other players in the game. On *World’s End* the character I played wrote a book on *Social Acts of the Felar*, where felar² was the race of that character. This book changed the options of the other players, as it out of character became the guide-book to playing felar, while in the game it remained a scholarly study carried out by my character, the female felar, Missepus. The player-reader is a reader with awareness of her power to shape the text of the game, influence it and thereby the options of the other players of the game, without becoming an author. In the game, I was not the author of this book, Missepus was. Outside of the game, the book has no meaning other than a game-object, a prop like the hotels and houses in Monopoly; out of context it becomes too esoteric to make sense to the reader.

In the attempt to make this a little easier to grasp, I’ll present the different layers of a game:

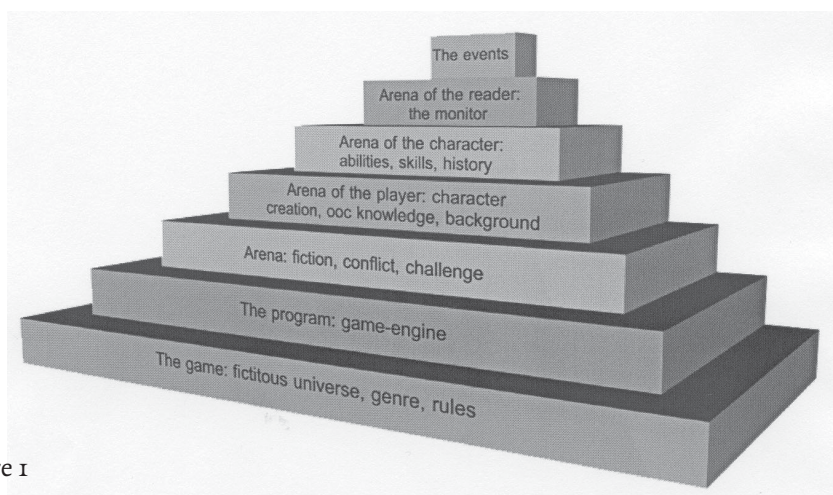


Figure 1

These layers can be viewed either as boxes within boxes, or as a pyramid, where each smaller layer rests on the one below, but still has an individual interface and can be observed in isolation. The game contains everything, and everything relies on the game: as such it is both the box into which it all fits, and the base of the pyramid upon which everything rests. The game-engine is the program that runs all responses and creates the environment that the players sees, tailored to suit the fictitious universe and the game genre. The arena is the conflicts, themes and challenges of this particular game. It is not uncommon that there are more games created in the same series and on the same gaming-platform, and then the game would encompass the entire series, while the arena is the theme of this particular game. The arena of the player is the sphere which the player can influence. In MUDs this includes (but is not always limited to) the gender, race and class of the character, description, attributes and score-sheet. Characters have their own arena, which is the In Character part of the game, where the characters interact. All interaction in a role-playing MUD between players is OOC, but when they interact as their characters – or the characters interact – it is IC. The reader receives information on all these levels, IC and OOC, but to act on this information is playing – and as such the reading feeds back into the player and the character. The events or perhaps scenes, are what comes out of all this, and it is the goal of the role-play: Smoothly running or exciting and captivating, the events are the goal.

The personal activity that a computer game demands from the player consists of several alternatives for actions to drive the game forward. This is not limited to the inner activity which is the interactivity Iser describes as taking place between reader and text: “This is an almost direct statement of the role of the reader in this novel. From the given material he must construct his own conception of the reality and hence the meaning of the text (1974:40).” The player will construct the meaning of the game, but he will also through his physical actions and game-choices construct the game-session. This session is of course limited by the perimeters set by the game producers and designers, but typical for a good game is the balance between limitations and freedom of action or decisions. The potential for manipulating the session and, in the case of MUDs, programming the work itself, makes the player different from the reader, while the reader remains a part of the player. The player’s ability to provoke new combinations of the elements of the work – the game – makes even simple games complex; and in a role-play MUD, the potential for changing, contributing and creating, are large.

This means that it is too much of a simplification to say playing a game is the same as reading it. Hence I will use the term *the player* in a broader sense than *the reader*, claiming that the reader is part of the player, but that the player is not limited to the reader. The player is more active than the reader when confronting the work; she has more control over the different parts of it, and therefore has more influence when it comes to her own experience. To return to Barthes, the analogy of music and performers lies closer to the player of computer games than the reader of texts:

The history of music (as a practice, not as ‘art’) does indeed parallel that of the Text fairly closely: there was a period when practicing amateurs were numerous (at least within the

² Felar have human-like intelligence and can speak several languages, but are in all other aspects like cats.

confines of a certain class) and 'playing' and 'listening' formed a scarcely differentiated activity; then the two roles appeared in succession, first that of the performer, the interpreter to whom the bourgeois public (though still itself able to play a little – the whole history of the piano) delegated its playing, then that of the (passive) amateur, who listens to music without being able to play. (1977:162-3)

This pendulum swings back in relation to the computer game, from being passive amateurs consuming texts, reading without writing; the player is required to play, and in some games the player is even able to compose, to create new works or creatively change (hack) the existing ones. We now know that computer time does not necessarily detract from the reading of books or the use of other media, but rather from television-viewing time. The technology and schedules of television and radio offer limited options in relation to their audiences, basically limited to consume or not consume.

This brings another quote from Barthes to mind as an explanation of the popularity of the computer games: "The reduction of reading to consumption is clearly responsible for the 'boredom' experienced by many in the face of the modern ('unreadable') text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, open it out, *set it going* (1977:163)." To play is to produce the text. Once you're in the flow of the game you feel it, feel the insistence of the game to go on and on – you have set it going.

Between reading and experiencing

The object of study is complex, and I would say it offers itself to a mixture of methods, based on textual analysis, participating observation and interviews. This is reminiscent of the demands for methodological variety presented by the Birmingham School. John Fiske describes some of the research strategies within cultural studies in this manner:

Cultural studies, in its current state of development, offers two overlapping strategies that can usefully be combined to help us understand how this cultural struggle operates. One derives from ethnography and encourages us to study the meanings that the fans of Madonna actually do (or appear to) make of her. (...)

The other strategy derives from semiotic and structuralist textual analysis. This strategy includes a close reading of the signifiers of the text - that is, its physical presence - but recognizes that the signifieds exist not in the text itself, but extratextually, in the myths, countermyths and ideologies of their culture (1992:305).

According to Fiske, the texts were supposed to be considered as political expressions: "Every text and every reading has a social and therefore a political dimension, which is to be found partly in the structure of the text itself, and partly in the relation of the reading subject to the text (Fiske 1992:305)." To determine the political dimension of this version of what Espen Aarseth calls an *ergodic* text can only be done completely, and with any hope of success, by the creator and the participator in any given role-playing-experience, the individual player. While it will be possible to say something about the political dimension in which the *work* is created, the realising of the computer game-as-work into a text will be a lot more subjective than the reading of a book. This makes it complicated to correctly assess the political nature

of computer games, since their realisation relies so heavily on the subject. But perhaps this is in itself a political position?

This subjectivity is not limited to the single user's conception of a fairly stable work, i.e. a work that does not change between play-sessions. The conception of the co-creation of the reader in the meeting with literature has been expressed in Reader-Response Theory by Wolfgang Iser

This, however, is only possible if we pinpoint that which actually *happens* between text and reader. As we have seen, the overdetermination of the text produces indeterminacy, and this sets in motion a whole process of comprehension whereby the reader tries to assemble the world of the text - a world that has been removed from the everyday world by this very overdetermination. (1978:49)

An *ergodic* text is distinguished by the way it is supposed to be read through change; it is a text that demands more than a trivial effort to be used (Aarseth 1997:93-94). According to Wolfgang Iser, a reader will always change a text as a result of his reading - there is an *interactivity* between the reader and the text. Iser uses the word *interaction* as a prerequisite for the creation of meaning in/by the reader

Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's act of comprehension. And, equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such interaction, on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. (Iser 1978:9)

The interaction, as Iser describes it, is limited to an inner process; a process of interpretation whereby what is being changed is the reader's perception, understanding and creation of meaning. Even if two people were to sit next to each other reading the same book, each would have a different perception of it. This would, however, not affect the printed text in the book. This is not necessarily the case if two people were to sit next to each other playing the same computer game, and especially not if the game is a multi-user, online game.

Espen Aarseth has discussed the value of the word *interaction* in describing computer software:

The word *interactive* operates textually rather than analytically, as it connotes various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalised media, while denoting nothing. It's ideological implication, however, is clear enough: that humans and machines are equal partners of communication, caused by nothing more than the machine's simple ability to accept and respond to human input. (1997:48)

As I mentioned in chapter 2, I prefer to make the distinction between interaction and inner action (Mortensen 1996, 1997, 2000), and in this work I add the concept of the enter action to the action-list. With the slightly flippant expression *enter action*³ being employed to

³ Coined by Matthew Cody in a conversation in New York, September 1999.

describe the act of sending messages to a program, local or remote (something which is often done/confirmed by use of the enter-key); I also prefer to underline the difference between the activity of using a program or playing a game, and actually interacting with another person or independent intelligent entity⁴. I use interaction in its sociological sense, where it is distinguished from inner action in that the interaction is external and physical, including expressive activity on behalf of the interacting agents, and from enter action in that it is not a process of human input, pre-programmed output. Inner action is the thought-process or the response of the individual in the meeting between reader and text, where the text spawns new understandings in the reader, while the reader finds new meaning in the text - interaction in Wolfgang Iser's sense of the word. This might be called interpretation, but as interaction, interpretation covers wider areas than Iser's description of what happens between a text and a reader: such as translation between languages. Since it is impossible to find a precise term for this activity, I like to use the one that connotes to the original term, because it signals familiarity to interaction, reaction, and enter action.

In the marketing of information technology, interactivity and interaction are used to indicate the extent to which a program will react to acts performed by the user – a form of reactivity, rather than interactivity. The direction in which information technology is developing suggests that the exchange of signals will be aiming for a level of communication as intricate as this; however, there still does not exist an equal exchange between human and machine. The answer from the machine is still a reaction; the human partner still has the initiative and the ability to act. If we were to use theory of media influence in this context, we might say that machines are still working at the stimulus-response level. I will also add here the claim that to code ways for a program to react leaves the initiative and the activity with the human both as coder and as user, although it is delayed and stored through the code. In this way, we can claim that there is interactivity through software, but the interactivity is slow, delayed and depends on the coders taking the users' feedback into account when revising programs. Still the reaction from the game-program to the player's input plays an important part in making a game special to each player, even in the events where the player is making an effort to copy the actions of another player in a MUD.

Normally, the administration of a role-play MUD like Dragon Realms will not permit two players to copy each other's actions, since this would lead to unrealistic and boring play. Let us assume, though, that two players create identical twins who are always together and always say and do the same thing, and that the players are able to write the orders with equal speed. Already in the technology that creates the connection, there is a potential for delays or lag. The signals from the two machines will be prioritised in sequence, not like a bundle where signals arrive consecutively. Even if a human cannot discern the time-lapse between when the signals are sent to and received by the game, the software will accept the one signal before the other. That means that even if other players may be willing to relate to the two "identical" characters as being the same, the game will treat them as two different individuals. Every aspect of the game that is ruled by luck or probability will create diversity between the experiences of the two players. In addition, the games are coded to ensure that some

⁴ In a game-fiction this could be an alien or an artificial intelligence. Let's just keep the theoretical possibility open.

messages only come up on one player's screen, depending on which player is the goal of this message at any given time. Even given that the other players will not differentiate between them, the way the game is coded will lead to the two players not receiving the same messages, despite them typing the same orders at the (apparent) same time⁵.

In a normal play-situation, the experience of playing a MUD will be individual and unique each time you log on. This is partly because of the manner in which the game is programmed, and partly due to the fact that you play with other people who relate to you as an individual. Within a multi-user game such as Dragon Realms, the player can achieve interactivity in the shape of communicating with equal parties, individual to individual. The role-playing creates the unique, new situations and makes the concept of the *reader* too narrow for the analysis of MUDs.

To summarise: playing an online role-playing game is a unique activity that is similar to other activities such as reading or performing a play, but it also includes aspects which are unique. It needs to be studied on its own terms; theory of performance or readership being useful to the extent that they ease the understanding of what constitutes the game's own terms, and also what distinguishes it from these activities which it so closely resembles.

The gratifications of the player

To be able to study what the actual player derives from a game, I have to interview the players I study. But to study the use of the games, how they are realised into texts or experiences through the activity of playing, I have to study that process from the viewpoint of a player. To study logs from the game as texts afterwards is like studying a description of an event rather than being present at the event. The nature of the computer as a channel, a medium and an archive permits me to both participate and go back in "history".

Role-playing is something different from drama or theatre, despite the fact that a major live role-play group in Bergen call themselves BFIT, *Bergen Frie ImprovisasjonsTeater* (The Free Improvisation Theatre of Bergen). As stated in chapter 2, when I addressed Richard Schechner's claim that a play is a game, a play has certain similarities with a game, but they do not correspond enough to claim that $a = b$. The game happens for the sake of the players, not the spectators. Watching a role-playing game without participating will be less of a rewarding experience for the spectators than watching a play presented on stage, as it is not designed for spectatorship⁶. In analysing theatre, we assume that there is a script, a dramatist, a set of actors instructed by an instructor, and that they are all working to create a play directed outwards, away from their own experience and towards the audience. To gather information from the position as audience, and view traditional theatre, means to

⁵ To answer Espen Aarseth's question during supervision of my dissertation: what if they give the order at different times? Since the Role-playing MUDs I played in were programmed to consider weather and time in the responses to players, the chance of having exactly the same response was very small, even if the player was to type the same order to the system at what appeared to be the same time – in system time or game-time (system time being the time where the server containing the game-engine is placed).

⁶ Several other games are, particularly different sports, such as football.

study it from the angle at which it is supposed to be viewed. But to analyse a role-playing game from the position of a spectator will at best give a description of the event without the understanding, and it will be very complicated to know what the player's words and actions entail without knowing the context or history of these actions. There is no professional dramatist who has planned the scenes, and the different words may not have a particular pre-planned meaning, even if they appear to be packed with significance. A sword introduced early into the game by a player does not have to be used again, and a planned scene, which the intrigue-leaders try to lead the game up to, does not have to happen at all. Still, the players can achieve a very satisfying feeling of having succeeded, and of having accomplished or experienced something, which is more fulfilling to a role-player than release through a dramatic curve.

To understand the motivation for playing, it was very important for me to understand what really took place during the play. And to observe the game-activity, I had not only to observe or read through the logs of other people's games, but also participate in the play. Since MUDs are text-based games, a solution could have been to have read through the logs of the players in the game. I was offered these from *World's End*. When I chose to participate while observing, it was in order to understand what I was reading on the screen, and also to understand the writing-process, how it worked, by what criteria and how complex it was.

Text-based multi-user games on the net, like a MUD, are fictions as process rather than text. Despite my belief that traditional reader-response theory is not the best tool for analysing the games, it still offers insight relevant to the topic, and I will use it while analysing the logs of my play-sessions. To analyse the texts in whose creation I participated, I logged most of my game-sessions from April 1998 until February 1999 - that means that I registered all text that showed on my own screen during these games.

At the same time I noted that I did not understand all that was happening, and that I did not get an answer to a lot of questions that I directed at the other players in the game. This was a result of the administrator's "snoop", a command which gives an immortal an opportunity to see everything a player writes to the game while logged in, not only the commands the game reacts to - and this of course shows all communication on all channels within the game. This potential for control by the administrators made most players very reluctant to give voice to criticism or talk about techniques for playing the game, which could be interpreted as cheating, or just talking about special stories or events they had been part of. Any kind of discussion about how the game worked could be understood as cheating by the administration/immortals and lead to the player being punished or even banned from the game. One example in this connection is how the entire domain of aol.com was banned from playing at Dragon Realms over a period of months, as a reaction to cheating and verbal attacks on the administrators.

This made it necessary to interview some of the players who were a vital part of my material in an environment outside of Dragon Realms. To avoid only interviewing people who had knowledge about my work through having functioned as my sources for a long time, I also chose to interview players who were not part of the text-material (my logged play-sessions). I interviewed them face-to-face, by going to the US to see them where they lived. While I could have interviewed them on "neutral ground", like another MUD or MOO, I chose to meet them face to face, despite the time and resources this demanded. Face to face oral communication provides better opportunity for the clarification of misunderstandings

than is the case with online written communication, and eases the interviewing process, as Annette Markham describes:

Online, I can't see the other person's face, hear their tone of voice, or get any sense of who they are beyond the words I see scrolling up my own screen. This does not mean the interview is less interesting. Through their words and through my interaction with them, I could sense joy, anger, passion, bitterness, happiness. In fact, I was surprised and impressed by the intensity of the conversations.

However, I found it difficult to manage the basic elements of conversation, such as taking turns at the appropriate time, nodding, or mm-hmm-ing to imply, "Go on, I'm listening." I couldn't give a questioning glance or wrinkle my forehead or frown slightly to let the other person know I didn't understand what they were getting at. (1998:71)

Not least, I also wished to learn about the game-culture in these meetings; how the different players related to the act of playing; what rewards there were in this for them; and, whether there existed anything that could be compared to an ideology.

The subject as tool

When I first logged into a computer game, I was at the mercy of the other players, who were supposed to become the subjects for my research. I had to develop the questions and the direction of the research while learning. This process worked in both directions, as the games were influenced by my interaction with them. In *World's End*, I kept asking about the nature and the social structure of the "felar", the cat-beast I was supposed to play. This changed with the course of my questions, from being human-cats played more or less like humans with hands but also claws, two feet, fur and tail, like some fantastic version of Catwoman⁷, to becoming large cats with the behaviour and looks more resembling real cats: something like Aslan the lion from *Narnia*⁸ rather than Catwoman⁹. In the first months of my online role-playing explorations, *World's End* changed the design of the world and a lot of the skills, as well as the entire system of schools of magic. The players were invited to test the new game out, to try the skills and play with the abilities in order to make the transition as smooth and flawless as possible. This opened up for cooperation between the players and the administration or immortals on creating the new version of *World's End*, rather than passive observation.

Later, in *Dragon Realms*, there were more ready answers to the questions I asked, and my or any other player's potential for influence on the game was less in relation to the entire

⁷ From the *Batman*-comics, for more information about Catwoman: <http://pw2.netcom.com/~mwomack/index.html>

⁸ Lewis, C.S. (2001): *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Collins

⁹ In a conversation in New York in September 1999, another of the felar players in *World's End* claimed that the felar race was changed due to my appearance in the game and the character choices I made. This might have been a coincidence, and the change just happened at the time when I started playing, but he claimed that my presence had an immediate impact on the game, before I was even aware that there had been a change I might have studied.

game-world and more when it came to the thread of fantasy I was participating in. This developed more consistently and within a fictitious frame, which resembled more a traditional storyline. But here as well, my actions changed the flow of events, and my presence and participation had an impact. When I moved to *Aarinfel*, *Lu'Tamohr* and later *Azhad*, I was no longer attending just in order to observe through participation, but in order to test out and play with ideas, thoughts and theories, discuss functions of the game back and forth with the administrators and also participate in developing the fiction.

At the outset of my study, I had imagined that my position would be that of the participating observer, assuming that the anonymity of digital spaces would help me maintain this role. However, it soon became clear that I could not perform an ethnographic study along the lines of a naturalistic view on participatory observation:

According to naturalism, in order to understand people's behaviour, we must use an approach that gives us access to the meanings that guide that behaviour. Fortunately, the capacities we have developed as social actors can give us such access. As participant observers we can learn the culture or subculture of the people we are studying. We can come to interpret the world in the same way as they do, and thereby learn to understand their behaviour in a different way to that in which natural scientists set about understanding the behaviour of physical phenomena. (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:8)

I quickly had to abandon the idea that I could observe without influencing the game and the online interaction. The MUDs I played in were too much directed towards change, the games were about developing and changing the current situation as creatively as possible. This made for an environment extremely sensitive to every individual involved in it. As Hammersley and Atkinson point out: "It is argued that what both positivism and naturalism fail to take into account is the fact that social researchers are part of the social world they study" (1995:16). Even if I had hidden my identity as a researcher, my character would have influenced the game, as I saw in one case in *Aarinfel* when I played without immediately revealing my flesh world identity to the other players. My character rose quickly in the ranks of the court I played in, interacted heavily with one of the characters of an administrator, had wide licenses and heavy impact on the role-playing within the clan and was offered builder-status – which I declined.¹⁰ Shortly after that it became obvious that the administrator in question had asked around, and my identity was revealed by former players, with whom I had been indiscrete enough to talk about the new character I had created. I could of course have planned better for anonymity, but I had not considered that the real identity would become a focus of inquiry for the other players. But even with a character that was designed to be just another avatar in the game, I couldn't avoid making enough of an impact that I changed the game, since changing and developing is the goal of the game. Making the intrigues shift and the story adjust to accommodate the individual characters is a major part of the intent of a role-playing game such as *Aarinfel*.

¹⁰ In October 2002, about a year since I last actively played this character on *Aarinfel*, an other former player of *Aarinfel* reported that a player also from *Aarinfel* and from the same court used my character's name in an other game. According to her, it was a tribute to the character.

When I could so easily make an impact on the object for my research, the methods for observation and description would have to consider reflexivity. Reflexivity implies that I, the researcher, am influenced by my social and historical position, and that my observations will be coloured by who, where and what I am (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:16). Participatory observation depends on being able to disappear into the background, to be accepted as part of the culture and learn from the vantage point of an insider. The insider-part was easy, as the MUDs were inclusive and open to new members. However, the culture I entered was not a rigid, established one. It was developing and under constant pressure to change: from the players, from the technology, and from others aspects of the lives of the participants. This meant that I had no way of observing without changing the object of my study, because the game itself was about change. It was adaptable, permeable, and only personalities represented stability. 'The good old days' were months old, not generations - or perhaps they could be measured in the generations of computers, where the 'good old days' at any given time is two or three generations of processors ago.

I was the outsider entering into the online games with some theoretical knowledge and some models for how I thought things would function: a 37 year-old Norwegian woman, who had never played role-playing games until 1997, although I knew something about them; and being placed at a distance of several thousand kilometres from the strongholds of the online or offline American role-playing culture, and at a great distance from the main administrators of the game. Perhaps the most useful part of my intellectual background was 20 years of active readership of fantasy and science fiction, the main reference for role-playing games, as well as other types of computer games, online or offline.

I bought my first computer in 1987, and after typing in 'format c:' I learned how to reinstall the disk operating system and programs. Since then I have been an eager user of computers for word-processing, layout, presentations and not least, games. Being a late-comer to computer games, I often need to seek advice or be assisted by others, when trying to figure out functions. In most of the games I have played online since 1997, I have been an anomaly demographically speaking. I am different in other ways; being a Norwegian, a woman, living with a functioning family (known among players as 'having a life') and I have research as a legitimate excuse for being there. The only thing I really had in common with a lot of the players was that I was in academia and logged on from a college computer, thus having almost unlimited, free access.¹¹

This position was both a handicap and an advantage. My lack of skill made the initial threshold to playing and later to building and creating fairly high. To install programs, which would allow me to communicate with the players, such as ICQ¹², was a difficult and complicated process initially, and I am still excluded from understanding the finer points of the differences in programming which distinguish a MUD from a MUSH and a MOO. This lack of skill was no handicap, though, as it also served as an icebreaker. It resulted in the players I encountered in the digital spaces feeling useful and knowledgeable; while I, despite being older and a teacher, became less a figure of authority or a threat, and more of an equal

¹¹ There has been a change in this over the last couple of years, as cheap, high-speed access from home has become more common.

¹² A messaging/chat program by ICQ Inc. The letters are a chat-language acronym for 'I seek you'.

or perhaps an exotic mascot with skills different from theirs. In some ways I was envied and my position considered desirable. As one interviewee exclaimed when we met in Portland and I explained my research and the reason why I was there to interview him: “Tell me who I have to kill to get a job like that! And don’t say you, because we don’t want blood all over the carpet.”

Ethnography in deep cyberspace?

First I need to clarify the usage of the terms anthropology and ethnography/ethnology. According to Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia, ethnography and anthropology are more or less overlapping:

Different terms are used to describe the fields of anthropology in the United States and Europe. While in the United States the term anthropology is used to name the whole subject, in Europe the name ethnology is applied. (Ethnology is defined as the science that studies the many races of mankind their beginnings, characteristics, differences, and distribution.) What is called “cultural anthropology” in the United States is also termed “ethnology” in European countries. The term physical anthropology is used in both parts of the world.

This corresponds with the description of this difference given by social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen in his introduction to anthropology *Small Places, Large Issues*. I refer to the Norwegian edition of the book). According to Hylland Eriksen, ethnology comes from the French ‘ethnologie’, and the distinction is between ‘ethnographie’: a description of society and culture, ‘ethnologie’: regional comparisons and ‘anthropologie’: The general comparative science of mankind, society and culture (Eriksen 1998:23).

Hylland Eriksen focuses on social anthropology, and he would of course use a definition of the concepts which positions anthropology as the main or dominant category leaving the other categories are subordinate to this. The American/European use of the words described in the quote from Compton’s has caused my confusion, as the texts I keep referring to position themselves (apparently) at random within the one or the other paradigm. However the texts themselves refer to the same kind of theory, problems, questions and methods. According to this I will try to limit myself to using **ethnography**, but when I use ethnology or anthropology I refer to the same type of study.

The ‘Realms’ I entered for study were fairly stable as digital spaces go. *Dragon Realms* had existed for more than four years when it was shut down, and several of the players had been part of the group and culture for the entire period. There was both the ingame history and culture and the out of character history and culture to set a context for the interaction between the players. There were also several satellite worlds, ‘spin offs’ made by players and immortals who felt that the game could be made better and more fun if it was just a little bit different. Two of these worlds became important sites for meeting with other players, and for discussing building, creating and administrating games: *Aarinfel* and *Lu’Tamohr*. Both were run by former players and administrators at *Dragon Realms*, and both chose different paths towards a fun environment for playing. But my actions differed from Clifford Geertz’s description of anthropologists on one important point:

The locus of the study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods...); they study *in* villages. You can study different things in different places, and some things – for example, what colonial domination does to established frames of moral expectation – you can best study in confined localities. But that doesn't make that place what you are studying (1973:22).

While I ask many related questions about other topics than computer games, as well as about the game-culture, the main focus of my study was originally the game as a 'space' rather than a 'geographical' site. I will return to the discussion of a game, or an online meeting-place, as a 'space' in Chapter 10. However, it was clear from the beginning of my study that the game was not just where culture happened to happen, but an object of study in its own right. I looked at the structure, the mechanisms, the functions and the way the players made use of it.

I played at *Dragon Realms* for more than a year, from January 1998 until February 1999, when the main 'immortal' (Topaz) closed it down. In this time I learned to know the game to a point where I could blend in with the other players and observe without being overwhelmed by either the technology of the game or the alienness of the role-play. I also made several contacts with players who helped me to master the game and understand the complexity of the social interaction. 'The Portland Cluster' took on the sponsor role while I played in *Dragon Realms*, with a few sponsors from the San Diego area who were closely connected to the players from Portland through a history of play and online socialising. In ethnography the sponsor can be vital to the research, as it can be impossible to decipher a culture without some source of information to the meaning of acts, the social relations, the different codes, as well as a reference to guarantee for the acceptability of the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:54). In *World's End* the sponsor, the main administrator, had known about my research and taken on a role of advisor, involving even watching and advising on minutiae – not just subjects related to the game, but also to how I should conduct my research. This is a position for a sponsor that is mentioned several times in discussions of ethnographic method, and one of the less desirable ones. The sponsors at *Dragon Realms* were self-appointed as well, but there were more of them and the connections to the creation and running of the game was loose – at least that was true as far as the main sponsor was concerned.

The most important sponsor was the player of the character my character interacted with most frequently. The role-playing brought us together, but friendship and intellectual curiosity made the constellation stick. The player of Eristeth Veridiatix the healer soon became my main collaborator, as well as the sponsor into the very active Portland cluster. For almost a year he was a steady companion who assisted me in and out of the game, and became a main informant when it came to understanding the mechanics of playing. His aid helped me to learn about and get in touch with the real people behind several of the other characters in the game. This helped me to get past a major obstacle in cyberspace ethnography, the anonymity and the way this opens for putting on a wide number of acts.

I approached the Realms almost to the letter following the idealized programmatic form described by Hakken (1999:45):

...the anthropological ethnographer

1. Identifies an intellectual problem in cultural anthropology of theoretical interest (such as the cultural dynamics of cyberspace);
2. Learn as much about this problem as she can;
3. Organises her thoughts about it into as coherent as possible a sense of problem;
4. Selects a field site in which there is good reason to believe that the dynamics of interest would be accessible to her through participant observation;
5. Familiarizes herself with the general cultural dynamis of the field site before she enters it;
6. Once in the field, participates in as broad a range of relevant activities as practicable;
7. Pays particular attention to the discursive accounts of her informants, those with whom she interacts regularly while in the field;
8. Analyses the relationship between what informants say and what they do, aiming to strike a balance between respecting the rationality, in the broadest sense, behind informants' actions and a sensitivity to the indeterminacy of action;
9. Develops models of the relevant cultural dynamics based on all of the above;
10. Finds ways both to feed her models back to informants for criticism and to act as if her models were accurate (participation); and
11. Once back from the field, attempts to communicate both what she has experienced and her account of why the dynamics are the way they are, typically by writing a type of monograph also called an 'ethnography'.

To learn as much about online games as I could, I played several other games before settling on the one I wanted to study. *World's End* and *The Infinite Point* were the two most influential in this process, both DIKUMUDs where I learned to understand the technicalities of the games, the commands and some of the basic ideas of role-play. I also learned about the importance and the power of the administrators of the games, and about the very particular etiquette that belongs to the online gaming world, including the peculiarities of crimes against the same etiquette.

I also used my long-time interest in fantasy and science fiction to understand the references which the MUDs were packed with, and spent time exploring role-play situations outside of the online games, through participating in a LARP, Live Action Role Play game running over 5 days in 1998. This was perhaps the roughest part of my preparations. Long nights in front of the computer playing a sentient cat-creature were nothing compared to this five days of pouring rain in the summer in the Norwegian mountains, wearing Asian-inspired, quasi-medieval clothing and living on food which had to be prepared over an open fire. While this experience was not immediately applicable to the questions at hand, I soon discovered that it was very important for my social standing with the players I encountered. So I didn't know the difference between LpMUD and DIKUMUD code? Well at least I had done the 'real thing' as far as role-play was concerned!

The organisation of my thoughts is an ongoing process, but they were very much present as I encountered *Dragon Realms*. *Dragon Realms* is representative of one aspect of MUDs, as it refers directly to the role-playing games that were the source of the original MUD – the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*. It builds on DIKUMUD and is typically altered, adjusted and hacked. At the same time it was unique, as those qualities which made it a role-playing

MUD rather than hack'n'slash were more pronounced and more strictly and systematically reinforced than elsewhere. This was a major reason why I chose *Dragon Realms* as my object of study and not *WE* or *TIP*.

Another one was the question of sponsorship. At both the earlier sites I had entered into personal interaction with important characters who granted me wide access, but who also made it problematic to concentrate on the game. The problem was a classic one for sponsorship in ethnography, as Hammersley and Atkinson point out:

However, even the most friendly and cooperative of gate-keepers or sponsors will shape the conduct and development of the research. To one degree or another, the ethnographer will be channelled in line with existing networks of friendship and enmity, territory and equivalent 'boundaries'. Having been 'taken up' by a sponsor, the ethnographer may find it difficult to achieve independence from such a person, discovering that his or her research is bounded by the social horizon of a sponsoring group or individual. (1995:75)

On *World's End*, I was generously offered access to all aspects of the game, and also to the logs of the game, but at the same time I was monitored, and the administrators would break into interactions with characters or conversations with players with comments on how I should conduct my research or my play. I had to find another online environment where I could study with less direct interference from my sponsors.

After a very short time playing *Dragon Realms* I discovered that the game was a thriving environment with several players constantly online, where intricate and amusing role-playing was rewarded and encouraged. I looked through several games around New Year 1998 until I discovered this MUD through the MudConnector, and I found that *Dragon Realms* seemed to have structure, be well administered and have a sense of 'literacy' to it which made it unique.

I spent a couple of weeks being a newbie and did not participate in the game-play or the role-play, simply learning the paths and turns which makes it possible to build a mental image of the site, learning about the skills I might acquire and how to gain them. But the main part of understanding the dynamics and background had happened over a period of years, from when I first picked up my first fantasy novel in the late 1970s. Once I no longer considered myself totally green, I could be found before the computer at all times of the day and night, ruining my sleep-rhythm for the benefit of the game, since most of the players were not only in US with its three-hour time-difference from coast to coast, but also in Europe, Asia and Australia. This permitted me to be present for the more important game-decisions and activities and to participate in a wide range of activities. After the game was closed, there was an informal survey where my character was deemed one of the most interesting characters to interact with, rating the same as the mortal character of one of the most active immortals. While this recognition was not a goal in itself, it is an indicator of my activity level in this period of information gathering.

The MUD-client I used (Zmud) allowed me to log hours of roleplay, as well as both In Character and Out Of Character interaction between me and other players through several different channels, and all the posted notes and stories as I read them. This allowed me to crosscheck the interviews with the actions of the informants as well as their statements along the way concerning how the game is used and enjoyed.

But despite the close resemblance to ethnography and the many ethnographic methods I used, I want to return to Geertz's distinction between studying *in* an environment and studying the environment itself. There was something lacking in order to make this either anthropology or ethnography - even if I frequently committed acts of anthropology.

In online anthropology I do not simply work in the environment, or as Geertz says, the village; I cannot avoid studying the environment as well. Online there is no distinction between the environment and the technology, and it is so obviously a construction. Compare this to, for instance, the environment of a traditional Sami nomad group. The traditional nomadic Sami use their technology in order to adjust to their environment as they move from winter pasture on the tundra to the summer pasture of the coast; their culture is developed and adapted to meet the demands of the reindeer herds and the physical environment. This culture also accommodates the conflict between the nomadic Sami and the settled fishing communities of the coast, and is governed by the harsh climate and the strategies of survival in the polar region. An anthropologist of the Sami might register how the culture is developed in order to ensure survival under these conditions, and how, for instance, their religion functions by laying down guidelines for their social practices; but their culture will have, relatively speaking, little impact on the already existing environment. Traditional anthropology will remain focused on the culture of the group and not the environment in which the group lives; the environment being simply the source of the limitations and possibilities that encourages the nomadic Sami to develop technology in a certain direction.

In online anthropology the environment is technology. The culture of the online meeting place is structured and restricted by the environment, but it can also alter it. Certain forms of behaviour which are for some reason not accepted, but which the environment allows, can be altered through making the environment less supportive of this behaviour. If a message-board keeps being spammed by anonymous flames, it is possible to restrict posting to this board to registered members. To operate this kind of security on a message board in the flesh world would include a level of security that would severely restrict the registered posters as well, but online the security-checks and the walls around the board don't need to be noticeable at all. This means that the hierarchy of culture and environment is much less rigid online than offline, and Geertz's distinction between studying in an environment versus studying the environment has to be reconsidered.

Research through active participation

The main methodological problem in a more traditionally objective, positivistic research tradition was my own active participation. I was not only observer, but also performer, player, builder and administrator, writer and player. Reflexivity in ethnography goes a long way towards making the relationship with the object of study open and verifiable. But the nature of the environment in which I studied, mainly the fluid, flexible and changeable nature of the online gaming community, defies objectivity and positivism. Role-playing games thrive on change; the object of the game is development and diversion, and a good argument or a well-played scene can change not only an evolving story-line, but also the programming of the game platform, in order to accommodate a certain type of play. The research I conducted became a factor to be considered in the game and had an impact; I had to admit, accept and take the consequences of this.

This defies what Orlando Fals Borda calls: “the fetish-like idea of science as truth which has been transmitted to us as a cumulative, linear complex of confirmed rules and absolute laws” (Borda 2001:28). The resistance to the paradigm of science as objective and politically neutral is an important motivation in the exploration of action research or participatory research. Action research is a tradition of social inquiry with its roots in the application of social science to solving practical social problems. According to William Pasmore (2001:38), the origin lies with the work of the American Philosopher John Dewey, author of the work on reflective thinking: *How We Think* (1933). His innovation, according to Pasmore, was using science to address practical social problems.

Pasmore and Borda trace the conflict between action research and more traditional views, giving examples of the use of participatory methods in processes of change and consciousness-raising in organisation and communities. Yvonne S. Lincoln points out the similarities or sympathies between action research and social constructivism, sketching a trend of thought where the objective truth is questioned from more than one standpoint: “Constructivist inquiry emerged from the failure of conventional evaluation to address programme change in any meaningful way.” She proceeds to present the similarities between the two approaches to research:

Thus, there are several characteristics on which action research, participatory research, participatory action research (PAR) and other forms of co-operative research (Heron 1996; Heron and Reason 1997) and constructivism resemble each other. Participatory research, for instance, “highlight[s] the politics of conventional social research, arguing that orthodox social science... normally serves the ideological function of justifying the position and interests of the wealthy and powerful” (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). Constructivist research has done the same. (Lincoln 2001:125)¹³

Both constructivism and action research are both highly politicised approaches to research, and particularly action research or participatory research aims at exploring how knowledge and access give people control over their lives, thus leading to more initiative in relation to changing their working conditions of living conditions. An empowered individual is both more active and more responsible, and action research explores the processes connected to liberation, democratisation and development of communities.

In the course of my research, I found that there was a process of self-realisation and liberation in the online gaming. The gaming was, to some of the participants, a project of action research, where they experimented with their own identities (Mariah, interview 16.09.1999) and with the alternatives open to them in what they considered laboratory conditions. However, this was not a laboratory. A MUD is a cooperative effort and the lives of others were touched and their views and understandings altered (Tom, interview

¹³ Lincoln refers to: Heron, John C (1996): *Cooperative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*, London, Sage Publication; Heron, John C. and Reason, Peter (1997): “A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm”, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(3): 274-94.; Kemmis, Stephen and McTaggart, David (2000): “Participatory action research” in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds): *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (second edition), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.

16.09.1999, David, interview 19.09.1999, Jason, interview 28.09.1999).

Common to all of the interviewees was the emphasis on their own ability to change the course of the game, to express themselves and to influence the storyline as it evolved. In the cases where players were disillusioned and left the game, lack of ability to alter the game or influence the story was given as a main reason for leaving (Beyne, interview 19.09.1999).

This is reminiscent of the early studies from which action research developed, such as the Tavistock Institute's observation of coal-mining practices (Pasmore 2001:41). Eric Trist and Ken Bamford studied the differences in work arrangements in mines with unequal productivity under other seemingly similar conditions. They found that the mines that had a higher productivity gave the miners more liberty to arrange their own work within self-managing groups below ground.

While the risks of an online gamer do not compare to the risks a miner takes working below ground, the value placed on influencing their own situation and having a measure of control over the dangers they were exposed to was crucial to both groups. This indicates that an important aspect of online gaming is freedom and wielding power. Janet Murray calls this 'agency', perhaps to avoid the more obviously political word 'power'. I find that using power is important exactly because it points to the politicised nature of digital spaces. Cyberspace, the fiction, is not free of politics either, as is clearly envisioned in the novel *ThiGMOO* by Eugene Byrne (1999), where virtual personalities start a real-world communist revolution.

I cannot claim to have used action research as my method: I started out aiming for qualitative analysis through text-studies and interviews. Looking back, though, what I actually did was more reminiscent of action research than not. I also find my own views and ideals mirrored in the descriptions by the practitioners:

Research is usually thought of as something done by people in universities and research institutes. There is a researcher who has all the ideas, and who then studies people by observing them, asking them questions, or by designing experiments. The trouble with this kind of way of doing research is that there is often very little connection between the researcher's thinking and the concerns and experiences of the people who are actually involved. People are treated as passive subjects rather than as active agents. We believe that good research is research conducted with people rather than on people. We believe that ordinary people are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a co-operative inquiry group to see if these ideas make sense of their world and work in practice. (Heron and Reason 2001:179)

One important assumption of this study is that since so many people play computer games, the games must have qualities which are not limited to what is considered commercially valid by producers of games. Particularly the mostly non-commercial MUDs could not be a result of stimulus-response marketing. The experiences which the players described to me: the play with identities, the pedagogic or educational aspect of gaming, the social networks created through the games and the creative freedom in the MUDs were not utilised fully in marketing until *Anarchy Online* was launched in 2001 as basically a role-playing game rather than an action game. And since the MUDs are text-based and operate on well-established and relatively simple technology for the net, the interest could not depend on the fascination with technology. Still, the design of my research did not fit into the parameters of action

research:

So in traditional research on people, the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive: the researcher only contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects only contribute the action to be studied. In co-operative inquiry these exclusive roles are replaced by a co-operative relationship, so that all those involved work together as co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone is involved in the design and management of the inquiry; everyone gets into the experience and action that is being explored; everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions; thus everyone involved can take initiative and exert influence on the process. (Heron and Reason 2001:179)

At first I had not planned to change the games, only to observe them. When the environment was too fluid to be observed without change, I had to reconsider my role as a researcher and reconcile it with my role as a player. While I switched between the roles of researcher and player, I did not at the outset expect my 'subjects' to do the same, and for most of the interviewees and subjects this cross-over never occurred. For some of the subjects however, their involvement in the study came close to the co-researcher-role.

That I did not involve all respondents this closely caused frustration, expressed through the reaction of a fellow administrator at *Lu'Tamohr*. At one point he accused me of reducing him and the others there to lab-rats. When I took his frustrations seriously and took the time to explain the work I was doing and the degree to which the building of *Lu'Tamohr* would be a part of my research, he relaxed and appeared to let go of his anxiety. I had not thought to involve the staff of *Lu'Tamohr* in the same manner as the Portland Cluster. *Lu'Tamohr* was not a main subject of study; it was part of the contextual knowledge, the same as reading fantasy literature to understand the references of the games. In the case of this outburst, I don't think involving this administrator would have lessened his frustration, since I was not studying him lab-rat fashion, but working as his equal. The loss of personal power and the exclusion from my 'real agenda' existed in his imagination and was beyond my control until I was made aware of it and could let him in on the secret that no studies were being executed beyond what he saw and knew about. The incident however underlined the importance of control, information and involvement in creating a good environment for research, as well as the fact that my research was not designed as action research from the beginning.

To conclude the questions of the methodology and its relationship to ethnology, anthropology and action research: when studying online communities, it is important to be aware that *it is not a laboratory*, despite the seemingly perfect laboratory environment of a digital space, where appearance, social status and even sex can be faked with greater ease than in any other kind of human interaction and communication, and the actions of the game are seemingly unrelated to the offline society. Cultural background and environments of the players have an impact online, and the individuals have to be considered as such, and not mainly as their own more or less identical avatars. Without the insistent flesh world reminders of the alien space I penetrate which would accompany fieldwork on Bali or in Paris, it is too easy to accept digital space culture as familiar to my own and start making assumptions about the realities of it.¹⁴ Only through close co-operation with the other denizens of the online meeting-places is it possible to keep in mind that this is not familiar

ground and that meanings or interpretations are not always obvious or even possible to relate to in the framework of the familiarity of this side of the screen.

How to read a text I write?

To study a text that has to be played, not read, places several of the traditional reader- and writer-positions at an odd position to the traditional understanding of them. Consider Umberto Eco's model of authors (Eco 1992:21) - he has examples of several different types: The empirical author, the model author, the fictitious author, and the narrator. One aspect that is absent from this model is the author as reader, consuming as well as acting on the text. In a game, the activity of the player or user differs from the author of a book or the viewer of a film to the extent that the use of the word *author* becomes problematic, if not useless, as it becomes a sub-category of the *player* (see figure 1, chapter 3). The position of *player* is not taking over but sharing some of the former authorial positions with the producers of the game and the other players, and the traditional distinction become obsolete.

Iser's flexible idea of the reader, in his description of how the reader is created by the text, contains a discussion which considers the reading as an event, in much the same way as the game is an event. But the player as an active participant goes beyond Iser's inner activity of reception, and into the realm of physical activity. Iser's reader doesn't exist anywhere but in the text. The implied reader is basically a concept, "a transcendental model which makes it possible for the structured effects of literary texts to be described" (Iser 1994:38). The player of a MUD such as *Dragon Realms*, however, participates in creating the *implied player* (if it can exist at all in a MUD), as he or she uses the structures of the game to create her own, layered over the structures supplied by the game, and thus she influences *the work* and sets the stage for other players.

While the player contains the more conventional reader-positions, it is important to see how playing goes beyond the concept of reading. When playing a game there is a variety of choices that are more dependent on the players' understanding than the producer's intent. The writer or producer of a computer game has to allow for change and manipulation in a way which is and is not similar to the openness of an open text. Like an open work (Eco 1987), the computer game must cater to the player's imagination, steer her without relying too heavily on cultural stereotypes that need to be learned in advance. The control over the player needs to be embedded in the game: the first three boxes of figure 1 (chapter 3): the game, the game-engine and the arena, the choices must be learned and made to seem obvious through the playing - as through the reading of a more traditional open text. But at the same time the openness of a game will be different from open texts in the manner defined by Eco, because to make a game playable and not just a riddle to be solved, it has to be open to change through manipulation. The main difference between the game and the story is in the open order as to the events. A game may generate a story in the retelling of the game-experience, but it has the potential of more than one story. Each new playing of the game can change the events, and offer the player a new experience. And the experience, while it might be partly the result of a random generator (like in first-person-shooters or games where 'luck', as in the

¹⁴ Henry Jenkins (in his article in *Technology Review*) (April 2002), describes how easy it is to make the assumption online that the players of the other avatars are white.

simulated roll of dice have a bearing on the result), will be dependent on the players' choices, skill, reaction-speed and knowledge.

In *The Princess Bride*, a game in the *King's Quest* series by Sierra, there is the option of going through the adventure chapter by chapter like a common linear story, but it also has an episodic quality, much like a soap-opera, and it depends on the choices of the player for the outcome to be determined. It has a dual ending, permitting the player to choose whether to actually save the prince or not, and the episodic quality of the game allows favourite parts to be explored more fully than others, without having to go through the entire tale at each new exploration. But as a game it fails, while it plays out its dual-ended story. It is interesting as an ergodic text with its fairly simple structure, where it opens for the manipulating reader, a reader which crosses over the line between sender and receiver, sending to him- or herself the messages of how to use and understand the text, twisting it into new stories, the structure doesn't invite play as much as reading and solving riddles¹⁵. Such 'games' act to blur the distinction between stories and games, because they fit so well the category of stories. There is a distinction between accessing a game through a story, and a game that generates stories. *The Princess Bride* contains the games within the story, but the number of stories is limited – *Dragon Realms* can be retold in more stories than there were players, and still the potential for the experiences and events in the game will not be exhausted.

Three aspects of playing MUD

A gaming-MUD is created with a wide variety of choices for the player. The software the game is based on together with the surrounding fiction delivers limits and possibilities to the original creation of the character. This would belong to what I will call the *technical aspect* of the game, and the most interesting element in this connection is the question of why some people choose to make things complicated for themselves. This part of the game is basically about control; this is MUD used as a variation of the complicated strategic games which exist both as board games and as single- or multi-user games distributed on CD-ROM. To study the 'rules' of *Dragon Realms* means to study how the game is programmed to react, involving programming and probability-calculation. The only area where the technical aspect is important to me is when I take note of how the players use it to their advantage. In my study, I gather knowledge of this aspect of the game through interviews with the players, to understand how they use the game to achieve a sensation of success and skill.

The second aspect of the game in a MUD is *the culture in the game* itself. On the one hand we have the fictitious culture, the surrounding fiction. A game of such complexity and one that is open to outside influence needs a convincing surrounding fiction as a driving force. Without this frame, the game at best will be used as a place for the players to test their own ideas, at worst it will be seen as boring and be left barren. The surrounding fiction directs a lot of what can be understood as possible and also impossible within the framework of the game. Good role-playing is as much about staying within the framework of the surrounding

¹⁵ These riddles frequently come in the shape of metaphors, puns and other figures inviting interpretation.

fiction, as having interesting ideas:

10) Do not, during roleplay, invoke powers your character would not have. Emote is a powerful command. You can write emotes about pulling out a laser cannon or invoking divine wrath - but don't. Talk to an immortal if you really want to do something outside of ordinary capabilities or involving the gods. (*Aarinfel* 2000)

An example of such a surrounding fiction was the central conflict on *Dragon Realms*: the Dragon Lords wanted to destroy the world and enslave all life. Some more or less powerful gods stood between them and terror, but some of these gods had their own agenda. The available weapons and the manners of fighting were references to war-skills from a wide range of cultures and epochs, but none included modern firearms. This included magic, and religion too had a real effect, and the action took place in either a pre-industrial or a post-apocalyptic setting. To study how the fiction was used and developed, I use logs from my own playing-experiences, saved help-files and conversations with players and administrators particularly Levi Hunter aka Morsillien the Demon, David Inthiadaka aka Eristeth the Healer, Jeremy Dartagne as Interith and Nort Dallas as Hordir the merman. These are all old players on *Dragon Realms* who know the history, also as administrators and immortals.

The other culture is the interaction between the players themselves. This is what is called OOC culture, *Out Of Character* as opposed to IC, *In Character* as the surrounding fiction can be assumed to be. Even if the OOC part is not supposed to influence the game, it does. It is revealed in the interaction between the administrators and the players, in what is being rewarded and what is not, in how people greet and talk to each other, and how the players choose to use or abuse the possibilities in the game, as well as the tolerance-level for errors. This culture is better studied through processes which are much the same as in the studies of other social units, through observation, participation and interviews, or at best, a combination of these, as exemplified in the previous paragraphs.

The third aspect of the game is the *player's notion of how to play* the game. The many different factors controlling her activity demands a personal approach to the game, what is called role-play. This concept can be difficult to comprehend until it has been experienced, as the meaning of and the rewards of role-play are very subjective and dependent on the player's own investments in the play. Role-play is a combination of the player's ability to co-operate with the mechanisms of the game, the surrounding fiction and the culture underpinning the game, the OOC culture. Role-play adds to creating a common In Character (IC) experience, which in this digital space is understood as good and constructive. It paves the ground for the creation of not so much a story but rather a potential for fiction; and within this stories can be acted out, experienced and told. On this level the player is totally dependent on his or her actions, within the limits of the first and second aspect of the game. The meaning of the player's autonomous position at this level shows in the conflicts which will flare up and has a potential to become very personal and emotional. Conflicts concerning whether the player's action on this level correspond with the other levels is a mechanism which gives birth to new MUDs. Players investing a lot on this level often have very strong opinions about the play, the culture and the fiction, and they often come out of the conflicts wanting to create something better.

To study this aspect of the game it is absolutely necessary to enter into the game and

interact with the other players, and if possible become part of the creation of the universe. This demands an immersion in this programmed, fictitious but also socially very real universe, to the point where it is possible to participate and observe without disturbing the flow of the role-play.

Non-linear texts and the influence of the user

The player's position in relation to the text is a position with influence. The game has rules and limitations, but given these rules the player can achieve results through his own efforts. Depending on what kind of game it is, the player can choose, the choices ranging from the ability to choose the sequence of events, to the wide range of choices in a MUD. This freedom to choose appears to be an astounding freedom from the popular media's space of entertainment formulas, where the consumer's only space for feedback is a strongly delayed yes or no through consuming or not consuming. The computer games do not presuppose a consuming user, and not even an actively understanding reader, but a manipulating reader who is a part of the player.

The manipulating reader reads with an eye to what can be changed within the limitations of the medium. What in the text can be used, and where will it permit the player to expand and – play? To study the manipulating reader is to study a media consumer with influence or *agency*. Janet H. Murray defines agency in this manner:

When the things we do bring tangible results, we experience the second characteristic delight of electronic environments - the sense of agency. Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices. We expect to feel agency on the computer when we double-click on a file and see it open before us or when we enter numbers in a spreadsheet and see the totals readjust. However, we do not usually expect to experience agency within a narrative environment. (1997:126)

While it is doubtful whether *Dragon Realms* can be called a story, it can be called a narrative environment. I do not use this to mean a story-generating machine, but an environment which is created to invite plotting role-playing and story-telling by its users: the players. Henry Jenkins (2002b) calls this 'spatial stories', and claims that "Spatial stories are not badly constructed stories; rather, they are stories which respond to alternative aesthetic principles, privileging spatial exploration over plot development (Jenkins 2002b)." While the concept "Spatial Stories" is tempting, this looks more like a forced attempt at keeping games within the parameters of narrativity, than a realistic approach to story-telling in games. There is a framework which permits stories to be created and to let events unfold, the more epic the events, the better. The game is dependent on myths, fantasies and literature for references, and it uses stories both to create the fictional framework the role-play happens within and the stories used to advance the role-playing. And afterwards these unfolding events can be retold as stories, whether as romances, tragedies or heroic tales, if the participants so wish, but the game is still not a story. Influence or agency within the narrative environment does not mean that the reader becomes an author. "The interactor is not the author of the digital narrative, although the interactor can experience one of the most exiting aspects of artistic creation - the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic

materials. This is not authorship but agency" (Murray: 1997:153).

The player of a game has more liberty within the game than the post-modern poacher using media in a pattern of choice and rejection. Jesper Juul (2001b) indicates that computer games are post-modern in their relationship to time, and while this might be correct when applied to some games, different computer games solve the question of time in different ways, and other aspects of games indicate that they are not basically post-modern works. A media user who uses the media in a controlled pattern of choice and rejection which some call poaching (Collins 1992:337, Jenkins 1992, Gripsrud 1995:260) is seen as an active subject within the framework of post-modern theory, and thereby an active co-creator of the texts. Post-modern consciousness has been described as leading to an extreme awareness of the text. All statements have been used before, everyone quotes something else, and the user has an ironic distance to the message and the content. This leads to a playfulness in relation to the text that goes beyond intertextuality. The audience are the poachers who fetch what they like, and also use what they like according to their own whim. When the producer then re-introduces the knowledge of the audience's use of the media messages back into the content, we have layers of hyper-consciousness and a play between these layers that is entertaining in itself.

But the user of the computer games goes one step further, and expects to be able to influence the work in shape of the game to create their unique text. That makes the ironic distance disappear, as well as the casual postmodern preoccupation with the surfaces, which seems to indicate that nothing makes an impression and nothing is important. The postmodern distance to the text does not compare to the intensity and possessiveness of the players of computer games. Perhaps it is rather a kind of Leonardo da Vinci-game; an attempt to convince the player that he is a universal genius who can master everything and have knowledge, read and write, play and create? The games then become miniature universes, allowing the players to see through the mechanisms and manipulate them, able to enjoy the feeling of control, understanding, creativity and influence. The intensity and the feeling of ownership towards the role in the game and to the events in the game indicate a seriousness and an experience of reality or realism in the game which also is seen in the language and the way computer games catch, hold and are addictive.

The question I am left with is whether my method is sufficient to show how the games change the expectations of the players with regards to the limitations of the medium. What happens to a generation which has grown up with being able to change the text through manipulating the work? How will these people use the computer when they are no longer limited by conventions learned through the book's tendencies to sequentiality? Is it possible to analyse oneself to understand such a change at all, or is the best I can do to gather fragments from a cultural field where this change might be taking place?

Through having participated and been a 'manipulating reader' or a player, I am fascinated by the flexibility of the computer as a tool for asserting influence in the meeting with the media products it conveys. I remain filled with questions concerning whether the role of player might lead to a change of perception on how to use information mediated by way of computers. The computer suits games so well, even before the introduction of games it seems almost like a separate arena which cannot be taken fully seriously, and the idea that online activities are not real, but virtual, persists.

Third interlude - A war of words and ridicule

Dragon Realms was supposed to take place in a possible world where several versions of the Middle Ages took place at one, combined with a couple of Renaissances and a few periods that never existed outside of the creators' minds. In order to add to the sensation of 'otherness', the players tended to write in a pompous, old-fashioned sounding writing, but the ideas they displayed stayed refreshingly moderne. At this warcouncil, which takes place within Zindwyn's and Xeziar's private home, Erinn, Rilliath and clan leader Zindwyn plan what to do with Gyzter, a drow who has hurt Xeziar and insulted their half-elf children, while Eristeth heals Xeziar's concussion and a fracture of his skull. Gyzter's behaviour is a provocation to which war would have been the answer if the clan could afford it, but at the moment the clan account is empty and they need to be creative and find some other way to fight.

The discussion happens both in the room and through the clan-channel, and it mixes IC and OOC interaction. I have edited out the interaction which had no particular connection to the war-council.

Zindwyn says 'Xeziar, why were you talking with Gyzter?'

Xeziar says 'Concern of what he has been doing'

Zindwyn says 'What has he been doing?'

Zindwyn says 'Our defenses are fairly good...if we can keep guardians in stock...'

Zindwyn says 'Gold should be up to par...'

Zindwyn says 'I just need to know *why* Magrath found it necessary to attack an Arcane bodily...'

Xeziar seems better enough, some scrapes on his hand from bracing from the fall.

Zindwyn says 'And why Gyzter needed to be tied up.'

A female elf stands before you, with long red hair curling to past her knees. Her eyes are a brilliant green, and they return your regard curiously. If the light is right, there is a smattering of freckles across her slightly up-turned nose. She wears a grey cloak, with two silver pins winking from each shoulder. One is a silver circle, imbedded with a stylized blue sapphire flame. The other is a silver eye made from purple stone, it's pupil embedded with the blue flame.

Zindwyn is in perfect health.

Zindwyn is using:

<worn on head> a circlet with a sapphire flame set in darkmetal
<worn on ear> a ruby and diamond earring set in gold
<worn on ear> a ruby and diamond earring set in gold
<worn on eyes> sparkling green eyes, framed by long lashes
<worn around neck> a jeweled darkmetal butterfly clasp
<worn on body> a dark grey bodice laced with a concord silk scarf
<worn about body> a rich grey cloak, lined with concord silk
<worn about waist> a chain of palm-sized darkmetal rings
<worn on legs> a pair of greaves

<worn on feet> a pair of boots
 <worn on arms> adamantite armbands
 <worn around wrist> a charm bracelet
 <worn around wrist> a bracelet with a water crystal set in darkmetal [Flawed]
 <worn on hands> dark grey fingerless gloves
 <worn on finger> (Glowing) a gold band, engraving like ivy barely visible
 <worn on finger> (Glowing) an emerald ring, encrusted with diamonds
 <worn as shield> a silver shield engraved with a flame
 <wielded> a quickmetal dirk
 <held> the Orb of Harmony
 <floating nearby> (Glowing) a misty butterfly with rainbow wings

Eristeth stands behind Xeziar, and slips off his gauntlets, then puts his hands on Xeziar's shoulders.

Eristeth stops using a pair of iron gauntlets.

Eristeth chants a few words and sends some healing warmth through Xeziar's body, trying to get him to relax.

Erinn glances at Eristeth with his hands on Xeziar's shoulders, the small smile on her lips creeping towards her eyes.

Zindwyn says 'What did he say to our children?'

Xeziar says 'He simply threatened to put them in place, some other things, mostly hostile things demanding horrible respect'

Eristeth looks up at Erinn with a smile in his own eyes, then goes back to concentrating on Xeziar.

Zindwyn says 'I'd like to speak to him.'

Eristeth tilts a corner of his mouth up in a half-smile as he feels Xeziar relaxing under his fingers, then lifts his hands up.

Zindwyn CLAN: 'Velvetra, tell me of Gyzter's words.'

You say '*calmly* he unbalances me.'

Zindwyn says 'Gyzter? What has he done?'

You say 'His entire manner, it is so deliberately devoid of logic'

Xeziar starts to nod, but stops short realizing the defeating purpose.

Eristeth closes his eyes as a silvery glow emerges slightly from his hands.

You say 'He is dangerously intelligent and manipulative'

Zindwyn says 'More like a religious fanatic then, as if Inquisitors weren't enough.'

Rilliath says '*quietly* I find myself disappointed in Gyzter at times, but mainly sad. He does this to please his House and their "Honor."'

Zindwyn says 'All right. Fear has been pushing us for months. It's becoming intolerable.'

Zindwyn says 'Plus, they are bullying Nova...taking lands and becoming far too powerful.'

Zindwyn says 'Reasons for not declaring war on Fear are?'

Zindwyn says 'One: They have the possibility of taking our land.'

Xeziar says 'Likely suffering it'll bring, deviation from pure research. I still believe, as I've said before, in the end we could glean knowledge from Malvena through her servants'

Zindwyn says 'Two: It is costly both in time and money.'

Zindwyn says 'Three: People will lose lives.'

Eristeth takes a deep breath, then moves his hands back to the sides of Xeziar's head, holding them there for a moment as the silvery glow flickers.

Zindwyn says 'Erinn are you saying you may have a counter plan that won't cause War?'

Zindwyn says 'Or just with holding from commenting?'

Eristeth's face shows a look of intense concentration as the flickers start pulsing in a discernable rhythm.

You say 'I am withholding comments until I have the skills to make my solutions work'

Zindwyn says 'Reasons *to* go to War.'

Zindwyn says '1) We can get Zepherus back from Fear, and curtail further growth.'

Zindwyn says '2) This would keep us safer from Fear, and also cement Nova as our allies.'

Xeziar says 'We could possibly obtain a land or two Noble would be willing to purchase, or exchange Silverbrook'

Xeziar turns around fully looking to Eristeth.

Eristeth pulls his hands away, then looks intently at the back of Xeziar's head.

Xeziar says 'Thank ...oh not done'

Xeziar sighs loudly.

Eristeth blinks as he finds himself looking Xeziar in the eyes, then nods to him.

Xeziar turns back.

Eristeth says 'It's done.'

Zindwyn says '3) Possibilities exist to further our relations with Noble.'

Zindwyn says '4) It will further the knowledge that Arcana is not to be taken lightly.'

Eristeth looks at Erinn, then smiles and nods.

Zindwyn CLAN: 'OOC Yes, pompous zin. Must be all the pampering going to her head.'

Xeziar says 'A fifth ties into the fourth, Dragon might be more willing to surrender the isles'

Zindwyn says 'This is all assuming we win.'

You say 'I would however, If I should talk, say that fear wants to show off in a fight'

Xeziar says 'A tough assumption'

Eristeth stands up straight, and rolls his head around, then walks over to where Erinn is sitting and settles next to her.

Zindwyn says 'Yes. What are our other options then?'

Erinn turns to smile at Eristeth, then leans in his direction as she continues talking.

You say 'I have on several occasions counselled humiliation rather than open fights and manly solutions'
Xeziar says 'Deal with the outlaws, and we likely have to deal with the group.'
You say 'I think Fear is made up of people with one real Fear - that of being made into the fools they are'

Erinn nods lightly to Xeziar.

Zindwyn says 'So our second option is to humiliate them. Another form of war...one of propaganda.'

Zindwyn says 'We can flood the world with secrets, rumors, and open pictures and stories ridiculing them...'

You say 'I would prefer that, until we have a GOOD reason for war'

Rilliath says 'I like this option better, as well.'

Zindwyn says 'It doesn't even need to be done directly from us...it can be anonymous.'

Eristeth hesitates before speaking, then blurts out, 'Although from my experiences, it has often been that most of them do not know when they are humiliated.'

Erinn puts her hand down to rest on Eristeth's thigh.

Zindwyn chuckles a little. "I think we can make it blatantly obvious."

You say 'Yes, that is a problem... we just have to be less than our intelligent subtle selves then'

Rilliath grins, nodding.

Zindwyn says 'I suggest we take two days to think about this.'

Zindwyn says 'I will ask us all to meet when those two days are up, and we can gather our ideas on how to start our propaganda war.'

Zindwyn says 'Then impliment them.'

Zindwyn says 'Anything else we need to talk about while we are all here?'

Zindwyn stands up slowly, her braids falling down her back.

Rilliath CLAN: 'OOC *grins* I've a good plan, I think.'

Rilliath CLAN: 'OOC I love this. So fun.'

Rilliath CLAN: 'OOC Much more than bashing Fears.'

Zindwyn says 'I'm going to talk to a certain drow.'

Zindwyn says 'Rilliath, would you like to come?'

Rilliath seems to be looking at a far wall, not listening to Eristeth but thinking of the meeting ahead.

(Zindwyn and Rilliath have left the group, Eristeth, Xeziar and Erinn have moved to the back garden)

Zindwyn CLAN: Rilli, could you keep up a wall across the door?'

Rilliath CLAN: 'Certainly.'

Zindwyn CLAN: 'I'd rather he couldn't leave, and no one could enter.'

Rilliath CLAN: 'I wish I knew the stone one, but...no helping it.'

Zindwyn CLAN: 'Thank you. I'm sure it will accomplish it's purpose.'

Xeziar starts to disapper downwards, 'The stairs down are this way'

Xeziar leaves down.

Eristeth leaves down.

A Secluded Beach

[Exits: north south up]

A small enclosed beach extends untouched here, sand soft and made of powdered shells. The ever changing ocean laps against the shore, darkening the sand to grey where it touches. The wind blows between the crags of the cliff, creating a soft music. Gulls and sea birds fly along the cliffs, calling out their woes. A cave sits to the south, vaped tendrils raising to the open air.

Eristeth Veridiatix, the healer is here.

Xeziar Borealis Silverdew, Troubadour, High Mage of [ARCANA] is here.

Eristeth breathes in a deep breath of the sea air and looks out onto the ocean.

Zindwyn CLAN: 'Should I shrink his manhood? Maybe we can hit everyone of Fear's members.'

Rilliath CLAN: 'It would be fun.'

Erinn CLAN: 'It would be good material for some nice songs and poems from a bard'

Xeziar CLAN: 'One whom would be bribed I hope...I've only referred to such things in song once, and I turned redder than possible as I sang it, once.'

Erinn CLAN: 'Oh, you only need to write it Xeziar'

Xeziar CLAN: 'I'm glad as well, that most inquisitor's don't know about the song'

Zindwyn CLAN: 'Gyzter is currently the size of a 'pixie'.'

Zindwyn CLAN: 'Or at least, his manhood is.'

Xeziar CLAN: '*shivers* '

Zindwyn CLAN: 'Shall we announce this to as many people as possible?'

The moon sets.

Erinn CLAN: 'Yes, it should be made public'

Zindwyn CLAN: 'The gall...he continues to threaten.'

Xeziar CLAN: 'Promises of what may be if I recall *said with a slight growl*' Rilliath CLAN: 'Poor drow. Does he squeak now?'

Chapter 4: *Dragon Realms: How to play a game.*

Entering the Realm of Dragon

Connected to host realms.envy.com



By what name do you wish to be known? Erinn
Password:

WELCOME TO DRAGON REALMS!

If you are new to the Realms, please take time to look at our Story,
our
Cities and the basic Commands.

- Type HELP STORY to read the history of the Realms.
- Type HELP CITIES for information on the cities of the Realms.
- Type HELP ROLEPLAY for information on playing a character in the Realms.
- Type HELP CHANGES for information on the latest changes to the code.
- Type HELP RULES for guidelines on expected standards of behaviour.
- Type COMMANDS to list instructions on moving, talking, fighting etc.
- Type SOCIALS to list commands used for non-verbal communication.

- Type HELP for more information about just about anything!

Please Note: Dragon Realms is a limited player killing MUD. Unwarranted

and/or casual killing of other players is not allowed. Type HELP PKILL and HELP WARZONE to get further information.

Enjoy your game! Press Return to enter the Realms:

A role-playing MUD is not initially different from other MUDs. The software is the same, accessing the game happens in the same way, and you get the same questions when you create a character. *Dragon Realms* was somewhat modified from the traditional DIKUMUDs, something which is made obvious in the entrance-page: The different programmers of the current version have been included with the names of the DIKU-creators, the Envy¹-modifiers and the implementers and immortals of *Dragon Realms*: Topaz, Scarabae and Elwyn.

Everybody who entered the realm of Dragon encountered this page first. It contains

¹ -I ENVY~

This mud is based on EnvyMud 1.0, created by the EnvyMud Staff. EnvyMud is based on Merc 2.2, created by Kahn, Hatchet, and Furey. Envy 1.0 is available as Envy_1.0.tar.gz from ferkel.ucsb.edu (most files moved to ftp.tcp.com), ftp.math.okstate.edu, marble.bu.edu, and zen.btc.uwe.ac.uk E-mail to 'merc-request@kpc.com' to join the merc mailing list.

Thanks to ...

... Diku Mud for starting it all.
... The Free Software Foundation and DJ Delorie for kick-ass tools.
... University of California at Berkeley Central Computing Services and Information Systems and Technology staff for providing the support and resources to develop and test EnvyMud release 1.0
... Copper Mud, Alfa Mud, ROM, ROM2, DALEMUD, Silly, and Circle for releasing their code and worlds.
... Jeremy Elson for help porting a few sites.
... Celeste for help in porting some more difficult-to-come-by sites.
... Zrin for administering the mailing list.
... RoX of Farside for just giving us a copy of the entire Farside mud.
... Locke and Surreality of The Isles for trading code with us.
... the many implementors and contributors on the merc mailing list
... the players and imps of Rivers of Mud, 4th Realm, Dragon Mud, Demonic Dreams, Farside, and The Isles for bug reports, ideas, new code, and hours of enjoyment

... AND the many players of EnvyMud for which this mud was created.

Share and enjoy.

The EnvyMud Staff (DR helpfiles)

information which is necessary to the public, much in the same way as the title page of a book. Different from the title page, however, is the reminder of the different ‘helps’: Help Changes, Help Rules etc. For new players the different help-files were particularly important. They contained knowledge that was somewhat rudimentary, but absolutely necessary for understanding what was going on. ‘Commands’ was another helpful function, it would give you an overview of the orders you as a player could give the game to be able to manoeuvre at all. An example of such commands was ‘look’, and you see a description of the landscape you are in. To be able to move in this landscape of words, type and enter n for north, s for south etc allowing you to move in as many as six directions, if you could see as many as six exits:

Main Street

[Exits: north east south west]

You are on a wide, well worn road running through the centre of the city. Merchants ply their trade to either side, taking advantage of the traffic that passes through here. Mouth-watering smells are emanating from a bakery to the north, while to the south you can see a general store. (*Dragon Realms* 1998)

This is the view of the main street of *Haven*, the town where all players of *Dragon Realms* started. The fantasy realm was described through countless similar bits and pieces, some more fantastic, some even shorter.

The Rainbow Garden[Exits: north west]All around you, the world explodes into a riot of colour. Flowers of every conceivable hue, and several clearly impossible ones, compete for attention. Even the insects flying through the blossoms are memorable. Several benches have been placed among the flower-laden trees, and the white gravel path twists through every band of colour to visit each one.

(Invis) A Girlish Pixie grins whimsically as she flutters by.

One of the bushes seems to be walking away.

A green and gold butterfly brightens the air with its wings.

A vibrant crimson butterfly flutters past you.

A brilliant blue butterfly flits from flower to flower. (*DR* 1998)

Inside the rooms there could be objects, things which could be picked up, and Non-Player-Characters or NPCs. In a MUD the NPCs (aka ‘bots from robots or mobs from mobile units) are run by the program rather than by a Gamesmaster (as in role-playing table-top games). In the sample room from the garden of Opal there’s an invisible NPC which moves from one room to the next, a visible roaming NPC (the bush) and three visible and stationary butterfly NPCs.

The shortest room descriptions in *DR* were normally roads, since they were rooms for moving quickly through. Even for such a simple act as moving there were different strategies, and movement was an important aspect to consider in order to interact or participate in fights, attacks and flight.

A role-playing MUD such as *Dragon Realms* is very flexible, and can be mastered in several layers. It can be played for the pleasure of role-playing, to create an illusion and

develop it. It can also be played for the technical skills, to master different versions of abilities that the game permits the different characters to develop. Or it can be used, as several other MUDs of different kinds are being used, for the chat-room quality, to meet, talk or fantasise with others. A large group also uses MUDs such as these for MUDsex, under the motto: MUDsex is safe sex.

In this and the subsequent chapter I will be looking at some of the different ways to use MUDs, and enjoy a game such as *DR*. I have charted some strategies for using *Dragon Realms* through playing, conversation and interviews, and will concentrate on how these strategies are expressed in the game.

Social actions in MUDs, the case of LambdaMOO

As MUDs have been built and their usefulness explored, the interaction on them has been subject to several studies. A classic example is LambdaMOO, which has been the source of papers, theses and books, such as for example the works of Pavel Curtis (1992), Elisabeth Reid (1994) and Julian Dibbell (1993). These all discuss the possibilities for a medium like a MUD or particularly a MOO to develop into a social arena.

Pavel Curtis was the arch-wizard and creator of *LambdaMOO* in 1990, connecting there under the names Haakon or Lambda. His article "Mudding: Social Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Realities" (1992) gives a comprehensive description of what a MUD is, as compared to other software. It also describes the different modes of communication and 'navigation' within the MUD, in comprehensive terms and with high validity also for other MUDs than the MOO which is his main topic.

LambdaMOO is a social MUD which allows for the participants to make objects for themselves. This means manipulating the code into responding to certain orders in ways that give you the experience, connotation or illusion of having encountered an object. It might be a rose with scent, a dog that barks, or a tank that bombards you with anything from missiles that do damage to your character to verbal clouds of perfume. All these 'objects' appear as verbal descriptions, and so the 'scent' of the rose will be a sequence of text sent to your screen when you type and enter a command such as 'look rose'. But when they take the description of a gate and change the text on your screen from one view of the MUD to another, or they create other little objects like food you can 'pick up' and 'eat', the objects seem to pass the line from being simply lines of passive text to be viewed; acquiring some kind of perceived, tangible existence where they make a difference to your mobility within the mass of text which makes up the digital arena of a MUD.

The easy creation of such objects is one of the distinguishing points of a MOO when compared to other relatives in the family of MUDs. While not unique to MOOs, object creation is an important part of the attraction, where scoring points and gaining levels would be the point of a play-MUD like DIKU- or LP-MUD. This is important in view of the social rules on LambdaMOO, which focus on the use and abuse of objects. Perhaps the most famous of MOO 'crimes', one which has been reported and quoted again and again, was such an abuse of objects. In his article *A Rape in Cyberspace*, Julian Dibbell describes what he claims is the experience that turned LambdaMOO into a society. A player of the MOO, whose character was known as Mr. Bungle, used his skills at manipulating the code-base to build objects called voodoo-dolls. With these dolls he made it appear as if he forced selected

characters to have sex with him, each other and themselves, in grotesque and offensive manners, in a public, populated part of the MOO. Manipulating his object, the voodoo-doll, from outside that particular textual 'space', the 'room'² his victims were in, he could give the impression that the described actions were those of his victims.

The resume of what happened afterwards was presented by Dibbell (1993) and describes a random group developing into a community through their common actions as they discuss where their limits were in social interaction and most important, how they could become empowered enough to avoid that this kind of thing happened again. The article focuses on the 'rape' as the cause for the creation of the society. I would like to ask if it might not also have been the experience of lack of power and the abuse of power, as it revealed the vulnerability of all participants, which made this such a very emotional cause.

If we take a step back from the holding power³ and the emotional content of the incident as Dibbell describes it, there is no evidence of rape here. Rape is a very specific concept, for an act to be legally defined as rape there are certain conditions which have to be met.⁴ These are hard enough to secure in real life, where there usually will be physical evidence of the act. To use this concept about a stream of abusive fantasy streaming over a screen is a rhetorical twist and not a precise label. If we view rape as an act not of physical nature, but an abuse of power, then we can talk of rape here. But that presupposes that participants have something to 'win' or 'lose', which again denotes the presence of power in some form.

What we have is a stream of words flowing over a screen. Why didn't the victims simply quit? Turn the machine off, let the screen go dark and the abuse go on without them? This was not a physical abuse from which they couldn't flee. I think the answer lies in the fact that LambdaMOO must have been a society or a community before the 'rape' happened. As a society or a community, the members would have a sense of what could and could not happen. If this had been an open, undefined space where you could expect any kind of behaviour, most people openly displaying a sexuality not clearly heterosexual male, like for

² This is another example of the use of metaphors, because while the players of the characters that were manipulated were at several different geographical points, they were all using the same channel. This channel represented some physical space, but with words. The metaphor of space corresponds with the descriptions, not with the actual place of the event. If the event took place in any geographical place, we have to talk of multiple places, the least significant of which is the spot where the server connecting all these people stood at the time.

³ 'Holding power': the power of a game to keep your interest through the wish to learn what happens next, what is beyond the next door. It is frequently used about the rate of addictiveness of commercial games, which makes the players stay with the challenge of solving the game, as well as long for and rush to buy the next edition.

⁴ In Norway this means that the rapist has to achieve sexual intercourse (seksuell omgang) through violence or threatening behaviour. Sexual intercourse means; vaginal, oral or anal penetration, or other sexual intercourse-like activities. There needs to be a causal relationship between the violence and the intercourse. If the victim is unconscious or is forced to have intercourse with someone other than the person using force, this is also defined as rape. Violence and threats are widely defined.

⁵ Along the same lines it's hard to get a conviction for rape if the victim was in the wrong place at the wrong time and dressed provocatively.

instance, females, would be unsurprised by acts of sexual aggression.⁵ That there was outrage, that the participants stayed to see what happened and witness what they expected to be the end of the interplay, and the fact that one man's violent fantasies found people to give him attention and react emotionally, was most likely to have resulted from an already existing feeling of having a place, a role, status, rights and power.

Communities are distinguished by among other things, the empowerment of the participants. It is not farfetched to say that the members of the LambdaMOO community took their own power for granted, operating on a standard set by their Real Life background and expectations. As Pavel Curtis (1992) shows, despite the theoretical possibility for diversity in the members of any on-line community, they are limited by some statistical facts that makes the many and seemingly diverse communities fairly homogenous. And so the set of standards violated with Mr Bungle's offensive descriptions (Curtis 1992) can be assumed to have been that of a community of academic, English-speaking upper-middle-class young white adults. Hence, although there was no physical rape, an incident of such uninhibited and undisguised verbal abuse would be a crime against the standards of the already established community, and what was offended was not physical flesh, but a feeling of wounded dignity and decency as a result of a contravention of what was accepted practice.

When discussing offences in digital communities, the power of symbols becomes clear. What is manipulated is not after all something that can be measured in centimetres, litres or kilos. The capital exchanged, earned and lost is a cultural/social one, not an economic one.⁶ This cultural capital becomes to some extent a substitute for the economic capital not readily available to the users of the net, allowing them an imagined space where status is not dependent on what you can show for yourself physically, but what you can imagine (Turkle 1995:240). As one visitor of an online sex-chat-site underlined when she talked about her experiences there: "When meeting on the net, all you have to show for yourself is your intelligence and skill with words. Everything else belongs to RT - Real Time, and comes second to the virtual experience."⁷

Technicalities: options in playing.

Elementary technical skills for playing MUDs include mastering commands such as *look*, *say*, *take*, *drop*, *open*, *close*, *eat*, *drink*, *emote*, *kill*, *flee*. Most of these have several versions of the same family of commands, such as: *Look* shows the room the character is in, and all the other characters, NPCs or objects in the room. But it depends on several other variables, such as if it's dark and the character carries/doesn't carry light, if the room is foggy, if the character is blind, if the different characters or objects are visible, invisible or hidden, or if the character has the ability to see what is hidden or carry objects to give them this ability. And these are just a few variables which can influence the *look*-command.

If the character was a thief, it would have some options, such as *peek*, a command which would show the contents of other player characters' inventories. This made it easier to steal

⁶ Despite the thriving market with characters, items and property in games Edward Castranova (2001) has reported, this is still the exception rather than the rule.

⁷ Conversation with '~ophelia~', New York, November 1999. Note that in several online subcultures RL - Real Life - is often exchanged with RT- Real Time.

from other PCs', since the thief would know what to take from the inventories. There was also in DR a magic which would let the character (and the player) see into a room from a distance to see who was there – appropriately the formula was called *crystal ball*. Other similar magic would *locate objects* by using a deck of tarot cards – a very powerful weapon against disguised characters, as you could look for one-of-a-kind items this character would always be carrying.

This way even the simplest commands in a play-MUD like DR can offer a wide range of variations as the player builds the character and it gets more and more abilities. While the variables were controlled through *skills* and *levels*, they were also influenced by race and class. Erinn, who was an elf and assassin⁸, was automatically able to see *hidden* objects through her race, while her companion Eristeth, a 'human' cleric⁹ had the abilities through the skills of his class not only to see what was hidden, but also what was invisible, those who slinked or lurked or the truth behind disguises. *Slink* and *lurk* were two versions of invisibility only thieves or assassins at a high level could use. Using those skills, thieves and assassins would only be visible to clerics at a corresponding level. This made the abilities exclusive and desirable, both when it came to being hidden and to see what was hidden.

Race and class

Race influences the abilities and particular benefits of the characters. The available races in DR were humans, elves, half-elves (mixture of human and elf), dark-elves or drow, orcs, half-orcs (human and orc), trolls, giants, meer-people, dwarves, pixies, hobbits and serpent-people. These were races the players could choose from when creating their characters.

The different races had abilities which made them desirable for different reasons, depending on how the players liked to play. Elves would be long-lived – 60 – 70 000 years, while humans lived for 70-80 years and trolls 40. On the other hand humans and trolls were both stronger than elves, and would heal quicker. Trolls also had the ability to automatically regenerate body-parts, which meant that if your character didn't kill a troll in the first attack, it would normally win, because it would heal faster than your character could hack it to

⁸ -I ASSASSIN~

ASSASSINS are hired killers, mercenaries, and bounty hunters who specialise in murdering people for money. They differ from rogues in that their profession, though demanding a certain degree of stealth, inevitably requires that they be capable of despatching their intended target, preferably by means either exotic or underhanded. Assassins are therefore highly skilled in the use of poisons. History provides us with the names of but few who follow this calling, for anonymity is almost a prerequisite amongst those assassins who wish to be successful. (DR helpfiles)

⁹ -I CLERIC~

The CLERIC class is a spellcasting class similar to certain religious orders of knighthood in the Middle Ages; the Teutonic Knights, the Knights Templar, and the Hospitalers. These orders combined military and religious training with a code of protection and service. Members were trained as knights and devoted themselves to the service of the Church. Their magic is primarily defensive rather than offensive in nature. Archbishop Turpin (of "The Song of Gareth") is a good historical example of a cleric. (DR helpfiles)

pieces.

Studying a *score-sheet* could reveal the different statistics of your character's race:

ERINN, 60th Level Elf Assassin
Mage (Rank 8) in clan [ARCANA]

Hit Points 1198/1198 Mana 120/120 Movement 744/744

[Strength] 21 (max 21) [Sex] Female
[Intelligence] 15 (max 24) [Age] 140 (Young)
[Wisdom] 17 (max 21) [Size] 0 (Medium)
[Dexterity] 22 (max 27) [Alignment] -19 (Neutral)
[Constitution] 15 (max 21) [Items] 36/45
[Weight] 393/400
[Armor Class] -208 [Gold Carried] 44114
[Hit Roll] 20 [Bank Balance] 865126
[Damage Roll] 41 [Exp Total] 1335373118
[Wimpy] 199 [Exp Needed] 49210982
[Favor Points] 12 [Practices] 50

You are trusted at level 151.

You are standing.

You are affected by:

Item: 'detect invis' modifies none by 0 in permanence. (DR 1998)

Numbers in parenthesis show the possible strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity or constitution of the PC. These, as well as age and size, were affected by race. The other statistics in this sheet were affected by those basic attributes and by how the player played the character.

Race also influenced which classes you could choose for the character, and class determined skills and spells. Elves could not be clerics, giants could not be assassins, pixies couldn't be warriors and so on. This was part of the game, to choose the best class in relation to what you wanted to do with the character. I chose to make Erinn an elf and an assassin because I preferred not thinking about ageing, and because I wanted to learn about *Player Killing*, PK, the act of killing not other players, but the characters of other players (as opposed to NPCs). When I created Erinn I thought I would be able to kill and still stay *In Character* (IC) if my character was an assassin. What I did not know at the time was that assassins were of the weakest classes in fights, and I wouldn't have a chance at being able to kill other PCs until I was at a very high level. By the time the game closed down, a year after I started playing, I had not yet reached this level. On the other hand I had learned about the value of role-playing and how that could be used to create rumours and illusions which my little elf-girl would not have been able to back up had she been challenged, but which protected her sufficiently.

Players and MUDs

Richard Bartle was one of the original developers of play-MUDs in the very late seventies and early eighties (Bartle 1990), and several of the MUDs running today are direct descendants of that original MUD. In Bartle's own words, the first MUD was created like this:

... the writing of that first MUD was basically a team effort, and the way Roy and I expect to see it described is "MUD was created and written by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle at Essex University in the UK", or words to that effect. (Bartle 1990)

"British Legends", based on the original MUD code is still open to players. The culture of MUDs, where codes are swapped and hacked enthusiastically and with creativity, has allowed for mutations of the original game into the many types of MUDs known today.

Where the articles on LambdaMOO concentrate on the growth of social systems, Bartle discusses the players of the more game-oriented MUDs. In his article from 1996, *Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs*, he splits the players of play-oriented MUDs into four types, Achievers, Explorers, Socialisers and Killers.

Achievers are those who want to gain levels, points or whatever is needed to 'win' the game. They do what the game demands from them, their behaviour determined by the reward-system of the game.

The *Explorers* are people who like to understand the game and how it works, how the different objects function - their main question is 'what happens if...'. Explorers are the pure scientists of the game, picking apart the different functions for the sake of understanding and gaining esoteric knowledge.

Killers (the type of player I was trying to emulate with my assassin) are the players that cause the public to worry when they talk about how computer games train youths to kill maliciously and without remorse. Their main joy is in 'killing' (defeating) the characters of other players; killing mobiles or Non-Player-Characters¹⁰ (mobs and NPCs) is just not thrilling or challenging enough.

The *Socialisers* are in the category which displays the most traditionally feminine behaviour. They are people who - socialise. To them, a MUD is a place to connect, to meet others, to communicate. Communication, exchange of knowledge and discussions about emotions are very important. Bartle exemplifies their discussions with a quote that clearly identifies them as female (or gay): "yeah, well, I am having trouble with my boyfriend (Bartle 1996)."

The connections between these groups place the Socialisers in a very special position to all the others. While Achievers, Explorers and Killers tend to treat each other with tentative respect on the basis of each other's skills and exchanging information to mutual benefit, only one of these groups has true interest in the Socialisers. The Socialisers are interested in

¹⁰ The distinction between bots (robots), mobs (mobiles) and NPCs (Non-Player-Characters) is diffuse, and different words are used about the same concept: a mobile agent in the game, in essence an object, but with descriptions and programming that let them react to PCs. If attacked, they may for instance fight back. NPC is normally used about mobs or bots that represent sentient beings, for instance shopkeepers or people populating the streets.

all the others as content for their conversations, a passive, voyeuristic interest which does not really make them dependent on the other three groups, as they only need others of a like mind to be able to communicate. But the one group that has a vested interest in and influence on the Socialisers, is the Killers.

Bartle describes Socialisers as prey, the natural prey of the Killers. It is sobering to see the one group of players which is characterised by qualities which in our culture are mainly attributed to females, described that clearly as a target for aggression. In Bartle's model of the balance of MUDs, this is the only way Socialisers have any significant influence on the other categories. They may be nice to have around as admirers for the Achievers or occasionally sources of information for the Explorers, but the true use the game-oriented MUD has for them is to attract Killers.

On this background, let us for a moment consider MUDs as communities that absorb and display the common values on the internet. Computer technology seems to lend itself very well to the skills our western society nurtures in women but men are still the dominant users. One answer to why that is so looks dark and unpleasant. While research has shown that the most pronounced differences between the sexes were "Boys' greater mathematical and visual-spatial ability, girls' greater verbal ability, and boys' greater aggression" (Maccoby and Jacklin described in Powell 1988:64), the verbal quality of the communication in the digital arenas does not favour women to the point that they have a chance to dominate or even be an equal participant in the verbally constructed space. Part of the explanation may lie in how the virtual communities allow for unpunishable verbal and symbolic violence against those who display typical feminine attributes: in these corners of Cyberspace, the feminine are prey.

However, it is proper to question Bartle's categories, where he implies that communicating, connecting, exchanging information, knowledge and pleasantries are the main characteristics of one narrowly defined group. First, remember that his four 'types' are not real groups of players, but categories, and the argument can be countered by saying that they do not exist in pure form anywhere in digital space. Looking again, there may be grounds to claim that the attraction of the online games lies elsewhere than where Bartle places it. His model contains two groups that according to Bartle do not look for interaction with other players. Where the Killers and Socialisers both need other players for the game to gain meaning for them, the Explorers and Achievers only need them marginally. This is adverse to the core of online communities, as has been addressed by Curtis (1992).

While Bartle talks of the Socialisers as a sub-group of play-MUDders, Pavel Curtis' description of the MUD-addict falls very close to the Socialiser-definition: "These people are not addicted to computers, but to communication; the global scope of Internet MUDs implies not only a great variety in potential conversants, but also 24-hour access" (Curtis 1992:12).

This indicates that the very activity that Bartle, with no little touch of irony, ascribes to those who create soap-operas of their 'virtual lives' is the main activity of the digital arenas. The need to communicate, to connect, is the heart of the MUDding.

From a gender-perspective, this becomes even more interesting. Why are there not more women represented in the online gathering places, when we cannot even say that the main goal in these arenas is dominating others in traditionally masculine manners? This fact should prod curiosity to the point of re-addressing the question of what men and women do

well, cf. Corneliussen (2000).

To take a step back to Bartle's argument; from Curtis' perspective, the true Explorers and Achievers would probably not be found in online multi-user games at all. Since they mainly act or 'inter-act' in and with the game, and not with other users, the single-player games should logically be their natural domain. Studies of the use of single-user, off-line games show that the behaviour patterns can easily be fitted into the descriptions of the Achievers and Explorers (Heim/Øiestad 1995). The limited social activities Bartle ascribes to these groups can be compared to the players' off-line connections. In off-line gaming the different ways to solve the puzzle or score points is the topic of face-to-face, flesh world interactions, with a widespread exchange of CD-ROMs containing the games in question. What is missing in the off-line gaming is the quality of social interaction by means of the game itself, the online chat, banter or gossip. This is exactly the quality of the game that Bartle claims is the main attraction of those who discuss boyfriends, the socialisers.

When Explorers and Achievers still are frequently observed in online multi-user computer games, it's because the social aspect does matter: It's more satisfying to measure achievement against other humans than against a machine. The computer is also an excellent channel for the discussions which assist in explorations and achievement: there are discussion areas online dedicated to single-user games on- and offline. What makes the online multi-user games worth playing is in most cases the social aspects: to have someone with whom to share the experiences, and not least – to be listened to, praised and admired. The games are also made easier to play when players discuss problems, listen to gossip, learn or other people's solutions and share knowledge. And so it is possible to argue that the very core of multi-user gaming is a traditionally feminine set of skills, popularly attributed to women and regarded as absolutely necessary for them to be able to complete tasks and fulfil their role in society. The skills required to succeed in and enjoy these games are skills like communicating and having several conversations at one time, similar to the feminine skill of 'contact-speak' instead of 'report-speak' (Tannen 1992), and memorising and maintaining contact with large networks of people over time. These skills not only make the games easier to play, but also more enjoyable for all parties involved.

Skills

When the player chooses class for the character, a predefined skill set is assigned. Different play-MUDs offer varying methods for choice of class. The majority of MUDs require that the race be the determining factor for class. There is a subset of MUDs known as class-less, which will allow players to choose the skill set independent of the race. A slight variation of these allows the class to be chosen after a specified period of play. Among the MUDs I played *DR* had classes while *Azhad* was class-less.

Gathering the skills in classes enables the inexperienced player to create a balanced character and evens out the differences in relation to the experienced players who know which skills are good or fun, and which are useless. For assassins there was first of all a long list of poisons. The list of skills was called slist (skill list) and Erinn's looked like this:
All Skills/Spells You Know Or Can Learn:Lvl Rnk Skill/Spell Type Cost Prerequisite

1 camouflage Race 1	33 lepers blood Class 2 handle poison
1 dark tongue General 2	35 black market Class 2
1 dwarvish General 2	37 darkener Class 2 handle poison
1 fey General 2	40 circle Class 3 backstab
1 mortavian General 2	42 throw Class 2
1 resist magic Clan 2	45 beggars boon Class 2 handle poison
1 romany General 2	47 distill poison Class 4 handle poison
1 tallisian General 2	50 black lotus Class 3 handle poison
1 water speech General 2	50 8 find familiar Clan 2
1 xersian General 2	53 strangle Class 3
2 dodge Class 2	55 blackenblade Class 2 handle poison
5 handle poison Class 1	57 disguise Class 2
5 swim General 1	60 9 mana vortex Clan 4
10 hide Class 2	60 shadowfist Class 3 handle poison
12 second attack Class 2	62 lurk Class 4 hide
14 sneak Class 2	65 assassinate Class 5 backstab
15 backstab Class 3	70 10 magic carpet Clan 5
17 avoid capture Class 1	70 soulsear Class 3 handle poison
20 cant Class 1	75 shock oil Class 4 handle poison
23 nightshade Class 2 handle poison	80 madjack Class 4 handle poison
25 third attack Class 3 second attack	85 iocaine Class 5 handle poison
32 critical hit Class 3 backstab	100 teach General 3 (DR 1999)

The skills have certain conditions and prerequisites. ‘General’ means everybody can learn it, ‘Class’ means only assassins can learn it and ‘Clan’ means Erinn got these skills because she was a member of a clan.

This list looks impressive, but as it turned out not all the skills were equally useful. *Nightshade*, a poison, weakened the opponent very little, and with a strong opponent it hardly had any effect, as it only removed 2-3 hitpoints for every round. For a new player who has 20 hitpoints that seems like a lot (at 0 hitpoints the character is dead), but for a level 100 character with 1500 hitpoints that was not even annoying. *Leper’s Blood* was even less useful (it reduced the victim’s strength according to the level of the assassin, never to any particularly large degree), and the knowledge of how to make it was hidden from the players, it had to be role-played out of a character where the player had knowledge of the ingredients from earlier manifestations (the program which should have informed the players was broken, and the administration didn’t reprogram it while I was playing.)

Other skills were very important prerequisites, even if they had no effect on the efficiency of the character in a fight. One such was *handle poison*, basically a prerequisite to any handling of poisons. However as Erinn rose in the levels, there were more efficient poisons and skills. The most feared poison was *Darkener*, which led to blindness. It was feared not because it was so dangerous, but because it always worked. There were no *saves*, no way to tip the odds when the game rolled the dice, to make *Darkener* fail to blind the opponent.

There was also *Assassinate*, which killed an opponent in one strike, and could permit a lower level character to kill a much more powerful one. The problem was that it was easy to miss, *Assassinate* didn’t always work. The clever assassin would use a knife poisoned with

Black Lotus to make the opponent fall asleep, in order to be able to attack again, this time on a sleeping opponent.

Another little twist to the poisoning game was that the character could easily poison itself. A player of an assassin or a rogue might spend much of the game time waiting for the effect of *Darkener* or *Black Lotus* to fade. This is where the combination of Erinn and her partner Eristeth the cleric was so beneficial for Erinn and certainly for me while I was learning the game. Among the skills of a cleric was *Heal Poison*, which saved Erinn from uncountable dangers while she was blind or sleeping – and saved me many a boring hour waiting in front of the screen as the poisons got more efficient, their effects lasting longer.

All the classes had similar strengths and weaknesses, and they were planned in order to balance each other, to neutralise or emphasize each other's strengths. This was to encourage cooperation and role-playing, give all players something fun to play around with and provide a reason to make networks within or outside of the clans.

Efficient playing

At the technical level it was possible to measure who 'won'. If your character survived a fight or a battle, you won, quite simply. In that context 'good players' were the ones who could use the game fully in competition with others, and survive. At irregular intervals the administration arranged *Battles* (announced in bright red letters) where the players would let the characters join, to measure the skills and spells of the characters and the abilities of the players against each other without influencing the role-play and the relations between the characters in the fiction.

BATTLE: Battle is now open for all characters of levels 1 to 25.

This message would preclude a lot of messages like this:

BATTLE: Femein has been killed by Zorg.

BATTLE: Zerinnia has been killed by Zorg.

The end of the battle would be announced like this:

BATTLE: Seridhas been killed by Zorg.

BATTLE: Zorg is the victor!

BATTLE: The battle has ended

The many different abilities could be used in combinations to achieve the best possible result. A sorcerer would have spells to serve as protection, for attacks, to reduce the abilities of the opponent and perhaps even stop the attack. Most magic-type classes also had spells for healing, and they had spells that could be used on more than one player – occasionally on entire areas. They could also have other ways of taking control, such as the sorcerer's power *Domination* in order to control a player or NPC:

o 'DOMINATION' ~Syntax: cast domination <character> With this skill, a sorcerer can DOMINATE the mind of his or her intended victim, causing the victim to do exactly as the sorcerer says. (DR 1998)

This command works best with NPCs. Players would try to role-play themselves out of the control, and the control was not total. It's not common that charm-type spells (such as this one) in online games gives the player total control over the character of another player, for instance by not giving the other player an option to quit that session. The problems inherent in charm-type spells is the problem documented in Dibbell's article "A Rape in Cyberspace", where the voodoo-doll used by the 'rapist' was a charm-type spell. In DR, if a player let her character obey the sorcerer, that was considered good role-playing, but there were options if the situation became intolerable for the player, as well as rules as to what kinds of role-play was permitted in charm-type situations, rape being very much discouraged.

One advantage of controlling a NPC was that a sorcerer could attack the character of another player and get help from the dominated NPC. This would make the attack more efficient, and would give a weaker character a chance while fighting a stronger PC or strong NPCs.

Next to the abilities, the gear played a very important part in inter-player battles. Most things could be influenced by the gear, and the most important factors in a fight were AC (*Armour Class*), *Hit Roll*, *Damage Roll* and *Saves*. This led to all objects in the game being tested for their influence on the characters, and particularly for their potential to enhance these statistics. Inexperienced players were at a great disadvantage here, since they didn't know what to look for. Clans played an important role in teaching and socialising. Their strength was measured by player strength, which made it vital to outfit the new players as well as possible, and make them level quickly.

Different classes used different strategies in fights. Most players wanted their characters to have a low AC, that means a low chance to be hit. Sometimes it was necessary to choose: less AC and higher *Hit Roll*, or the other way around? Most characters benefited from a low AC, but for rogues and assassins it was a matter of doing maximum damage immediately, and then getting out quickly, making a high *Hit Roll* more important.

When I played Erinn in a fight, I would use several different poisoned knives, particularly poisoned with Black Lotus, hoping to put the opponent to sleep. If Black Lotus wouldn't do, I'd let Erinn use a knife poisoned with Darkener to blind the opponent, and then attack again with Black Lotus. On the occasions where Erinn would have to fight a much stronger opponent I'd let her throw the knives from the next room, in the hope that at least one of the knives poisoned with darkener would hit, since a blind opponent couldn't attack first. This would give Erinn the option of first attack and a chance to use backstab and at a higher level, assassinate. A blind opponent was also easier to escape from, and it couldn't chase her. While these were efficient one-on-one tactics, Erinn was not a character fit to fight multiple opponents. The strength of the assassin in this game was in the disguises, to be used for espionage and more general mayhem. An assassin could be very annoying without being lethal, as it could put the characters of others to sleep or blind them, leaving the players to wait out the effects of the poison with no other options for entertainment in the game than OOC chatting. The alternative was to be 'killed', end up in your temple of choice, and hurry

back for the equipment still on your dead body (as mentioned, much time and care had often been invested in the equipment).

The *bard*¹¹ Xeziar Borealis Silverdew fought differently. His player depended on superior numbers, using charm:

o 'CHARM PERSON'~Syntax: cast 'charm person' <character>This spell, if successful, causes the victim to follow you and to take orders from you. Use ORDER to order your charmed followers.

You are responsible for the actions of your followers. Conversely, other people who attack your followers will be penalized as if they attacked you.

This spell has no effect upon undead creatures. (DR helpfiles)

By using charm he'd make NPCs follow Xeziar. If they attacked him while he tried to "persuade" them, he'd use either *discord*¹² or *calm*.¹³ This would abort the attack on the bard, and the player could concentrate on making a new attempt at charming the NPCs. When he attacked another player-character, he used another ability of bards:

o DENUNCIATION~Syntax: cast denunciation <player name>This spell requires the bard, through music and verse, to thoroughly blacken the name, character and deeds of the specified player. All intelligent (non-player) creatures able to hear and understand the denunciation will develop a lasting hatred for the target of the denunciation. (DR helpfiles)

¹¹ -I BARD~

The BARD class is a something of a hybrid, combining the wits and guile of the rogue with quasi-magical spellcasting abilities derived through the use of song. They generally make their way in life through charm and talent. A good bard should be glib of tongue, light of heart, and fleet of foot! Historical examples of this character class include Alan-a-Dale, Will Scarlet, Amergin, and even Homer. (DR helpfiles)

¹² o DISCORD~

Syntax: play discord <character>

Syntax: sing discord <character>

This spell invokes uncontrolled anger and hostility in the creature upon whom it is cast, causing them to attack another nearby character. If they successfully resist the effects of the music, they will attack the caster instead. Characters that are already fighting are too intent upon their own survival to be affected by the music. (DR helpfiles)

¹³ o CALM~

Syntax: cast calm <character>

This spell calms the creature upon whom it is cast, causing them to cease any fights in which they are currently involved. Aggressive creatures affected by the spell will remain calmed for a short period and will generally not *initiate fights unless provoked*. (DR helpfiles)

This ability would make certain that the opponent could not use the same tactics of charm as Xeziar, since NPCs that heard the denunciation would not follow the opponent, but rather attack him or her.

The player behind Xeziar was infamous for his efficient use of the skills, abilities, equipment and how these could be combined in the game. At one point the player was accused of cheating, because of his control of the game. The player let his Xeziar-character be killed, and for a while I lost the player from sight. I told another player that I missed Xeziar. I was told to wait for another character that would go from level 1 to level 100 in three months (To compare: I played for a year and was level 85 as the game closed). This turned out to be a good tip, a short time later the player was back, this time as a *druid* a class which up to that point had been considered one of the least efficient in the game. After a very short time there was a spate of new druid characters, as players thought the success of the druid Lindar was due to the class and not the exceptional skills of the player.

Dragon Realms was limited when it came to PK or Player Killing. It was permitted in certain zones, such as arenas or war zones. Parts of the areas of the game would become war zones when the clans declared *Clan War*.¹⁴ In a war it was not just a matter of killing the characters of other players, but to conquer and hold land. All clans controlled different areas, and the wealth of a clan depended on which and how many areas they controlled. This made some areas more important than others. Cities like *Azur*, *Opal* and *Tallis* were all coveted by clans that wanted to strengthen their economic position. To take over an area of land it had to be emptied of Player Characters. This could happen through killing the PCs in the area, or by capturing them and dragging them out of the area. Then the other clan's symbol was *desecrated*. To be able to put in their own clan symbol – *consecrating* it – the opposing clan would have to clean the areas not just of players but also of NPCs.

An area was a war zone as long as it belonged to a clan at war. At this time all who entered into these areas would risk being killed. That's one of the reasons why so many welcomed these wars, since they permitted fights among players who'd not normally fight, as they

¹⁴ o 'CLAN WAR' *From time to time, clans who are at odds with one another will declare war upon one another. When this occurs, all areas controlled by both clans immediately become War Zones (see WAR ZONE). Players from the two clans are recognised by the game as being sworn enemies, and may attack one another freely anywhere throughout the world.*

A clan war continues until both sides agree to make peace with one another. In order to do this, both clan leaders must meet and each declare a truce with the other. If there is fighting between the two clans before a two-way truce can be declared, any existing truces are considered to have been broken, and the clans involved are back to being at war again.

Clan members should note that waging war is an expensive business, and it will take its toll upon the clan bank account. During wartime, all income ceases to flow from any areas held by your clan. Even the act of declaring war immediately costs your clan 1,000,000 gold pieces, and there are also ongoing costs associated with maintaining a state of war. Clans whose funds become exhausted during wartime become bankrupt (see CLAN BANKRUPTCY). (DR helpfiles)

¹⁵ 'MAGIC WHISTLE' ~ Syntax: cast 'magic whistle'

This spell magically summons all charmed creatures following the caster from wherever they may be in the world, to the caster's current location. (DR helpfiles)

didn't belong to warring clans. They were also useful for other things: the city Opal was very hard to get into: new players below a certain level would have to be summoned in. Only bards and clerics could summon other players, and only clerics could do it without attacking the other player. A bard would need to use charm, and then summon the player with a spell called *magic whistle*.⁵ Because charm was considered an attack, it couldn't be performed on a PC unless in a war zone, thus making magic whistle useless on other PCs in times of peace.

Play-cultures

Along with the technical part of the game and the rules which were coded as a part of the game, there were written and unwritten rules for what a player could or could not do. The first 10 levels were supposed to be an apprenticeship: a period of grace when the players were to learn the rules, understand the game and find a suitable clan, while being protected by their newbie-status. But there were rules which would get you expelled if you broke them, and at one time all players using aol.com were excluded from the game.

o RULES~. Although we would prefer to have a minimum of restrictions on players, some rules are essential to ensure that time spent playing on Dragon Realms is enjoyable for all.

1. Bugs. Don't exploit bugs in the code to your advantage. If something is obviously not behaving the way it should, we expect you to act in good faith and notify an immortal, rather than taking advantage of it.

2. Multi-Play. No multi-playing of any kind is permitted. You may only have one character at a time, period. If you wish to start another character, we will store your current character and approve you another one.

3. Player Killing/Stealing. These activities are permissible within the broad scheme of things, but you can expect to make enemies if you persistently indulge in such behaviour. We will take action to curb the excesses of anyone found to be killing or stealing from other players to the exclusion of all else, and are not likely to treat them kindly. We particularly don't like to see players being victimised, so if you kill someone once and they offer you no further provocation, don't kill them again! Repeatedly killing the same player or sacrificing their equipment will draw the kind of immortal attention that you may not want.

4. Politeness. Roleplaying in the context of the game is fine. However, when stepping out of character (for example, when posting notes that talk about game mechanics) we expect you to be both constructive and courteous. Childish tantrums or ravings will not win anyone to your cause.

5. Profanity. Keep it to a minimum. We understand that there will be times when things go wrong - everyone gets hot under the collar during such moments. However, bear in

mind that other players may not be of an age suitable for having their ears blistered by your oaths.

6. Reimbursements. Reimbursement is a privilege, not a right. The immortals have ultimate discretion on whether the circumstances of a particular case warrant a reimbursement. Their decision is final.

7. Spam. Repetition of commands to the detriment of other users is called spam, and it is most impolite. Unnecessary spamming, particularly on public channels such as OOC, will be treated with universal disapproval. Avoid it wherever possible.

8. Scripting. Running your session using scripts effectively precludes any form of roleplaying and is therefore prohibited. Macros, aliases and so on are acceptable when used as part of the overall game, but automated behaviour designed to increase your level or skill ratings is not.

9. Sexual Harrassment. Don't sexually harrass other players. We don't accept excuses based on your character being a sick pervert whom you are trying to roleplay. This is a deleteable offence.

10. Passwords. Never give out your password to anyone else, regardless of the circumstances. You are responsible for everything your character does. It doesn't matter to us how much you trust someone else, we don't want to have to deal with the confusion arising from who was playing whom. If we find you've been sharing your password you can expect everyone involved to be frozen until we sort out who's doing what, and why.

These rules are very straightforward. We intend that they add to your playing pleasure here, rather than detracting from it. If you feel unable to comply with any of the above, please speak to an immortal. (*DR helpfiles*)

These rules regulate the use of the game, how the players behave towards each other, and towards the program of the platform on which the game is based. They are an attempt to introduce some basic manners, in order to make the game fun for as many players as possible. Some of them are about purely technical matters, such as scripting. Some MUD-clients, such as Zmud,¹⁶ permits the player to write series of orders to be performed automatically. In DR a player might set the character up to go through all the rooms of an area and kill all the NPCs, gathering experience points while the player does other things, such as writing a thesis, or the character can perform quest it makes money from over and over again. If another player tries to make his or her character interact with this scripted character, there would be no response other than perhaps a response based on a trigger.

Triggers are common in scripts – at a given message on the screen, a subroutine starts.

¹⁶ When I access MUDs and MOOs I use Zmud rather than telnet, because it has a better window to work in, and it's built for playing rather than chatting, accommodating game-oriented MUDs.

The most visible triggers often had to do with greetings: when somebody gained a new level this was broadcast to all who were playing the game, and congratulations were common. These were often long and looked fancy – but arrived split seconds after the message about gaining a level. That meant they were the result of a trigger. Less pleasant were the triggers used in warfare. A player could set a trigger to make their character attack the moment the program registered the ‘enter’ message, and the program would react quicker than the player could. But the game held ways to avoid that kind of traps: when using sneak, a skill of rogues and assassins, Erinn could avoid triggering traps like that, because there would be no message sent when she entered the room, and triggered traps had to be combined with *look* or *scan* in order to trap her.

There were also numerous unwritten rules, not least concerning the fiction within which the game took place: rules of how to greet superiors in the clans, rules of how to behave on the interclan channels or how to distinguish between IC and OOC. *Dragon Realms* was a fictitious world, and the immortals were not just technical administrators, but also had a responsibility for creating the fiction containing the history and mythology as well as the geography, natural laws and all levels of rules on which the world was based and for which all characters should be tailored.

The art of playing

The year spent in *Dragon Realms* convinced me that playing a role-playing MUD might not be all that complicated, but playing it well is a very special skill. Often players chose to specialise in one or the other aspect of the game. Those who preferred to role-play would rarely be experts hack’n’slashers, while the hack’n’slasher would be frustrated because they wouldn’t achieve the favour points they needed in order to advance from level to level.

The most successful players were the ones who could do both, and if they knew how to utilise the many objects in the game both in role-play and in battle, it created a total experience of immersion which was highly admired and sought after. The high-level players who mastered both displayed – not to say flaunted – their status through customising their equipment. The much desired FPs were necessary in order to pass levels, but they had other uses, one of which was to buy ‘renames’; new descriptions, often colourful, of the standard items in the game. A high-level character loaded with renames indicated both abilities: the technical knowledge and the role-playing skills.

Because of this, renames got a lot of attention. They were also often passed on to lower-level players when they crowded the pack of the high-level player, something which lent a less skilled player an air of ‘affluence.’ The really observant players kept track of renames, and used them to read character relations. They did not match player relations, because the renamed items were considered IC. While your character’s worst enemy’s player might give you some better armour taken unmodified off an NPC, the character would never let your character have his ancestral shield.

The tension between role-playing and hack’n’slash, and the need to negotiate the player’s wishes with the character’s background, stimulated the creativity of the players, and assisted in increased interaction. While it was possible to remain within the same social sphere online as offline, the complexity of the game rewarded wide social interaction for those who needed assistance in order to find equipment, to complete quests, to gain levels

and find partners for role-playing. It's also what made the game accessible for so many different kinds of people: a good role-player could help a less creative one to look better and get the much-desired FPs, while a good hack'n'slasher could help the role-player to finish quests and gain levels. Despite the apparent hostility, violence and escapism, the game not only encouraged but rewarded cooperation, creativity, logic and social skills.

Fourth interlude - No orphans allowed

One of the prerequisites to full player status at *Dragon Realms* was writing a background. Generally, the background was very open, but there were a few rules: No royalty, unless you could convince the immortals that your character might be related to the royal family of giants, no god-like or extra special powers perhaps hidden in your past, and no orphans.

The orphan rule was very strongly upheld. No matter how good the background was otherwise, the child had to have at least one living parent somewhere. If the character really hated its parents, it was always possible to return home and kill them later. I met one exception to that rule, and that was a female assassin who started her career by killing her parents to get a way from long-term abuse.

The background consisted of one public and one private part. The public was the one all other players could see, and this part normally didn't say much. The private part was only for the player and the immortals, and contained the information which normally motivated the not-so-nice acts of the character.

Public background for Claire:

Claire was born in a small village within the woods of Adarth. She was an exceptionally beautiful girl, and was loved by her parents deeply. She grew up in that tiny village, isolated from the rest of the civilised world. When she was in her early teens, a great change came into her father. He became a drunkard, often leaving the village and coming home only late at night. He also hit Claire's mother often. In time, mother and daughter grew closer, and Claire's mother, who was the village priestess, began to educate Claire about the religion of the land, about the Trinity and the other gods.

Claire was fascinated by all these, but grew sick and tired of her simple life and unhappy family. One day, Claire was wakened in the middle of the night by her mother. She gave Claire her treasured diamond hair-brooch and some money, and smuggled her into a caravan passing through the village. She said, "Go, my daughter, and live your life the way you want it to be.... This place is not for you". Reluctantly, Claire obeyed and slept a long, fitful sleep on the caravan. When she woke up, she found the caravan in a place called Haven, and left to carve out a name of her own, armed only with the principles of life her mother had taught.

Claire is an emotional lady, especially after her unhappy childhood. She is also temperamental, a trait carried down from her mother. She is also reserved, for she prefers to observe rather than speak, yet carries with her a heart of gold.

Public background for Hophrian:

Hophrian's Background

Like my sister Helloisan, I was one of only a few pure human in the in the elven village where I grew up. I had one sister and one brother. My father is a great warrior and fought bravely to defend our village from a band of orcs and trolls many years ago. My mother, like my sister, is a healer who also contributed in the battle. After the heroic battle my father, my mother and one of their friends were welcomed and honored by the elves presiding in the village. The friend of my parents ended up falling in love with an elven woman who bore a son named Follim. My parents also settled down and had their children during this

time. They were very rewarding for my parents' endeavor and granted them and their families longevity through a spell known as *revivify*.

Unlike my sister, I developed no natural healing powers from my mother but I did retain her courage and the strength of my father. From the time I was a boy wrestling with my brother, my father had his eye on me. He saw the chance for a warrior to develop of me and so it has. I have trained with elves for most of my life and learned to speak their tongue. When my sister left to marry I stayed back in the village where I felt tied down with the responsibilities of defending the village. As the months passed I knew more and more in my heart that this life was not suited for me. I needed to experience life, not watch it pass me by. The village had just entered a time of peace and so I decided that the time had come to approach my father about leaving. Understanding my cravings for life and experiences, he took the issue to council. The next day we received a letter from a friend of my sister's that her husband had died and she was taking it hard. My father cared much for his daughter as so encouraged that I go to Haven and join the Academy where I could also spend time with her. The council agreed that I was longer needed for peace had come to our realm. I personally could think of no better purpose to leave for Haven, in an attempt to comfort my sister and join the ranks of the Haven Academy. Thus I have travelled here and my journey through life begins anew.

Public background for Ungadoin:

Ungadoin grew up in a small tribe named Grabutz, just north of the Dragonback Mountains. Here he lived a life like any normal healthy young orc, fighting his brethren and killing travellers for fun. Every now and then the tribe went on a killing frenzy, destroying the local human settlements, and Ungadoin was there. One day everything went wrong... The tribe was sacking one of the local villages, and Ungadoin was on his way to burning down one of the huts. Then he felt a sharp sting in his side. He looked down and saw a human child standing there with a long dagger in her hand. The child ran away, and Ungadoin collapsed on the ground. He was able to stand again, though it was very hard. Then a towering shadow fell upon him. Ungadoin looked up and saw Qauntyll, a rival orc. Qauntyll raised his weapon and Ungadoin saw no more...

The next day Ungadoin woke in a pool of blood. He could hardly think, but forced himself to his feet and started stumbling back towards his tribe's village. When he returned he was met with stones and sticks, and he was forced to flee. Apparently Qauntyll had told the others of his encounter with the child, and had left him to die with his shame. Now a deadly game of survival began. The winters in the northern regions are tough, and there was very little food to find. After a long time where Ungadoin learned to survive with what the wilderness could provide he began travelling south.

Finally he found his way back to civilization, and the rest is yet to come...

Halli:

I was born in a small village several leagues south of Haven. I grew up as a typical pixie, running playing games and tricks, and in general having a fun time of it. One day when I was very young, a travelling minstrel came to the village. I was awestruck. After that I tried to emulate that man. I told my parents

that I intended to travel. They looked at me strangely until explained that I wanted to become a travelling performer, to see the realms and to experience life . My parents agreed that would be a wonderful idea. We had a grand celebration and I was off on my journey . The journey to Haven was not a pleasant one. Marauding outlaws and animals roamed the land. As I had not yet mastered all my survival skills I was in peril for my life. I was chased and harassed to no end. Little children tried to pluck my wings off. It was an all around bad thing. At that moment in my life I changed from the typical carefree pixie, to a jaded specimen of my kind. But now I was even more determined to bring joy to this dark world.

I continued on to Haven to search for a minstrel that would teach me the art of life.

Chapter 5: **Dragon Realms and popular culture**

To immerse yourself in the imaginary life of your character, you need models for behaviour, background, conflicts and scenery. The mundane world rarely makes for grand fantasies of larger-than-life format, we are all keenly aware that while hard work might get us a decent job, a nice home and a happy family, it rarely gets us magic, murders, dangerous intrigue and unlimited power. In the alternate worlds of fantasy, meeting a sorcerer of the dark or the warrior-prince and the last of the House of Goldenhand is as common as having coffee at the local coffee-shop. *Dragon Realms* co-existed with a cultural segment where high fantasy is the inspiration and provides role-models and limitations.

MUDs developed from Advanced Dungeons and Dragons games (AD&D)¹, and relates to Fantasy, a branch of American youth culture that can be found in books, films, comics and television-series, but most of all in games: board-games, card-games, table-top role-playing games, strategy games, live-action role-playing games (LARP), and computer games of a wide variety of genres, single- or multi-user, online and offline and with all kinds of non-computer games. This subculture of the fantastic has its roots in nineteenth century gothic and fantastic tales.

Fantasy culture

Role-playing games and much of the most visual and caricatured fandom culture have more than their visual aspect in common. Both have strong roots in the same cultural sphere, the realm of fantasy and science fiction. Role-playing games owe much of their origin to people who wish to relive the imagery of Tolkien's epic work *The Lord of the Rings*. This work has influenced generations of writers and inspired them to write their dreams and their visions in a fantastic realm where elves are real, where magic works, and where passions, dark and light, survive the ravages of time and overcome simple obstacles such as space, dimensions and logic. Also important are the works of early science fiction writers such as Jules Verne, and gothic tales such as Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). These are considered basic reading for fantasy fans.

The genre of science fiction and fantasy is a large industry today, which exists between accepted mainstream and what is often simply called junk or trash fiction. Within this genre there are books and films of extremely poor quality. However, some of the films have achieved critical acclaim, such as the artistic and prophetic *2001, a Space Odyssey*, while others have an immense and faithful popular following, such as the *Star Wars* series or the *Star Trek* television series and film.²

¹ First *Dungeons & Dragons* game was published by Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) in 1974 (Sones 2001), the first *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* in 1978. In 1997 Wizards of the Coast bought *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* from TSR (Park & Chin).

² The *Star Trek* fans are described in Henry Jenkins' book from 1992, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*

To position the literature the games are referring to in relation to the universe of paper-print books, I will borrow categories from Thomas J. Roberts' *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (1990): he speaks of canonical fiction, serious fiction, plain fiction and junk fiction. According to Roberts, the distinction between the categories is mainly established by the intent of the author, particularly the last three categories. Serious fiction is written to be studied, and similarly, canonical fiction is not only read, but analysed: written to be subjected to intellectual criticism and academic study, and to obtain cultural capital and social status. Plain fiction has the largest market, and is written for money. According to Roberts, junk fiction is written for love, since paperback writers "contrary to all myth, are usually ill-paid" (1990:15). Canonical fiction stands apart as being selected by others, not something that the author can choose to write. It is often the case though, due to what may seem to be arbitrary cultural and historical reasons, that serious, plain and even junk fiction achieve canonical status.

Roberts' categories reek of culture politics and a so-called 'high/low taste' bias, despite the fact that he proclaims deep respect and love for junk fiction. However, I choose to use them here, because I feel the political aspects of literary genres are still relevant to the study of computer games. Computer games borrow their fictitious worlds from a literature that is thought of as 'popular culture' at the very best; but even within this fantasy context tends to be treated like trash. Some of fantasy books read by the players of computer games have been permitted into a mainstream³ acceptance. For instance, in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, she discusses the conflict of genders and hegemony quite recognisably to modern readers, but in the setting of the court of King Arthur. An other example is Samuel R. Delany who wrote the series of books from *Neveryon*, a fantasy setting where he discusses estrangement, slavery, power, the advent of AIDS and the change of the gay community in New York in the 1970s and 80s using fantasy metaphors. However, these works rise out of a massive production of books that have little recognition outside of the genre they are produced in. Bradley's books from the planet *Darkover* have a large fan following, as well as being the source of a large amount of 'fan writing', much of it gathered in collections of short stories edited (and thus approved) by Bradley herself. In later chapters, Roberts also uses the name 'genre fiction' about what he starts out by describing as junk fiction, and points out that reader loyalty follows genres to a much larger degree in 'junk fiction' than in other fiction strata.

The links between this fiction and the online multi-user games is obvious. Looking in at the MUD listings at The MUD Connector, the categories bear witness to the literary references: "Amber - Based on Roger Zelazny's Amber novels, Anime - Based on Japanese animation, Babylon 5 - Based on the popular television show, (New) Christian-Based Muds - Themes based on Christianity, Comic Books - Based on comic book themes, Dragonball - Based on Dragonball, Cyberpunk - Based on William Gibson's Cyberpunk Genre, Dark

³ I use 'mainstream' in this context to mean books which are accepted as being popular beyond the constraints of the genre, read by more than just genre fans and marketed for the mass middle and upper middle-class market; and not to mean books of literary acclaim such as Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*; books of cult status or books blessed by the literary critics for being of experimental interest or formal innovation.

Fantasy/Horror - Muds with a dark fantasy and/or horror theme/genre.” The list goes on with: “DragonLance - Based on DragonLance, Dungeons and Dragons - Based on TSR’s Dungeons and Dragons®, Eddings - Based on the works of David Eddings.” Or also: “Star Trek Muds - Based on the Star Trek TV series or movies, Star Wars Muds - Based on the Star Wars movies, SuperHeroes - Based on superheros, Sword of Truth - Based on the Sword of Truth book series by Terry Goodkind.” This demonstrates that the topics for MUDs do not discriminate (much) between the original ‘worlds’ imagined particularly for the MUD in question, and the ‘worlds’ to be found in books, television series, films, comic books or other games; there are even MUDs based on single-user games such as *Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star*.

However, reading through the list there are no games based on what Roberts calls canonical fiction, serious fiction or even plain fiction. The closest thing to canonical fiction is Tolkien: there is of course a category of MUDs based on Tolkien’s works, with 19 MUDs and MUSHes listed. On the other hand, there are a couple of games based on the first great graphical classic of online computer games: *Ultima Online*.

This positions games within a kind of fan-activity: when the official story ends, the fans make it continue, embellishing and re-inventing it in the universe of the original texts. The Pern-MUDs have weyrs and villages, and arrange gatherings for hatchings, making space for the imagination of the individual within the frames of the fiction. Or, as Jenkins writes of the fan-culture surrounding *Star Trek*:

Fan writing builds upon the interpretive practices of the fan community, taking the collective meta-text as the base from which to generate a wide range of media-related stories. Fans, as one long-time Trekker explained “treat the program like silly putty,” stretching its boundaries to incorporate their concerns, remolding its characters to better suit their desires. (Jenkins 1992:156)

When fans build computer games, this is just what they do: they treat the original text like silly putty and press it into the mould of the game, focusing on role-play or hack’n’slash as they prefer, rather than as the original text might indicate. In the view of this widespread quoting and remodelling of other works, it is quite interesting that despite this close connection between fantasy and science-fiction literature and MUDs, in the category: “Original World - Muds which claim to have a completely original world”, there are as much as 666⁴ listings.

The fact that the games are so heavily based on fantasy and science fiction, with fantasy as the main focus, means that the roles of the players are easy to identify and identify with. Fantasy literature is filled with familiar archetypes more or less dressed up as individuals. There is the hero and the helper, the damsel in distress and figures representing evil incarnate. Some common juvenile fantasies are so common that there are warnings against using them, such as ‘the orphan’. If this study had applied psychoanalytical theory, one

⁴ No, this is not a reference to Satanism; on the day I checked *The MUD Connector* 666 was the actual number of listings. It would however be very much in character with the genre if it was interpreted as such.

might have wondered a little about the popularity of ‘the orphan’.

However, we are concerned not so much with the question of what hidden pleasure the players take in the games, but with what conscious choices are made: what the players themselves claim gives them pleasure, their reasons for playing and their choices in the acts of playing. Some of these choices might not be justified as easily as others, but in this study I am looking for the justification not in the player’s mind or past, but in the game itself, and in his or her experience of playing the game.

Dragon Lords – no dragons

Dragon Realms does not take its name from dragons, as the game has no fire-breathing, scale winged reptiles. On the other hand, there are *Dragonlords*. From *DR*’s helpfiles:

STORY

Two thousand years ago, after a long age of peace and prosperity, the world fell into an age of darkness during which time dread creatures known as Dragonlords arose from the abyss and squabbled and fought for possession of the land. The Age of Dragons is believed to have begun because foolish mages meddled with things best left alone but it was eventually ended by a council of mages, who managed to create bindings upon the dragonlords that would imprison them eternally. The places of imprisonment were carefully hidden and then all record of them destroyed, all entrance to them removed. True, dark evil was eliminated from the world and The Age of Peace was restored.

Five hundred years ago, miners digging for precious metals in the Dragonback mountains unwittingly broke the seal upon a magical tomb. Sealed within, trapped for a thousand years, was the dragonlord, Balpherus. The flesh of his body had become dust centuries past but Balpherus’s spirit was able to escape the remaining magical bindings. The mine where his tomb was uncovered was totally destroyed by the terrible magics he unleashed in making his escape and the area around it so twisted and warped that it became known as Scar.

Though mages at the time strove to find and destroy Balpherus’s spirit, all their attempts were for nothing. He was just too cunningly hidden.

Over the centuries, Balpherus remained hidden, working his evil plans, hatching his evil plots, moving from body to body as he needed to. Two hundred years ago, he succeeded in breaking the magical ward upon another tomb, this one where his dark elf minion Malvena had been imprisoned. Malvena had always been a servant of evil but finding her master, Balpherus, much weakened by his having to take on mortal form, she cast him aside and escaped his control.

Both Balpherus and Malvena have since established groups who work covertly or openly to bring them to power over the world. These are the clan groups [DRAGON] and [FEAR]. In response to the threat that the freed Dragonlord Balpherus and dark elf Malvena presented to the world, several groups arose to guard against them. While not

strong enough to destroy Balpherus or Malvena, these groups protect and hold territories that might otherwise fall to evil.

This was the situation as *DR* opened for the players. The fight between good and the evil took place between the two clans openly allied with *Balpherus* and *Malvena*, *Fear* and *Dragon*⁵, and the groups that fought not to be controlled (solely) by these forces: *Arcana*, *Noble*, *Nova Mortavia*, *Privateer* and *Inquisitor*. *Haven* was also considered a clan, but they had no ranks and no leader, it was a way to distinguish the new players from the others in order to protect them and to assist in learning the game.

Fear and Dragon were often allied in war due to their closely linked past. Red Gauntlet was a clan which had been dissolved and split into Privateer and Nova Mortavia: Privateer was a group of pirates and mercenaries while Nova Mortavia a group of idealists who wanted to reclaim the lost Mortavia.⁶ Arcana was a group of magicians, central in the fight against the Dragonlords. Arcana's magicians were the ones who had bound Balpherus and Malvena in the first place, and they were the group who supposedly could do it again. Noble was the only clan led by a king. Only nobles by blood or those adopted into some special families could hold power in Noble. Inquisitor was a group of religious fanatics, worshipping the trinity *Elwyn*, *Topaz* and *Scarabae*.

At the time I started playing, there were personal relations making Noble and Arcana allies, as Rilliath, a high-ranking member of Arcana, was the wife of the regent of Noble. Nova Mortavia was fighting alone for the Mortavian Empire, but in the struggle against the Dragon Lords they allied with Arcana and Noble. Inquisitor was another tentative ally, but the varied aspects of their trinity of gods made them unreliable to all sides of the conflict.

o IMMORTALS GODS~.The Trinity: Elwyn: God of Light and Good, Elwyn delights in watching mortals spurn the opportunity to do evil in favor of embracing the light. He is known to strive against Scarabae, to undo all that dread God does. Elwyn watches those in the realm closely, sometimes rewarding unexpectedly those who aid and assist their fellow mortals. His wrath at witnessing an evil act can be terrible. Those who choose to worship Elwyn must take great care not to fall into evil ways.

Scarabae: Dread God of Evil, this being is the essence of darkness, hate and corruption. The struggle and toil of mortal creatures amuses him, particularly as he watches them

⁵ [DRAGON]

[DRAGON] represents the powers of evil, and its leader houses Balpherus's spirit within their body. The clan aims to subjugate all areas and wipe out all resistance to the Dragon Lord. World domination is the name of the game. [DRAGON] can often be its own worst enemy, however, as those within the clan bicker and fight to be promoted and to outdo one another in their evil. The clan might be considered a rather a chaotic group. (DR helpfiles)

⁶ Mortavian~

MORTAVIAN is the ancient language of the Mortavian Empire, which first rose to prominence in the time of the DragonLords and which ruled much of the east of the Realms in the centuries after their fall. Spoken mainly by scholars, this ancient tongue still persists in the Realms. (DR helpfiles)

fall further and further into evil ways. Scarabae will often take particular interest in those who further his dark vision for creation. He is a dangerous and demanding God to worship.

Topaz: God/Goddess of Balance, this being stands between Scarabae and Elwyn, watching their excesses carefully. His/Her principle role in the Realm is to dream into creation creatures both good, evil and indifferent. Topaz can be both fickle and contrary, helping at one time and hindering at another. Mortals should turn to this god for aid keeping this in mind. (*DR* helpfiles)

Elwyn, *Scarabae* and *Topaz* were played by the three original creators of the game. Elwyn was the programmer, and the person who had created several of the special aspects of the code which made *DR* unique and attractive, such as the skills. He was also the one who made certain the game was stable, and who balanced the classes in relation to each other in order to keep the game amusing for all. At the time when I played the game, Elwyn was mostly absent, due to a serious illness. It is typical for the stable and socially involved player group of *DR* that even after several months, Elwyn's absence was a source of concern and personal messages between Topaz and other players; *DR* did not forget quickly.

The most active and present of the gods was Topaz, while Scarabae had a less active role at the time I joined the game – although evil was active enough. Topaz however was very active in her role as a god and a visionary leader for the game.

Both Scarabae and Elwyn had PC-immortal minions to take their place as active role-players as their own activity lessened: the demon Morsillien for Scarabae, and the angel Aphreal for Elwyn. Azhanith, another more recent immortal, was the servant of nobody, but a magician from Arcana who had found the Palace of the Moon and the power within it, and used this power to fight Balpherus and Dragon. Glenstorm the character was the champion of the Gods, and was immortalised for his sacrifice, but the controller of Glenstorm was asked to leave the game after a conflict with the main administrators. According to the players, this came about because OOC he sided with the players against the administrators. Several players kept in touch with him, and he was involved in the creation of at least two MUDs that could be considered to descend from *Dragon Realms*.⁷

The last of the immortals to my knowledge was Isameth, who entered the game in the last months, and whose main function as OOC administrator was programming. In the fiction the character Isameth might have been a dragon, not a member of [DRAGON], but the only dragon with wings and fire-breath in the game. It was a part of the myth that dragons should be unknown, mystical and mythical, and so Isameth was not played as a dragon, but as a humanoid. The player of Isameth was also the programmer at *Lu'Tamohr*, aka the *Strive* platform, a game that made an attempt at utilising the gaming platform developed for *Dragon Realms* by Elwyn.

Within the frame of *DR* every player created their own fiction. Before they could leave the clan Haven and lose the newbie stamp, everybody had to create a background⁸ for their

⁷ Because of the frequent hacking of the code of MUDs, it is hard to say how closely the different games are related.

character. These were habitually formed as histories usually giving the individual character an exciting past. There were a series of rules for things which were not permitted in order to make the character fit into the larger fiction. The characters were to come from an area within the Realms. There were no way to get to this land from beyond. My character Erinn was a compromise between my understanding of the game and this rule. She came from somewhere “far north”. But with this background my assumptions clashed with the assumptions of the creators of the game, because the initiators of *DR* were in Australia, and where I saw “far north” as being cold with deep forests of pines, they imagined rainforest and intense heat. In this fictitious frame *Dragon Realms* was in the southern hemisphere, and while playing Erinn I had to adjust to that.

Separating the player and the character

To play a character in *Dragon Realms* meant to put on a new costume and personality. The ideal was that the character should be different from the player, a fictitious personae. Every player had to know their personae so well that the reactions were not the player’s own, but those of the character. This was important to maintain awareness of In Character (IC) and Out Of Character (OOC). This awareness had to be signalled at all times. Some examples of OOC discussions of IC matters:

Hogg CLAN: ‘(OOC): We got Bay of Azhure? Is that asking for any trouble?’ Kalomin CLAN: ‘ooc: yes.’

(...)

Kalomin CLAN: ‘ooc: who knows, we may get lucky, and Ymoina may still want it.’

(...)

Goofer OOC: ‘Ick... don’t you hate when ants go on your enter key?’

(play-log, *Dragon Realms* 1998)

This sample contains two different OOC comments. Xeziar and Hogg are having a meta-discussion about the game on the clan-channel: for members of the clan only. They are discussing the possibility of a war with Privateer. Ymoina was the clan leader for Privateer, and Bay of Azure an area that Privateer wanted, because it was quite valuable and gave a substantial income to the clan holding it, while being a coastal town.

Goofer’s comments are totally irrelevant to the discussion - the player is complaining about the result of ants on the keyboard. The two comments are broadcast on different channels: Goofer’s comments on a channel that can be heard by all players, which is always

⁸ BACKGROUNDSyntax: background <character> This command is used to display background roleplaying information on the players who inhabit the world. Each player is responsible for submitting their own background to the immortals via a NOTE prior to exceeding 10th level. Background information is divided into two parts, public and private. Public background information can be seen by anybody. Private background information can only be seen by yourself and the immortals. (*DR* helpfiles)

OOO; Kalomin's and Hogg's discussion on the clan-specific channel, which was also at times used for IC communication.

The difference between IC and OOO is between the characters' world and the players' world. The character was not supposed to know everything the player knew, such as the reason why a character was not available while the player was at school, or that Hogg was planted in Arcana as a spy by Privateer. At the same time, this was very difficult to respect, OOO information had a way of leaking back into the game. This was one more aspect to play with, and Erinn and Eristeth utilised this fully by not sharing too much OOO or meta-information about the characters. It therefore took almost eighth months before the Arcana members, recruited after Erinn, knew she was in the clan; which allowed Erinn to operate efficiently as a spy, both on other clans, and on the members of Arcana. When it was revealed that Erinn and Eristeth were not just members of the clan, but also among the highest-ranking characters, the surprise was as big IC and OOO.

In the game *Aarinfel*, I played Vind B'Greth, a male, gay elf. Despite knowing the administrators of *Aarinfel*, and having built parts of the game, I chose not to tell anybody who the player behind Vind was. After several months of playing a gay man, I was forced to disclose my identity, when another player became emotionally involved, after her character had played an intense scene with my character, Vind B'Greth. A very short time after I revealed my real identity, everybody in the game knew that Vind was played by a woman. This changed the play of several of the male characters - from reacting to Vind with disgust and homophobia both IC and OOO, several permitted their male characters to flirt with Vind, even to hit on him.

The initial secrecy as to my real identity was a test, to see if *Aarinfel*'s favour point reward system⁹ was flawed by the administrators' OOO preferences. The players recommended each other for FPs, but the immortals had to accept them. I assumed that this led to a reverse bias; in order not to reward their friends overly much, the FPs were a lot more scarce for the old and established players than to the newer or less familiar ones. After the experiment I still think this was the case: before the administrators discovered who I was, Vind had a lot more favour points than any of my other characters on *Aarinfel*. On the other hand, after they knew it was my character, I had much wider access to background stories and meta-information. By keeping my OOO reality secret, I managed to keep the character more exciting and less controversial despite the often provocative role-playing, but at the same time the other player would probably not have become this involved and her attempts to reach me OOO would not have been as emotional if she had known the entire time that the player of the male elf was another woman.

This emotional level of involvement is one of the aspects of role-playing, which a strict differentiation of IC and OOO is supposed to resist. Role-playing frequently leads to a situation where a character declares eternal-beyond-death-love to the other - a lover dies for his beloved, and all the clichés are lived to the full in the imagination of the involved parties. Erinn and Eristeth were known as a couple who loved each other beyond life and death. In

⁹Where *Dragon Realms* operated with Favor Point Spies, *Aarinfel* used a system where all players could recommend the others after each session, and the administrators would award FPs according to the recommendations.

real life, I was old enough to be the mother of Eristeth's player (admittedly, with a very early start), and despite the intensity of the role-playing and the close friendship which grew from a year as partners in fictitious crime, we were both very clear that this was a romance between the characters and not us. Eristeth's player became acquainted with details of my family, while I had intimate knowledge of his pleasures and frustrations, which most of his geographically closer friends knew nothing of. He also became an important sponsor and source of information for the parts of this study to do with *Dragon Realms* and *Aarinfel*, as well as on role-playing in general.

Erinn and Eristeth were a rarity: a couple not played by a real life couple, which lasted until the fictitious world fell apart. While other couples had relationships, connecting a character too strongly to another often lead to insurmountable problems with the role-playing, once the first flush of romance was over, and playing 'settled-and-content' started to take its toll in boredom. When the players started to disagree, or one of the players were taken with another player, it was very easy to just slip out of that fictional skin and start playing a new character. As the games dragged out, the number of absent spouses in either game became very high. There was also a high frequency of heroic deaths, very often in order to save the loved one, leaving a conveniently grieving widow or widower. In the late months of *Dragon Realms*, relationships of a sexual nature became such a large part of the role-playing that it inspired the immortals of *Aarinfel* to write a help-file for mudsex, with a primary focus on sex in the game and the split between IC and OOC:

MUDSEX

This is a mud intended for a mature audience, and players are allowed to rp sexual relationships if they wish. However, there are a couple of things you should keep in mind:

- 1) All players involved must agree. This does not mean that the IC relationship must be consensual, but no one can be forced to roleplay something they don't want to. Sexual harassment is against the rules here.
- 2) There is no guarantee of privacy. You may be overheard or there may be an invisible character in the room. Immortals may be also watching. The other player may also be logging.
- 3) We don't police player ages or genders here, and the person you're rping this with might be underage or a different gender than their character. We suggest discussing things OOC beforehand to minimize problems.
- 4) The Imms will not give FP for netsex.
- 5) Be very careful about giving out any information that can identify you in real life, if you enter into mudsex with a stranger. There is no way for the admins to protect any player against unwanted attention through other channels than this mud.

6) RP of rape is not allowed. It is simply too emotional for too many people and has proved to be impossible to rp in isolation. While other players may not be involved in the rape scene itself, the aftermath almost always has to be dealt with by others and by the imms.

Mudsex is safe sex.

(*Aarinfel* help-files, copied April 25th 2000)

Other OOC considerations were less emotional, but just as controlling for the development of the game. A group of boys and men from Brisbane, Australia (known in the game as 'The Brisbane Boys') was the core of Privateer, friends and roommates outside of the game as in it. They were extremely efficient players, knew the game, took a lot of pleasure in developing systems for warfare and had a very competitive relationship to *Dragon Realms*. But their efficiency soon got out of hand, and they controlled unreasonably large areas in the game - unreasonable in the manner that the other clans lost the ability to defend themselves and the fiction of the powers of Malvena, Balpherus, the different gods of Inquisitor, not to speak of the mages of Arcana, was impossible to maintain in the face of the success of one group of mercenary pirates. The administrators tried to dissolve the group and integrate the players into other clans, in order to spread their skills and abilities, reinforce the other clans and balance the game so that all could enjoy it.

The enchanter Hordir – played by one of the Brisbane boys - came to Arcana, and as head of security it fell on Erinn to check if he reported back to Privateer. Erinn planted misinformation in the clan where it would get to Hordir. Soon after it came back to her from her informers in Privateer. While this was a fun part in the role-playing, Hordir' OOC explanation, when he was revealed, was interesting. He claimed that he could never play anything but an informer, because the other players in Brisbane were watching his screen as he played. He could not avoid them reading what was going on, as they were all in the same lab and constantly read each other's screens. Knowing they would use the information in their play (which was bad form, mixing IC and OOC information), he preferred to make this situation ICly valid by keeping his old clan informed in Arcana matters. He did this despite the high moral standards of his IC character, and the fact that his character was involved with Arcana's Magister (clan leader) Velvetra. The most interesting part of this was that Hordir's player felt this as a moral dilemma - a conflict between the character he wanted to play, and the limitations of the flesh world.

The most common limitation to the players was the gap between the intelligence and experience of their characters and the players. In a fiction where everybody could describe himself or herself as they wanted to, where everybody could choose their background, it was unusual if the characters were not beautiful, strong and extremely intelligent. Living up to this was a real challenge though, and tended to become the most frustrating part of the role-playing.

Most roles could, however, be filled with imagination where you did not have tactical skills. If the player did not manage to kill the character of another player - he or she would dream up a non-playing character and describe how it was defeated. Only the clan-leader's job was not just to role-play, but also to administrate and inspire. Several players did a really good job at this, such as Ymiona in Privateer and Indira in Fear; both were efficient

administrators who managed to make the clans grow and gain strength while delegating as much work as possible, integrating the other clan members and keeping them active. To make the clan work well, it was not enough to be able to write fantastic fiction about your character's abilities, if the leader could not inspire the other members and gain and keep new ones, the clan would fade and weaken.

Zindwyn, the magister of Arcana when I started playing in the later winter of 1998, was thought of as an ambitious and ruthless clan leader. She could be whimsical and temperamental, but had good advisors IC and OOC in the characters Ronitho and Xeziar and their players. In the summer of 1998, Arcana was the wealthiest clan in the game. In the late summer Zindwyn resigned, and Velvetra was appointed Magister by the mage-council of Opal (played by the administrators):

Before you stands a well formed elf maiden her ice blue eyes return your gaze. Her golden hair flows beyond her waist and is laced with ribbons of silver and white. Wearing a dress made of the finest white silk trimmed in silver. The heart shaped neck line of the dress outlines her delicate frame. About her neck a crystal upon a gold chain catches you eye. The light sent of blossoms catches your nose the closer you get to her. Her skin is pale beige in color, unblemished save for a crimson mark that runs down the right side of her face. Not really a scar, merely a mark. A glint of gold around her ankle catches the sunlight, you notice she is wearing an anklet of Argentan gold.

Velvetra is using:

<worn on head> a stylized sapphire flame set against a shimmering circlet of silver
<worn on ear> an emerald earring
<worn on ear> an emerald earring
<worn on eyes> sparkling green eyes, framed by long lashes
<worn around neck> (Glowing) a shimmering crystal upon a gold chain
<worn on body> a shimmering dress of the finest white silk, trimmed in silver
<worn about waist> a girdle of gold
<worn on legs> a shimmering anklet of argentan gold
<worn on feet> pair of white satin slippers
<worn on arms> spirals of argentan gold engraved with mystic runes
<worn around wrist> a gold bracelet
<worn around wrist> a gold bracelet
<worn on hands> long white silken gloves trimmed in silver
<worn on finger> (Glowing) a sparkling emerald ring
<worn on finger> (Glowing) a sparkling emerald ring
<held> the Orb of Harmony
<floating nearby> (Glowing) shimmering prism of rainbow colors
(Velvetra, *Dragon Realms* 1999)

This was Velvetra Heavenlake, the Master of Arcana fall and winter 1998. The player was a young single mother with a lot of time to spend online, a sure sense of drama and a skill for complications easily meeting soap-opera standards. She described her character as intensely desirable. An important entertainment for the character and player both was sexual

and romantic relationships with characters from all clans, regardless of politics or loyalty to the clan, something which frequently brought her to the attention of Morsillian the demon.

Velvetra's player made a large effort to lead Arcana. Without any experience and with very little understanding of the mechanisms of an organisation from the position of the one in charge, she wanted to lead through the love of the clan-members and their personal devotion to Velvetra. This led to emotional ties and frustrations as the player discovered that it was not enough to be loved, Velvetra needed to be respected as well. According to the player, her model for authorities were her mother and grandmother, as she came from a family dominated by single women (Velvetra, conversation *Dragon Realms* 1998). This was the experience she tried to apply to Arcana. The player had few qualifications for understanding organisation and administration, and she was eager to prove that she could handle the role without assistance, which made it hard for her to take advice or delegate work. Velvetra's quite charming and entertaining player turned bitter and frustrated as she discovered that Arcana's organisational problems could not be dreamed away, the clan losing members despite her efforts at charming them all.

By the end of 1998 the clan was fighting a bitter fight to keep its status and members. The remaining members were fighting Privateer, Fear and Dragon, occasionally all three, without thought for the wear and tear on the characters and the equipment. While death was not permanent in *DR*, each death cost the character experience points, and the players would have to spend weeks and weeks to regain lost XP and gain just one level. In this final desperate war for the survival of Opal, Arcana's clan-members were wearing each other down OOCly as well as ICly. It did not help that the clan leader by then had long since forgotten to distinguish between her personal abilities and those of the character, taking each defeat or defection as a strike against her, the player, rather than against Velvetra, the Magister who would sleep with the enemy and claim it was to protect the clan.

When the clan leader forgot about this distinction, it was hard for the rest of the clan to remain distant to the bitter loss the last winter *Dragon Realms* existed. In the last few months, Arcana was fighting Fear over possession of Opal, the magic city and stronghold of the mages. While war a year before had been considered a situation fraught with potential, at this point it had become a strain, and clan-members kept leaving the clan, claiming that they felt useless.

War was a particular strain to lower-level characters, but they could still be given tasks which kept them out of harm's way, while being made to feel useful. Zindwyn described how Riddar, the former Magister, had made her and another character sit in a private room (where only two characters could enter) to make certain Opal could not be taken over at a previous cusp. As long as they were in the area, the clan symbol could not be desecrated, and since nobody could enter, they were safe from most external attacks. With a Magister who felt that all problems had to be solved by her personally, there was no room for that kind of planning, and the war was turning personal.

The game was both generous and ruthless in this manner. If you played well, it was simple to accept that you could not do everything your character could. Stealing poetry and be a great poet was no problem (although it was considered good manners to tell who was the real poet in an OOC aside), and your character could be a great poet without you having to make up a single line. At the same time the players were ruthless against those who did not see their own limitations, who tried to be their character, to claim the skills for

themselves. The real assets for a player were to be able to write well, possess a good imagination, have a sense of humour, social intelligence and a realistic view on your own limitations. But the moment a player tried to make a character with more abilities than fantasy could support, he or she had better have those skills in real life, or the other players would quickly see through the bluff and outplay the character.

This was one of the reasons ‘assassin’ was such a complicated class to play. After the first thrill, the player realised that the real skills lay way up there around level 60-80, and their scary-assassin-roleplay had blown their cover at level 15. One mythic assassin had a player who took the consequences of this. Corgoth’s player was thought to have left the game before I started playing. It turned out Corgoth had been in disguise for the entire year, and none of his clan-mates knew about his existence until he assisted them in getting out of a labyrinth or he freed them from a trap. And then he would disappear from sight, nobody but the high-ranking clerics knowing where or who he was. In that period there were two level 100 clerics, until Eristeth gained true sight as one of his cleric’s skills and the Eristeth’s player’s experience with Erinn’s¹⁰ disguises put him on the track of the disappeared assassin.¹¹ The kind of roleplay Corgoth’s player played demanded tremendous self-discipline IC and OOC, but the player had it and the character became an ingame myth because of it.

To be different within the framework of the game

Role-playing games have become increasingly popular, and an activity that started as a version of historical replays is today an active subculture and alternative life-style. The games have spread with the fantasy literature, as a wish to play in a world where elves still roam and where magic works.

¹⁰ My strategy with Erinn was to play her as a ‘polite’ figure, and somewhat remote and withdrawn. If pressed, she would reveal a little from her very sad background, but she would prefer to ask questions and listen politely. This worked very well, and what had originally been a ploy to let me, the player, listen and learn as much as possible became a good tool in her role as spy for Arcana.

¹¹ Clerics and assassins were created to negate each other. The clerics had healing powers which would help them to defend themselves against the assassins and powers of detection to reveal them and track them down. Assassins on the other hand had the one strike that could kill a cleric despite their excellent defences: assassinate, an attack which would leave the cleric no time to cast any of their defensive spells.

¹² *FAVOR POINTS* Favor points are bestowed upon mortals by the Gods as rewards for good roleplaying and successful questing, or occasionally just on a divine whim. You can use your favor points to:

- Beseech a miracle in a temple (see BESEECH).
- Ask a God for a battle.
- Ask a God for personalisation or rename of an item.
- Ask a God for some other favor.

In this, as in all other things, Gods have absolute power. The choice of whom to bestow their favor on, and how much a request diminishes this favor, is exclusively theirs. (DR helpfiles)

In *Dragon Realms*, good role-play was considered a quality worth rewarding, and the system contained a certain type of points: *Favour Points*,¹² which were the reward for good playing. Favour points or FPs were given to the characters according to the judgement of the administration or their secret spies as to the quality of the role-playing of the player. It was important how well the players could immerse themselves in the roles of their characters, and communicate this. *Aarinfel* and *Strive* both kept this system of Favour Points, although it was changed somewhat. The criteria for good role-playing was described more elaborately in *Aarinfel* than in the other games. *Aarinfel*, when it started up, had a system where all players could nominate¹³ all other players. They would give each other numbers from 0 - 10, at what the help-files at *Aarinfel* called a RP scale:

‘RP SCALE’

Please do not rate an individual more than once per day. You should feel free, however, to rate as many individuals as you make sure you have observed. Please have observed the person for a significant amount of time before making a judgement. You can only rate people who are in the same area as you.

0 - Detrimental. This player is behaving either OOCly or ICly in manner that is detrimental to the roleplay environment of the mud. You wish to condemn their behavior.

1- Inappropriate/Unskilled. This player may not understand the world background and/or may be having difficulty creating a playable character concept. The player may also not understand some of the fundamental concepts involved in roleplay, such as the distinction between IC and OOC.

2- Making an Effort. This player does not currently have the required level of skill/knowledge that they need to RP successfully but they are making an effort to be IC and to learn about the Mud. They are not being actively disruptive.

3- Underdeveloped. This player is IC but their character concept is oversimplified. They tend to respond to everyone and/or everything in a similar fashion, regardless of the situation or its appropriateness. The player needs to further develop their character and his or her motivations and not rely on an overly simplistic formula or archetype. Overuse

¹³ NOMINATE

Syntax: nominate <player> <rating> <comments>

This command is used to nominate another player for FP. It can only be used to nominate someone once a day.

The list of ratings can be found in “help rp scale”.

See also: RP SCALE, FP (*Aarinfel* help-files 2001).

of socials is common. You could put this character in any other fantasy mud and it would not seem overly out of place.

4- Passing. The character being played has a glimmer of a solid, unique personality. Emotes, however, are still fairly generic much of the time. You do, however, begin to get a sense of the character as a realistic person, acting appropriately within the virtual space of the world. They are also making a consistent effort to improve.

5- Solid. This person understands the world background and has created a subtle character that is appropriate to it. The character seems like an individual, with convincing likes and dislikes, and not like an overly simplified stereotype. Emotes are being effectively used to give you a sense of what the character is doing and how they are responding to the situation they are in.

6- Proficient. The character has a clear, distinctive personality and it is being consistently played out. The emotes being used are unique to the character and the situation. You can sense the characters emotional states by observing their emotes.

7- Artful. The emotes convey something unique or subtle about the character. If another character used one, it would seem out of place. This player is starting to make an art form out of their Roleplay. This person interacts with the world in a creative way, making the space that you are in seem more real.

8- Inclusive. Not only is this player playing well, but they are trying to include others. Their roleplay has a balance to it. They do not dominate the conversation but are able to keep it going. There is an ease to the interaction with this person. This person goes out of their way to invent plausible IC reasons why they would interact with people. They are actively promoting RP, drawing people into their sphere.

9- Excellent. The character fits seamlessly into the game world, their actions perfectly in keeping with the situation and their personality. You could tell stories about the person without using their name and people would know who you're talking about.

10- Awe inspiring. It took your breath away.
(Aarinfel help-files, copied 27.04.2000)

To summarise: Good role-playing in *Aarinfel* means that the character suits the fiction of the world, has a recognisable personality, and that the player is able to convince others that the acts of this person are logical and reliable, as well as being able to pull others into the role-playing situation. These criteria are valid all the way up towards 10 points. At this peak, the thorough and experienced role-players who lead *Aarinfel* use no precise words, but what they try to describe at 10 points is rather a feeling. In the interviews, this is described by Jack (Werting/Stavo) as 'the role-play high' (interview). This is a feeling that everything is right, that the characters are no longer pieces in a text-based game but persons that interact. The character you play in the game in the game has become a personae which is different from

of the flesh-world you, but still tied to you. It is after sessions like this that the player looks back at something that happened and says: "I did not want to do that, I wanted to take the play in another direction but for the character, there was no other choice, so he did it!"

Good role-playing is not measurable in victories. The character might frequently end up in a situation where he or she loses ground, but experiences a conflict. That is not necessarily a negative thing, since a conflict is a good source for further development of the mutual fiction. Role-playing in a text-based game is a process of mutual and co-operative writing, where all players create their little part of the common fiction. The task of the immortals is to push all the different threads in the same general direction, give advice and rewards, and contribute with histories and conflicts to give the players a feeling of progress and action.

Erinn and Eristeth: a virtual love-story

Eristeth's background was complicated and fantastic, as befits a character in a game characterised by a high level of fantasy. Eristeth's player at first played a neuter cleric of the serpent-folk, Eystyx. Eystyx was a member of Inquisitor, which, at the time when Erinn met Eystyx, was at war with Dragon. Eystyx was aware that it would be captured and killed, and that it could not rely on the triad of gods to save it. Because Eystyx was not just an enemy of Dragon and Balpherus, it was a heretic within the clan as well, and a follower of the god of dreams and madness: Azhanith. Eystyx struck a deal with its god, and used a whorl of moonlight to gain a wish. But it had to prepare the ground a little for this wish, and for that it used Erinn.

Erinn was an elf-woman at the brink of madness, due to grief, and as such already within the area of Azhanith's influence. She was accused of the murder of her brother, and cast out of her family by her father. Young and without any particular gifts she drifted south towards Haven and the Academy. There she discovered that she could learn to become an assassin and take revenge on the real killer, the person who had set the fire to drive her people out of the forest and kill her brother.

Eystyx met Erinn while she was looking for teachers, and her mixture of vulnerability, will of survival and lust for revenge touched something in that cool serpent heart. Eystyx had grown up with an elf woman who had left to go elsewhere - elves not living at the same pace as those mortals surrounding them. Out of a longing for this woman, Eystyx took the lost elf within its protecting coils, and helped her. At the same time it concocted the daring plan to avoid Dragon's prison and certain death.

Erinn was given a crystal tear by Eystyx, which worked as an anchor to her, being the only thing left from its elven foster mother. Then it went to war and was, as expected, caught, tortured and left to die. But it just disappeared, no corpse turned up, and Eystyx was not returned to the game by the gods; it disappeared from the game.

At the same time, a human male came down from the palace of the moon and to the garden in Opal. He called himself Eristeth Veridiatix, the healer. He was a stranger to all, but he asked for Erinn. He turned out to be an advanced and skilled healer, which created quite a stir OOCly among the players, as well as ICly, because most had expected to have heard about somebody like him (he was an entirely new character, but started at level 65, which was unheard of.). But he only had eyes for Erinn, as if he had been tied to her before he came down into the garden in Opal.

This was the start of a long and at times tragic romance. But we decided that it ended well, as none of us could bear to think of Erinn and Eristeth not finding the endless future together which they dreamed of. So with the fall of Opal, they fled the town, fleeing to the north, beyond the known limits of the game, to continue the struggle to think without the controlling paw of Balpherus on their minds.

But this romance was not planned by either of us. I had made Erinn unpredictable and dangerous because I did not want her to get into a relationship. At one point she even slit the veins of Eristeth's wrists. David, Eristeth's player, had made Eystyx a neuter, sexless, for the exact same reason. The gods, in this case in the very unreliable Azhanith's shape, twisted David's plans for Eystyx, and what David had thought would be a disguise was a full transformation into a human and a man.

Erinn needed to learn trust all over again, while Eristeth could not ever leave her, tied as he was to her through his own gamble, making her his focus. And so we, the players, were both trapped by our characters, two very different people who just had to figure this interdependence out, or ruin the role-playing potential of an intrigue which was imaginative, beautiful and exciting.

When *Dragon Realms* was closed we still remained close friends, and until the time-zone difference became too much of a problem, we spent a lot of time chatting, idling, and discussing role-playing online. Part of that time was spent wondering why we both missed Erinn and Eristeth so much, they were, after all, just us and we were both there. David's explanation was that while the characters were us, they were just parts of us. We had realised that there were sides of us which could - given the right context - have been very tightly bonded, but this was just a small part of the full range of our flesh-world personalities. We were not our characters, even if the characters were parts of us. When DR closed down, parts of our imaginary world could no longer be nurtured and developed in the same way, and we did not miss or grieve over anything lost to us, the players, but to the people we could have been, in a very different world - having found them beautiful.

Role-playing: virtual reality or fantastic soap?

Aarinfel, which was even more based on role-playing than *Dragon Realms*, was frequently criticised for being nothing but a long soap-opera. The characters fell in love, married, betrayed each other, divorced, on and on in a way that was very reminiscent of the typical soap-opera. And for the characters who could not divorce due to their ideals or the political situation, there was always the option of fading into obscurity while the players started over again with new characters - unless they insisted on some spectacular death; there were lots of widows and widowers in the game.

But even in MUDs with less of a slant towards the romances between the rich and the beautiful, there were still several other aspects of the soap opera. Role-playing is not defined by a fully drawn dramatic arch, but by sequences. The game cannot be pressed into a pre-determined dramaturgy, it will remain periodical. This is partly caused by the fact that not all players can participate all the time online. The game is not written and created by a narrator who can reveal everything in an order that compacts and build up to the events. Role-playing games with several live participants happens as an imitation of life, without a continuous conscious consideration of how the events we are mixed in are part of a larger

connection, an all-encompassing narrative. Some players can have a fairly clear idea about which conflicts they are involved in and how to solve them, while others are less alert or informed, and just do what they are asked to - or do their best to make trouble or reach their own goals, and other fairly realistic strategies compared to how reality works.

Creativity, empathy and expression

Online text based role-playing games make some demands on the technical standards of the machines used to connect to them, but to meet the technical specifications will not give automatic access to the play. These games are not created for the individual player the same way as more commercial games are. There is an attitude among players and administrators that if a new player does not want to take the time to learn how to use the software, then the game does not need that player. This is a result of the game being free, and that the administrators are doing their job for nothing but enthusiasm. Teaching a player who does not want to make an effort brings no gain for the staff or the other players, only aggravation. On commercial sites, where players pay for access and are charged for their play, or with games where it is important to make as many players as possible buy the game and the sequel, making the game very easy to understand or spending time to explain to the player how to play has a financial reward, which the MUDs in this study did not have.

Technology is kept as simple and uncomplicated as possible, because it opens the possibility of an easier adjustment to the visions of the creators. I have not found any role-playing MUDs where the standard platform has not somehow been adjusted to fit the fictional world of the game. This means everything from rewriting the text-files, which contains the calendar (year, month and date in the fictional universe shows when you type: time) so that they match the culture and tradition of the game - to creating new skills, new channels change the speed of time or interfere with how the game calculates points and matches. Several MUDs have kept standard areas without rewriting them (Midgard and Thalos are two cities which keep popping up in DIKUMUDs) but most of them have created original areas, changed the races and classes and made new skills or fancy effects.

Many of these changes can be carried out through simple text-editing functions in the program, and demand little or no knowledge of programming. That makes creating a MUD a process which all who are able to write and make up something can take part in. Playing is an important function of the game as well, without players the beauty of the programming or the elegance of the room-descriptions is useless, unrealised. For the game to develop into a game and not just a collection of possibilities, somebody must use it. And while it is a special experience to play with a group of excellent players, you do not need to be constantly ranked 10 to experience "the role-playing high" and feel that your character is alive in the game.

A fairly inexperienced player felt chills down his back for more than a week after a situation Erinn and Eristeth had put him in. For us, playing with inexperienced players was part of our job as role-play spies in DR. For him, the experience of playing with two characters who had a past, a long history together, changed his approach to his character and his way of playing. He realised that his character would have to react differently from what he expected, his own character came to life for him through responding to the detailed and demanding play-styles we had at the time. This illustrates how a MUD is a game which

opens up to participation on several levels, open to many different approaches to playing, depending on technical skill or verbal creativity.

Fifth interlude - A grain of sand

The player who kept talking exited about the chills down his back after playing with Erinn and Eristeth was the player of Kander, a level 25 elf who was planning to join the clan Fear. Due to a mistake which he didn't notice, he contacted my character Erinn instead of a member of Fear, Finn. January 16th 1999 Erinn and Eristeth met Kander in Haven. It soon became obvious that he had made a mistake. The player could have OOCly bowed out at this point and asked to be excused because it was an honest typo, but he didn't suggest it, and I and the player of Eristeth both wanted to see if this relatively anonymous character was played by a good player.

Erinn and Eristeth led Kander to 'The Bloody Dagger', which was one of the few unsafe areas within Haven. There he was questioned, intimidated and in the end offered a gift: A grain of silver sand. Like the Silver Rose, this is a floating signifier: an object with no other meaning but that which the players invested in it. Unlike the Silver Rose, the vial with the grain of sand was not at the time an object in the game. (If the game had proceeded past February 28th it most likely would have been – either I, Eristeth's player or Kander's player would have spent FPs on a glass vial and a grain of sand.)

The scene, which has been cut down from 55 pages, became a turning point to Kander, both player and character. The player later claimed that he had a revelation about role-playing which made him change the behaviour of his character, because he realised that the character would have been deeply moved by the entire situation, the shift from intimidation to gentleness would have worked on him and particularly the symbolic item would give him a mystery to ponder and lend the character more depth and variety.

Kander is physically an average elf. He is about six feet tall with ear length auburn hair and green eyes. His clothes don't appear to be extremely extravagant. Nor do they seem to be dirty. He seems a little drag just because there is nothing too special about what he is wearing. You notice a few small bruises over his arms, along with a couple healing cuts. His physique isn't something he appears to be too proud of. He is not very muscular, but doesn't seem to be a stick figure. His face is a bit unadorned by age or nature, he doesn't have a scratch or bruise anywhere on his face. Kander is in perfect health.

"The Bloody Dagger"

[Exits: north east south west]

You come into a poorly lit and thoroughly disreputable-looking bar. The patrons are all sitting in dark corners, conversing in low tones, and as you enter you can sense them sizing you up. This looks like a good place to get knifed.

Fat Benny greets you warmly and invites you to come have a drink.

Dirk idly plays mumbly peg with a razor sharp dagger.

(Shopkeeper) Sharky is behind the bar, waiting impatiently for you to order.

Eristeth has arrived.

Kander has arrived.

Erinn smiles her small smile that never reaches her eyes.

Kander starts to tap his finger against the ground a bit more...

Kander says 'yes yes yes... I think I did make quite a mistake in contacting the wrong person...'

Erinn takes a swift step forwards, and she puts her foot down on Kander's hand.

Kander grimaces a bit...

Kander says 'now now... '

You say '*very gently* What an annoying sound'

Eristeth lifts up his left hand and brings it to his head, shaking his head somewhat... although such action doesn't keep his eyes from being watchful.

You say 'I trust you will cease trying to annoy me?'

Kander says 'I wasn't trying to annoy you, you are just irritable...'

Erinn takes a small step back, and her lips twitch.

Kander bites his tongue on the end of the sentence...

You say 'Oh, maybe I am'

You say 'Maybe I feel a little irritable today.'

Kander chuckles nervously..

You say 'But you, little one, you fear Fear.'

Eristeth says '*softly* Interesting. Diplomacy isn't your strong point, it would seem. Still, I do have to rather wonder about your interest in Fear.... especially since you seem of the squeamish type.'

----- snip-----

Kander says 'you know for a while I was thinking of joining Arcana...'

Eristeth says 'You will have to excuse me if I say that I am glad that you did not.'

Kander says 'actually Eristeth, I was about to say the same thing'

Kander says 'Erinn, may I ask you something?'

You say '*gently* you may ask... I may choose not to answer.'

Kander says 'why did you humour me... drop Opal and come to speak with me?'

You say 'Because I wanted to see what I will be facing, next time Malvena turns her eyes on what I am sworn to protect.'

Eristeth shrugs and settles more comfortably against the walls.

Kander says 'I guess you feel pretty comfortable then....'

Kander smiles and chuckles to himself...

You say 'and because I maybe might find a lonesome soul who needed aid'

Kander says 'and instead you found someone completely mad...'

You say 'and who reached for me out of need, his mind tricking him to what his thoughts would not let him see....'

Erinn tilts her head, and she gets up.

Kander thinks for a second..

You say 'no, not completely mad. But very, very scared of what he thinks he is about to join.'

Kander looks to the ground, not completely sure of what he is talking about...

Kander says 'suppose I was that person, the one that needed aid?'

Erinn pushes a golden strand away from her cheek, and waits, silently.

Kander says 'and lets say that I really don't know what I am getting into and I am really scared...'

Kander says 'then what...?'

Eristeth says '*softly* It is easy to help now, while you are clanless. Much harder to pull the teeth from the serpent.'

Kander doesn't look up from the floor....

Kander repeats to himself one more time, "suppose I am really scared..."

Kander looks up his eyes seem to be somewhat red.

Kander says 'I don't know what I am getting into...'

Eristeth says '*in a more normal tone of voice* If you want to join a clan suited for yourself, we'll help. Maybe Nova. You don't seem right for Dragon or Fear.'

Eristeth says 'Maybe also Noble, although I do not know your background. Arcana I doubt, and likewise Privateer.'

Erinn leans against the wall, nodding lightly at Eristeth's words.

Kander says 'can one of you do something for me?'

Eristeth says 'I don't believe in forcing someone into something that person isn't meant for. And it depends: What do you want us to do?'

Erinn makes a light gesture with her right hand, coupled with a shrug.

Kander says 'if it's alright.. I would like you to get rid of something for me...'

Kander drops a bunch of blood berries.

Kander drops a bloody head.

A bloody head lies on the ground here, staring sightlessly.

Kander says 'and there's a third...'

Kander says 'I can't get it off though...'

background Kander

Public background for Kander:

Kander has led a wandering life, moving from place to place since his coming of age. He appears something of a loner, introverted and not very talkative. Folk in Haven describe him as "snobbish". He appears to have no particular devotions to anybody or anyone and to be without any real goal or purpose in life.

Eristeth looks at Kander.

Eristeth says 'What is it?'

Kander says 'it's a bloodstone...'

Eristeth looks at the stone and nods.

Eristeth says 'Bide a moment.'

Kander says 'there's a connection between all of the, but it's unimportant...'

Eristeth chants softly.

Eristeth utters the words, 'candussido judifgz'.

Kander tosses the bloodstone to the ground.

Kander smiles having that thing off of him...

Kander looks up to Erinn smiling...

Kander says 'you will help me?'

Eristeth turns to look at Erinn, then looks at Kander, raising an eyebrow.

Erinn turns to Eristeth, her golden eyes resting in his silver ones for a moment.

Erinn turns back to Kander, then she smiles her small smile.

You say 'I will do what I can'

Kander nods...

You say 'But I am no goddess, to do miracles. You will need to cooperate as well.'

Eristeth hides a small smile by relaxing his face.

Kander says 'do you think you could get rid of those objects for me though?'

Kander says 'I would rather not look at them anymore...'

You say '*to Eristeth* Eristeth, if you could take care of the matter...?'

Eristeth nods, then bends down over the items.

You say 'You are a mage?'

Kander says 'well.. of sorts..'

Kander says 'more parlor tricks... elementalist'

Kander says 'the only thing I really wanted is just peace..'

Eristeth says 'Peace comes in different ways. Think about which way you want to take.'

Kander says 'I know what I'm asking for is impossible, an easy way to peace, but I just want some help in knowing I'm not crazy for wanting it'

You say 'To wish for peace, is not madness.'

Eristeth says 'You're not crazy. But peace is something which is very hard to obtain.'

Eristeth says 'Like true love.'

Eristeth leans a bit against Erinn, passing her a soft hug with his arm.

Kander snickers...

Kander says 'yes well... I gave up on that as well...'

Eristeth says 'Well, what I'm getting to is that just because something is hard to obtain doesn't mean it isn't worth fighting for.'

Kander nods.

Eristeth says 'In fact, once you get it, you fight all the harder to hold onto it.... Sometimes it works, sometimes it slips through your fingers.'

Kander whispers to himself, "Just like sand..."

Erinn opens her eyes, and she looks down at Kander, nodding lightly.

You say 'Yes, like sand'

Eristeth blinks, then looks at Erinn. 'Like sand.'

Erinn moves lightly away from Eristeth, and she opens a silver box.

You say 'Maybe I have something for you, Kander'

Eristeth nods to Erinn, with a broadening smile on his face.

Erinn takes a vial from the box, it's small, and clear, and it looks empty.

Eristeth CLAN: '(ooc) *giggles* What a nice coincidence.'

Kander looks up to Erinn not quite sure what to expect...

Erinn CLAN: '(ooc) *laughs*'

Erinn moves over to Kander, and she reaches for his hand.

You say 'Take off the gloves, they are in the way'

Kander stops using a pair of silver gloves.

Eristeth looks at the vial, his eyes shining somewhat.

Kander holds out his bare hand... something he hasn't seen in a while...

Erinn crouches down in front of Kander, and she opens the vial very carefully.

Erinn supports Kander's hand with her left, while she pours the contents of the vial into his hand.

Kander looks into his hand still not sure...

Erinn looks carefully at the single silver grain of sand that rolls out of the vial.

Eristeth looks at the small silver grain in Kander's hand with a touch of reverence, followed by a nod to himself.

You say '*softly* This is a gift, that has been waiting for the right hand. Listen to it, and you will hear it speak of the endless patience of a grain of sand'

Kander nods still looking at the one small grain of sand in his hand...

You say 'Of being moved from the depths of the ocean, to the light, with a patience even we of the long lives have to admire'

Erinn puts the vial and the top to the floor next to Kander, then she gets up from the floor.

Erinn turns and moves back to Eristeth, twining her fingers with his.

Kander picks up the vial with the other hand and carefully places the sand piece into the vial.
Kander closes it up carefully...
Kander blushes a bit...

Eristeth says 'Patience. It is what you make of it. Doesn't look like much, but you'd be surprised at what it can do.'

Kander says 'yeah...'
Kander nods... still looking at the vial carefully...

You say '*softly* Just listen to it.'

Erinn stands next to Eristeth, very close to him, by the door, looking at Kander, who sits by the wall.

Kander opens his eyes and then looks at the vial again...
Kander takes out a small box and a small handkerchief.. he lines the inside of the box with it before putting the vial in.

You say 'I hope it will aid you. It is all I can give you at the moment.'

Kander says 'I hope for a while... it's all I need.'

You say 'then I think it was well given.'

Kander says 'what should I do now...?'

Eristeth says 'Isn't that something you should ask yourself instead of others?'

Chapter 6: Asking questions and searching for answers: interviewing players

Interviewing rescues events that would otherwise be lost. The celebrations and sorrows of people not in the news, their triumphs and failures, ordinarily leave no record except in their memories. And there are, of course, no observers to the internal events of thought and feeling except those to whom they occur. Most of the significant events of people's lives can become known to others only through interview. (Weiss 1994:2)

Defining the Question

In Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), white mice had evolved into a superior race, for whom knowledge had become a religion. They built a super-computer which they called 'Deep Thought', and asked it about the answer to life, the universe and everything. Deep Thought considered the question for 7 1/2 million years, while civilisations rose and fell, and finally arrived at an answer. With solemn ritual the white mice approached the computer, and received the response, the number 42. It turned out that while Deep Thought knew the answer to life, the universe and everything, it did not really understand the question. In order to analyse the question properly, the white mice had to build a much larger and more sophisticated computer, called 'Earth'. Douglas Adams evaded having to phrase the question by having the computer destroyed just before it arrived at a conclusion. The construction of a bypass to an intergalactic highway obliterated the planet.

In this study, I will try to avoid such imaginative solutions when I have to state the main questions. When I interviewed the subjects, I had to know how to ask the right questions, or the opportunity for gaining knowledge would be lost to me, as it was to the white mice whose computer was demolished by the construction crew.

The main question which I pose in this study cannot be answered through quantitative measurement. The number of people who play a game, or how many games they play is immaterial. What I am looking for is *why*- what kind of pleasure do they gain from playing and what motivates them? Neither the passive observation of youth or children at play, nor the registration of the number of players who log onto a game is relevant in this context. What *is* important is the experience of the players; the internal processes which occur while playing and the reasoning and motivation for the play. The only way for me to learn about this was by questioning the players themselves. The question I posed is complex and addresses intangible factors. It is difficult to phrase it in a manner which will ensure useful responses. In order to come close to a solution, I have to ask many different questions, approaching the topic from many different angles.

What I wished to learn was, as stated in chapter 1: *How would a textual environment in which the texts were continuously created by several users of the same environment differ from the idea of a constant cognitive or inner activity in which a text is recreated by each single user as it is read?* In order to discover the answer, the question I wanted to ask each

of the players I interviewed was: *How does frequent use of multi-linear or non-linear texts change your relationship to the text, and change yourself as a reader?* A direct answer to this question would not give me an answer that would be valuable, as that would require that my respondents had already done my work for me. I had to approach the topic in a manner which would give me relevant information which could let me address the question in conjunction with various theories and other types of studies of games, ergodic texts and performances.

My question requires several assumptions. The most important one is that there exist an active component of game-playing which is pleasing in itself. This is the intellectual activity which gives the player a feeling of power and control, or, as Janet Murray (1997:126) points out: an experience of agency.

Based on this hypothesis, I framed my questions and my approach to the interviews with the intention of uncovering not a conscious strategy, but rather a way of using and thinking about computer games which differed from the use and interaction with texts as understood in reader-response theory. In order to do so, I approached games from an aesthetic angle; searching for the desirable qualities of the games. I sought what was pleasing and intriguing about them, and what goals and visions the players, builders and game-administrators had for the ultimate game. Through the aesthetics of games, I hoped to sketch an outline of the emerging computer-mediated text.

What Weiss (1994:9-10) described as “reasons to conduct a qualitative interview study” matched my intentions in interviewing the players. My research aims were, among other objectives, to obtain multiple perspectives on the progress of the game. Since there were a number of persons participating in the role-playing, I wanted to describe the process of interaction through the game, how the game developed and how it resonated in the players. I also wanted as full or ‘holistic’ a description as possible, which meant I needed to interview both the players and the administrators of the MUDs, and learn how they interpreted the events.

Weiss mentions one goal which I did not pursue, *bridging intersubjectivities* (1994:10). I was not aiming to uncover or communicate a “you are there” experience in this description. I assumed at the outset of the study that there would be a discrepancy with respect to how a cultural phenomenon, which was commonly perceived as linear, would be understood, between the trivial idea of a text and a new approach arising from the development of the computer. In this work, I assumed that the widespread use of computers would change the use of texts from being predominantly similar to that of books, as in print or pen and paper writing, from linear and non-ergodic texts to multi-linear as well as ergodic digital texts. In more general terms, I assumed that there would be a progression from consumption towards a more active use of the text.

This transition, I hoped, would be more easily understood, described and recognised by those who experienced it through growing up as computer-users, than for the generations who had to learn of computers after their personalities had been shaped and play had become a less prominent aspect of their learning process. This potential change was conceptualised as a prediction, a forecast concerning the future use of text. I only expected to find indicators of this development in the interviews. I did not expect to be able to communicate the full extent of the change in human perception which I theorized; but I hoped to communicate some of what others had experienced and were able to share through

their participation in my study.

The object of study, the respondents and the aims of the research all suggest that my objective should be the understanding of subjective experience rather than the analysis of quantifiable data. In order to do so, the qualitative interview is the best tool. It is designed for learning about the subjective experiences of the players. Coupled with observation, participation and textual analysis of the event itself, the scope of the study is deep rather than wide, an immersion into the experience of the game rather than an exploration of the multitude of possibilities.

The Interviewees

The respondents and the object of study were significant for the types of questions I could ask, and how I could ask them (Weiss 1994:18-19). The environment I was working in was a *loose collectivity*, yet it possessed sufficient structure to include recognised administrators or community officials in the form of immortals. While the *collectivity* existed for a long period of time, centred on *Dragon Realms*, the focus was limited in time. This turned the role-playing experience on *Dragon Realms* into an *event* - albeit an event lasting for about 4 years. The collectivity, and the event, shared certain traits as well as some of the participants with other similar occurrences. In order to isolate the distinctive nature of *Dragon Realms* as an event, I interviewed players from other games, thus gaining information from respondents who had followed and participated in similar events. I interviewed a professional game producer as well.

The panel of informants started with a couple of key informants, as discussed in chapter 3. Through playing and interacting over a long period of time, I came to know (out-of-character) Levi, the player known from *Dragon Realms*, as the administrator and immortal *Morsillien*. I also became acquainted with David, the player of *Eristeth*, the character who the fates of role-playing and the hand of *Azhanith* (the immortal recognized as master of madness and illusion on *Dragon Realms*), led to be the partner of my character for almost a year. These two players became invaluable to me in different functions, as sponsors and informants. David patiently spent hours explaining the game-structure itself to me, what my character needed to function and which sphere of role-play was relevant, as well as assisting me in the play itself. When I later was to do the interviews, his introduction to what I refer to as "the Portland cluster" brought me in touch with several of my respondents from both *Dragon Realms* and *Aarinfel*. Levi explained the inner workings of the game to me, and later assisted me in understanding how MUDs, and particularly role-playing-MUDs, function. He also described the potential for individual creativity from an administrator's and the coder's point of view. Both supplied me with information essential to understanding the environment I was navigating in, and assisted me in merging into and functioning within a culture quite unlike any I had previously experienced.

While these two turned out to be key informants and were active in generating more respondents, the way in which I met them was not planned and did not reflect any of Weiss' many suggestions on locating good respondents. I had no introductions from others, nor did I have any appointments. To begin with, there were no obvious orienting figures. Was it luck or was it skill that enabled me to acquire such useful helpers?

Part of the explanation lies in having patience and being interested in this topic long

before I started the study itself. My period of observation and participation began long before I became involved in the more systematic study. Through role-playing, which required that I learned, accepted and understood the specific rules of conduct in a role-playing environment, I was able to make and secure contacts; or, as Weiss points out, as important for penetrating an organisation – I was able to acquire contacts through tact and awareness of the politics of the organisation (1994:19).

During the period from September 7th to November 10th, 1999, I conducted fifteen interviews, each lasting from thirty minutes up to one hour. The interviews included players and administrators from several different online multi-user role-playing games. The games in question were *World's End*, *Dragon Realms*, *Aarinfel*, *The Infinite Point* and *Lu'Tamohr*¹. I also interviewed a game-designer from Sierra Online. The other interviews were conducted face-to-face, and I travelled to New York, Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles and San Diego to carry out the interviews. One player and administrator from *Aarinfel* was visiting Oregon from Arizona at the time I was in Portland. One scheduled interview, which was to take place in Morgantown, was cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. Another interview in Bethlehem, Philadelphia, was cancelled. Two interviews were added because the players were accessible and willing, one in New York and one in Portland. Both players came from games other than *Dragon Realms*. Since the interviews do not pretend to be representative of a universe of computer game players, but rather focus on the subjective experiences with games, as well as personal preferences in relation to games, I see no problem with the loss of two interviews and the addition of two others.

The fifteen players all had different backgrounds for understanding the event they had been involved in, but the understanding itself was surprisingly similar for all. Very few of them deviated. Although some had never played in the same site and had not been in touch with each other outside or even within the games, the patterns for using and understanding games were repeated frequently.

All of them had, at the time, access to computers with which they could connect to the Internet often and regularly enough to allow them to play MUDs and maintain a continuous presence in a role-playing game. Some of them used high-speed connections that were kept open not just for hours, but for days. This was quite remarkable in 1999, before high-speed connections such as cable and broadband became common in private homes.

All participants had volunteered to be part of the study. Most of them were very easy to make appointments with; they were obliging and interested in the research. One player, a young female, had to obtain her parents' approval before meeting me. She received their permission after one of the other players, a long-time friend of the family, had met me and could confirm that I was who I claimed to be, and was perfectly harmless. Another player had misgivings about meeting me after some role-playing that led to somewhat strained online relations between us out of character (OOC). Her room-mate, also a former *Dragon Realms* player and *Aarinfel* administrator, insisted on retaining the right to refuse to answer my questions, as she feared they would become intrusive and touch upon personal matters. When we finally met, both of these players gave very open, interesting and informative interviews. They expressed interest in the topic and were delighted with having met me

¹ In 2002 several of the same players and administrators had moved to Azhad.

personally in a situation where they did not feel estranged and where they felt the risk of misunderstanding and miscommunication was reduced. It was obvious that the insecurity and the slight antagonism had resulted from the distance and the strain of communicating along such a limited medium, and was relieved by meeting in the flesh.

These were three of the four female players I interviewed, the fourth was consistently forthcoming and pleased to answer all my questions. None of the male players had any misgivings either about meeting a person they only knew through the Internet, sharing their experiences or knowledge or expressing themselves, beyond a slight reticence or qualms about not being able to answer astutely enough for serious research, fears that were quickly overcome as the interviews progressed.

The Portland Cluster

If there is a problem with the selection of interviewees, it is their cultural homogeneity and the close offline relationships of the group centred around Reed College in Portland, Oregon, the 'Portland Cluster', which encompassed eight out of fifteen respondents. All of my respondents had an educational level of which involved at least half a year of college or university training. All have, or have had, fairly easy access to computers. With one exception, they all played other kinds of role-playing or computer games and read fantasy literature. The one exception was the youngest female player, Doris, a girl who did not fit the patterns of media use displayed by the other players, but who shared several other common factors concerning her reasons for playing online computer games and her approach to media-consumption with respect to aspects other than content. She was not one of the Reed-group of players, and had not played any of the games common to the Reed-players.

The cultural homogeneity was obvious, not just in the Portland Cluster, but in six of the seven other players as well, the youngest female being the main exception. From observation in other situations, such as from OOC (out of character) conversations in the games while playing, I would claim that this was because this demographic group used Multiple User Dungeons more than others at that time,² while they were also more open to and available for research. I chose to interview volunteers, and while there might have been some social pressure on some of the respondents of the Portland cluster, all interviews were conducted at a site chosen by the player in question. Due to the circumstances of travel it was difficult to ensure that all of the interviews were conducted under identical physical conditions. By making certain that the interviewees were as relaxed as possible, I attempted to provide them with similar levels of comfort or stress rather than identical environments.

There was some ethnic and economic variation. While I think economy and ethnicity might be valid factors in a study such as this, I do not consider either to have had much impact on the answers. I think the similarity in educational levels and access to computers diminishes potential ethnic differences. I had one African-American and one Asian-

² This may most likely be attributed to easy access to computers connected to the Internet, the need to keep graphics and loud sounds from disturbing the computer-laboratory environments and restrictions concerning the installation of software such as games on public or college computers.

American respondent, as well as respondents of Slavic, Spanish, Italian and a variety of other European ethnicities mixed with native American descent, but I will not consider this in the discussion as it is difficult to generalise about ethnicity from the individuals in this study.

Only one interview expressed a concern that might appear to be related to ethnic identity, and that was in an African-American whose character on *Dragon Realms* strove to end the slavery of the serpent men. Considering the way in which *Dragon Realms* was set up, one might expect that a black player would identify with the plight of the serpent-people or *Xersians*. They were suppressed, having fallen from power and mastery of their earlier empire. They had been banished to a hot and dangerous rainforest, and were considered more animal than human by the 'master race', the Drow, who ruled the city of Xersia, once the heart of the serpent folk's empire. Beyne, however, was not the only player concerned with such questions. It would be to fall victim to a cliché to claim that his interest was spurred by ethnic identity, while the interest of all the other players who worked towards similar goals was simple opportunistic exploitation of a site of tension and conflict built into the fictional frame of *Dragon Realms*. I could, of course, counter cliché with cliché and claim that their - and also my own - interest in the serpent-people was motivated by 'the white man's guilt', but I do not see either view as having any value for the discussion at hand.

That ethnicity was important to the interviewees in their daily lives was made obvious by a minor episode which occurred during the interviews. Three of the players were room-mates, living in a house with a fourth student who did not play MUDs. When I, in casual conversation with this young man, referred to him as an 'American', he reacted with puzzlement. Being an American of Latin descent, he stared at me, and then said: "I never had anybody call me an American before. I never thought of it that way. But you are right... compared to you, I *am* an American." His Afro-American and Asian-American house-mates nodded and confirmed the experience, all three of them suddenly expressing this sense of puzzlement. They were surprised at being referred to as Americans, rather than being classified by their ethnic heritage.

The significance of selection

With regard to the question of whether such a limited and homogenous panel is representative of the general population of MUDders, I must admit that I have no real way of knowing. On one hand, the availability of college computer labs for access makes it very probable that this is a likely mix of youth. It is quite reasonable to assume that the most active MUDders were young people with free high-speed Internet access, with a certain level of education, middle- to upper middle-class, mainly white, and predominantly American. Playing from a European time-zone it was obvious that the majority of the players logged in from US time-zones.

Still, the selection of players who were interviewed lacked those who did not wish to participate, or who did not have the resources to aid me in finding them, such as a young man in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He was excluded from the interviews because I was unable to find out how to rendezvous with him in his hometown within my time limits. He was too inexperienced to travel to New York from his hometown, and too young to meet me anywhere not within a short distance of his school or home. Since I was equally baffled by transportation in US at that time, I lost one respondent from a less mature and resourceful faction.

My decision to personally meet people I had originally contacted online presented an additional problem. The fear of revealing names and addresses is strong and based on convincing and frequent reports of the abuse of such information. It is not considered to be a good idea to make oneself easily available to a person only known through the computer. This problem would have been eliminated if I had conducted the interviews online and let the respondents retain their anonymity. While that would have provided a wider group of respondents, working online would have given me much more limited latitude in the conduct of the interviews. Online interviews would have diminished the commitment of the participants to the interviews. They would also have made me appear less serious, since conducting the interviews in person also affirmed my own dedication. A computer-mediated interview might have generated errors impossible to spot. Online identities are frequently fictional. Names, education, race and age can easily be hidden or misrepresented, or they are performed, as Anette Markham (1998) notes:

Most people I met online perceive self to be a performance controlled by the sender of the message. This perception is no doubt strengthened by the fact that, for many users, vieweing and revising their utterances and choosing facial exoressions of degree of spontaneous resposes – whuckle, gasp, roll on the floor laughing (ROFL) – is a newly discovered and seemingly limitless ability. (Markham 1998:125)

When it is so simple to be imprecise and insincere with simple demographic data (which can be gauged with a reasonable level of precision when meeting face to face), it is easy to assume a similar lack of precision and sincerity in response to serious questions.

One situation I feared, when I considered doing online interviews, was being ‘played with’. Online chat-environments in general, and multi-player games in particular, are conducive to pretence and teasing. Anonymity encourages jest, trickery and a certain level of elusiveness that would have left me at a serious disadvantage, if some of the respondents had decided to disregard the sincerity with which my questions were asked, and had chosen to answer randomly, untruthfully or carelessly. Travelling all the way from Norway to the West Coast of the United States demanded considerable resources, but prompted sincere, well-thought-out answers to complicated questions, and ensured friendly and open interviews.

This resulted in a limited group of respondents and thus restricted the opportunity for generalisations. I could draw certain conclusions about young middle-class role-players who played MUDs, and who mainly accessed Internet through colleges and universities. They had a certain minimum level of education, were willing to be interviewed and were able to actively assist in arranging the interviews. This indicated that they had considerable resources at their disposal, at least in terms of cultural and social capital, though some were fairly short on economic capital.

These limitations, however, are not a problem for the research of this nature. This is not a study of computer-use in the general population, but a discussion of theories and concepts. The answers will not be reviewed or used to support generalisations, but to shed light on concepts, models and hypotheses.

Questions asked: which and why?

These are the questions that I used as an aid in organising my thoughts during the interviews, and to jolt my memory while talking to the players. Each interview was adjusted according to the responses and other topics that came up during the conversation. The following questions were primarily intended to impose a form of structure and continuity from interview to interview. They should not be regarded as standardised questions.

Introduction: Age - gender - education

How much do you watch television?

What books do you read? (*Do you read books?*)

Why do you read books?

How *often* do you read books?

(The questions in this group were often modified into: What kind of media do you use and how much time do you spend on the different media?)

Do you play computer games?

Which kinds of games do you play?

Would you make a list of existing types of computer games? (These responses could be further elaborated upon during the interview.)

Do you design computer games?

What kinds of games do you make/build?

How much time do you spend on computer games?

How much time do you spend on the computer?

(These two last questions were generally incorporated into, or used as follow-ups to the questions on media-use.)

How much time do you spend online?

How much time do you spend on online games? How much time on offline games?

How much time do you spend building? (Very rough figures)

About Types

Why do you make these distinctions, and what is important about them?

About playing

Why do you play computer games? In what situations? For how long?

-divide this into what kind of computer games are being played in what manner and for how long.

What is your favourite kind of computer game?

What is most attractive to you about the games you play?

Have you ever felt that your perception of things have changed after playing computer games?

About building

What kind of game do you build/create?

Why do you build it?

What is your primary concern as a builder?

About administrating

What kind of administration?

Why do you administrate?

What is your primary concern as an administrator?

What is your goal with the game?

About commercial production:

The stages of a production process:

Number of actors

Is there a formula? Which? (This may be an inquiry he will not want to answer.)

Is there a message to these games?

Does it make a difference?

How is this different from producing for other media?

These questions are directed at the experience of playing, as well as at the player's experience with different media. I did not ask them about their writing tactics or playing strategies. One reason for avoiding those questions was the degree of competition within the games we were playing or had been playing. Since I was involved as a player, one of my assets when I asked questions about the structure of the game, asking about tactics and strategies might have provided me with unfair advantages in other contexts. Consequently, I tried to avoid such subjects. This was particularly relevant since several of the players I interviewed were immortals and administrators in the games, and did not wish to discuss playing strategies. This would have been considered betraying quest-information, a serious offence on both *Dragon Realms* and on *Aarinfel*. On *Aarenfel* particularly, where several of the players were active, such questioning might have revealed secrets and caused them to lose an advantage in playing against me. In this one area, my street credibility as a player worked against me. I had become not only an observer, but also a participant and thereby a competitor. The two women who were roommates had the strongest reservations against answering questions directly concerning the play-strategies of the game. However, the answers to such questions can to a large degree be deduced by studying my logs from the games, and noting how a person's role-playing is expressed in the logs and notes posted to the game.

Robert S. Weiss warns the interviewer against agreeing with the interviewee, or expressing opinions. During one interview in particular, I was so delighted to be able to tell one of the subjects how much I had enjoyed an area he had built, that I did not maintain that distance. The last part of the interview disappeared into my pleased comments. I did gain some valuable insights about how that player felt about his building as he described the area

and how he experienced that area compared to later sites, but I might have learned as much or more by simply interrogating him, reserving my praise and comments until after I had turned off the recorder.

Recordings and notes

I recorded all of the interviews except one, where I used notes and typed the interview immediately after returning home (about 2 hours later). I am fairly skilled at taking notes, and the interview with Mortimer Green seemed satisfactory to me. I found it more difficult, however, to identify my own role in that interview than in the other 14 interviews. It was more difficult to determine if I had asked leading questions or failed to follow up a response, as I did not listen to myself or take note of my own questions as conscientiously as I listened to his answers.

For the recordings, I used a Mini-Disc Walkman. The discs are easy to carry and store. In the interview situation itself, the recorder functioned as a conversation piece rather than a distracting element, as tape-recorders and microphones often are in both journalistic and research interviews. The respondents were not shy about the microphone, they rather expected it. Several of them commented on and played with the recorder, enjoying the chance to have a close-up look at an object of fairly up-to-date technology. This is probably typical of the group I was interviewing, as they were all familiar with a wide range of different technologies. Having grown up with technology that permits them to control their spoken or written words, there was little or no fear or tension in connection with the presence of the microphone on the table between us. On the contrary, it was a prop which legitimised my position, the accepted equipment for a researcher doing interviews.

The etiquette of real-life encounters

Each interview took place in a place that the interviewees considered appropriate. The reason for letting the interviewees choose the surroundings, rather than doing so myself, lies in the transition from online to offline communication. Online communication and meetings in 'cyberspace' or 'virtual time'³ have their own rules of anonymity. There is an accepted etiquette for meeting strangers from the net. In all chat-rooms where people frequently decide to meet in the flesh, certain precautions are repeated almost to exhaustion. The most common precautions when meeting somebody off the internet include (my synopsis from different chats):

- Get their private telephone numbers– and preferably their work telephone number, so that you are able to check their names and connections.
- Leave a written note with the name and address of the person you are meeting, as well

³ 'Virtual time' as opposed to 'real time' is one way of speaking about online experiences. What happens in the digital meeting spaces is considered outside of real time, although the participants spend real time communicating. For many of the people chatting and playing online, the concept of virtual time means that the communication which goes on is not real and does not have to be treated according to the rules of courtesy, honesty and sincerity of 'real time', that is non-computer-mediated, conversations.

- as the address where the meeting will take place, with a friend.
- Never conduct first-time meetings in isolated locations, such as in hotel-rooms or deserted areas.
- Never enter the car of a stranger. Drive your own car or take a taxi.
- Make an appointment to call a friend at a certain time during or after the meeting. (some groups call this a ‘safe-call’, I found the practice frequently recommended).
- Agree on a code-word to indicate danger, in case you are forced to make a safe-call.

While I did not set up the network of safe-calls the more cautious and safety-oriented groups called for, I did make certain that my full name was available, as well as a picture of myself. Contact addresses and numbers were available for those who wanted to check out my references prior to the meeting. I let the people I intended to meet choose the site, and did not suggest meeting in private. I also made certain somebody knew who I was planning to meet and where, although my main concern was that the interviewees felt safe. In taking all these precautions, I adhered to the netiquette, the rules within which first contacts were established, hoping to give the impression of being harmless, but not stupid. The initial distrust I experienced from the parents of the 18-year-old girl I met on *The Infinite Point* underlined the state of apprehension which many, particularly young women, live under in the United States.

Five of the interviews were conducted in public places such as restaurants, tearooms and food-halls. One was conducted in a park, two in my motel room, two at the private home of one couple I interviewed, one in a moving car, three in a house shared by three of the respondents and a fourth young man (of the same social group, but not a game-player), one at the office of my interviewee and one in the house of the parents of one player. The interview in a moving car might appear to represent a total disregard of the aforementioned precautions, but the subject was very comfortable with the situation, as he was my driver for a five-day trip from Portland, Oregon down to San Diego, California.

Transcription and interpretation

When all the interviews were completed, I was left with a stack of minidisks and a lot of work. Over the next couple of years, I have spent considerable time typing the discussions, taking notes and listening to the interviews. What did I actually find out? I discovered that all of the players enjoyed what they were doing. They were all highly intelligent and literate, and able to answer well for their play, to the extent that they participated in the games. The only person who encountered difficulties in answering was Doris, the youngest female, but this might have been because she did not actually view herself as a player, but as a participant in a social arena. She did not enter the MUD in order to play a game, but rather in order to contact and chat with her flesh world friends.

My impression of the players might be skewed. They belong to a group who volunteered to participate in an academic investigation, so one might expect them to be resourceful and feel they can contribute to the study. This implies in turn that they have confidence in their ability to express themselves in an interview. In addition, all were avid players. If there is any substance to theories about players being social misfits who possess few or no social skills and no real ‘life’, these heavy users of computer games might have been expected to display

such traits. Nothing in my interviews, however, indicated any lack of social skills. The participant who expressed himself least coherently on the topic of playing was also the most eager player of action-games and hack'n'slash MUDs. He was also the most immediately charming and charismatic of all the respondents, in his own words, he was 'a mother-in-law's dream'.

I needed to approach the interviews without being predisposed by earlier theories concerning addiction, lack of individual identity, playing as compensation for flesh world failure and as an escape from intellectual activity. My goal was to understand the wide scope of the players' approach to their games. While some of them at times displayed addictive behaviour, there were none who actually remained addicted and dependent on the games to an extreme degree. Most of them wanted to use the games to control their own actions, pleasures and environment, rather than to use them as an escape from an unmanageable world. This fits to a certain extent with Sherry Turkle's (1984:141) observations of children learning to control the actions on the screen, particularly with respect to the pleasure of being able to create rules for the actions on the screen. Some of the youths I interviewed were old enough to have been the children in Turkle's observations, and the pattern of pleasure through control and creativity was repeated in their play, although their actions were somewhat more elaborate and complex than manipulating a turtle who drew figures on the screen, as Deborah in Turkle's study had done (1984:143).

That difference between simple manipulation and more elaborate efforts is part of what I am exploring in this study. Constructing and maintaining a game demands enormous exertion, as several of the builders I have interviewed have indicated. They obviously feel that the rewards justify their efforts.

Rewards of role-playing MUDs

One such reward was the freedom of testing personal limitations and personal potential. Most of the players took great delight in playing with different aspects of their personalities, testing if they could create a convincing psychopath, fashionable fop, seductress or warlord. Mariah, a 22-year-old female belonging to the Portland cluster, offers this as her reason for playing MUDs:

TM: What about playing? Why do you play computer games?

Mariah: I like the contact with other people. It's something you do with other people. It's something also that you discover. I'm a social science major, so I am very interested in people and how they interact with things, and how the communities form and break up, and how people are choosing to portray a specific character. Hopefully you are not playing yourself all the time, but you have a character in your mind, and if you think: "OK, this is it; my character is shy", then you have to use the stereotype of "shy" and portray this character as shy, and I am very interested in what people think shy is, and what people think angry is and what people think cold is... icy, and angry, and I'm very interested in how people are choosing to portray a specific person, and I think that the really good people are the ones who are willing to sacrifice their own personal way of doing things in order to do something in the way of the character in a stuck situation. (Portland, September 16th, 1999)

Mariah describes how she derives pleasure from the challenge of playing different roles, and

she proceeds to describe how role-playing expands her understanding of society:

Mariah: I do think that people who MUD think differently about the world. Because it's a different way of thinking, if you have never mudded before and you have never been in that sort of mindset or thoughts. I think role-players or actors have the same kind of sense. I don't think people look at stereotypes as clearly as they do when creating a character. You don't look at society the same after that, and you don't think about it. You wouldn't think about things unless you were mudding, I mean there are things about being a character or being in a situation where you are not yourself when you can really study yourself a lot – when in role-play.

TM: Do you like exploring different kind of persons, personalities?

Mariah: Oh yes, very much! Never a lot, or just a blur of one part of me, or a blur of another part of me, it's like you have this original set of digits, and you flip one, and then you flip the other one, and you flip a third, and then in the beginning you are a lot like yourself, and with each character you get farther and farther away from yourself. It's neat to see what works and what doesn't in the situations, behind the safe society of the character. (Portland, September 16th, 1999)

Among the characters this player played was a stern clan-leader as well as a ruthless fertility goddess. Mariah was at the time of the interview newly married, did well at school and enjoyed a stable and varied social network. Her role-playing of other personalities was not an escape from an unsatisfying reality, as often seemed to be the case with the MUDDers in Sherry Turkle's study (1995), but a way of exploring social abstractions, or testing her believability as certain characters: a mental exercise and a private little experiment in sociology. This intellectual challenge was an important part of the reward that went beyond the more immediate pleasures of the social act of playing.

Another delight was the pleasure of beating the system. This sometimes appeared to be secondary in MUDDing, at least to Jason; an 18 year old male interviewed in Los Angeles September 31st, 1999:

TM: any reason why you prefer the strategy games?

Jason: They are more of a challenge. If nothing else, I'll take an adventure-game or a role-play game and play it for ten hours and beat it. And - yeah, it might puzzle me a couple of times in the ten hours, or however long it takes, and I won't play it again, when you have played one once it gets pretty dull, it's just repetition. I have certainly played a fair number of them, I spend a lot more absolute time playing at Civilisation or Alpha Centauri or Master of Orion cause I crank it up to highest difficulty and set it up to lose most of my games. Each one might take six hours, or ten and so they hold my interest longer because they are different every time and they are harder.

TM: Why do you play games?

Jason: Why I play games...? Gee, I don't know. I was brought up on computer games.

I may not be characteristic of the people you interview, because we have had a computer in the house since I was two. My parents are both as much or more computer geeks as I am.

TM: It seems like everybody I interview grew up with computers.

Jason: I grew up watching my parents playing computer games. And - I don't know, I play them for different reasons, I mud for different reasons than I play something like Alpha Centauri or Civilisation, that's a lot like playing chess with somebody, it's an intellectual exercise. Can I, you know, twist the rules, and figure out how to work around the silly rules system enough to win this. That's a mental exercise.

The common denominator is the mental exercise. Both Mariah and Jason take pleasure in testing themselves against the game and the other players, and testing their minds against the game. Jason claimed that he might not be a typical player, and in certain aspects he was not. He was a prodigy, extremely intelligent and academically successful at an early age. At the time I met him, when he was eighteen, he had withdrawn from completing an advanced college degree. I doubt that many of the players I interviewed could have figured out how to beat the system of a computer game faster than he could. In many other aspects, he was a typical MUDder:

TM: And when you talk about this, it sounds like role-play has its own reward?

Jason: Yes, in my opinion.

TM: And what do you feel that this reward is? What kind of reward do you get?

Jason: I get the same kind of... It's a combination. On one side it's a purely social thing, it's the same kind of satisfaction you get from going out and spending a day with friends, chatting with them. And on the other end, I find it's almost an artistic thing. I'll put a great deal of effort into making a consistent character, and a detailed one and an interesting one. And I try to write him a history, and it's almost like writing fiction and writing for artistic purposes, and that's entirely different from the social. I enjoy creating intricate characters, intricate stories...

The challenge of creating the character and its story combined with the social experience is a recurrent theme throughout the interviews. One player quit *Dragon Realms* before I started playin: Beyne, a 23-year-old male interviewed in Portland on September 19th, 1999. He associated this pleasure directly with the pleasure of having control. It is not simply a delight in creativity, but also a matter of controlling events:

Beyne: There's lots of games where the game is great visually, it's like an action game, but when you sit down at the controls, your character can't do whatever you want to do. You need to feel in control of what's going on; that's the biggest issue. People would say that they are playing just because of the pretty lights, but they really want control. If you mess up their mass when they are playing the game, they will scream like babies. Because what they really want to do is be able to do what they really want to do with the game, and sort of in the context. There needs to be lots of points of control, lots of perceived

freedom, whether this be a role-playing game, an action game, or anything. (...) Which is why MUDs are so liked I think, because you can be everything and do everything; it's why role-playing games are liked too. MUDs are actually more limited; it's harder to do things. Oh, yeah, after all's said and done control is the biggest issue of them all, and it becomes the perfect game. Which is the single difference between books and MUDs; because in a book, I can't change the fact that the main character is an idiot. Nothing I can do will make Captain Ahab less fanatical. He's fanatical now. If I pick up the book later, he's still fanatic. Obsessing over a porpoise. I can't do anything about that. In a MUD, I can shoot him. Most MUDs allow that sort of thing. Of course they repop in five minutes, but at least then I can shoot him again, and maybe that's self-satisfying. If I am the imm (immortal) I can just delete him. I hope that there are less violent things I can do to him, afterward. Control, it's the main difference.

The main theme of challenge, personal control and activity was represented in many different ways. For some of the players, gaming was a philosophy or a life-style rather than a pastime. Tom, a 23-year-old teacher and also part of the Portland cluster (interviewed September 16th, 1999), considered the activity of the player as more than a way to receive pleasure. To him, it was a political choice, the choice between passivity and actively taking charge of one's life:

Tom: So – and I think that's where gaming is so great for this, because it demands from the player participation that – if you are not participating it's a movie, it's a book – well, books aren't a pretty good example as - there's an element of imagination there which isn't in a movie. You watch a movie, if you're not participating in it, it's just a one-way experience, and I think most people – more people than I like to think participate in life as a one-way experience – stuff happens to them. And there are plenty of people out there who are not making it a one-way experience, who are making it a two-way experience, who are making decisions about a foreign, or investment, or military policy; using our children, money, votes, citizenship whatever, to make decisions. And since there are two-way participants in the world who use the world like a game and don't use it like a movie, who change things and don't let things just happen to them, I am into to try people to get, get my students and players to be two-way participants, and that is why a game is so great, because it gets us to being two-way participants, and it gets us searching for that kind of participation that started this long diatribe, searching for the inspiration and the creativity and the problem-solving; and that's why I like reading science-fiction stories, because the authors oftentimes look at current events or looking at last recent events then take the next logical step of; 'now that we have got this it is eventually going to lead to this – once we have that, what are the kind of decisions we are going to make about it?'

Tom's ideology of gaming carries with it an important social aspect, that of responsibility towards the others who are involved in the game. Several of the players touched on this in their interviews. Benjamin, a 24-year-old male and one of the Portland cluster (interviewed September 19th, 1999), was a clan leader and emphasised the responsibility he had while role-playing:

TM: To help the good people and keep the bad people away.

Benjamin: I think so; I think that was basically it - and survival. There was a point where we were pretty stripped as far as pfiles⁴; our strength was not very strong. We couldn't kill as much or defend as much as some other clans (pointed clearing of throat).

TM: Don't look at me!

Benjamin: I am not looking at you⁵! So, ah... you know, it was a lot more towards survival, and it became more, when I became a clan leader, towards defending and protecting MY people, I can't protect everybody, because there's a lot of big fish, and I mean much bigger fish; and I just can't protect them all. Let's just keep it at my people, and put up a wall of bravado or something, to keep people from messing with my people. So that became what it was, survive and protect my people.

In response to my attempts to approach the rumoured addictiveness of the games, none of the players spoke of being unable to avoid playing. Apart from the social aspect, the most common factor was some sort of intellectual challenge, the nature of the challenge depending on the preferences of the player in question. The closest thing to a state of mind which could be reminiscent of the addictiveness of drugs, was described by Jack, 23 year old male, interviewed in his car on the road to San Diego on September 24th, 1999:

TM: And what is the attraction; what attracts you with the online role-play?

Jack: The strife for the role-playing high. It's a lot like impromptu acting for me. It's basically getting up on a stage and putting on a different mask, and playing out a different facet of my personality or interests, for the mutual benefit of the storyline. Be it a positive or a negative benefit, it's the role-playing that really attracts me.

According to Jack, the role-playing high is a state of flow, when one feels that the borders between the player and the character have been dissolved and the player no longer needs to consider the next move of the character, but acts as the character:

TM: Can you explain the role-play high to me?

Jack: The role-playing high is just a pet theory of mine, which I find a lot of other role-players understand, and necessarily a lot of actors and writers; people who seek to achieve almost a mentality outside of their own. And it is the point at which you have stopped thinking about; Given this situation, what would my character say? Given this situation, what would my character do? - and start thinking from the point of view of your character and say what you want to say and do what you want to do. To fully immerse

⁴ Pfiles: player files – means characters or avatars. Each character has its own file which the player accesses and manipulates during play, hence the reference to files rather than players. Jonathan is emphasising that there was nothing wrong with the players in his clan, he just did not have enough of them: i.e. of files.

⁵ Benjamin's character was head of one of the smaller clans, while my character was in one of the larger clans, and was also the influence which kept at least one of the more powerful characters and allies of Jonathan's character away from his clan.

yourself into the character. I find that it's very enthralling.

Other players have more specific pleasures: Matthew tests out characters for his novels and stories, trying the character-concepts on, literally, to see if they are valid, Elisabeth plays for the aesthetic pleasure, for the delight of the well-turned phrase and the elegant plot, while David and Levi agree on the most simple solution of all. Levi, a 19 year old male, answers through his description of his favourite game (San Diego September 24th 1999):

TM: Do you have any game which you'd say is your favourite?

Levi: Uuuuummm, yeah, I would.

TM: And which?

Levi: Digdug.

TM: Digdug?

Levi: Yeah. Old, old, old arcade game. I found, like – it's a very small file, it plays perfectly, it's fun, it's simple, it's entertaining.

And David (22, male, part of the Portland cluster) sums it all up very precisely and tongue-in-cheek, well aware that I am fishing for a more complex answer in the interview in Portland, September 16th, 1999. Still, his reply is to the point, and honest:

TM: Why do you play computer games? Why do you play them?

David: I hate to say this, but – the answer that comes into my mind is – they are fun.

Summary

The answers to be had from the interviews mainly expressed a few basic experiences for the players. They played because playing was an intellectual challenge and/or socially satisfying. While they underlined the importance of fun in the games, they were also to a large extent able to draw conclusions from the game-experiences and to experiences in other social contexts. Other concerns were also with the blurring of boundaries between IC and OOC, and the responsibility of administrators or immortals, and how the way a game is run determines a lot about how popular the game can become and how much fun the players will have. While the players to a large extent subscribed to the 'you only have the fun you make for yourself' school of thought, and were active, creative and inventive, they had strong opinions and feelings about the roles of game administrators, and did their best to live up to these ideals in their own lives.

The most interesting thing I found was that playing online role-playing computer games was not a way to kill time or something done with their brains shut down. The players were so conscious of what they did within the game that they could describe the different states of mind in different activities, such as how levelling (hack'n'slash) was something they did when they needed an intellectual break or focused on something else, while role-playing was a state of almost trance-like concentration where they engaged with all their intellectual capacity and used otherwise unexplored parts of their personalities in a conscious effort.

Most important, the interviews convinced me that the players at *DR* were well aware that they were playing a game. Their meta-consciousness was very high, and they did not at any

point mistake the game-reality for the flesh world, despite their strong social, emotional and intellectual involvement.

Sixth Interlude - The perfect game

This is a part from an interview with Lukasz, one of the players who did not play on either *Dragon Realms* or *Aarinfel*. He was a polish student in New York, and his interest in MUDs was both in the building and administrative part, in coding/programming and in playing. In this sample he expresses his ideas of a perfect game, and discusses realism in games. Realism in Petrov definition is not about a fully immersible virtual reality, but that the relationship between actions and their consequences should be as comparable to reality as possible. In the discussion of arms and armour, this means that the percentage of damage the player character takes with a certain weapon should be comparable to the actual physical damage a fighter would take wearing the same type of armour facing the same type of weapon in the same situation. This means not a realistic illusion of the flesh-world, but a realistic causal relationship between actions and effects.

Torill: If you were to build the perfect game – what would it look like?

Petrov: Either a science fiction space simulator with some economical somethings, such as Allied, which was never really developed – or Privateer which wasn't either... there's one coming out called Freelancer, I think, and that's close to what I believe to be a game for most people, or a role-playing fantasy Mud. A MUD. Which I don't really care about the graphics as long as there's a crowd that's in it, but it would have to be really realistic, if we can say that about any computer game

Torill: How do you define realism then?

Petrov: As close as you can get to real life – basically – to compare it to for example armour – the combat system will be much different – much different. I can understand that it's hard to cope, but we are speaking of the perfect game here.

Petrov: It should take into account physical elements as well as fantasy, if you have a body it has to function somehow, and it can get in different areas and – it would have some importance in what you can do or not.

Torill: Would you feel that the combat system would be very important to create the perfect game?

Petrov: It depends on the type of game. Since I would be rather more inclined to write a fantasy game, there is obviously a lot of combat going on in there – other areas should be developed as well, I feel, even the building of the whole world would have to be different because right now you have only two dimensions and they can't be easily translated into a three dimensional environment. And the idea for a perfect game is that what ever you can do in real life, you can do there, and this I will try to achieve as I can have the mans and time and knowledge and all of that the list goes on and on

Torill: Why do you play games? Computer games?

Petrov: For entertainment.

Torill: Do you play any other games than computer games, do you play role-playing games offline?

Petrov: No, haven't had chance doing that, I was thinking about it, but never ended up doing that.

Torill: Is that because you don't have any contacts around here?

Petrov: Probably, because otherwise I believe I'd be probably as much into it as , well...

Torill: Do you read the game-books?

Petrov: I have read a few but I didn't like the simplicity of what they were representing, so...

Torill: When you play a game, what's the most attractive feature about it, what is it that makes you go on playing a game?

Petrov: Taking character details, which come in different terms, in realism or in even in graphics if we are speaking of a higher level of game, but basically realism, I'd say, and consistency, which is a flaw that quite a few games have, because they go against what ever was said in print. In the next chapter, or...

Torill: When you play games, do you have any feeling for the way the story unfolds? Do you have any manner in which you'd prefer to discover it, to explore it?

Petrov: Frankly, no, because I'd rather see what other people came up with and then try to find loopholes in it, which is my form of entertainment.

Torill: Have you ever felt that your perception has been changed by playing games?

Petrov: It could be said it helps developing skills for solving problems, as I found lot of times I am not actually playing it, but looking for the easiest way to solve what ever the problem is within the game. So that could be useful.

Chapter 7: Searching for the Good Game: an Online Quest

The variety of online multiplayer games, free or commercial, cover a wide range. *The Mud Connector*, a very important site for any MUD player searching for a new game to join, lists 1771 MUDs and sorts them by 54 different categories¹. These are just the listed MUDs, play-MUDs like LPMuds and DIKUMuds or their derivatives, as well as MOOs and MUSHes. The games still in progress are normally not listed at *The Mud Connector* unless they are listed with a call for administrators/immortals and builders. The player about to decide which game to play has a multitude of choices to consider. The seemingly wide variety of MUD choices is dwarfed when put along side the massive output of the computer game industry. As of Jan 19th 2002, the website Game Research (2002) reported these statistics:

- Computer and video games sales in the US, not including edutainment (2000): \$5.6 billion
- Global computer game sales, not including video gamer or edutainment (2000): \$2.8 billion
- Value of European leisure software industry (2001): \$5.5 billion
- Number of computer and videogames sold in the US (2000): 219 million

However, where the game-production industry has bulk, the MUDs have variety. With such a wide range of choices available to the computer game player, it comes down to individual taste in the end. The player has to choose on the grounds of his preferences and make an aesthetic choice. To newcomers MUDs do not look like they have any particular aesthetics in the traditional sense, the visual image is dependent on the client used to connect to the MUD, and the action of MUDDing appears to be incompatible with common criteria for aesthetics: the telnet window is spare and not user-friendly, the MUD clients such as for instance Zmud are slightly better, but not exactly visually pleasing. At first glance the text is fragmented and hard to make sense of, and often filled with errors, typographical errors, flawed syntax and uninspired language. The gap between what the screen displays and what the player experiences can be deceptive however, and even if there might not be a large public discourse of multiplayer aesthetics, there is obviously a culture where aesthetics can emerge:

Before aesthetics could emerge in a particular culture, it would not, of course, be necessary that certain objects be set aside by that culture as specialized aesthetic objects – as connected with that interest alone. But at least something like an aesthetic interest,

¹ New on this list in May 2001 was an adult category, hinting that MUDs are not just for crazy questing kids, but also hitting the trash culture backbone – or should that be pelvis - of erotica.

appropriately directed to some objects and not to others, would have to exist. And the philosophy of art would no doubt involve quite early an attempt to puzzle out and clarify the nature of this interest: asking what makes some objects and not others valuable in this peculiar way. (Beardsley 1966:21)

What I need to look for in order to find the aesthetic of the MUD culture, the preferences and the criteria for a judgement of taste, is what kind of choices the players make, and what kind of choices there is a cultural consensus for considering ‘tasteful’ or valuable.

The players already exist in a society where ‘good taste’ hardly applies to their interests. The literature most frequently related to computer games is fantasy and science fiction (as discussed in chapter 5). While fantasy is a genre with increasing acceptance, it is hardly accepted as high art; except when it is written by Shakespeare or Ibsen or set to music by Wagner, Grieg or Mozart, of course.

Can there be criteria for ‘good’?

To discuss ‘good’ or any judgement of taste in relation to a computer game, I have to address some of the many aspects of the game that will be considered in the process of passing judgement. Games such as a playMUD consist of the code of the game itself, the way this code is adapted to the fictional setting of the game, and the way the setting and the code limits or liberates the characters of the players into acting out their fantasies.

MUDs exist in different brands, and to choose a playMUD, MOO, MUCK or MUSH is already an aesthetic choice. I will look briefly at the differences between the playMUDs and MOOs. Some play only playMUDs and some only MOOs,² and they defend their choice not only depending on what they wish to be able to do while logged on to the game, but also on small differences in the way you give orders to the program supporting the environment. In DIKUMUDs you can commonly use ‘say’, ‘emote’ and ‘tell’, abbreviating these to ‘s’, ‘em’ and ‘te’, or you can reply to a tell by typing ‘reply’ or ‘re’. In a MOO you often use ‘say’, ‘emote’ and ‘page’, which are basically the same commands, but the MOO does not accept the same abbreviations. Instead you can use “ for ‘say’, where in a DIKUMUD you use ‘; you can use: for ‘emote’; in some DIKUMuds this is the short command for one of the administrator only channels, and you can use “– for replying to a ‘page’ (same as a ‘tell’), essentially the same order as ‘reply’ in a MUD.

While preference at this level might simply have to do with habit, choosing play-MUDs or MOOs is a preference that is also culturally skewed. Play-MUDs are traditionally the arenas of the gamers, while MOOs frequently are the arenas of scholarly researchers and teachers. Several MOOs are developed, maintained and hosted on academic servers, e.g. linguaMOO at the University of Texas at Dallas, AppalachiaMoo at West Virginia University

² While MOOs are MUDs, gamers tend not to make the distinction playMUD and MOO, but just MUD and MOO, considering a MOO a breed apart. The main difference is that the playMUDs like LPMud and DIKUMud have the dice-roll ability in the code-base, while they don’t allow all characters to create objects, as a MOO does. (See also chapter 1 and chapter 4 for further descriptions of this distinction.)

and MediaMOO by Amy Bruckman (originally situated at MIT). While there are role-playing areas within LambdaMOO, and there might be as much role-playing going on there as on any play-MUD, the opening screen of Lambda is totally different from the opening screen of play-MUDs. A play-MUD wants to signal immediately that this is fiction or perhaps even high fantasy, and clever ASCII art in the shape of castles, unicorns or dragons is highly sought after for the entrance screen, to set a mood. Most MOOs open with some kind of disclaimer, covering the legal issues of playing, as well as an explanation of the topic of this particular MOO.

Entering play-MUDs, the character is as a rule made to go through a MUD-school, designed for new players. While MOOs often have a delay in approving new characters, screening players through email, MUDs have MUD-school to serve as a period of socialisation that teaches the player some of the essentials of playing the game. These essentials include how to give orders to the game, but also the fiction of the game itself, and how the frame fiction of the game is integrated in the quests, in the code³ and particularly in the role-playing.

The MUD school can often tell an experienced mudder exactly what type of MUD he or she has entered into. A classic DikuMUD, where they use the original rooms, will have a recognisable MUD school, where the character spends the initial levels slaying slugs. The DikuMUD has, however, evolved into a family of MUDs (DikuMUD homepage 2001), where each coder (programmer) expresses his or her own artistry through adding to the original code in order to change or adjust.

This creativity of the coders creates a particular aesthetics for these games based on coders' language. They make their judgements of taste based on how gracefully the code is set up, how it works and how easily it supports the different functions of the game. Between the coders of Lp- and DikuMUDs, there are debates about coding which are beyond the scope of this work, although they are concerned with a clearly aesthetic view on the difference between an LpMUD and a DikuMUD: an aesthetic of the code. One example was in how the followers of the LpMUDs find them easier to code to support quests, that is: an automated support of replying to the actions of the players is easier to set up in an LpMUD. I will, however, not pursue this particular brand of aestheticism, leaving code aesthetics to the coders.

These many distinctions between games indicate that 'good' is definitely a question of taste and not of absolute function. It is not only deemed necessary to create different types of multiple user environments. Each type has to be adjusted and 'improved' according to the taste of each new coder. To know the difference between the many versions of the MUDs demands specialised knowledge, or as Bourdieu states:

A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which

³ While code is not fiction, the code is developed to suit the fiction. If the fictional world needs a particular ability or needs the program to respond in a certain manner, a good programmer alters the code to suit the fiction.

constitutes pictorial or musical culture is the hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of a period, a school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason. (1984:2)

The trained eye is absolutely necessary in order to spot the distinctions between different MUDs, and the process of 'training the eye' has to be considered when talking of choosing what is 'good' in a MUD. As Bourdieu says: history and education creates the tool with which assessment and evaluation is done: 'the eye':

The 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education. This is true of the mode of artistic perception now accepted as legitimate, that is, the aesthetic disposition, the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension, i.e., legitimate works of art, but everything in the world, including cultural objects which are not yet consecrated - such as, at one time, primitive arts, or, nowadays, popular photography or kitsch - and natural objects. (1984:3)

In the continued discussion of aesthetics I will limit the topic to the particular versions of MUDs which comprise the common universe of experience of the interviewees in this study: DikuMUDs of the later modifications named Merc and Envy (DikuMUD homepage 2002)⁴ (and occasionally occurring mixed – Diku modified with both Merc and Envy-type modifications, and then hacked), each of them tailored to the fictional framework of the different games. This fictional framework is very much part of the criteria for defining a good game, the game platform is considered in this study only as it relates to function, not on the level of programming or reading the code itself.

I will expand on the preferences of the players with descriptions from the MUDs and with other builders' advice on developing games that the players and builders pass around among themselves.

Aspects of games

Before I can speak of the qualities of an online multi-user computer game, I have to define what I speak of at different times. Although I have pointed out that my work is not concerned with the aesthetics of code (which is the common term used in MUDs for the programming), this is not strictly speaking entirely true, because code will have to be considered to some extent in this work. However, the main focus will be on the areas in the game and on the play. The aesthetic choices, as well as the activities of the players and builders, will be divided into three by three categories, with playing split into the sub-categories of role-play and game-play. This will be expressed in a table with the following variables:

⁴ There is a genealogy of DikuMUDs at the DikuMUD homepage <http://www.dikumud.com>.

Character: This is the avatar the player creates in order to be able to enter the game, and develops in order to be able to play it. While avatar is often used about the icon or the visible symbol representing the player in online interaction, the character has attributes, strength and weaknesses, and in the case of a role-play game a past, history and personality. This is different from role, as role is a wider concept: several different characters can play the same role; i.e. the bad guy, and one character can play several different roles; mother, daughter, lover – but the character is individual while a role is a certain set of behaviours which can be common to more character.

Fiction: Games are played out in a universe of different rules from the mundane world. These rules are often integrated in or caused by the fiction that creates the framework for the game. This fiction permeates the game from deciding religion, natural laws and history to deciding how characters can and cannot act, dress and look. In the game, this fiction is not perceived as fiction, because accepting it as the natural law and actual history of the game-world is absolutely necessary to playing the game; disbelief has to be collectively suspended.

Rules: These are what define a game as a game and not a play, for instance. The rules create a tension between restriction and freedom and still allow the outcome to remain open. In a play or a film the actions are limited through the script saying what the actors should do, while in a game they are controlled through the rules saying what the players are not allowed to do.

Character, fiction and rules are the aspects of the game the player will be most concerned with. While developing a game for playing, the builders and administrators will have more to consider. I position these on the horizontal axis of my table, where I present the activities that players, builders and administrators have to consider:

Playing: I have split this into Role-play, which is the make-believe, the acting “as if” the character is a being independent of, or at least different from the player, and Game-play, which is the competitive part, including quests, levelling⁵ and player-killing. This is the part of an online game most players will be involved in, as this is what the game is built to support: the purpose of the game.

Building: This is the activity of creating the way the game looks and works on the level at which the players experience it. Building is the creative use of the code to create an environment for the play to take place in.

Coding: Without a codebase, a text-based game is just a collection of writings which at best can be read as a book or a collection of stories of the type of Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*⁶. Some of the game-elements reside in the code, for instance how different skills work, how the dice will roll in a conflict, how important one attribute is compared to another, in which rooms it will be possible to use which spells and so on. Access to changing the game at this level is normally restricted to only a very few particularly skilled administrators, as an error here can make the game unplayable for everybody until the problem is tracked down and eliminated.

Most important for the player is how playing a role-play MUD has to be divided into role-

⁵ Gaining experience through actions in the MUD, which leads to gaining levels.

⁶ While *Silmarillion* is not considered a particularly good book to read, it’s widely read by those who want to understand what Middle-Earth is, and what lies behind it. It has become the model for several fictitious frames for worlds in which games take place.

playing and game-playing. Role-playing fits with what Caillois calls mimicry:

All play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a closed, conventional, and in certain respects, imaginary universe. Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. (1979:19)

This expands on the “dressing up” in play, which Huizinga (1950:13) describes as he talks of taking on the role of another, becoming another through the game. Caillois elevates this into a classification of games. The game-playing part of the MUD will then be classified as games of *Agôn* or of *Alea*, where the dice-rolling based on the statistics of the character, of the opponent and on the randomness of the dice-simulation is *Alea*, the chance element in a fight which might let a character get a very good hit against the odds, or let a strong character take a lot of damage. Roger Caillois defines *Alea* this way:

Alea. This is the Latin name for game of dice. I have borrowed it to designate, in contrast to *agôn*, all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. More properly, destiny is the sole artisan of victory, and where there is rivalry, what is meant is that the winner has been more favoured by fortune than the loser. (Caillois 1979:17)

Agôn is the competitive part of the game, where the player combines the different advantages of the character with the aim to win:

Agôn. A whole group of games would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph. It is therefore always a question of rivalry which hinges on a single quality (speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, ingenuity, etc.), exercised, within defined limits and without outside assistance, in such a way that the winner appears to be better than the loser in a certain category of exploits. (Caillois 1979:14)

Each of these types of games is to some extent part of what the players consider a good online role-playing MUD. In a hack'n slash game, it is all about *Agôn* and *Alea*, using the knowledge of the game, the rules, the equipment and the skills to tip the roll of the dice in favour of the player's character. These depend mostly on how the game is coded for the *Alea* or chance part, as the dice-roll of table-top games is coded into the MUDs in the fight-code, and on code and building for the *Agôn* part, as the skills are coded into the platform of the game, but the equipment and the statistics of the equipment the character can use is the domain of the building.

If we were to position *agôn*, *alea* and mimicry into the table of what constitutes a MUD,

as well as consider if there is room for the fourth, *Ilinx*, or games in pursuit of vertigo (Caillois 1979:23) we would arrive at the following table:

Table 2, chapter 7

		Character	Fiction	Rules
Playing	Role-play	Mimicry	Mimicry	Mimicry
	Game-play	Agôn Alea	Agôn	Alea, (Ilinx)
Building		Mimicry, Agôn, Alea	Mimicry	Agôn, Alea
Coding		Agôn, Alea	Agon	Alea, Agon, Mimicry, (Ilinx)

Ilinx. The last kind of game includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consists of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In cases, it is a question of surrendering to kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness. (Caillois 1979:32)

Ilinx is not too frequently present in stationary games such as computer games, but I still want to keep it in the table, because there is something like the fascination of games of speed and flow in several computer games. When the fingers fly faster than the brain can follow, and the signals leap from the eyes or ears to the fingers avoiding the brain, going by way of the spinal column, there is a certain sensation of physical flow, of giving yourself over to the experience. In MUDs I think this is a very personal experience, but one which is dependent on the response of the code, or the rules as they are coded into the platform of the game. A game like *Aarinfel*, where actions happened slowly enough that it was possible to consider the individual acts, the velocity, limited by the need for consideration before typing, had very little of *Ilinx*, if any at all. The hack'n'slash, or even questing, had been severely restricted there, and turned to conscious puzzle-solving rather than fighting, or other means of solving problems with the help of the character's speed or strength. The code retained the potential for fighting, but the rules and the fiction ruled this out, as fighting was taken care of by NPC soldiers or through battles of intrigue and quiet poisonings⁷.

In a game like *Dragon Realms*, however, players could play at the game for a long time

⁷ This was made particularly obvious as a new set of immortals wanted to re-introduce agôn and alea into the game by insisting that fights had to be realistic concerning what skills and attributes the

and never experience this flow, this dizzy mixture of adrenalin and automated responses which would be the MUD equivalent of physical vertigo. But for those who liked to challenge the statistic limits of the character in the MUD versions of violent confrontations, hack'n'slash, *Ilinx* was definitely a part of the pleasure of the game. The quests at *Dragon Realms* were both puzzles and battles, and the in-character wars as well as the out-of-character battles permitted a combination of player speed and character strength in confrontations which combined to give a sensation of a "flow" which can be said to resemble the dizzy joy of movement which is called *Ilinx*.

A role-playing MUD integrates and depends heavily on *mimicry*, and mimicry is not just accommodated as a part of the fiction, but required through the rules and desired for the character. The mimicry is upheld through the way the skills are coded into the game to support an illusion of the character being something or someone other than what I, the player, am; it is supported by the fictional framework, which also influences the code, as it raises demands to what can and what can not be done, and it is lived out through the character, the virtual doll which the player experiences the game through.

Building influences and adjusts to the equipment and items in the rooms, and the way the rooms invite different types of play; but it is also influenced through the needs and demands of the character, needs for equipment to match skills and roles, both *agôn* and *mimicry*, and also *alea*, through increasing the saves; the statistics which tips the potential for winning in the direction of the character with the higher save. On *Dragon Realms* this was increased through the levels of the character: a level 50 character had saves equal to the levels. This made it more likely that a level 50 would win a fight with a level 49, even if the level 49 might have some better general statistics, because chance was on the side of the player at the higher level. Holding a certain item would increase the saves, and as such increase the chance of winning any conflict of magic or arms.

Fiction is very obviously connected to building, as building creates the atmosphere of the world, and it has to adhere strictly to what is possible here. The fiction decides the possible size of the world; it decides how travel happens and as such decides how areas connect, as well as making a myriad of similar connections. *Dragon Realms* had a fictional frame where active gods were important and miracles commonplace enough to be used as transportation. There was a holy wafer, which, when eaten, would bring you "home" to the temple of your choice. This was the most common way for Arcana members to get to Opal, the island that was their stronghold. Another way could be to be summoned by a cleric, or spelled into obeying a bard, or to cross, at certain times, over the moon-bridge. To do that, you needed to know the secret of the bridge. On *Aarinfel* there were the travelstones through which a traveller would pass to emerge from a similar stone elsewhere, one in each of the lands of the courts, corresponding to a Stonehenge-like setting of a circle of stones outside Precipice, the imperial city. Lu'Tamohr chose to restrict the area to an island, isolated by the currents and the odd winds around it, and thus able to depend on more regular travel, by foot or by

characters had gained through levelling. Since *Aarinfel's* policy up to that point had been that the fights happened based on mimicry, and that consistently role-played skills were valid, the sudden shift to other categories of play was not received well by the players.

wagon. Each of these scenarios created different meeting-places in the game; on *Dragon Realms* characters would just lurk around the home-temple of a certain character, certain that sooner or later he/she would show up. On *Aarinfel* the travelstones were a similar place to wait at, and in this manner building and fiction affected the behaviour of the player, and the experience of playing.

There is always a debate concerning which rules it should be possible to break, and which should be coded into the game. For instance, those who have to do with building influence the possibility of setting different sector flags. A room where it was not supposed to be possible to fight could be flagged a “safe” room, and nothing bad could possibly happen. One example was *Haven* in *Dragon Realms*, where no attacks could happen, where poison did not work and anybody who insisted on attacking others was tracked down by the spirit of the deity of goodness, *Elwyn*. Because Haven was the sanctuary for new players, the aggressiveness that was prevalent throughout the game was not permitted there. This attracted members of warring clans, people who knew they would be targets, as well as the newbies. Besides providing a sanctuary that brought the more experienced players and the new players together, Haven was a major site for role-play. On *Aarinfel* there was a general no-attack policy all over the game, which led to guards materialising and breaking up fights immediately. This was part of the fiction: that the Empire was strong enough to uphold the law all over the realms. It shifted the focus of *Aarinfel* from fighting to role-play, or from agôn to mimicry, and it also led to spreading the characters over more areas in the game, as they would all be safe. This would often make it very complicated for new players to find role-play, something they needed to, because according to the rules, they needed to be sponsored by other players before they had access to all the elements of the game.

When discussing both playing and building, coding will always be part of the discussion, as the gaming on all levels will be very much a reaction to what the code permits, restricts or rewards. At the same time, the use of the code will depend on the rules, the fiction and the characters playing. *Aarinfel* had a perfectly good and functional fighting-system. It was however never used, not because it could not be used, there were arenas where it was possible to fight, but because there was no reward in using it. The most substantial rewards at *Aarinfel* came from developing mimicry, while the most violent negative reactions were to instances of agôn or fights.

This means that considering what is a good online role-playing game, the questions which should be asked will look something like these:

Table 3, chapter 7

		Character	Fiction	Rules
Playing	Role-play	What is good role-play, and what are the characteristics of a good player?	How does the world support good role-play, and how does it integrate these ideals of role-play with the fictional framework?	How should the rules of the game, expressed in help-files and in what the code permits, invite to play?
	Game-play	What is needed to create a character with the best statistics?	How does the fiction integrate the quests, skills, tactics and strategy in the game in the most pleasing manner?	What kind of games of skill, strength or tactics should the rules of the games permit?
Building		How can the character take the best advantage of equipment and rooms?	What are the limits fiction puts to rooms, movement, travel and gathering places in a game.	To what extent should the geography and objects in the game adhere to, use and enforce the rules?
Coding		How can code encourage or discourage different types of play?	How can code and fiction influence each other?	What rules should or should not be coded into the game?

When I claim that role-playing does not contain *agôn*, this is not a rule without exceptions. In the last months of *Dragon Realms*' existence, the immortals staged tournaments of role-playing. In these tournaments the rules of fair play, as well as even matches, were essential. The players fought through emotes, mimicking the actions the game-platform would otherwise supposedly perform. These mock battles had an element of *agôn*, because they were battles of role-playing skill: who was better at pretended online fighting?

Collective aesthetics

Searching for the criteria for "good" in online role-playing games leads into a complex set of questions, rather than to answers. With the many aspects of the game demanding many different skills, a game is a compound, not a unified personal work of art. The "Game Master" to control each and every aspect of the creation of a game would have to be a Leonardo da Vinci indeed, a multi-genius of engineering and story-telling at the same time.

However, a fairly immediate and useful comparison can be made between the process of producing a game and producing a film. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson describe the social factors of film production in the much-used work *Film Art* (1993:9). To paraphrase the opening of this work: Machines do not make games (films) by themselves. Game (film) production transforms raw materials into a product through the application of machinery *and* human labour. But human labour may be utilised in different ways, and the options are affected by economic and social factors.

The main point here is the way organisation of labour as well as specialisation is necessary and practical, but also political. A film is produced through several phases and with varying degrees of specialisation, but it is always a compound product, one that demands human imagination, technical skill, and technology:

The organization of production tasks at each phase can vary significantly. It is possible for one person to do everything: plan the film, finance it, perform in it, run the camera, record the sound, and put it all together. More commonly, thought, different tasks are assigned to different people, making each job more or less specialized. This is the phenomenon of *division of labor*, a process that occurs in most of the tasks any society undertakes. (Bordwell and Thompson 1993:9)

Among the gamers, the image of the “lone hacker” as the creator of great games is long dead. Creating games is accepted as a social activity, just as playing games is. The interviewed players/administrators, especially Tom, Elisabeth and Dawn, mention in their interviews that they use game creation as a way to test their administrative skills and gain experience, as well as recognize the need to use what skills in cooperation and people management they might have gained in other situations.

To produce a work of quality in the composite media⁸, which is made possible by means of the computer, requires a very wide range of skills and abilities. The quality depends on the skills of writers, builders, coders and play-testers, to create the complex unit that is a MUD. For graphic games this becomes even more obvious, as there is a need for graphic designers, and in this manner the need for more and more specialists makes itself evident as the composite media become more complex.

There might still be single creators who work by the creed of single-handedly creating mythic games, and thus establishing themselves as the romantic artists of the game-creating tradition. However, the romantic ideal of the artist of the 19th century was a starving lonely figure, acknowledging nothing but his or her original vision as the source of the art. They did not ask the creators of their canvas or their paints to sign their paintings, among other things because to acknowledge them to such a status would have an economic impact. At the time when the image of the lone artist was the most prominent, genius was becoming business, and sharing the honours meant sharing the money.

Once we take a step outside of the economic and cultural sphere of ‘high’ art, acknowledging the many different artists involved in creating a work is no longer such a hot political issue. This might be one reason why it is easier to accept the importance of the hardware producer as equal to that of the software-programmer, whose program is often mentioned with the presentation or description of non-profit works of art on the Net, than it is to remember to mention where the stone or canvas came from. One example of this is Marc Striklin’s *Brittle Bones*, a site of artistic experimentation, which also contains pages where he demonstrates how he creates certain effects in Photoshop, and describes the use of Flash,

⁸I will not use the word multi-media here, because there were multi-media before computers: just think of film and television, a mixture of sound, images and printed text.

both certain types of software that he acknowledges as important to his creation. Not even Michelangelo's search for the perfect marble equals this, as there is no plaque on his *David* telling us where the marble was mined, enabling us to track down the masons and workers who had the skill to extract and shape such a massive block out of the mountain without flaws, or tell us names of the workers able to transport it to Florence.

To acknowledge the need for the creativity of a team rather than a single artist/creator, is to accept the reality of the building process as it is practiced by the commercial companies, in this case Sierra On-Line. I interviewed Mark Seibert, game designer at Sierra Studios at his office in Seattle in 1999, and, among other things, he described the process of gaining acceptance for a game-idea:

TM: when you work on the production of a computer game... can we just go through the stages?

Mark: first it's just the design-concept, that's like a two or three page, here's my idea, this is what the game-play is to be like. And this is why lots of people are going to buy this game because it really has THIS, which is really exciting or what ever. From that point Sierra will go on through a prototype-stage, which will go on for three months or so where you just go on - you just hack together art, try to use maybe an engine that already exists. You just try to get things up on the screen, try to flush out a design document where it might be 20-30 pages of information, and if you can get it past that stage, you get funded to continue, at which point you've been working with maybe three or four people, at the most. Now you go on to full design where you have to have a complete design document, and you have to come up with sketches, models, and that kind of stuff. But you're still working with a very small team, trying to put it all together, until they say: here you are, fifteen people and we say GO. (Mark Seibert, interview September 14th 1999, Seattle)

Even at the initial stages of pre-production, the number of people working on a game from Sierra is as high as the staff of several MUDs, and when the game is accepted for production there is a large group of people working together. In the case of the *King's Quest* games, which Mark Seibert often worked on, the one being credited as the creator is Roberta Williams. It is all done in the best tradition of Rubens' workshop, where they all worked in the style of the master, who approved and gave permission for the work to be sold and marketed in his name. This same legal claim still holds for games, although it becomes increasingly common that groups and companies are accredited for the development, and not individuals.

Describing games: sensible properties and specific code

But creating, using and appreciating games demand as rigorous a training as any other work of culture. When it is as complicated for non-players to perceive the qualities of a game, as it is for players to describe them, it is because of the lack of a language, and of concepts. Or as Bourdieu continues, referring to Panofsky:

A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason. Not having learnt to adopt the adequate disposition, he stops short at what Erwin Panofsky calls the 'sensible properties', perceiving a skin as downy or a lace-work as delicate, or at the emotional resonance aroused by these properties, referring to 'austere' colours or a 'joyful' melody (1984:2).

'The specific code' of describing and understanding a computer game is not easy to find. When asking what makes it good, it is easy to resort to Panofsky's sensible properties, saying it has to be 'cool' or 'fun', that the characters have to be 'buff' or 'sexy' and the graphics have to be 'awesome'. None of these words actually describe the game in a way which makes it possible to recreate the game through the description, as 'cool' is as subjective as 'delicate', and the description is metaphoric rather than precise.

It is tempting to use this kind of "sensible properties", as several of the players do when they are describing a good game. Mariah talks about her favourite game as being "One that has an intense mood that you can involve yourself in." However, through rephrasing the question a few times, it is possible to get answers like this from William:

TM: In the games that you play, what's the most attractive part?

William: I think it's the number of options available, the number of things you can do that gives some kind of response, the things you can build in strategy games for instance. It's - in StarCraft for instance, a lot of the real effective strategies don't require you to do very much, you can start at the basics with a very large number of simple troops and send them off to attack your enemies, but it's a lot more fun to come up with the really bizarre intricate strategies, add in twenty-three different things, and build up different types of troops and try to use them in combination. And it's probably not more effective that way, it might slow a player down quite a bit, to be wasting your time doing all those various things, but it's a lot more interesting than going through the same rote activities. (Interview, September 18th 1999, Portland.)

The players represented in the interviews had almost uniformly precise descriptions of what attracted them to the games, for instance Mariah, who started out with a "sensible" description, very quickly came up with the sort of description which showed that the schemes of appreciation of the kind of games she played were vivid enough that they could be expressed clearly when questioned:

TM: What's your favourite kind of game?

Mariah: One that has an intense mood that you can involve yourself in. A place that's very different from where I am with my computer. In front of my computer I want to be in a place where my imagination is stretched to its furthest and engaged. I really like the room descriptions, because I can paint rooms easily then, in my mind, and I can really be there, I can feel it, I can imagine what the illusions would be, what the attitudes would be, what the agendas are, and I can lose the here and the now to kind of escape into the world.

TM: So if you are to say what's attractive for you about the games you play, it is this factor or ability for escape?

Mariah: Yes, but it's also for full senses' engagement, I am fully engaged in what I am doing. It's not just an escape; it's also delving into another reality, another place that is fully capturing of all of my attention.

If there is an aesthetics to the experience of playing online role-play games, there are some factors which keep returning in the description of a good game: It must be challenging, it must engage players on several levels, it must be social, it must have a fiction which permits fantasy, and it must let the players have some kind of control of their environment.

In the early works of aesthetics, such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 B.C.E.), appreciating art, as well as creating art, are both considered activities, and active participation and attention is thought to be vital to the appreciation, as the activity is dependent on pleasure:

This may be seen, too, from the fact that each of the pleasures is bound up with the activity it completes. For an activity is intensified by its proper pleasure, since each class of things is better judged of and brought to precision by those who engage in the activity with pleasure; e.g. it is those who enjoy geometrical thinking that become geometers and grasp the various propositions better, and, similarly, those who are fond of music or of building, and so on, make progress in their proper function by enjoying it; so the pleasures intensify the activities, and what intensifies a thing is proper to it, but things different in kind have properties different in kind. (Aristotle 350 B.C.E.: X.v)

The pleasure of the players, when playing online computer games, was not just the pleasure of actively contributing through building and administrating, although this was important. Most of them were focusing on the potential for being independently and personally active, as Benjamin describes in the interview:

Benjamin: I mean you can go through a book and read page after page after page - and you know read a lot of drivel, but at least on like a MUD you can add to that drivel, you can type in something and do something, so there's a certain level of activity that you are throwing in through it that's keeping you awake, so to speak. (Interview, Portland September 19th 1999)

Benjamin responded to a question about what he liked about MUDDing in a text-based role-play game, given that he did not really like reading books. Several of the others, in addition to saying that they liked being active and making stories, were also avid readers, and loved reading beautiful descriptions. Benjamin's reply is interesting, because he declares that he is not an avid reader and he does not like reading books – his main interests in MUDs are the things which make them different from books: the potential for his own creative expression in the company of others:

TM: You have been playing a lot on one of the MUDs I have been looking at and I'd like to know why you have been spending quite a lot of time on this MUD? What was attractive about it?

Benjamin: Because you get sucked in and then it's like, you're always playing. One thing

I have compared it to is this coffee-shop you go to? And it's always someone there and someone you can talk to. So you can always go there and hang out. So if you ever want social interaction to some degree, you can always go there and hang out and talk to people. Although it's a kind of weird social interaction, because you're not actually seeing people. Very limited. But... at a certain point, you can get to be expressive, even though it's only text. There's also the thing of a little bit of competitiveness. So the more hours you spend online, the stronger your character gets. So you want to spend more time, so you can get stronger, so you can pass up this other person who's been annoying you, beat them up, that kind of thing. That never works. Because there's always someone who can spend more time online than you, that's more annoying than you. So.. I don't know. It's also free long distance.

Benjamin points to an essential part of playing an online, multi-user game. The gaming experience is not just depending on qualities in the text or in the pictures, or even in the efficiency of the code. These games are collective experiences. Playing a computer game requires activity, and in a multi-user game you are not only depending on your own activity, but also on that of the other players.

This gaming experience puts demands upon the fellow players that are part of a culture surrounding the games. Different types of games can be viewed as identifiers of certain cultural settings or social spheres, or as Pierre Bourdieu opens his article 'How can one be a sports' fan': "I think that, without doing too much violence to reality, it is possible to consider the whole range of sporting activities and entertainments offered to social agents – rugby, football, swimming, athletics, tennis, golf, etc. – as a supply intended to meet a social demand" (1993:339). In this article, he continues to show the connection between choosing a game and having a social and cultural identity, choosing games as important cultural signs, or - I will claim it is suitable to use Beardsley's (1966) words here - as "specialized aesthetic objects". Amateurism and fair play are important aspects of the proper attitude to the sport, and being a 'good sport' is recognized as a desirable quality (Bourdieu 1993:343). Unless a player lives up to these qualities, he is what Huizinga (1950:11) calls a spoil-sport. With the strong connections to different social spheres, the spoil-sport in the case of Bourdieu not only shatters the play-world in the game, but she also reveals the fragility of the play-world of the social sphere which identifies with the game.

In the interaction between the players, as well as in their words in the interviews, it was obvious that the games had certain rules, which could be viewed as an aesthetic of games. Some of these were due to the nature of the games and the different gaming options, others were due to the values and goals of the active players, within the social sphere which the games were, certain behaviours were rewarded because they were considered 'fair play', while others were frowned upon. An obvious example of this was 'hack'n'slash', which all the role-play games found it necessary to restrict in some manner.

Desire and obsession: the need for fantasy

To online role-players, the perfection of the single achievement is not what is attractive, but the unfinished roughness of the less formally accepted books. Asking the players what kind of books they liked, they would acknowledge the value of certain books, like Tolkien's *Lord*

of the *Rings* or the children's fantasy of *Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, and science fiction classics such as the *Foundation* series by Azimov, or more modern classics in a mixture of genres like Douglas Adams' *Hitch-hikers Guide to the Universe*. If asked, however, of their perfect book, or the one they would recommend, the answer would be some esoteric work which had either changed their perception or understanding of the world or their place in it, or which had created a space for them in which to continue fantasising – or both. Most of them would not read fantasy books for the pleasure of the intellectual analysis, they would devour them with a voracious hunger for fantasy and for stimulation of the imagination, a hunger mirrored in their habits of playing which most of them admitted approximated addiction and obsession, whether they spoke of this phenomena in themselves or in others.⁹ It is tempting to draw the comparison to addiction, and claim that they are fantasy junkies who have turned the play of mimicry into an obsession, as Caillois describes it:

The rule of instinct again becomes absolute, the tendency to interfere with the isolated, sheltered and neutralized kind of play spreads to daily life and tends to subordinate it to its own needs, as much as possible. What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion and source of anxiety. (1979:44)

Asking the players to evaluate good role-play, however, makes it clear that one of the criteria for quality is not to let yourself become obsessed. Real Life and the game must not be mixed up, and the limits between IC and OOC must be respected. Jason expresses his opinion on the problems of making the distinction between IC and OOC (In Character and Out Of Character):

Jason: ... there are people who take it seriously enough to get depressed over something happening online. I think that's a bad idea, and I don't think you can make a general statement about how seriously people take it. For some people it's entirely remote. I mean I create characters that are intricate enough that I can't help empathize with them, and I do not create characters that are absolutely nothing like me. They are not echoes of my personality by any means either. I don't get terribly upset over bad things happening to them or fall in love with characters' lovers. I mean... I think that's a mistake. And I have seen people do it.

TM: Well, sometimes it works.

Jason: It does. And look at the latter case. If you decide that you like role-playing with somebody enough, I mean that's almost my criteria more than anything: "She's a lot of fun. I like her." I have fun role-playing with this character, and I am willing to let my character get involved with theirs, and that's fine with me. And this can be an indicator that this is the kind of person you'd enjoy, people reflect their personalities in their characters often. On the other hand, because they probably play their character more

⁹ The only player who did not use a metaphor for the pleasure of playing which somehow mentioned addiction, obsession or getting a high was Allison. She was also the only one who did not play for the role-play pleasure, but solely for the social aspect.

frivolously than they would in real life, I don't know... I don't think - taking mud-character relationships out of character is a good idea. And more than anything I take my out of character impressions of people and those definitely translate into real life, I mean I have met a lot of people from the Mud in real life, and in fact a lot of them are close personal friends. The people I table-top with a lot are people I met on *Dragon Realms* that go to the USC, five miles that way, and my character hated a couple of theirs.

TM: And they are your friends.

Jason: Yes, they are very good friends. I may have hated them, but I enjoyed role-playing with them. And there's a distinction there, and some people miss that entirely. Some people take slights against their character as this horrible offence, and I can see it being easy to slip into that mood, it's something you need to be on guard against, particularly if you are really much getting into character.

In the words of Caillois, this means that the universe of play must remain tightly closed and the rules of reality must not contaminate it. There is no such thing as inescapable consequences in a game, the option of stepping out and saying: "this is just a game" was important not just as a quality to the game itself, but to the play of the singular player. Each player had the responsibility of remembering this, and each player was also a potential carrier for the contamination of Real Life.

The 'Real Life Bug' would break up a role-play session even if most of the players had agreed to ignore it. It might influence and erupt entire plots, if the carrier of the contamination of real life kept on insisting on inescapable consequences. An example of how the contamination of the inescapable consequences could come into the game is a plot-line from *Dragon Realms*:

The clans *Arcana* and *Fear* were at war. *Arcana* had no players with a more than common amount of time to invest, or a character strong enough to take on guardians (NPCs guarding areas) alone, but it had money, land, agreements, a writ of truce from the leader of *Fear*, the Dreadlord (or in this case: Dreadlady Indira) and so had the 'make-believe' of role-play-consequences on its side. Playing by the rules of the fiction, the one opponent in *Fear* who could take out the guardians of *Arcana* should not be able to use the tactics the game-code permitted him to use. This one player was not entirely strong enough to beat the Guardians of *Arcana* on his own either, so he enlisted help from a character who ICly should not be opposing *Arcana*, as his clan, *Privateer*, a merchant/pirate group, had been paid not to interfere. Through this out-of-character alliance of two players not minding the rules controlling the mimicry part of the game, they managed to break down the resistance of *Arcana* to the point that the one player from *Fear* could do the rest on his own.

At this point the players confronted each other out of character (OOC), and pointed out that the way this had happened was not acceptable as good role-playing, and the person playing the aggressor in *Fear* (let us call him Magrath) should back down and cease his killing of guardians. His reply was that he could not, because he could not let his clan lose. He had the chance of breaking *Arcana*, and he would, no matter what it took or what his clan-leader said, because he would not accept the possibility of losing a game just because it would be in-character to do so (OOC conversation on *Dragon Realms*).

This is an example of a contaminated scene - a plot-line contaminated by the real world; "in which every act has inescapable consequences" (Caillois 1979:44). The consequences of

not breaking down Arcana's defenses would in the mind of Magrath's player be losing, and he, the player, could not bear to contemplate loss. In the game-world, both of these assumptions were very likely to be wrong, as the role-playing game would not end at the point where he had to stop taking out Arcana guardians. No referee would blow the whistle and say "here, this is where we decide who won", and Magrath's clan would not have lost the game just because they did not win it at this point in this manner: through refusing to accept the rules of the fictitious framework¹⁰. The game itself had a fiction where it was fairly clearly given that the clans and players resisting chaos and terror could not win¹¹. The Dragon Lords were increasingly powerful, the quests given by the immortals were designed to break down the resistance of those trying to oppose Dragon, and every victory over the followers of the Dragon Lords or their allies such as *Malvena* the Lady of horror, or over the followers of the gods of chaos and terror like *Scarabae*, was temporary at best. For *Fear* not to beat *Arcana* at this point would only delay the ultimate victory of the Dragon Lords and their allies until more of the members of the different clans could get involved, the agreements of truce could be broken in an orderly fashion (IC rather than OOC), and *Arcana* could have a chance to assimilate the loss of their lands into the role-playing with some kind of grace or tragic flair.

Through his acts ignoring the rules of the role-playing part of game and claiming with the logic of real world that there was nothing the players could 'really' do to harm him, while he could win the game, Magrath's player created a situation where real life opinions became a problem in the game world. As the only IC strategy to delay him was suicidal (for the characters) and short-term, the fact that his real life permitted him to spend a lot more time than his opponents online let him carry on. For days while the players were trying to get hold of his clan-leader or some immortal who could exercise their authority to force him to obey the rules of the game, he managed to make the game miserable for the players of Arcana, and a great deal of the less powerful characters were deleted, as their players were tired of having their characters player-killed over and over again. In the end the player was told by the administrators to archive Magrath for a period of several weeks. This was a strong reaction, just an inch short of deleting and denying him, and it was rare that the immortals would go to such a step against a player who acted marginally politely in conversation.

I see this as an example of contamination of the game by real life, because he chose to disregard the needs and consequences of the fiction of the game and obey the fact that he was able to do this - that the programming of the game did not stop him. To compare this with football, it would be as if one of the players picked up the ball in his hands and ran with it into the goal, just because he had hands, he was able to lift and hold on to the ball, the goal was there and he could reach it before anybody stopped him.

The second aspect of contamination is in his rationalisation: Because he, the player, needed to feel that he won, he could not obey the fiction of the game or those rules of the game which were not coded into the game-platform. His personal, real-life need for a feeling of victory was stronger than his need to play the game by the rules, and what was designed to be social fun, turned to egocentric obsession. To use the football metaphor again, this is

¹⁰ According to this logic, beating Arcana would not mean victory either.

¹¹ At least in the clear light of hindsight, since in the final week of playing the powers of the Dragon Lords and of terror was released, Opal fell and nightmares roamed its streets.

where a player will use drugs to enhance his strength, speed and endurance of pain, and try to disable opposing players while the umpire's back is turned, because it is possible to appear to be better and to score if he disregards some of the rules.

It is only fair to mention that I was part of Arcana, and one of the players whose character¹² was killed several times by Magrath. However, the decision to have him archived was not taken by any member of Arcana, but by the immortals, and the reaction was rare and strong enough that I have chosen to use this example despite the fact that my involvement might have contaminated it. I would not have known the details if I had not used the method of immersing myself in the game and been part of the activities rather than simply observing.

The spoil-sports of MUDs

There is obviously a certain pattern to the interaction which is accepted, and which is accepted as "good play". The judgement of taste is fairly consistent, and the socialisation, which the MUD-schools ensure for new players, points in the direction of opinions of the players. To disagree, to break the rules or even to argue against them is considered a good reason to be ostracized. The good player is one who masters all the different aspects of the game, and accepts the rules of the game itself, the process and not only the goal. The wars on the MUD were related to the wars of medieval myth, or as Huizinga describes the Japanese *bushido* (1950:102):

The ideal of noble contest is particularly evident in a society where a military nobility with moderately landed property obeys a monarch regarded as divine or sacred, and where the central duty in life is loyalty to your lord. Only in such a feudally constructed society, in which no free man is required to work, can chivalry flourish, and with it the tournaments.

Dragon Realms permitted an arena where these noble contests could be re-lived, and the spirit of the game could be expressed in the manner Huizinga quotes from a story of a Japanese noble man who, when he heard that a non-warring ally has cut the delivery of salt to his enemy, sent his enemy salt with the words: "I fight not with salt, but with the sword!" (1950:102). While the players at *Dragon Realms* did not fight with real swords, the idea was that a good player fought according to the terms of the game. But since this was loosely policed by a small staff of immortals, the game was rife with the potential of non-consensual attack strategies. The rules of the game were pretty much impossible to enforce, and only the consent of the players to submit to the rules could possibly bind them. Each player was a sovereign, who could agree or disagree on the terms for the game, and each player had the potential for disrupting the game:

As soon as one member or more of a community of States virtually denies the binding character of international law and, either in practice or in theory, proclaims the interest

¹² *Erinn* at this point had the skill of producing a certain poison, and using it was the only way Magrath could be delayed in an IC fashion, something that made him track Erinn down at every opportunity, to kill her before she could do any harm. That would delay her/my poisonous attack on him.

and power of its own group – be it nation, party, class, church or whatsoever else – as the sole norm of its political behaviour, not only does the last vestige of the immemorial play-spirit vanish, but with it any claim to civilisation at all. (Huizinga 1950:101)

The problem for the game was when individual players or whole clans decided that because they had the power of arms to subdue others, the other rules of the game that related to the role-playing aspect, did not matter to them. What was left when this happened was nothing but *agôn*, the drive to win through power and skill, not through luck or through mimicry. It reduced the game to a very simple battle of might. There was still some kind of game-element reinforcing this behaviour: “Yet in a society completely disintegrated by the collapse of all legal ties, the agonistic impulse is not lost, for it is innate. The innate desire to be first will still drive the power-groups into collision and may lead them to incredible extremes of infatuation and frenzied megalomania” (Huizinga 1950:101).

This was particularly clear after Topaz declared that the game would close February 28th 1999. The last week the game was open saw a breakdown of all the more subtle elements, and the players disregarded all rules in favour for tests of strength. This became a time of grouping with IC enemies in order to combat that NPC you had never been able to fight alone, power levelling (that is when you get the help of another player to incapacitate the NPCs in advance, so that you can make the kill quickly and level fast) in order to test new skills and spells, and PC to PC combat, ally against ally as well as ‘enemies’ fighting. When the long-term goal of gaining status or creating a personal fiction or mythology was no longer there, mimicry held no more rewards for the players, and *alea* became secondary to *agôn*: experimenting with skills and power in a free-for-all frenzy was the only option left to the players. Topaz tried to reintroduce role-playing through giving the players a quest for the last week. In a post on *Dragon Realms*, February 22nd 1999, she writes of the ‘Tears of Topaz’:

Rumors continue to abound about the so called ‘Tears of Topaz’ - the Guild of Argenta offers a rich reward for any who bring them one of these star fallen crystals. The Dreadlord of Fear apparently seeks them. A strange structure has appeared in Opal Gardens, with a place for ten items arranged in a circle and in the middle, a cavity that appears as if it will fit the Silver Rose¹³ of Azhanith. (log *Dragon Realms*, February 23rd 1999)

Despite Topaz’ and the other administrators’ efforts to introduce more elements related to quests and story-line development to the game in the last week than in several months preceding the close-down, the players were not enticed to continue the role-playing.

Even the privileged players, such as the builders, started to abuse their privileges in order to test their skill and their equipment. One borrowed and cloned Erinn’s crystal epee, a weapon that had been passed down from a period before the weapons had been modified in order to have less striking power. And those players who were not involved in measuring strength against skill were simply hanging around saying goodbye. The most popular

¹³ Here the Silver Rose is suddenly integrated in a quest run by the immortals. It gains a specific meaning, fixed as a key in conjunction with the ‘Tears of Topaz’.

activity was swapping email-addresses and ICQ-numbers, in order to stay in touch once the game was closed down.

What would the players like?

In this chapter I have tried to show some structures of the game which can be assessed in order to decide upon whether a game is good or not, through other manners than Bourdieu's sensible taste. Through looking at different aspects of playing, I have positioned the playMUDs in relation to play-theory, and I have pointed out some types of behaviour which is considered good and bad.

Good playing comprises knowledge of hard-coded as well as socially accepted rules, and the will to stay within them. There's a certain amount of room for exploring the rules as well as working around them, as long as it is possible for the other party to do the same. This was however more accepted for coded rules than for social rules. One reason for that might be that it was too easy to ignore the social rules: the art was not in breaking them but in ignoring them.

The relationship between rules and good play meant that a good game needs rules. Removing them would not make the game better or worse. The immortals tried to change the rules of the game, to create an arena for trade and negotiation rather than battle, but this caused too much of a contrast between the coded rules for the races, classes and skills and the social uses these could be put to. A good online multiplayer role-playing game seems to need the variation of hack'n'slash and role-playing, something to do while waiting for the other players, or when the brain was not all there, while this something needs to have a meaning in the larger context of the game. With trade rather than war or conflict as the main focus of the role-playing, the battle-skills gained while levelling became obsolete.

In the next chapter I will continue to pursue this elusive concept of the good game, this time focusing on what is good play and a good player. The interviews contain opinions on what constitutes good playing, and these comprise the base for measuring quality in games.

Seventh interlude - The strategies of Brizzial

Beyne was one of the players who left *Dragon Realms* just before I started playing. He still influenced the game in different ways though, as he was an influential and outspoken member of the Portland-cluster. In this cut from the interview with him, he speaks of what is interesting in a MUD, and he compares it with other games. He speaks of why it's important to have a rich fictional background, why the players need limits, and the role of the immortals in a MUD versus the role of a Game Master in the flesh-world. He discusses conflict, pathos and characteristics of a good character, and sums it all up with a quick comment on why players endure the periods of no role-playing, gathering experience points: levelling.

Beyne: OK, the background is I made a character I called Brizzial of the ancient Fang. *Dragon Realms* had a race called the serpent folk, known to themselves as the Xersians, and they have their own language: Xersian. This is a race that conceptually, in the one paragraph it is given on the entire MUD, for its world-background was a really powerful race a long time ago, bigger than any other race. It fell into complete and utter decadence, and I do mean decadence, became basically nasty and slovenly, and their entire empire crumbled. They seemed to have had a monolithic empire which completely fell apart, and now they are a slave-race, to another race of really bad people called the drow, dark elves.

The character concept was revolutionary, which was actually fitting into the world background, no breaks there. I had a character who wanted to take the serpent folk and not only retain their freedom but also retain their integrity, build them up as something bigger. As a side note to that the character was basically a rat bastard. He was nasty and not a nice person. This doesn't mean he was mean, he just had a very soldier-like mentality: there was the enemy, and there was the friend. And most people were the enemy. Then there was another class of people called people that could be used against the enemy.

So—he was manipulative, scheming and quite willing to do anything necessary to reach his goals, because in his opinion his goals were paramount. His entire race was being destroyed, systematically, by outside forces and by themselves. So I had a lot of pathos there, the character runs itself. I don't have to make up motivations here .. I mean he's fanatic. I come online, something happens and I immediately know what my response is because he's fanatic and you know how fanatics think, they respond one way or another way to everything. His only saving grace which is the reason why he isn't boring is because he can hide the fact that he's fanatic, he doesn't have to tell you that he thinks you're scum, or that when the revolution comes you'll be the first up against the wall. He doesn't tell you this, he is that manipulative, he's that subtle. So he's a lot of fun.

Now what I was trying to do was both make room for my character make a revolution possible, because there was some background for that, I should have had support for that. What was bigger, and bigger than my character, was trying to make one of the races on *Dragon Realms* something more than a paragraph. Because a paragraph of text for me is not a lot of fun. It doesn't give my character a lot of room to act, it doesn't give the world background that much depth, it doesn't give much context. If an elf and a serpentfolk are talking and we have a paragraph between us about our races, you know that's not a lot of interchange. If you are doing some improv acting and one of you are supposed to be French and the other is supposed to be Italian, you know a paragraph of Italy's history and you know a paragraph of France's history, you're not going to be getting very far.

And so the problem is obvious, and I thought people might enjoy more depth. And some of them did, some people liked any attempt from any quarter to take a race, a faction, a clan, any sort of faction in the game,

and give it life, give it some breadth. Not enough of these people would be imms¹⁴. For one thing – we are getting into issues of power. One of the things about gaming - there's lots of reasons why people game. One of the reasons why people game is because it gives them control. Another reason why people game is that control gives them power. Usually because they have problems in their own lives, so they want power over this game. And there was at least one imm who was power-mad. And any attempt to alter the plot-line would be of course infringing upon that power. (...)

So I was in conflict with that person, but that wasn't anything new. Her want to make the game her way put her in conflict with everyone else because everyone makes the game their own little way, it's part of the role-playing experience that they all add to the game. I just had a very straight forward and literate way of conflicting with her because I had written out a manifesto, a series of possible changes – not even changes, additions, some were changes yes, and those obviously I was a little sensitive about, because obviously it's harder to change something but definitely easy to add.

The additions were viewed with nonchalance from some imms to amusement from other imms – not actually amusement – to just simply unwelcome by her. So it was difficult, I mean it was made more difficult by the fact that the players, as Benjamin mentioned, varied in quality, not everybody play for the same reason, most people played it to work out some aggression, a lot of kids. You don't play badminton with three-year olds, they just don't know what's going on, and for fun they might end up beating up the racket against the pall. Which actually is kind of amusing in a certain bizarre way, but it's not badminton now, is it? I think cricket involves a bit more than to strike people's shins with a big bat, but that's what a four-year-old with a cricket bat would do, if you made him play cricket. God help you with baseball. At the same time, 12-year-olds have serious problems with the concept of being a different person or a different character. And living in this artificial world where you are all adding to it by, you know, adding to it when you're all interacting – most people just don't get it. Honestly. The role-playing aspect of a MUD is just flying over people's heads. It's just how it is. So what I am trying to do is just a waste of time to them because they don't see the benefits of it.

It's hard to improve what people don't recognize as a problem, I mean – it's like a car, when I try to put an engine in it and everybody is telling me not to even if it doesn't drive any place because they think the point of a car is to sit in it. So they are sitting in the car rather than going anywhere in it. Oh, and I am making out myself to look really good this way by the way. This is ignoring all the obnoxiousness I might have caused, I am sure I am as obnoxious as anyone else there. I try to be nice, I have friends checking me out when I know I am obnoxious, so... it was difficult. I was trying to be co-writer. And I wasn't overstepping my bounds because we were all supposed to be co-writers. And there were examples of people who were doing that sort of things. Lots of them. Little things here and there. Little books in the game, which we could flip through and read the history of this faction. Very specific: There's a book about each clan. There's a book about each race. But that was a paragraph again, so we have gone from one paragraph to two paragraphs. Still not talking about a gold-mine here.

We, players, who would stay online deliberately would be founts of information, almost walking libraries. I became an authority on the serpent-folk because I was basically obnoxious about them. People would ask me about – you know, even ooc out of character issues about them. Who should I talk to about this and that, and in character stuff, because I made myself available on that basically. So there were sources of information for people who wanted it, but it was still difficult, because you're role-playing at odds with other. OK, I'll use the mer-folk as an example. They are a great example from DR: The mer-

¹⁴ Immortals or administrators

folk were about 7 races, because they were given a paragraph of information: They were never defined in that paragraph, physically. Ever. They breathe water, they breathe air, that's all we know. We don't know what colour they are, we don't know what their skin looks like, we don't know what their eyes look like, we don't even know if they have a basic humanoid structure. We assume they do, because in fantasy races everybody looks basically like people. And this was taken with a wild amount of diversity. There were people who came on that had – they had tails, always, and legs. They were basically people with tails. There were people who came on and said they didn't have tails because it didn't matter, they looked like fish. They had gills, they had big bulbous eyes, they had blue skin, the whole nine yards.

Then... side note, digression. I tend to prefer races that look less human, or races that have more imagination. Less human is more imagination. The more human you look, the less work it takes. There was the other class of people who said they look just like people and acts like people. Then there was another group of people who said that they looked just like on Disney's *Splash*¹⁵. *They have legs on ground and tails in the water. It's amazing that a game can go on for a year and a half without this sort of things being defined. I mean: it's happened to serpent folk too although to a smaller extent, I don't know if we had tails or not. I had to ask for a month to find out whether we had legs! Excuse me, legs. Because there were descriptions of serpentfolk in the game with legs and there were descriptions of them without. That was – you know, it was very confusing.*

Without legs, how do we get around. And I don't think I overstepped my bounds by being particularly obnoxious by asking "do we have legs? I am in trouble! I don't know if I can kick someone! I don't know how I walk! Should I be wearing boots?" Course of course equipment is a big part of the game, equipment is power in that game, it's how you beat stuff up. So, I don't know how much is supposed to be role-playing and how much I am supposed to be covering my eyes, you know. So – one of the imms actually came down from the high, on the mer-folk and got to pestering the other imms to give an answer. And that was: just do Splash. Yeah, that was pretty grating. Yeah, it's – it was very different from what a lot of people were role-playing.

As a GM (Game Master) you only have so much power and if people want it in a different way, you give up GM-ing or go their way, because there's nothing really to do about that. The rules are as they see fit. It's their play. If you're a referee to a football match and you don't like the text that the coach is using, that's too bad. It's their game, all you do is call bad calls. And so there was contradiction, there was people who was playing it differently... Benjamin was playing Souman. Souman was a fish, he was fishy, with blue skin. Some of his opponents in the other clans were very humanoid, and in my opinion less creative. Which, if I may make a completely random call or slam was basically less creative was how they played mostly everything on that MUD. Man – that felt good!

Well, yeah... There were, they were – that sort of thing was an issue there. Unlike table-top RP there's less of a standard on MUDs of what should be and what isn't. This is a random book on a world background that's sort of a dark modern day (This was a book supplementing a role-playing game for board-games or live action role-play, I did not note the title at the time). OK? I flip it open, and I am reading about the history of (a certain set of) islands. This place explains those islands, and how that really happened in that dark shadowy world-background. And that's really specific, and that's what role-players use in order know about their world background.

¹⁵ A movie produced by Disney, release in 1984, with Daryl Hannah playing the mermaid.

Studying Italy I learned about the birth-place of Rome and how that affected modern culture. It lets me do a lot of things, with limits, I have freedom. Without those limits of where I come from no character has any context and therefore has no true freedom. I can't do everything I want to do because I don't have anything to push against. And in MUDs there's very little to push against, as you may know. You are making a lot of stuff up on your own. Which is fine, if what you are making up stands, and you're an author. If you're the first person to get to marsh-wiggles on DR... My god, how they stole that completely I don't understand that. You're the first person to get to marsh-wiggles and you say they like peaches, and you eat peaches a lot, that's really cool cause you have added something to the game, and now people knows something about marsh-wiggles and it's part of conversation and social interaction. If someone comes on and says that peaches are poisonous to marsh-wiggles, causing extreme allergic reactions resulting in a horrible death with lots of spots – oh, well, this is not only a problem because you disagree, you have actually destroyed the context, one of you needs to be right. It doesn't really matter who, so now you have a void, a contradiction within MUDs.

The void is because of apathy within the game itself, both between the imms and the players, and the contradiction is because of the apathy between the imms. Because the imms are there to say: no, he's right! You know, pointing down from up high. It's a problem, it's what makes people that want to roleplay stop playing MUDs or stop playing MUDs for a little while and go to different MUDs. They go to a new MUD, everything is new and fresh, they have fun for a while, and it gets old and tiresome, and they realise that there is nothing there and they go on to do something else. It's how MUD's work.

I think a lot about games in general. I can't be – I can not say that, MUDs. I will say that MUDs specifically have made me think a lot about games in general. Games are something I am interested in, it's something I want to do, I want to go into computer gaming, I want to design games. So it's not just the MUD's fault. But a MUD is a wealth of information about human psychology and about gaming in general. It is, don't get me wrong.

But I – I am also the kind of person that would utilise that, that loves to delve into it. Yeah, there is – I learned a lot about games from MUDs, you learn what is important.

Torill: Do you feel that by playing not just MUDs but any kind of computer games that your perception of games have changed?

Beyne: Well – I have got a reasonably categorised sense of perception even if it is kind of dull, so I can say that it has influenced a few things, not much – usually what I learn about games, and let us stick with games: Here's a thing, I play a lot of games that reflect reality, they are designed to reflect reality. So you tend to learn about reality in that. Role-playing games attempt to categorise all reality to broad sense – you can pretend to be somewhere else. StarCraft is a wargame that pretends to take some kind of task of reality including the economic factors, you have so many resources to put against war – and encapsulate them. So you can be, I can say that I have learned something about warfare from a game about warfare. It makes sense, unless the game is really horrible, even chess, which is very abstract, you learn about warfare, there are many modern tacticians who think that chess is a good way of training yourself for real life conflicts, even though it has nothing to do with it in general, since in real warfare, more pieces move at the same time! So yeah, I think I learn a bunch of little things.

On MUDs I learned about human behaviour that doing something irritating is comforting enough that you'll seek it out, if only because it's comforting. So one thing you do in MUDs is level. Not all. Most. Levelling is getting character power. And equipment hunting. You can always encapsulate it, levelling

usually includes equipment hunting. Basically it's improving your character's ability to do more of that, to beat things up. Or beat up other players, that also an issue. Levelling is generally not fun. It generally isn't! It's – there's no – vey little visceral pleasure in levelling. There's – it's hardly orgasmic to watch screens scroll by on a game telling you you beat something up, especially since the game is styled to make sure you win. Any even nine-year old can go on a MUD and even if they are risking their character's life, never die, because they take advantage of the saves the game gives them to survive. So there's no risk! Is a monotonous task, making it boring. But MUDders do it with a passion! Because it's something they can easily do, it's familiar, and it doesn't fail them. Which is why when they can't level for what ever reason it's extremely frustrating because they don't expect this to fail at all. It's the one part in the character's life they have control over, even if it isn't terribly entertaining.

That's not a – that was quite a revelation in psychology for me. I mean it's one thing to study what people do under duress and that is interesting and everything, but most of the time we are not under duress, and this is to study people under mild stress, and basically people will find things to do, and do them, even if they don't enjoy them. Especially if there is a possible for enjoyment. We'll go on, and we'll go on to level, but say we find a friend in the MUD and role-play with them! Or maybe we can form a hunting party and hunt down that one schmuck from that other clan who has been annoying us. And the possibility of that, even if you're probably not going to do that, is enough to get you on, and you level in the mean time, even if that's not what you wanted to do either.

Chapter 8: Elements of Taste: Preferences of Players

Beyne: OK I want out of most games – to be someplace else with a character and to be doing something else than I am doing now. If I played a game where I was basically playing myself even if the problems were different it would be a lame game, because the entire point of it is to get me someplace else. So the appeal of the game to me most of the time is the experience of doing - it's like acting or improv. I am somewhere else doing something else – it's like reading the book. It may not be in first person but you certainly sympathise with the character. I play 'cause it lets me be elsewhere and do something else. (Beyne, interview)

We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity. (Sutton-Smith 1997:1)

To be precise about the pleasure of playing was challenging to all the players. It was much easier to talk of the games, how they were structured and what they felt would work in different contexts. Most of them were hard put to say exactly what kind of games they liked and why they liked them, but while speaking of the structures they would emphasise certain qualities that were necessary for the game to function. The most difficult admission for them was that of pleasure. Only in a few of the players did I encounter the rhetoric of play as frivolous (Sutton-Smith 1997:11). To the others play was educational, it was power, and it was identity or imaginary. Perhaps the most universally shared experience was role-playing as closely related to ecstasy. This counts under what Sutton-Smith terms “Rhetorics of Self” (1997:173), where the reason for play is self-centred rather than social or community centred (the most common approach to play in anthropology). And the role-playing contains all the seven stylised categories of play which Sutton-Smith quotes from Geerstmyer's study (1991) of his daughter (Sutton-Smith 1997:194): In role speech, vocalised sound effects, magicking, anticipatory and facilitative behaviour, out-of-role behaviour, brief out-of-role communication and lower-volume cues to climactic events. All of these behaviours can be found in the logs from my MUD role-playing in some manner, and the games are even coded to support several of these, such as the out-of-role communication through OOC channels.

The examples of role-playing supplied in between some of the previous chapters all contain role speech. Vocalised sound effects are a little more elaborate than a child's 'wroom-wroom' to imitate a car, but they are written out in emotes such as this: 'Erinn enters silently, crossing the square on light feet, footsteps a soft rustle of gravel.' Magicking is vital to the game, so vital that it exists at all levels, from the program controlling all actions and to the emotes, the game is constructed to support an illusion of a world where otherwise impossible things are not just possible, but also expected. Magic skills and other skills, instant travel and sudden transformations into incredible beauty; it permeated *Dragon Realms* and can be found in some manner in all the MUDs and MOOs I have encountered so far. Out-of-role communication is the OOC communication, while notes are a common way

to give “lower-volume cues” to climactic events: to explain why something is important.

Being elsewhere: the arena

Most of the players use games as a way to “be elsewhere”, whether this elsewhere is a social space or a game-space. The computer games, and particularly MUDs, transport the players into other “spaces”. It transports them to the game-space or the arena, where other rules count. This is an escape, but it is as much a flight to something that is challenging and interesting as an escape from something they cannot deal with. Most of all, it is an escape which permits something different: “Play is distinct from ordinary life both as to locality and duration. This is the third main characteristic of play: its secludedness, its limitedness. It is ‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning” (Huizinga 1950:9).

To the players of *Dragon Realms* and *Aarinfel* this was dependent on how convincing the game fiction was, and how well it would function as surroundings for the playing:

Elisabeth: But I mean for me it’s so real, for me it exists somewhere. And to be able to take something out of your head and put it somewhere where other people can go into it and experience it, that’s something that’s very cool. That’s more than – you can do it in a book, in some sense, but it’s not real in a book even for me. Once you take a book it’s private. I mean it’s the person’s private experience with a world, they take it and they put it in their head and they can experience it. But with the game, and with being online, I can put it outside of myself and into the world and then people can come to it. It’s a totally – the dynamics are completely different for that (*Elisabeth*, interview 1999).

This feeling of socially constructed place is very powerful, and I will expand on the sensation of space and geography in chapter 10. The perception of space is based upon the writings of the original builders of the game, but expanded by each player in different ways. A comparison between my experiences and those of David, as well as some of his observations around how one particular room on *Dragon Realms* was described, was quite enlightening. He was using the Fountain Square in Haven as an example of extrapolation by players in games:

David: Yes, but that’s the problem that then you get people misinterpreting things like “how much snow is there?” I have a friend who likes using, in Haven, the Fountain Square, in *Dragon Realms*. Where we have talked to a lot of people, and it seems that every time we talk to someone we find a different view of the Fountain Square. Where some people – I was one of them – thought there was actually buildings in it but there isn’t, at least not in the room descriptions.

TM: There isn’t? I was absolutely certain there were buildings all around Fountain Square.

David: And somebody put in a tree, people put in grass

TM: I remember trees, they annoyed me, because they were not in the room-description and people kept putting them in. (*David*, interview 1999)

Where Elisabeth found these extrapolations to be of particular interest to her, as they gave life to *Aarinfel*, David found them to be a problem on *Dragon Realms*, while I had been annoyed at them when they did not fit with my own assumptions. My image of Fountain Square was inspired by the piazzas of Italy, with streets coming in from four sides, yes, but with the square itself wide enough so that there would be buildings surrounding it, perhaps even a row of columns supporting a roof under which to find shelter or shadow. However, the description shows that I was assuming all those things:

Fountain Square

[Exits: north east south west up]

You are in a wide square from which Main Street enters east and west, and Centre Road north and south. An elaborate fountain depicting a rampant lion with a fish's tail plays in the square's centre, surrounded by a crowd of pigeons that coo and trill in the hope of being fed.

The waters of the Rampant Lion fountain sparkle and play here. (*Dragon Realms*, Haven 1998)

This description tells the players about the roads crossing the square, and what the central fountain looks like, as well as placing some pigeons on the square. The fountain was used a lot by the players, the characters would sit on the edge, would bathe in it, would drink from it and would poison it. The streets crossing it were connected to the main entrances to Haven, which made it a good place to find other players in order to role-play. In Haven, there could be no ambushes based on the game-platform, and if an immortal was looking, there could be no violent role-playing either. Haven was just that: a haven where peace ruled, and as such it was a safe place to hang out and heal while playing with mimicry rather than *agôn* or *alea*.

On *Aarinfel*, where Elisabeth and David were builders, the rooms looked different, they did not address the player with the second-person address, were more detailed and left less to interpretation while at the same time setting a more varied stage for the play:

Inside The Gates

[Exits: north east south west]

Just to your east, the gatehouse provides egress to Precipice, travellers and merchants passing through at a steady pace. The city's walls tower over it, providing some shelter here from the howling wind. An imposing bronze statue of a warrior on horseback faces the gates, seemingly ready for battle. Garil Way bisects the city, heading off to the west, and Barracks Road parallels the wall. (*Aarinfel*, Precipice 1998)

This is the same kind of square, open in four directions and to busy streets. But this description includes the wall to the east, with the gatehouse opening to the street beyond the city. It positions the statue of the warrior and makes it face the gate. This means that a character standing in the shelter of the wall will see the face of the warrior, while a character approaching along Garil Way will see the back of the warrior and be walking against the wind. It tells the players that there is steady progress across the square, which means that the characters will have to weave through traffic, and it also makes it clear that if characters

go north or south, they will still be walking along the wall, which is massive and high, towering over the gatehouse. This square was however not very much used, because of its position. The games have their own main roads which rarely yield to the fiction, unless the fiction and the thoroughfares are designed to accommodate each other. These main traffic areas will for instance be exits or entrances to important sources for safe rest, food or equipment, areas where new players will be introduced to the game and need help, important areas for quests, or en route to some nexus of travel, such as the Precipice circle of 'Travelstones'¹ in *Aarinfel*.

The fact that the communication networks of the games create these hubs of activity disregarding the quality of the texts of the room, indicate that the geography of the MUD has closer resemblance to flesh world geography than even the builders were aware of. Precipice, the Imperial Capital, and according to the fiction, the more important of the cities of *Aarinfel*, with the embassies at the fortress Eisle Fast as the planned centre for the intrigues of the courts, became less important than Khigatin, the Teiress capital, which was also the entrance point for the new players into the game. Precipice became a thoroughfare on the way between the different homelands of the courts, through the circle of travel-stones and on to Khigatin. This is reminiscent of the way development of trade and communication have made the European capitals grow slowly and gain importance due to their already well-established influence, while American capitals were chosen after a relatively short period, and their importance has faded as more stable communication patterns have formed.

Still, in-character geographic considerations did matter. Privateer aimed at ruling the sea, Arcana's heaviest protections were in Opal, the city of magic, and the other clans had similar connections to certain areas. At the same time the way different quests, equipment and potential for gaining experience points had been spread over the game made in-character considerations and the game-structure cooperate in order to spread the players over a wider area than in both *World's End* and *Aarinfel*, where the players tended to cluster in Windhaven or Khigatin.

Being different: the role

Another very important aspect of the role-playing is being someone else. The pretence of being more beautiful, stronger, smarter, wiser or just different is a major part of the pleasure of role-playing:

Jason: The medium is not realistic. People don't get on and role-play sitting at a desk and filling out papers, that's boring. People would not role-play, you know... finding someplace to eat dinner and trudging home, and getting up early in the morning to go to work, and... . (Jason, interview 1999)

As Jason acutely observes, nobody role-plays shuffling papers, except if those papers are

¹ These constituted a magic way to travel quickly from one court to the other, all travelstones leading to or from the circle at Precipice, which was supposed to be the Imperial City and the centre of the realm within the game.

death-sentences or bestow land or wealth – or perhaps are declarations of war. The yearning was for role-play of epic dimensions:

Benjamin: Yeah, I mean... role-playing experiences on there were fun, the big meetings, to see everyone try to do their best at doing things... watching their emotes. And there were some... it kind of faded, the role-play aspect was kind of fading towards the end, but there was some history, at least while I was at the first 50 levels there was some history for some of the characters that had some closer to epic level story-line stuff happening, which is neat, to be part of, or at least watch happen.

Benjamin's character was a bard of the meer-people, and he was struggling to keep the dream of Mortavia burning in his clan. Nova Mortavia was his clan, a motley crew that dreamed of rebuilding the liberal and democratic land of Mortavia, a lost Utopia which sounded pretty much like Sparta. Where Mortavia was Sparta, home of equality, liberty and ascetic values, Xersia was the *Dragon Realms* equivalent of fallen, decadent Rome. And the players made characters who were willing to fight the epic battle of reclaiming past glory: the role of the redeemer:

Beyne: The character concept was revolutionary, which was actually fitting into the world background, no breaks there. I had a character who wanted to take the serpent folk and not only retain their freedom but also retain their integrity, build them up as something bigger. As a side note to that, the character was basically a rat bastard. He was nasty and not a nice person. This doesn't mean he was mean, he just had a very soldier-like mentality: there was the enemy, and there was the friend. And most people were the enemy. Then there was another class of people called people that could be used against the enemy. So – he was manipulative, scheming and quite willing to do anything necessary to reach his goals, because in his opinion his goals were paramount. His entire race was being destroyed, systematically, by outside forces and by themselves. So I had a lot of pathos there, the character runs itself. I don't have to make up motivations here .. I mean he's fanatic.

Where Benjamin played the protective and honourable clan leader, struggling against impossible odds, Beyne plays the scheming underhanded manipulator. Where Benjamin played an even-tempered fighter, Beyne's choice is the cold fanatic. Both of them hold what Beyne calls pathos, the characters have motivation for their actions. When the players ask themselves "what would this character do", they will not get a random answer. The answer will always be: what serves the goal of the character. An environment with sufficient complexity to support such characters is considered a great advantage to a role-playing game. *Dragon Realms* had limited fictitious historical background, but it still had enough that it was possible to give the characters political or ideological motives, and not just personal motives. Political or ideological motivation for the character meant that other characters could agree or disagree with yours on non-personal subjects, which again meant that there could be conflict or loyalty based on causes not personal; a prerequisite in order to let the role-playing transcend personal conflict of the brand too well known from soap-opera.

This also gave the players opportunities to test different parts of their own way of thinking, their personalities and the way their minds worked, or as Jack said; different parts of themselves:

Jack: Most definitely. Kind of my worldview, the way people are - kind of like a large gem. And there are different facets to that gem, how people are, how they interact with different aspects of that gem, different feelings and how they interact with other feelings - everyone has a dark side and a light side, there is the altruistic side and the darker more evil kind of aspirations, and I find that over time I make a character, I base a little bit of them on myself. Experiences I have had - and admittedly I take those particular facets I want to expand upon, and then I heighten them a little bit more than what I think is normal for me, because I feel that in the hyping, the focus of those facets, it gives you more of an attunement to concentrate on them. And I think it's a very healthy way for people to explore sides of their psyche without becoming social misfits.

Aarinfel was at times accused of being a soap-opera and not a game, precisely because the game became too personal, and the conflicts lacked the scope to make them significant, to make them other than petty backstabbing of the type too familiar from everyday lives. There was no slavery and no truly oppressed groups; the courts were too carefully balanced, all striving for the same goal, the manoeuvring for the favour of the Imperial Court too subtle for the common player². The immortals and high-ranking courtiers had ideas about how the game might develop, but the common player was lost to the democratic pleasantness of the game. Even the dangers common to MUDs were removed, as there was not even the unpleasantness of death and resurrection with subsequent complicated equipment-hunting.

Winning or losing: gaming

Even in a role-playing game winning or losing matters. While victory and defeat is defined by other aspects than statistics, a good game gives the players a sensation of progress: It is possible for the character to change and develop, and he or she can reach some of his or her goals. These are not necessarily the goals of the player, because a player goal can be to reach level 100 and beat up the character of another player, while the character was not supposed to know about the levels (it would be vaguely referred to, but since the players also wanted to hide their levels from others in order to keep the element of surprise, levels were rarely mentioned at all other than in OOC situations with OOC allies). The character goals are within the fiction of the game. This means that the game fiction or the surrounding story – the narrative environment – has to be flexible enough that it can not just absorb, but also add the stories of the players to the history of the game, permitting these stories to have an impact, to change the future. Such a level of complexity needs maintenance and refereeing,

² The Imperial Court was also mainly staffed by the administrators or their friends, putting the power to create inequality firmly in the hands of the administrators who strived to keep the game free of frustrating conflict; thus creating the frustration of inertia.

either by the immortals or by the players. The fact that the refereeing would have to be OOC but implemented IC was just another challenge.

Dragon Realms used 'Favour Point spies': players whose job it was to report good role-playing to the immortals. Occasionally these spies would be consulted by the immortals as to what was happening, and at times the immortals would introduce quests or changes to the history based on these inquiries. One such example was the death of one of the Lords of Opal due to the lack of organisation of the clan Arcana. Such changes gave a sense of progress, even if that progress did not always lead to changes to the better. It made the environment and the play dynamic rather than static.

Winning in role-playing is after all more a matter of creativity than of competition, and as discussed in chapter 7, obsession pollutes the game, leading not to good role-playing but to a statistically measured victory:

TM: If we take the case of our mutual friend Magrath, he did have the idea that it was possible to win, and he was willing to do quite a lot to do that. Would you say he could win? Or in your opinion, was he losing while winning?

David: From his perspective?

TM: From yours. He was certain he had to do this in order to win.

David: From my perspective... I guess that the answer will have to be yes and no. I mean he was having a great deal of fun, so in that sense he was winning – but he was also getting a lot of people angry at him, and that wasn't good either.

MmHmmm – he's – well – (pause) I guess for the most part I can't say if he was winning or losing. He would have the attitude that he was winning and after a while it just seemed like he thought it was winning and nothing else mattered.

The key to enjoying the role-playing game is fun. Agôn, alea, mimicry or ilinx – the type of game is second to a cooperative sense of light-hearted experimentation and common achievement. A functioning role-playing game is not enjoyed by a single, isolated player, but through cooperation. The example of Mr. Bungle (Dibbell 1993) demonstrates how isolated, one sided role-playing is intolerable. Role-playing is a social game, playing with social rules as well as the game-rules, manners and behaviour of equal importance as technical skills or the ability to manipulate game structures and statistics.

Being social: the players

TM: We were talking about the social aspect of the MUDs

Elisabeth: Yes, the social aspect...I do prefer to – I prefer to deal with people face to face. It isn't yet at – I mean you can convey a lot through text, but you lose facial expressions, you lose gestures, you lose – I need my hands to talk, so I am somewhat crippled when they have to be typing. But I certainly think there is a very strong social aspect to it, particularly as it enables you to go beyond your physical locality. It's everyone who's been chosen to be in that environment instead of everybody who – you get people who have chosen to be in a physical environment too, but you get a more wide range of people.

Elisabeth points out a few very important things to the players of MUDs: role-playing is a

social activity. The game is optional, as Huizinga points out: “Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, that play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life” (1950:8). The players have chosen to be in that environment rather than in the environment that has been forced on them: school, work, and home, mostly environments that are a necessity for them due to the restrictions of society. Through games they gain freedom and also are moved beyond the ordinary, out of the dissatisfying ‘real’ lives, and they meet others with the same interests, who have made the same choice.

This freedom invites an expansion of their own experiences, to go not only beyond the limitations of the social structure within which they have to function, but also to go beyond their physical limitations. As we saw in chapter 6, Mariah, for instance, plays for the social experience, as well as for the satisfaction of experimenting with her own characters by seeing how her imagination and personality can give life to more than one type of game-character, believable and predictable according to type – to a certain degree, of course.

Elisabeth does her building to make a place where she can play with other people, while Tom thinks of his games as ways to teach; Jack experiences the flow he calls role-playing high when he plays with others; Benjamin talks of his clan possessively, as “his people”; Beyne needs a human partner/opponent in order to enjoy a game; and Levi sees the computer games as strengthening and creating bonds between people in a society where people move and travel frequently:

TM: Why do you play games?

Levi: Something to do, it’s like a distraction, sort of, and they’re fun. And it’s also, most of the online games I do, it’s to meet people I’d otherwise not meet.

TM: So you use it as a social function?

Levi: Yeah.

TM: Is that very important to you, the social function?

Levi: Yeah, I think so. It’s... One of the things like modern travel, you know, people get more and more impersonalised. And I think there’s a very powerful potential on computers and text, just communicating, and create certain bonds that wouldn’t normally form.

TM: Yeah, you would – how much of the time that you actually spend on the computer would you say that you spend like that, for actually talking to people?

Levi: Most of it, if not all of.

This is perhaps the opposite of the more common understanding of online computer games. They have been blamed as the cause of social isolation to the point of causing or at least strengthening mental disorders to the point of causing suicides, as in the case of Shawn Woolley and EverQuest, described, among other places, in the JSOnline, March 30th 2002, and discussed in my weblog (Mortensen 2001-2002). The real lives of the group of players I interviewed however indicates that rather than creating false bonds between people, role-playing has created real bonds. Levi has moved from San Diego to Portland in order to study closer to his friends from *Dragon Realms*; Jason has visited with friends from *Dragon Realms* and had visits from the Portland group in Los Angeles; Jack meets with the Portland group (some of whom have moved to the East Coast of USA by now) in Arizona every winter,

as they go down there to join a campaign, a large live action role-playing game which includes fencing-tournaments; Dawn moved to Portland before she was interviewed, in order to stay closer to her friends in Oregon, and she has shared living-accommodations with Elisabeth and David. Similarly, the last set of *Aarinfel* administrators became increasingly involved with the real-life social bonds developed through the game, moving to be physically closer, not just mentally. While I do not know how many contacts online which fail to turn into lasting friendships, the patterns of the *Dragon Realms* group indicate that the games have lead to reliable social networks which function for players who did not know the others in the flesh world before meeting in the game, as well as serving as a way for established friendships to stay open and active.

While Sherry Turkle reports the same feeling of closeness; her study of MUDders published in *Life on the Screen* does not document long-term effects in the social life of her subjects. Apparently she also did not follow her subjects after the period of interviewing was over. To the contrary, she doubts the reality of the feelings the players have for each others, and see the game as a way to avoid dealing with real social contacts, rather than making them. As I have already discussed in Chapter 2, Sherry Turkle advocated online as being its own place, which should not be mixed with reality. The player who is married in the MUD and replies with an immediate yes when asked if he is married does not, as Turkle claims, contradict himself (Turkle 1995:205), just as the man who meets women online and has relationships with them offline before he dumps them (Turkle 1995:231), is not confusing the issue. I might prefer Stewart, who blushes when his emotions for his MUD wife are revealed to the man who uses the Net as an easy place to pick up women, but both behaviours are common to the flesh-world, as well as the online world. It is just that we have not learned the codes yet; online meeting places hold no dangers, pleasures or emotions that the flesh-world does not. Consider the advice given to a widow in her mid fifties, when she told her online friends about how her son was suspicious of a man she had met in chat-rooms: "Right, tell him you'll start hanging out in bars in order to meet someone."

The perfect game

The perhaps most experienced builders and administrators at the time of the interviews were Levi and William, both of them with experience from *Dragon Realms*, and both of them involved with *Aarinfel*. Of these, it was William, particularly, who was a builder who cared about aesthetics in his building, as well as playability, struggling to make the two meet in the context of text-based games. His most interesting achievement (in my opinion), at this point, was The Silver Palace, or more correctly: The Palace of Moonlight:

The Palace Of Moonlight

[Exits: north east south west]

A pair of arches open in the walls of the corridors, opposite each other. The north is bordered with the diaphanous forms of sylphs, represented so well that you can almost see the metal of their gowns rustling in the breeze, which blows constantly past them. To the south, letters form the edge of the opening, in a string representing alphabets both familiar and alien.

The Palace Of Moonlight

[Exits: north east west]

Springing up from the silver floor is a field of opalescent flowers. Their petals gleam in shifting hues as they gently sway, and the entire bed, from a distance, seems to hold a continuously changing message. The perfume of the blossoms is sweet and calming.

A fountain rises from the midst of the flowers, producing a constant flow of sweet-smelling ambrosia.

(White Aura) A Wild-Eyed Woman watches the splashing fountain and giggles to herself.

The Palace was made up of several rooms of equally evocative language, but all different, and all with a special feature, and with NPCs (Non-Playing-Characters) to match, drifting through the rooms, all with their special roles to play in the many quests of the area. Some quests were mainly used for money, as the quest of the nectar, which caused the Wild-Eyed Woman to applaud:

The Handmaiden of Delirium applauds, her whole body shaking with giggles.

The Handmaiden of Delirium fills a silver goblet from the fountain, and the ambrosia becomes as bright as moonlight.

The Handmaiden of Delirium says 'This is your reward, dancer! It must have been minutes since I've last enjoyed myself that much....'

The Handmaiden of Delirium drops a goblet of lunar ambrosia.

The Handmaiden of Delirium says 'What seeds will you water with this nectar, dancer? What dreams will infuse with the liquid power of the moon?'

Others were for power of the heart of moonlight, the most secret and sacred of places in the Palace.

In the interview William mentions his specific plan with this area. Apart from its general beauty and playfulness, there were a few absurd situations he wanted to avoid. When you play a MUD, most of them demand either that you fight and kill NPCs, or that you go through quests in order to gain levels, equipment and experience. In the Palace of Moonlight, an area which existed between dream and reality, slaying a NPC just to have it repop³ two minutes later didn't break the illusion, creating an endless supply of mobs to be used for training and gathering experience points. It is rather absurd that some shopkeepers would be killed several times a day in order to return to their shops after a few minutes, and that some bandit leaders were killed over and over, just to return and kidnap the same helpless child. But since the Palace of Moonlight was all dreams, it would not be surprising that the NPCs did not remember you from time to time, or that they would reappear if they were killed – after all, the place did not appear to be realistic, but magic.

Aarinfel did not have room for such dreams, but sought a higher degree of realism, and

³ Repop: The game checks at regular intervals for changes, if certain objects have been removed from rooms etc. "Killing" an NPC means removing it, and the game then restores those removed objects or mobile units – i.e. the NPC repops.

levelling had to happen in some other manner, such as by means of quests or by using favour points. The quests for experience points could only be done once, to avoid the ridiculous repetition of being greeted in the same manner every time your character approached a NPC he or she should know very well by now. This hampered the development of characters, as the quests were not self-evident and favour points were needed for a lot more than levels⁴. While they appeared to be more abundant than at *Dragon Realms*, the cost in FPs for things it was possible to buy with them, such as renames, was higher than on *Dragon Realms*. This led to an economy of special favours which was even more restrictive than the economy of favour points at *Dragon Realms*. *Dragon Realms* had a restriction on levelling, forcing the players to gain at least one favour point through role-playing at every five levels in order to continue. *Aarinfel* had the same number of possible levels, but they had to be either gained through quests or through favour points, and it took eight favour points rather than two favour points (as on *Dragon Realms*) to gain a level. Although favour points were supposed to be more available at *Aarinfel* than at *Dragon Realms*, this huge leap in costs was not made up by the available points. This resulted in a problem at *Aarinfel* which could be explained by something Beyne mentioned in the interview:

I learned about human behaviour that doing something irritating is comforting enough that you'll seek it out, if only because it's comforting. So one thing you do in MUDs is level. Not all. Most. Levelling is getting character power. And equipment hunting. You can always encapsulate it, levelling usually includes equipment hunting. Basically it's improving your character's ability to do more of that, to beat things up. Or beat up other players - that's also an issue. Levelling is generally not fun. It generally isn't! It's - there's no - very little visceral pleasure in levelling. It's hardly orgasmic to watch screens scroll by on a game telling you you beat something up, especially since the game is styled to make sure you win. Any nine-year old can go on a MUD, and even if they are risking their character's life, never die, because they take advantage of the saves the game gives them to survive. So there's no risk! Is a monotonous task, making it boring. But MUDders do it with a passion! Because it's something they can easily do, it's familiar, and it doesn't fail them. Which is why when they can't level for whatever reason it's extremely frustrating because they don't expect this to fail at all. It's the one part in the character's life they have control over, even if it isn't terribly entertaining.

While *Dragon Realms* ended after 4 years because the immortals closed it, with people begging to be permitted to take over and keep it running, *Aarinfel* stranded after two years on a very different note. The old players had drifted away from the game, the administrators had all been replaced, new players did not stay, and the suggestions from the remaining players to the administrators for ways in which the game could develop became too much of a burden, causing the immortals to lock the game to new players and desert it. The main frustration on the part of the players was lack of action and of control: lack of development of the relationship between the courts, and lack of control over the development of the

⁴ Specially designed equipment was very important on *Aarinfel*, and the cost was four times that of *Dragon Realms*.

characters, as attributes and skills were all connected to the levelling, which after the quests had been exhausted became fully dependent on the favour of others, players and administrators.

Limitations

This is the most complicated of all, and what most of the play-MUDs I have played struggle with: the balance between player-control and the limitations of the game⁵. *Dragon Realms*' code was, in the first years before Elwyn's player had to retreat from active duty due to illness, constantly calibrated in order to find the balance between freedom and limitations, power and opposition. This was a fine-tuning of the game-engine and the program that took care of the agôn and alea parts of the game; determining winners and losers in a short-term scale from confrontation to confrontation, and this comprised the most immediate limitations. The different races could be different classes, which gave them access to different skills and spells, strictly regulated by the code.

The mimicry, the role-playing, at first glance held no such limitations, but it still held rules for the players. This was a source of frustration for both administrators and players, but the lack of limits was more problematic than having too many. Beyne expands on this:

OK, I'll use the mer-folk as an example. They are a great example from *Dragon Realms*: The mer-folk were about 7 races, because they were given a paragraph of information. They were never defined in that paragraph, physically. Ever. They breathe water, they breathe air, that's all we know. We don't know what colour they are, we don't know what their skin looks like, we don't know what their eyes look like, we don't even know if they have a basic humanoid structure. We assume they do, because in fantasy races everybody looks basically like people. And this was taken with a wild amount of diversity. There were people who came on that had – they had tails always, and legs. They were basically people with tails. There were people who came on and said they didn't have tails because it didn't matter, they looked like fish. They had gills, they had big bulbous eyes, and they had blue skin, the whole nine yards. (...) There were the other classes of people who said they look just like people and act like people. Then there was another group of people who said that they looked just like on Disney's *Splash*. They have legs on ground and tails in the water. It's amazing that a game can go on for a year and a half without this sort of things being defined. (...) Because there were descriptions of serpent-folk in the game with legs and there were descriptions of them without. That was – you know - it was very confusing. It was rather important.

What distresses Beyne here is the lack of limitations on the descriptions of the different races, since this would be important to their role-playing, for interaction and for representation. Should he be slithering over the floor or walking? William introduces the same problem from the administrator side, the problem of having players accept limitations:

⁵ I think it is a challenge in all games to find the correct balance between restrictions and freedom, where the limitation:freedom ratio depends on which type of game it is.

TM: What is your primary concern as an administrator?

William: Ahh, maintain a consistent atmosphere and theme, and get everyone to move in the same direction without hurting too many people's feelings. We – we have - this was mentioned in the car, we had somebody leave because we weren't thought to be fantastic enough, we criticised his background for being completely incoherent and unmatched to the world, it was – something which was obviously composed mostly off blind, had nothing whatever to do with the stuff he'd actually encounter. We get that a lot with people who get to be the Prince of an undersea kingdom raided by air-breathing orcs or something. Actually that was a *Dragon Realms* one –

The fictitious frame of the world makes the limitations that the role-playing game rests on, and there is a consensus among players and administrators that there has to be limitations on the role-playing or the theme will not be able to progress. Role-playing fights for instance were carefully staged to only emote what the different players actually could do according to their levels, skills and content. These were fights made with nothing but emotes, and were considered a good test of the quality of role-players. The players would be equipped as well as for a fight where the outcome would be judged by the game-engine, but in these fights it was possible to use tricks the machine would not have permitted.

As an example: for one tournament my character Erinn was fighting another rogue-style character. While both had poisons that could be used and were very evenly matched, Erinn had 'darkener', against which there were no saves, and she used it. That blinded the other character, but he turned with the sound of Erinn's footsteps, something the game-engine would not have taken into consideration. To counter that I toggled 'sneak' on, and had Erinn throw a stone she was holding in her hand to make the other character turn after that sound. The 'stone' was a rename of a common piece of equipment, and the game-engine would not have let Erinn throw that stone, but this was an emote fight: since she had it, she could throw it.

Erinn won the bout because of the darkener, and I won the prize for the role-playing, because my opponent had emoted throwing two more knives after Erinn than he actually had in his inventory. While the limitations the role-players have to obey in order to play well do not have to be the limitations of reality, the role-play has to be consistent with the fiction of the game and the rules of the game-engine

Main options for the 'good game'

These are the characteristics of a good role-playing online multi-user text-based game according to the players I have interviewed, as I have attempted to introduce them here:

The arena needs to be attractive. This can mean fancy graphics or elegant writing, compelling stories or interesting little features, but most important is the challenge of the game-engine. The game-engine IS the arena, the sand and sawdust in which the players perform, compete and socialise. It has to open up for the many features of a game, in order to satisfy some immediate needs of the players. Here, from *Man, Play and Games*:

The need to prove one's superiority

The desire to challenge, make a record or merely overcome an obstacle

The hope for and the pursuit of the favor of destiny
Pleasure in secrecy, make-believe or disguise
Fear or inspiring of fear
The search for repetition and symmetry, or in contrast, the joy of improvising, inventing
or infinitely varying solutions
Solving a mystery of riddle
The satisfaction procured from all arts involving contrivance
The desire to test one's strength, skill, speed, endurance, equilibrium or ingenuity
Conformity to rules and laws, the duty to respect them, and the temptation to circumvent
them
And lastly, the intoxication, longing for ecstasy, and desire for voluptuous panic
(Caillois 1979:65)

In addition to this, the players all mentioned the need for control. In some way or another the game-engine had to permit the players to control their character or the environment so that there could be a feeling of achievement on a long-term basis, not only when it came to overcoming one single obstacle. This was coupled with the MUD as a creative outlet, as a chance to excel not only at the techniques of the playing, but also create or experience their little part of the history of the game as it unfolds. This means that the arena has to be not only technically clever, but also imaginary in a more fantastic sense. In the case of *Dragon Realms*, as is often the case with computer games, this meant creating an arena which was closely related to fantasy literature.

The game has to invite to a flight of fancy or imagination. This is not much different from most other entertainment media. But whereas books, films and television can be entertaining, while dealing with the tragic and disturbing facts of life, such as films of disasters, holocausts, personal tragedies and social realistic stories of common people, such topics will not function well in games. Character options have to permit the players to be different from the realistic options of their lives. While that does not mean that games need to be escapist, as in avoiding ideological, political or social problems in their subject matter, they have to give the player the option of being wiser, stronger, more important, better looking and have abilities far beyond the realistic expectations of most humans. Simulation games are perhaps the ultimate game for this, as they let the player be god and take decisions on behalf of entire populations with no damage to their own character, while first person shooters tend to be more dangerous to the player character. The ability to restart saves those games from the unpleasant reality of death, for instance. Games are by nature apart from reality, to the point that Caillois (1979) insisted that: "The many writers who persist in viewing games, especially children's games, as pleasant and insignificant activities, have not sufficiently observed that play and ordinary life are constantly and universally antagonistic to each other" (1979:63). The roles the players have the option to play need to be apart from reality as well.

While winning or losing in the quantitative sense is not really important in a role-playing MUD, there has to be a feeling of achievement or progress. What is special about a game such as *Dragon Realms* is that winning or losing according to the players I have interviewed is measured not against some ranking-list, but against a social-democratic goal of maximum pleasure for as many players as possible. A personal victory that distresses other players,

particularly players weaker and less experienced than yourself, is no victory. This is why experienced players would often play low-profile characters, or would have little problem with giving up their high-level characters in order to start over as someone else, to support an ailing clan or help develop a story-line. This is also why the “battle” function at *Dragon Realms* could be set to different levels, so that the top-level players could not always join the battles, giving the lower-level players a chance, or the higher-level characters would offer others to group with them in battle, until most of the high-level opponents were wiped out. This was not only a sense of fair play, it had to do with the main goal of the game, that of having fun.

Maximising the fun for all is a very social activity, and socialising was an important goal for a lot of the players. The game was conducive to friendship and more or less lasting relationships, and the rules about Out Of Character and In Character helped keeping the social flow of the game between the players, while the characters competed or even warred. Many a good enemy could become a wonderful friend through the potential for using the game-engine in much the same ways as a MOO or a MUSH: to communicate person to person rather than act. Since role-playing in itself is a reason to contact and interact with others, the mimicry-part of the game would assist in creating social contacts, and for the players this was an important quality with a good game.

The perfect game was a little more difficult for the interviewees to describe, but it had in common a good fictitious frame, good world-background for the players to create their characters against, a balanced and reliable game-engine, maximum player control within the limits of the game, and clear limitations. Some of the interviewees preferred simpler games than MUDs, and they played the MUDs mainly for the social aspect, but mutual to all was the combination of control, limitations and potential for creativity.

Limitations were essential. The role-playing game needed a well-developed fiction. This is the narrative environment: the environment that gives direction to the role-playing. Without an authoritative narrative environment, the game would fail to give direction to the play and it would end up as too loose or too restrictive. A good narrative environment should contain imaginative religions or cultures, dramatic areas, well-planned meeting-points, a history that is relevant to the present situation and well-funded conflicts. Such limitations will set the role-players free to play with what they are given: there is a freedom in limits that in itself is pleasing.

The aesthetic according to the players

To sum up what the players wanted from a game in order that it be called good:

- An arena which is different from this world
- Interesting roles to escape into
- Maximum fun for as many as possible, not just for the individual
- A social environment
- Large degree of control over one’s own character
- Reasonable, but firm limitations

Dragon Realms had several flaws and was almost as much hated as it was loved. Several of the players I interviewed had left before the game was closed, because of disagreements,

particularly with the administrators, and mainly over the limitations or the content and direction of the game fiction. Both Beyne and Elisabeth left after arguing with the administrators over how the role-playing should develop, and I had left *World's End*, the first MUD I played, after a similar disagreement. But *Dragon Realms* still had enough of the important factors to keep it running for years. In retrospect, however, I agree with the administrators' decision to close the game in February 1999. Running a role-playing game is a manual job, it is not done easily by a game-engine, unless some of the limitations are sacrificed, such as the directionality of the role-playing. Administrating a game like this, with several hundred players, is a time-consuming task. The MMORPGs, such as *EverQuest*, are different from this, more open to pure hack'n'slash and less restrictive as to role-playing. I can not however say anything about the social sense of belonging or sharing; hopefully these most charming aspects of the MUDs have been transported into the land of the Massively Multiplayers, with their graphic environments – that is another study.

Eight interlude - Full senses engagement

This is a part of an interview with a female role-player, Mariah, in Portland. Mariah is part of the Portland cluster, a clan leader in Dragon Realms and one of the implementers and immortals at Aarinfel. Mariah is married to Tom, who is also one of the respondents, and one of the things they do together is playing computer games.

Mariah is a sociology major, and her view of role-playing is very much coloured by the concept of roles as presented in sociology, for instance by Ervin Goffman. I will discuss this further in the following chapter, and Mariah's thoughts about the distinctions between her self and her roles have been very useful in my discussion of role-playing in games and in society.

Torill: What about playing? Why do you play computer games?

Mariah: I like the contact with other people. It's something you do with other people. It's something also that you – discover. I'm a social science major, so I am very interested in people and how they interact with things, and how the communities form and break up, and how people are choosing to portray a specific character. Hopefully you are not playing yourself all the time, but you have a character in your mind, and if you think – ok this is it : My character is shy, then you have to use the stereotype of shy and portray this character as shy, and I am very interested in what people think shy is, and what people think angry is and what people think cold is... icy, and angry, and I'm very interested in how people are choosing to portray a specific person, and I think that the really good people are the ones who are willing to sacrifice their own personal way of doing things in order to do something in the way of the character in a stuck situation...

Torill: What kind of situations do you choose to play computer games in?

When you are tired, when you are awake, when you are bored?

Mariah: Oh, definitely at night when I am alone. Whenever I am alone, I'd rather be on the computer than to be – I was going to say reading a book. But I guess reading a book also passes time. I read a lot also.. so I usually play at night when I can't sleep – I just can't go to sleep.

Torill: OK... What's your favourite kind of game?

Mariah: One that has an intense mood that you can involve yourself in. A place that's very different from where I am with my computer. In front of my computer... I want to be in a place where my imagination is stretched to it's furthest and engaged. I really like the room descriptions, because I can paint rooms easily then, in my mind, and I can really be there, I can feel it, I can imagine what the illusions would be, what the attitudes would be, what the agenda's are, and I can lose the here and the now to kind of escape into the world for

Torill: So if you are to say what's attractive for you about the games you play is this factor or ability for escape?

Mariah: Yes, but it's also for full senses engagement, I am fully engaged in what I am doing. It's not just an escape, it's also delving into an other reality, an other place that is fully capturing of all of my attention

Torill: Have you felt that your perception of things have changed after you have played computer games?

Mariah: Oh yeah, to see the way that people choose to lead or choose to follow or choose to group

themselves.. I definitely think my image of humanity has changed. There was a time when I am certain I have lived a very secure and cosy life, and there was a time when they said that the MUD I was on was going to close, and everybody went wild, and it was the only time. It was the riot mentality, it was people doing various crazy and strange thing they'd never do if they didn't think the MUD was closing down, and I've never been in that mentality before, and I never understood why riots happen, why that mentality is there, but now I really believe there's this primal thing inside people which wakes up and they go: "Oh well there's no reason why I should be restricted by rules, here I go!" And it's pretty scary that that capacity is there. And so I definitely think that it has changed me and plus coming into contact with people who are different or strangers to you, having a close relationship with anybody changes you. I mean for a long time I was more contact with people on the computer than I was in real life, so, those people ARE my friends. I mean if you look at Levi, he doesn't have any other friends except the people on the computer, that's his whole world, that's all the people he talks to every day, and so that's .. it's a community in itself.

Torill: When you build a game... what's your primary concern as a builder? What do you want to do, what's your goal as you build?

Mariah: Well, since my favourite thing to do as a player is to be fully engaged in a theme or a story... when I am building a world...

Well, first of all, I build the world for players. My primary goal is that the players have a place where they like, that they can be, where they can lose themselves in... that they can be surrounded by and focused on. And so I don't build for myself, I build – except for as myself, as a player – I build for the players, and I totally, totally believe a MUD should be for it's players, it's one of the reasons why *Aarinfel* was (problematic) to us, because many of the imms there who weren't us, were not as involved with the process of building and creation, they lost sight of the fact that if you don't have players, you don't have a MUD. And I think that the players are the most important part of the MUD.

Torill: so your primary concern as an administrator as well as the goals with the game is to attract players.

Mariah: yeah. Well, players who want to role-play.

Torill: Do you have any other goal with a game like it, when you administrate, and when you build?

Mariah: Well, I really want... I don't like portraying women in situations of subordination all the time. You have lots of cultures where you can have one culture like that... but I don't want to copy medieval society, I think that there should be some realism, there's always prejudice in a society, but I don't want it to be so route – and I do like, as a personal thing, I do like to push women into positions of power as much as possible, at least equally as the men. And that might not be as realistic as it could be, but it's my personal agenda. And I also really like seeing spaces and ideas I made being used too, and so I am of the opinion that if players don't pick it up, then wait a while, and reintroduce it, and see if new players pick it up.

Torill: When you build or create a game, do you feel that you are writing a book, or are you doing something else?

Mariah: It's not writing a book.

Torill: Why not?

Mariah: Because, your building is a setting. You are not building a plot, you are guiding a plot, but you are not building it. You are creating a culture but you are not running that culture. Once the world is put into place, everything changes, because you never know what a player is going to do. And the world changes according to its players. And so at the beginning you have created a history, and you have created a world, and you have created a setting and you may nudge certain plots along, but in the end the story

is written by the characters, not by you.

Mariah: I do think that people who MUD think differently about the world. Because it's a different way of thinking. If you have never mudded before and you have never been in that sort of mindset or thoughts – I think role-players or actors have the same kind of sense, you have never... I don't think people look at stereotypes as clearly as they do, when creating a character. You don't look at society the same after that, and you don't think about it the same... you wouldn't think about these things unless you were mudding. I mean there are things about being a character or being in a situation where you are not yourself when you can really study yourself a lot – when in role-play. Well, I am sure there are some people who don't see themselves at all, and they just go through it – pixies, for instance, I have a thing against pixies. But that's what I think mudding is, it's about a different perspective on life.

Torill: Do you like exploring different kind of persons, personalities?

Mariah: Oh yes, very much! Never a lot, or just a blur of one part of me, or a blur of an other part of me, it's like you have this original set of digits, and you flip one, and then you flip the other one, and you flip a third, and then in the beginning you are a lot like yourself, and with each character you get farther and farther away from yourself, it's neat to see what works and what doesn't in the situations, behind the safe society of the character.

Torill: Do you feel that you are going further away from yourself in this? Or further into yourself?

Mariah: Personally I... go back and forth. I rol-eplay something similar to myself, then I play something radically different from myself. Then I come back in and play something more like myself, and then more not like myself.

Torill: These characters which you think of as very different from yourself, are they really outside yourself?

Mariah: I think everybody play shadows of themselves. I don't think you can ever get away from yourself. As hard as you are trying, you are still playing yourself playing something. You are still you. And so, all of it is going to be at least a shade of yourself, because at the very least you are portraying something you believe a thing is like. So it's always you, it might be just a shade of you which might not be what you are used to be every day.

Chapter 9: Online Role-playing in Games and Everyday Life

The word role-play is still tainted with the taste of make-believe, and often positioned in the realm of children's games or in the theatre - if it is used for any serious purpose, it is for therapy or education. Goffman's work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) expanded this view of role-playing, as he treated the social arena as a stage with front-stage and back-stage, and used the metaphors of the theatre with setting, scene and actors to explain how people construct the impression of their personalities and the performances of their everyday lives. Testing these metaphors on MUDs, it is interesting to see how the technology enhances certain effects, while it mutes others, making the connection between online communication and performance more obvious, as well as underlining the importance of understanding the effects and techniques of online role-playing in order to understand the social interaction on the Net.

Questioning the performance aspect of role-playing, the playing of role-play games seems to be easy to fit into the performance theories of Richard Schechner. He does not specifically discuss role-play in games in his work, but his diagram of different types of performances gives a space within which I find it easy and useful to position role-playing. This makes the distinction between the better known types of socially accepted and utilised make-believe and role-playing games clearer, and gives a starting-point from which to discuss similarities and differences. It also provides the opportunity of finding what makes a difference in the structure of the performance, and not just in the social and cultural context in which the games exist.

The fantastic reality

The myth of role-players is that they escape reality. This myth they share with the fans Henry Jenkins describes in *Textual Poachers* (1992), in his discussion of behaviour and activities of the users of popular culture with examples from the fans of Star Trek.

Role-playing games as I discuss them in this work are limited to the fantasy genre, *Dragon Realms* being a place of magic and post-apocalyptic development. The post-apocalyptic theme is typical of science fiction, but in this case the apocalypse was caused by the magic of godlike creatures and led to a non-technological world ruled through magic and hand-held short-range weapons. *World's End*, the first role-play MUD I played was more of a general mixture of the science-fiction and fantasy genres, with gnomish inventions and a mixture of modern and fantastic settlements; exemplified by 20th century starting city Windhaven with a medieval-fantastic drow camp just outside town, and the hints of star travels and journeys from far away worlds mixed with magic. More than one observer who does not appreciate the pleasures of role-playing has been tempted to treat these interests as unrealistic, remote from "real life" and suggest to the players: "get a life".

The most visible connection between the culture of role-players and science fiction and fantasy fans is perhaps exactly this phrase: “Get a Life!”. Jenkins (1992:9) uses this phrase as the heading of his first chapter, where he immediately launches into a description of acts that have been used to prove that “Trekkies” (Star Trek fans) are social misfits. Among these acts he lists having their own flags, uniforms and anthems, having a Klingon warship hanging from the ceiling of your recreation room, or being married in Federation uniform and Vulcan ears (1992:11). From the lives of my interviewees, I can also find parallels to this type of behaviour, for instance: Jack is the captain of a fencing team who fences in costume when ever possible, and one of his most elegant outfits for the SCA-events (Society of Creative Anachronism) was originally made for the wedding of two friends, where they were all in 18th century costumes. Jarok, or Erik, the husband of Elisabeth (another of the respondents to the interviews and a long-time role-player), is hunting for the perfect useable armour for reconstructions of medieval wars, while David’s first thought, when I brought him a present of traditional Norwegian silver cufflinks, was how great they’d look if he used them to close a cape for a costume. This is not considered deviant behaviour among role-players, but actually rather moderate. A more local example is Trond (a Norwegian role-player) who is making his own hauberk (a mesh of steel rings) to use in reconstructions of Viking fights.

To a casual observer, it is not easy to see the distinction between a Marion Zimmer Bradley-fan dressed as a Free Amazon of Darkover, and a role-player engaged in a live-action role-playing game that includes female medieval fighters. The myth of fans such as the “Trekkies” of Jenkin’s description, as people with deviant interests and unhappy social lives is easily applied to other groups displaying the same visual signals, particularly since observers will often find people with overlapping interests. The convention attendee, the renaissance faire worker or visitor and the costumed role-player is often the same person, and as such outside casual observation will confirm the cliquish image and the impression of fanaticism rather than playfulness. With television series and films being born of books¹, or books being born of plays, or games being born of plays, films or books, or games leading to books or plays, this is a process of remediation (Bolter & Grusin 1999:44) that has been active since long before the birth of the digital media, and has been the case as far as the genre of the fantastic is concerned.

Role-playing as performance

If I apply Richard Schechner’s definition of performances, role-play and performance look almost synonymous:

Performances are make-believe, in play, for fun. Or, as Victor Turner said, in the subjunctive mood, the famous “as if”. Or, as Sanskrit aesthetics would have it, perfor-

¹ *Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley was released as a television mini-series June 26th 2001; *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis has been turned into television series by BBC; *Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien is being filmed - to be released as three films in 2001, 2002 and 2003; Douglas Adams’ influential *A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* was originally a radio-play in BBC. This suggests that the remediation of works in this genre is common and often expected.

mances are *lilas*—sports, play—and *maya*, illusory. But, the Sanskrit tradition emphasises, so is all life *lila* and *maya*. Performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more “truthful”, more “real” than ordinary experience. This too, was Aristotle’s opinion in his *Poetics* where theatre did not so much reflect living as essentialize it, present paradigms of it. As *lilas*, performances not only play out modes, they play with modes, leaving actions hanging and unfinished, so theatrical events are fundamentally experimental: provisional. (1977:xiv)

Role-playing is also ‘as if’ – as children play, pretending. Huizinga (1950:8) points to this quality in all play: “Here then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life.” But the definitions of play and performance splits up when Huizinga continues: “This ‘only pretending’ quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with ‘seriousness’, a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself.” Here Huizinga betrays what Victor Turner would call a Calvinistic streak:

The Calvinists wanted ‘no more cakes and ale’ – or other festival foods that belonged to the work and play of the gods. What they wanted was ascetic dedication to the mainline economic enterprise, the sacralisation of what was formerly mostly profane, or, at least, *subordinated to*, ancillary to the sacred cosmological paradigms. (Turner 1982:39)

Turner and Schechner both turn away from this non-ludic approach which has had such a large impact on how western society considers play and ludic activities, and towards playing as something with a value of its own. Perhaps it should not be rated at the same scale as work, as it is different and not comparable.

Schechner in his definition of performance points out that performance can be considered more truthful and real than ordinary experience. This is perhaps the main difference between the role-playing as play, and the role-playing as a sacred rite, a part of a drama, or even a comedy. The role-playing as play maintains the knowledge of the playfulness, and a frequent reminder in online role-playing games is “Chill, this is just a game” as opposed to considering it more real and more truthful, somehow superior to ordinary experience. Turner describes, in an example, the difference between the western playful and carnevalesque rituals that have survived from before the introduction of Christianity, such as the Norwegian tradition of ‘Julebuk’ (Christmas Goat)², where children go from door to door begging for sweets, singing in payment, and similar rituals in tribes he has observed where the masked participants of the ritual can enter any house and *demand* food, drink or service: “Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory though, indeed, fear provokes nervous laughter from the women”

² Turner’s example is of ‘belsnicklers’ from La Have Islands, Nova Scotia, where older boys and young married men roam the streets, playing tricks, and knock on windows and doors to be let in.

(Turner 1982:43). To Turner the liminal is exemplified with the rite or passage, crossing a border which is perceived as real, as having consequences, and as such the rites and play in tribal society is work, while the liminoid is playing with the border, stepping back and forth, approaching and retreating; the play being aware of the line which is overstepped, and the fact that it can be reversed; the masks taken off and no consequence will reflect on the real world being a major aspect of the pleasure. Where a rite or a theatrical performance needs immersion and conviction, play needs the tension of immersion and distance, of the meta-knowledge of “only playing”.

Keeping this important, almost vital difference in mind, the similarities of role-play and performance can be explored, and the understanding of what role-play is can greatly benefit from the vocabulary and the insights of performance. If I use Richard Schechner’s (1985) vocabulary, a role-play game can be seen as an ‘unpublicly performed restored non-event’. To understand this phrase, it is necessary to look at the meaning of restored behaviour the way Schechner uses it.

To Schechner restored behaviour is living behaviour that can be directed and pre-planned rather than happen more or less accidentally (1985:35). This makes restored behaviour a very wide concept, and if we accept Goffman’s metaphor of human behaviour as happening on a stage³, just about everything which is not an involuntary response becomes ‘restored behaviour’ and as such part of a performance. Schechner narrows it down however: “The practitioners of these arts, rites and healings assume that some behaviors – organised sequences of events, scripted actions, known texts, scored movements – exist separate from the performers who ‘do’ these behaviors. Because the behavior is separate from those who are behaving, the behavior can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed” (Schechner 1985:36). At this point restored behaviour becomes separate from the everyday self-presentations.

Not all restored behaviour can be said to be role-playing, although the statement can be defended when turned the other way around: all role-playing can fit within the perimeters of restored behaviour. To continue the quote:

The performers get in touch with, remember, or even invent these strips, either by being absorbed into them (playing the role, going into trance) or by existing side by side with them (Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*). The work of restoration is carried on in rehearsals and/or in the transmission of behavior from master to novice. (Schechner 1985:36)

The rehearsed and coached performances of an actor in a play rarely have their match in role-play. Role-playing is more spontaneous and improvised, not based on an already written script, but on the knowledge of the background of the character and the restraints of the role. This means that the invention of the strips of behaviour in role-play is less learned and remembered, and more invented through absorption. This absorption again echoes with what Jack in the interview calls ‘role-playing high’:

³ Although the metaphor belongs to William Shakespeare, and appears in *As You Like It*, 2. 7. 139-167: “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players”.

Jack: The role-playing high is just a pet theory of mine, which I find a lot of other role-players understand, and necessarily a lot of actors and writers, people who seek to achieve almost a mentality outside of their own. And it is the point at which you have stopped thinking about a given situation, what would my character say. Given this situation, what would my character do - and start thinking from the point of view of your character and say what you want to say and do what you want to do. To fully immerse yourself into the character. I find that it is very enthralling.

What Jack describes here fits very well with Schechner's description of restoration through absorption. Jack works himself into a state that seems almost like a trance, and is, in his own words, immersed in the character. This is such a pleasure and thrill to him that he keeps pursuing it, using time, money and energy to achieve it through role-play.

David has a more intellectual and a less absorbed understanding of his role-play personae. Again to quote Schechner (1985:37): "Put in personal terms, restored behavior is 'me behaving as if I am someone else' or 'as if I am 'beside myself,' or 'not myself' as when in trance. But this 'someone else' may also be 'me in another state of feeling/being,' as if there were multiple 'me's' in each person." David claimed, on several occasions over the year of role-playing and following years of communication that the character or avatar he played was not him, but each character was a fragment of him, aspects of his personality, which he could use and explore through role-playing, and Mariah said as much in the interview with her in Portland 1999:

Torill: What I am really asking is; are these roles very different, are they really outside yourself?

Mariah: I think everybody play shadows of themselves. I don't think you can ever get away from yourself. As hard as you are trying, you are still playing yourself playing something. You are still you. And so, all of it is going to be at least a shade of yourself, because at the very least you are portraying something, you (think this is what) things are like. So it's always you, it might be just a shade of you which might not be what you are used to be every day.

Playing with identity

In *Life on the Screen* Turkle (1995) speaks of the Internet as a social laboratory for experimenting with identities and the self. "In it's virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create" (Turkle 1995:180). In this same paragraph, she expresses opinions of games which are somewhat revealing as to why I view her comments rather sceptically, and can't entirely accept her conclusions:

What relation do these have to what we have traditionally thought of as a "whole" person? Are they experienced as an expanded self or as separate from the self? Do our real-life selves learn lessons from our virtual personae? Are these virtual personae fragments of a coherent real-life personality? How do they communicate with one another? Why are we doing this? *Is this a shallow game, a giant waste of time?* (1995:180) [my italics]

It is in that last part of the quote that the main difference between her approach and that of this study is obvious. Turkle is looking at a tool for exploring the self, and in that relation gaming becomes less important, and to engage in games is shallow and a waste of time.

By using this approach, Turkle misses some of the importance and immediacy of the replies of her informants. I have already mentioned the example where the player was married on the MUD and Turkle chose to interpret his MUD marriage outside of the experience of role-play and rather as an example of confusion and personal conflict. The nature of games implies as we have seen a tension that demands an awareness of the meta-level. To play a game without being aware that it is a game is in itself a way of being a 'spoilsport', while that very knowledge creates a tension that is the heart of games.

The role-players of the MUDs I have studied would agree with as well as deny the statement Turkle quotes from one of her informants:

You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. You can be just whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be. You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you. Because all they've got is what you show them. (Turkle 1995:184)

While the players would agree with this at one level, at another level they would point out that you do not change. It is not you who are different, it is your character, or in Turkle's terminology, the personae. The awareness of the two levels of the game, the IC and the OOC, positions the claim that "you" change in a conscious rather than an unconscious mode. Turkle studies identity online and finds that the Net, MUDs, MOOs, chat-rooms and other digital meeting-places are used to explore identity in manners that are so far unprecedented. The instant communication and the low bandwidth permit a freedom of creativity and expression, which Stone has noticed with her studies of phone-sex workers (Stone 1996:93):

The cultural history of electronic communication is in part a history of exponentially increasing bandwidth. The effect of narrowing bandwidth is to engage more of the participants' interpretive faculties. This increased engagement has the effect of making communications more difficult when the information needs to be conveyed precisely. On the other hand, for symbolic exchange originating at and relating to the surface of the body, narrowing the bandwidth has startling effects. A deep need is revealed to create extremely detailed images of the absent and invisible body, of human interaction, and the symbol-generating artefacts which are part of that interaction. Frequently in narrow-bandwidth communication the interpretive faculties of one participant or another are powerfully, even obsessively, engaged.

Role-playing games are about playing with the interpretative faculties of others on a conscious level, like performing, rather than on an unconscious level, as we tend to do in everyday interaction. Turkle studies the potential for exploring identities online on this unconscious level, for therapeutic or self-expanding reasons. The players in my study play because it lets them consciously explore the symbolic content and the limitations of interaction, and they explore this with all the tools this low-bandwidth medium gives them,

from the system of the game through the game-fiction by way of the rooms and objects in the game and with the engagement of their own imagination. They play games, but their games are involved and aware. Whether they are a waste of time is something only time can really tell, but if they are, they waste time in a manner they enjoy, which is what most of the seemingly non-productive or leisure activity of humans is about: wasting time in a pleasurable way.

Role-playing in everyday life.

Online the low bandwidth, as Stone points out, makes the few cues which people do give each other more significant. These cues are what we need to be able to say that we ‘understand’ the other person. Goffman describes how strangers apply roles or stereotypes to each other: “If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean cues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him” (1959:1).

The low bandwidth permits for a much wider range of stereotypes in each individual case, as a handle, avatar or persona does not yield much information in the matter of appearance. Cues have to be gleaned from conduct, and this conduct is all verbal or written descriptions of acts, something that leaves a wide range of interpretation even to the most precise description. “Gareth smiles warmly as he moves to the indicated chair, his tall frame bending into it awkwardly” (DR 12.10.1998) is an emote from *Dragon Realms*. Gareth has in this scene just entered the room, and is joining others at the table. It is done by a series of messages like this, each emote giving little signals about the character, each one a cue to how this player wants to present his character Gareth. In this case the little message communicates Gareth’s pleasure at seeing the people at the table through his warm smile, his height through the mention of the tall frame, and a sensation of helplessness, quite disarming as it indicates an adolescent having outgrown his body, embarrassed and struggling with his awkwardness. Later the company moves into a public bath, where Gareth goes on playing the playful somewhat childish and harmless character:

“Gareth lies in the water, turned opaque by the mass of suds filling the room with bubbles.”

“Gareth utters a spell and submerges himself in the water.”

“Gareth sends bubbles up from the bottom of the large tub.”

“Gareth’s head pops up from the water, and emits a small cough. He appears comical, as he forgot to remove his spectacles.”

These are simple and to a certain extent stereotypical acts that are not just used by the other players to ‘understand’ Gareth and place him in the suitable category. They are also examples of how role-play is a conscious use and manipulation of these stereotypes by the player into creating a character.

Creating the character

The role-player creates the *character*, *avatar* or *personae* according to certain characteristics. No matter if it is an orc, a troll, an elf or a human, it has a side to its character that is not just made up of statistical attributes, but of patterns of appearance and behaviour which humans are able to recognize and relate to. These patterns rely on the other players' understanding of the standards of society, or as Goffman puts it:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging him to treat them in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be and hence foregoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they *ought* to see as the "is". (1959:13)

In real life the roles we wear, or are given, are reinforced by this cultural agreement of how 'such as we' should be treated, and how we should treat others. There are rules against trying to break this agreement, to the point that trying to 'be' something that we 'are not' is considered everything from tasteless to criminal (as in fraud). This constant reinforcement is both conscious and sub-conscious, as many tiny details included in the act of playing the real life role we have been trained to might reinforce the projected image - or shatter it completely.

Online communication, with its low bandwidth, opens for the presentation of the self to be either misunderstood or wilfully false, as the possibilities for checking are less than in the flesh world. When we communicate through typing, the communication is slower, takes more effort and is easier to manipulate if it is conscious. An example of that is the myth of the cross-dressing psychiatrist which Stone relates, where he found himself addressed as a woman, causing him to try and maintain that character (Stone 1996:70). The medium of the discussion lists gave him a chance to be what he was not, but when people felt they had been fooled, their outrage was a moral outrage, due to the moral obligation Goffman mentions, the moral obligation which made them all treat him in a certain manner, in this case as a disabled woman named Julie.

No matter if this story is real or an online myth, it illustrates the potential for playing with the presentation of self in online life. Computers invite role-play as they invite the construction of that which does not exist in nature:

Computers, too, lead us to construct things in new ways. With computers we can simulate nature in a program or leave nature aside and build second natures limited only by our powers of imagination and abstraction. The objects on the screen have no simple physical referent. In this sense, life on the screen is without origins and foundation. It

is a place where signs taken for reality may substitute for the real. Its aesthetic has to do with manipulation and recombination. (Turkle 1995:47)

The problem arises when this construction is taken for reality, when others are taken in by the act. As Goffman points out (1959:18), to play a part implicates the belief of others. Unless the audience accepts the performance, it has failed and it will have no consequence. The manager needs for her *performance* of managing to be accepted, or she will fail in the *task* of managing, no matter how good her plans are. The real work of managing might be in the routines she implements, in the attention to details or her ability to plan for the future, but without being accepted as having the right to implement routines, she cannot function as a manager: she cannot just have the skills, she has to perform convincingly as well.

Online play with identities aim at this, at being accepted as not just playing but being the persona you pretend to be. Convincing others and dispelling their disbelief is crucial for trust and openness. The problem arises when you have people who believe in their act mixed with people who do not believe in the act... and when you mix people who believe in their own act with people who are aware of their own performance, it can give odd and heated responses.

Convinced by your own act?

To be convinced by your own act is not a prerogative of online role-playing, but it becomes even more complicated when flesh-world and digital-world roles and players mix. In the web-based chat-environment State of Insanity (soi.hyperchat.com) the room Z2 is supposed to function as a place for people interested in BDSM to meet and chat online. The message board connected to Z2 is the Z2cork, and while it is more often filled up with non-BDSM-related personal messages than not, sometimes the messages address not just BDSM, but the “real identity” of the people chatting at the site. Z2cork, being an electronic message board in a digital place visited by people who are curious about BDSM, people who play with it and people who claim to be living a BDSM lifestyle⁴ – and the occasional shocked visitor who tries to convert and save all the rest – tends to exemplify the different attitudes the participants have to their own online and offline act.

Sun May 20 23:20 * - Subject: Who are the real Doms here?

Visitor said:

Who considers themselves to be a real Dom

Why do you consider yourself to be a real Dom?

What *is* a real Dom and why?

⁴ BDSM – an acronym that covers a wide range of sadomasochistic activities – is a particularly apt example here because the ‘lifestyle’ comprises a wide range of commitment to the different roles: from the people who attempt to live with total power exchange, sign contracts to own/be owned by others, to the occasional role-player who spices up the routine with a bit of spanking and bondage.

The responses reached over a wide range. Several 'Doms' (sexually dominant males, in this chat-room they use names written in the conventional manner, with a capital letter, to signal their 'dominance' as opposed to the submissive counterparts, who spell their names in small letters) did not care about even taking the question seriously. This strategy might have been due to the fact that it is very hard to convince anybody about your real personality in writing if they do not choose to trust. Or they might just have thought that the question was irrelevant, as several of the people who chat at this site do not care about the reality of their dominance, they just have fun with the fantasy and leave it at that, or make fun of it like this chatter:

Sun May 20 23:52 ~ - Subject: * - o reaction(s)
Cognitive Penis said:

I'm just a penis that thinks.

Some, both at the submissive and the Dominant side would trust their own experience or view and not feel a need to defend it:

Mon May 21 08:20 ~ - Subject: * - o reaction(s)
His lovely said:

hmmm.....well,when i poke Master Raider He moves so i guess He is alive and real...(and i usually get poked back harder!)

i hate this vague question, so often seen.....it defies defining

Others chose to reply with denying the entire reality of the concept, judging the whole group of people through the experience of chatting with them, while others chose to go into a debate about the characteristics of a real Dom/me (Dommes being the female version of a sexual dominant) and also to quote literature on the topic:

Sun May 20 23:43 ~ - Subject: * - o reaction(s)
Liontamer said:

slipping through the shadows of my mailroom...seeing this and smiling...

A real Master is one who will help their submissive find their own inner strength and beauty. One who will take theirs through all their problems and desires, and then take them to their real problems and desires. They will reach through walls and fears to bring their submissive back to the plateau of self reliance and self control, and then stand there, with them on a whole new vista of their submissive's mental horizon.

A Master is one who cares about their submissive's health and well-being first and foremost. A Master is one who will not ask for one to kneel before them in submission; a submissive will kneel out of respect. A true Master will know themselves.

Mon May 21 06:38 ~ - Subject: * - o reaction(s)
peach~*pussy said:

How about a quote from “Screw the Roses Send Me the Thorns” About the True Master....

“Too often one runs into the one that calls himself the true dominant who says he wants total control of his sub at all times, together or apart. This individual really believes his submissive should live solely for the pleasure of her Master. They have a penchant for referring to themselves as “True Masters”. Some of them believe that subs who set limits are not “true” submissives. Another type of True Master believes that a sub wants precisely what she says she will not tolerate.

These are lovely fantasies. At best, these fellows have little experience; they are confusing what they have read in stories for reality. The correct scene term for them is “asshole”. At worst, they truly behave in this manner, in which case they are referred to as “dangerous assholes”.

I didn’t say it...Philip Miller and Molly Devon did...And I think that they did a pretty good job of it...didn’t you?

Screw this whole mind set of “real dom” why not work on being the best dom one can be?

The BDSM and leather community consist of people who among other things, like to role-play different parts in scenes often concerned with power-relationships. The Master, the slave, the servant, the School Mistress, the sissy boy, even the Horse Handler and the pony belong in the repertoire of the people choosing these roles for their personal and sexual satisfaction (Bramble et. al. 1993). However, as these responses indicate, it also consists of people who believe in their own performances, they are convinced by their own acts.

The BDSM community tends to spill into the groups who play live-action role-playing games through the connection with the gothic lifestyle. Many fetishists find that they can safely display their longing for feminine clothes through the lace and silk in a goth outfit, or wear fetishized items like collars and leather cuffs, or signs of aggression such as extremely high heels, black leather and spiked collars. But where the role-players are very much aware that they are not what they play at being, the ‘lifestylers’ not only tend to claim that they are slaves and Masters, they also seek to live the fantasy and protest against a society which is either of the opinion that they are mentally ill or sexually deviant and should be treated for their tendencies, or convinced they are simply playing a gigantic role-play game.

According to Goffman, that is however exactly what they are doing. “I have suggested two extremes: an individual may be taken in by his own act or be cynical about it” (1959:19). Viewed in this light, to be convinced that you ‘really’ are something – such as in this case a ‘real Dom’ – does not make your behaviour any less of an act or a performance than if you claim that you just go through the motions or limit yourself to certain scenes. In either case the performer makes a moral claim to be treated in a certain manner, according to a certain

protocol. The cynic might have a little added pleasure in ‘fooling everybody’, or a kind of pleasure which seems almost to beg attention from somebody who likes to use the online freedom to switch roles: “It should be understood that the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously” (Goffman 1959:18). This gleeful aggression at playing with the perception of others is perhaps the answer to the often repeated: “Why can’t people just be themselves online?” The frustrated sound of this question is the frustration of social relationships betrayed, when a character which has been treated in one manner, turns out to be just a character played by a person who has totally different characteristics.

In role-play games, what the players toy with is the moral obligation and the social relationships. It is a conscious effort to sustain the social relationship of the character with other characters. Some players are able to do this better than others, and sustain characters different enough from their flesh-world role that they convince other players of the “reality” of the in-game personality. At other times, very few cues are enough to make a player draw a conclusion. At *Aarinfel* the list of characters logged on and visible comes up with gender. In this game my character for a long period was Vind, the male, gay elf. Players I never role-played with, but who had only seen the:

[Mal Elf] Vind B’Greth, his honour Setirgreth, Prince’s Hand of [Et’Thalior]
caption of the who-list, were still surprised when I started chatting OOC about my husband, or when I mentioned me being a mother on the OOC global channel. The simple signal of the title on the who-list is enough to create an image of the Out Of Character player that confuses people when the word “mal” on the who-list meaning “IC male” comes in conflict with the OOC claim to motherhood.

The electronic front

When discussing performance, particularly in the words of Goffman, I need to address the concept *front*. Goffman defines it like this: “Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (1959:22). This equipment will be different when we talk of online ‘fronts’, not the least because the online front will have several filters between the physical location of the person behind the character and the receiver. While it will have to be more carefully constructed not to become totally random and defined by the other party, it also offers the chance of constructing a very different front from what your physical presence would give you to work with. The low bandwidth again opens for introducing only select cues for interpretation to the other party of the communication.

The first aspect of the front that Goffman addresses is the setting. When playing a computer role-play game, the matter of setting can be solved very easily. Setting as Goffman understands it is the environment of the performance: the furniture, the props, the geographical space (1959:22). In MUDs and MOOs this can be solved very easily through writing up a description:

The winter-garden

A room with windows on three sides. Through the windows you look out on a world

covered with snow. Inside it is warm and nice, thanks to the fireplace by the fourth wall. Green plants stand all over in large pots, and the room smells faintly from warm, wet soil. A white orchid blooms in a corner. In front of the fireplace, there is a comfortable-looking pillow. It is covered with hair that looks like it belongs to a longhaired cat. (lingua, the winter-garden)

At the same time, while one level of setting is easily manipulated, others are more complicated to influence. When communicating through computers, other aspects become important which are not a problem in real life, like the speed and stability of the connection, the speed and stability of the software you use to communicate, and the speed and stability of your own computer. The physical setting you are actually in will become important too. The hardware becomes a part of the setting, and old, flawed hardware has to be explained somehow. If you're a student, all types of hardware are accepted, but if you try to pass yourself off as someone wealthy and skilled, you had better have a good explanation for the frequent disconnections from the chat.

In a role-playing game, ignoring the hardware becomes part of staying IC. Experienced players, upon seeing another PC disconnect and then connect, will just ask: "What was the last you saw", and the last couple of says and emotes will be played out again. In a role-playing game the IC setting is the important one, not the OOC setting, which will be ignored as far as possible. Sometimes, however, it is impossible to ignore, either because it is too funny or more interesting than what is happening in the game, and you learn about the real lives of the others. And in this manner, over time you gain information that do not belong in the setting of the game, but which are part of the setting of the place where the person you play with live. This is often physical or geographical information like: they frequently have to disconnect due to thunderstorms, they have kids (frequent interruptions with no prior warning), they share the computer (can only be online in short periods which are not very flexible), they are in a different time-zone from you, and so on. The list of what it is possible to learn about the person at the other side from OOC hints or just from play patterns and style is long, and that is before I have started analysing language, knowledge, imagination and style in the communication.

Language is one of the most important aspects of the online image you want to create. It is very difficult to appear mature if you do not have the language that appears convincing. When it comes to role-players, though, it is not exactly the mature impression the players are aiming at:

In keeping with Garriott's Tolkienism, *Ultima Online* is also extraordinarily detailed, down to its most banal features. Players can design clothes for their avatars; they can have pets and train them to do tricks; and they can construct elaborate houses, which, if they have the wherewithal, they can decorate with paintings and rugs and candelabra and tchotchkes. They "talk" to one another by typing (the words appear suspended above the characters' heads) and they tend to use a combination of pseudo Middle English and computerese, slipping from "thee" and "thou" to "LOL" (Laughing out loud) and "WTF" (What the fuck?). (Kolbert 2001)

In *Ultima Online* the setting is graphic and very detailed. In Kolbert's article, Richard

Garriott, the founder of Origin Systems that operates and manages *Ultima Online*, describes his approach to making a game-world. Like Tolkien, when creating a fictional world, he needed to know more about the details of it than what was immediately visible. In *Ultima Online*, the fictional setting has become so important to the players that property and equipment is being auctioned outside of the game, for real money, not IC game-money:

The game's achievers, for their part, have managed to produce an overheated, almost Hamptons-esque real-estate market. Buildable lots are scarce (in some areas unobtainable) and such is the demand for mansionettes that it has spilled out of Britannia. On any given day, eBay has a couple of thousand auctions running of U.O. homes and other paraphernalia. Recently, I saw on the auction site an enormous castle for sale in Trammel that had received twenty-two bids and was going for eight hundred dollars. (Kolbert 2001)

Sherry Turkle addresses the personal meaning of having a setting that supports a front of the person you would like to be rather than the one you are. She describes how young, unemployed Americans just graduated and with very little prospects of upward mobility in their present situations use MUDs to gain a feeling of who think they should be:

Thomas moves on to what has become an obvious conclusion. He says, "MUDs make me more of what I really am. Off the MUD, I am not so much me." Tanya, also twenty-four, a college graduate working as a nanny in rural Connecticut, expresses a similar aspiration for upwards mobility. She says of the MUD on which she has built Japanese-style rooms and a bot to offer her guests a kimono, slippers and tea, "I feel like I have more stuff on the MUD than I have off it." (Turkle 1995:240)

When we start talking about language, the *setting* fades into *appearance* and *manner*. Appearance in Goffman's terms means the signals that tell us of the social status of the performer, and manner warns us of the role played in this particular situation. In this little scene from *Dragon Realms*, Hermeth is a dark elf, a Drow, who is trapped in a realm where he does not know how to get out, and my character, at the moment disguised as an anonymous elf noble is bargaining for his services in exchange for his freedom from the fairy circle. This is Hermeth' appearance:

Before you is a dark skinned shadow of a being, a fey creature dressed in the black concealing robes of the Magi. From his dark hood drift locks that are stark white as freshly fallen snow, that contrasts greatly with his finely chiselled features with their burning violet eyes that regard you with calm interest, seeming to hide a teeming nest of secrets. You shiver and do not know exactly why.

Hermeth is in perfect health. (*Dragon Realms* 03.12.1998)

The player makes an effort to make his character seem to be a mixture of noble, threatening and mysterious. He is given a certain status as a mage or 'one of the magi' through the robes, and the eyes are made to hint at secrets. The last line of the description "You shiver and do not know exactly why" is supposed to convey a faint threat. In this context, however, this

description reveals him as a role-player who is still inexperienced and not conformed to the standards of this game.

There was an entire clan of mages, and they rarely wore dark robes to distinguish themselves, as a matter of fact they wore bright blue when wearing clan colours. If he had been an experienced player, he would have been aware of this. Next his eyes “seeming to hide a teeming nest of secrets” were not in accordance with the directions for descriptions. Descriptions were supposed to be just that, simple reports of how an avatar looked rather than the impressions you would get from this combination of looks. The line which really opposed that rule was the last line: “You shiver and do not know exactly why.” This is an imposition on the other person, an attempt to control the reaction of the other. In this game where everybody played someone remarkable or special, there would most likely be several characters who could look a drow in the eye and not flinch, either because they were supported by their faith in the light, because they had done deeds which would have scared the drow in question into hiding, or because they were living by so alien values his idea of terror just did not count. To tell others how they would react was very bad form.

In this way the appearance could be interpreted in several ways, even before the viewer had started studying the equipment. Equipment on DR was limited by levels, and you could have better and more efficient equipment or armour with higher levels, something which made the players struggle to reach higher levels and get this equipment for their characters. Since it sometimes was in the interest of the player that others could not determine the level of their character, they would get the equipment renamed, which means having the appearance of the equipment altered according to what the player felt would suit the character.

The manner is the way the player lets the character behave. In this conversation “A fey noble” is my character disguised:

Hermeth says ‘My loyalty lies with Topaz and with the woods which I have come to love though I do not fully understand those feelings.’

Hermeth says ‘for as you might guess the drow do not teach much in the way of feelings other than hate.’

A fey noble shrugs delicately.

Hermeth says ‘and hate I do not want.’

(Fey) You say ‘I have known drow with deep passions.’

(Fey) You say ‘and I have known those of the light who hate.’

Hermeth says ‘It is good to hear that there are others that redeem us in some slight way.’

(Fey) You say ‘What has hurt you so deeply, you have not seen honour, and loyalty, in your own kin?’

Hermeth says ‘I will eventually go mad.’

A fey noble tilts her head gently.

(Fey) You say 'why?'

(Fey) You say 'You have all you might dream of here in this peaceful and gentle land.'

Hermeth says 'My kin my lady have never shown me that they have much capability other than greed and hate.'

The character is fleshed out through the IC interaction, or the role-play. In this case Hermeth is making an attempt at being a drow, which is a dark elf. The game *Dungeon and Dragons* presented the first widespread popular version of the drow, originally troll-like beings in myths from the Shetland Islands (McNeur 1994). The D&D drow are the dark version of elves, albino Tolkien elves, which means tall and beautiful, but afraid of light, with dark skin, pale hair and red eyes.

Since the Drow in *Dragon Realms* were supposed to be arrogant, in favour of slavery and frequently followers of the dark Queen Malvena and the Dragon Lords, they were perceived as evil. And so Hermeth had to behave in a manner that would both signal his past of evil, but let him cooperate with others. The player does this by telling how poor Hermeth was raised with hate, but now denies it for neutrality (following Topaz, the deity of neutrality), and he speaks of the conflict between the gentleness he sees and the greed and hate he has been raised with.

The elf noble in this case is not a real noble, and so she is setting him up to be tricked later on. Hermeth wants help to get out; Erinn wants him to feel really grateful to her and be her pawn in the endless game of positions that a role-playing game is. Their manner in this scene is dominated by his attempt at appealing to her feelings and her attempt at measuring his need.

At the same time his manner reveals his lack of experience as. The drow in *Dragon Realms* were creatures of the dark, but they were fiercely protective of their own. Their evil, as it was expressed in the examples of the game, history and the example of Non Player Characters (NPCs), was along the line of slavery, nepotism, drug-dealing and other acts which would be considered crimes in contemporary flesh-world society. If drow parents hated their children, the children would have been disposed of, not grow up at all. The fact that Hermeth' player could not reason his way to that conclusion also indicates his lack of experience.

A player's ritual state, meaning the social activity, work or recreational activity, would however be complicated to ascertain, unless the player told the observer directly. This would often happen. Complaints about homework which needed to be done, about the intrusion of others in the computer lab, about parents insisting on dishes being done, about employers showing up and looking over the shoulder of the player while s/he played, would be offered over the OOC channel. The character's ritual state would be easy to read, carefully constructed if it was a matter of an imaginative player. The character might kneel to pray, might be eating a leisurely meal or have a conference with an associate either secretly or publicly. To reveal this was an important part of the role-play, using a combination of setting, appearance and manner to signal the ritual state.

The front of a role-play character tends to be pretty easy to put together and uphold. For a player who is reasonably aware of the signals most people read and interpret, a front can

be constructed on the base of the information of the fictional universe as well as on the patterns learned from the flesh-world. But with the low bandwidth and the ease of representation of self with a very controlled front built through some simple signals comes the danger of misrepresentation.

Misrepresenting yourself

Computer mediated interaction is limited by the computer, but that also means that it opens a whole wide range of new opportunities for disguising flaws or truths which the user or player does not wish to communicate. Sometimes this misrepresentation of the player's self is unintended, as in Stone's description of the cross-dressing psychiatrist's first experience of being taken for a woman online (1996:70). Online interaction depends on the signal-decoding skills of the recipient as well the encoding skills of the sender, and if the two happen to read different meaning into certain signals, misrepresenting will occur. This is often a factor when web-based discussions suddenly explode into flaming on mailing lists, and what the victim thought to be an innocent statement turns out to be the target of attacks, or is being interpreted as some unforgivable, extreme offence.

The next step of the cross-dressing psychiatrist of Stone was, however, the deliberate misleading of others. Through signs and statements, Lewin presented himself as a woman named Julie. Goffman writes about *Misrepresentation*:

If this tendency of the audience to accept signs places the performer in a position to be misunderstood and makes it necessary for him to exercise expressive care regarding everything he does when before the audience, so also this sign-accepting tendency puts the audience in a position to be duped and misled, for there are few signs that can not be used to attest to the presence of something that is not really there. And it is plain that many performers have ample capacity and motive to misrepresent the facts; only shame, guilt, or fear prevent them from doing so. (1959:58)

The mythical online persona Sanford Lewin is a typical example of how sign-acceptance lead to people being misled, and this is perhaps the largest problem with online fraud, as well as the source of fear and worry of parents whose children chat online. Too ready acceptance of signs make the children vulnerable to being misled, and the potential for misunderstandings, or of being duped, is large. This, most likely, is one of the important reasons why there is a fear of the new technology. Instead of aiming their worry concerning what the children may be led into through their online encounters at the social behaviour of other humans, worried parents tend to aim their anger and fear at the technology. The technology only opens for new ways of misrepresenting yourself - it is the human agent before the screen who chooses to misrepresent him/herself or to believe in the performance of others.

In the case of role-playing, this misrepresentation is conscious and open. Role-playing is a way of training yourself into understanding the signs of deception, their nature and the potential of creating different impressions of your personae within a protected environment. An experienced role-player does not only understand how to put on a performance, he or she also knows how to recognise one, or realise the potential of a presentation as being a performance. In many ways role-play games can be seen as a training-ground for online

communication. They provide a protected area of play where it is not just accepted that the players toy with different signs of their performance, it is expected. Everybody knows this is going on, and they will reward each other for such behaviour, give advice as to how to do things better or criticise each other if it is not done well enough. In role-playing games such as *Dragon Realms* there will also be people with experience of the less benevolent side of online performances, and most games contain help-files warning players against giving out their real names, addresses or phone-numbers to others in the game. While creating a safe haven for learning how to interact to obtain the desired effect, online role-play games act as awareness practice for the Internet innocent.

What's so special about role-playing?

When faced with a role-playing game, it's important to be aware that the difference between a role-playing game and every-day life isn't necessarily the acts or the costumes. It's not uncommon to role-play present-day situations. The difference is most noticeable on a meta level.

In everyday life the roles we all play are accepted as natural behaviour. Women behave like this, men like that, and children learn as they grow. There is some awareness of how we all play roles, but it's rarely expressed in a language that makes this clear. Quite the opposite, the language used to explain how people behave and why they do it, is frequently obscure and vague, rather than clear and precise. 'Because that's the way it is supposed to be' or 'that's not the way to talk to your superiors' is as often as not the explanation that goes with a reprimand. Praise is equally vague, leaving the children to learn their roles not by conscious choice, but by trial and error.

In a role-playing game the roles are not only consciously chosen, the characters shaped to fit them, but they are also discussed. This is why the players, for instance Mariah, felt that they experimented with different roles: not so much because they skipped from one mode of behaviour to another, but because they did it deliberately. If we analyse our own behaviour, most of us have at some point in life tried out different roles to see how they fit. The difference is that not all of us considered that it was a role we changed into. The catchphrase from the 70ies about 'finding yourself' can also be taken to mean finding your ideal role, the role in which you are comfortable and feel secure, the one played with the least effort.

This turns role-playing MUDs into fields for social experimentation, as they have been described frequently by among others Bruckman, Turkle and Stone, but social experimentation once removed from the reality of the user. Role-playing MUDs such as *Dragon Realms* invite experimentation, but they invite experimentation within the strict limitations of the rules of the game. These limitations are what keep the players aware of the roles they play. Their automatic everyday response would be wrong in most cases, and this forces the players to an awareness not just of the character, but how the character is not the same as themselves. When I play a man in a MUD, I don't play 'Torill as a male', I play that character, which also happens to be male. This means that I don't experiment as much with what it would be like to be a male as with how it would be like to be that particular male; in the case of Vind a rich, spoiled, extremely handsome and more than a little sadistic bastard of a male elf. And while the experience was amusing, challenging and immersive, it was also conscious and distanced from how I experience myself.

This distance makes role-playing games less useful as environments for personality experiments than the MUDs in Turkle's descriptions, but at the same time it makes for a buffer between the personality of the player and the personality of the character. Since I am very aware that I am not Vind, I am also very aware that I cannot poison opponents when they annoy me. In the same way a child who experiments with the role of a maniacal killer will be healthily aware that the persona that can murder innocent babes in their beds is not his or her own, but that of the character: an imaginary character belonging to a fantasy world on a server somewhere else and far away.

Ninth interlude - On managing and building a MUD

The next two texts are taken from the interviews in Portland, Oregon, with the players William and Elisabeth. They were both administrators, William had been an immortal at *Dragon Realms*, and was working on *Aarinfel* at the time of the interview. Elisabeth had left *Dragon Realms* and stopped playing there, and was now building and administrating *Dragon Realms*. Both moved on to design *Azhad* with two other immortals from *Aarinfel*.

They have very different views on building and administration. William has clear ideas about administration and a goal which relates to controlling the game, while Elisabeth has clear ideas about building and not the least, playing, while administration is a necessary evil for her. The main difference is in how they describe their areas. For William building an area is a problem, a puzzle to be solved to make it fit into the main fiction of the game. For Elisabeth the same process is mainly concerned with the use of her rooms, and the way they are realised through playing. She wants people in her MUD, in order to watch them and play with them, while the MUD comes alive.

William

Torill: What is your primary concern as a builder? What do you really want to do?

William: As a builder? I think my primary concern is just making something that looks good and is durable. That's one of the major differences between *Aarinfel* and *Dragon Realms*, we had to step up - we did step up realism a lot. You couldn't have a cities street where it was always night, for instance. You couldn't have quests where when you went through a second time it would react the same way. You couldn't have a treasure chest you could raid for the same materials several times, because that had to belong to somebody. So - that currently a lot of that is to try to find a way to integrate - a lot of my major concerns is try to find a way to integrate realism with something that's playable and entertaining. I think entertainment would probably be the most significant concern - as a builder.

Torill: MMHMM. Is that a problem to get these two things to work together, is it difficult?

William: It has been so far.

Torill: How? Why is that?

William: I think a lot of it is just that our instincts were... I learned all my instincts on *Dragon Realms*, where you didn't have to worry about realism, you could have the infinitely raidable treasure chest, or orcs would come back every time you killed them, and there'd never be any legal punishment for it. So, it's a thing to get used to - and realism is in many ways to try to mimic the real world, which is an incredibly complicated place. All of these tiny little variables to match up, and work out how something would go differently if somebody said this instead of this...

Torill: So that's what you feel is the greatest challenge, to get to that point where you manage to make it realistic but still enjoyable?

William: It seems to be - I mean, it's been a great challenge so far.

Torill: What is the standard for enjoyable? Or fun?

William: I guess that would be my standard. If I can enjoy it, then it's enjoyable.

Torill: What would you think is fun?

William: I don't know how to define that properly. It's... something stimulating and believable? And - ah...

Torill: you can use an example, for something which has been fun?

William: In terms of the MUD – well, I always like the fey circle for instance, that was always a lot of fun, that was I think one of Kelly's better areas. And just all of the various things going on there – there was always something going on there. And all the time you could spend just gawking slackjawed at the scenery, there was always something going on there, little bells in the trees... and detail. And the various odd little things.. the characters and the way they would talk and come to life. Oh, that was great entertainment; it was like a virtual amusement park.

Torill: yeah, that's a good example. So what you like then is the detail and the interaction. When you administrate - will you say that building and administration is two different things?

William: Completely different.

Torill: What is your primary concern as an administrator?

William: Maintain a consistent atmosphere and theme, and get everyone to move in the same direction without hurting too many people's feelings. We – we have this was mentioned in the car, we had somebody leave because we weren't thought to be fantastic enough, we criticised his background for being completely incoherent and unmatched to the world, it was – something which was obviously composed mostly offblind, had nothing whatever to do with the stuff he'd actually encounter. We get that a lot with people who get to be the Prince of an undersea kingdom raided by air-breathing orcs or something. Actually that was a Dragon Realms one – but most of the administration is right now just approving backgrounds and dealing with the crises which pop up when a player does something really... well, we get a lot of fights between players, or players breaking rules, and then we sort of have to sweep up afterwards. We had a rash of headhunting recently which we had to resolve. Basically it was just one who was approaching every single person she knew asking them if they wanted to come imm on her MUD. And it wasn't until she came to one of our builders that we really found out about it. We didn't actually lose any players except her and one person who was losing interest anyhow. But it was still an uncomfortable and aggravating situation for everybody concerned. Which is what administration ends up being in a mud, in my experience.

Elisabeth

Torill: Does your observation skills change when you have to translate your mental image into a lower bandwidth experience than when you just translate it over to painting?

Elisabeth: Definitely. In some ways the interaction is simplified, but in terms of forms of expression it's actually much more complicated I think to try to express something on a MUD than to express something on a painting. Then again a painting is to me almost more equivalent to writing a book. Or perhaps even less so, it depends on the media. I do water colour, and once you put something down on a water colour it's down, it's onto the paper. You can go to a new painting, and try to redo it, and you can revolve it through these layered elements, you know these very static elements, but again it does not have the dynamics that a MUD does. And it is a .. I think it requires a lot more attention to express something on the MUD if only because of the complexity, the layeredness of it, the fact that if you act something onto it, it acts back. Which does require you – both in the element that in fact it is text, and it is a limited bandwidth, you only have one colour, one brush, it's only one way you can get everything across, so you have to concentrate everything into that one medium. An in the fact that it's constantly throwing – in the painting it's you put the brush down on the canvas, and the painting shifts underneath what you have

done, and it changes from what you intended the stroke to be. And then you have to react to something that's moving with you, sort of as you involve yourself with it.

Elisabeth: On some level I think that it's definitely improved – it's improved my writing tremendously and it's improved my ability to verbalise things tremendously and it's – I mean I don't think I used analogy as much as I ever did when I was building. And I mean not even in the interaction but you know, doing a room – especially that silly palace, that big Eisle of Fast (The palace of the court of Et'Thalior, in which we both at the time had player characters), there's just only so many – it forces you, it's like it's an other big large fancy elaborate room with marble floors, and it's two hundred of them and you have to describe each one different. You have to you know: how does the light strike this texture, how does the you know – how many ways can you describe that it's – how many gilded things can you put in a room before you run out of descriptions of marble? I definitely think it forces you to not only deal with expanding your vocabulary, you have to meet the challenge of it...I am so tired of it. It was fortunate that I didn't burn myself out on that one, isn't it?

Torill: you need to make a totally plain village or something.

Elisabeth: Exactly, or a swamp or marsh or something Trees, slimy little bugs... but if I have to describe one more stained-glass window it's all over you know.

Torill: When you build, what's your primary concern? What do you really think about that you want to do?

Elisabeth: For me it's actually it's giving a sense of real space. I have these images in my mind – I think of Eisle of Fast particularly, because I think for me it was the biggest project I ever had to tackle, the biggest one I completed. But I mean I had an image of what spaces I knew in real life, and it was all based off bysantine architecture, I mean Mosques – cathedrals – what I would picture Constantinople to be.

Elisabeth: But for me it was I had a very clear image of what it would be like. I mean I can walk around that space in my head, I have a very clear idea of what it looks like, and I wanted to, as best I could, and the way that didn't overwhelm people, to make it feel like you were really in something. IT was multi-sensory, it wasn't just visual, you knew what it smelt like, you knew what it felt like – like an added sort of illusion of reality. With just words, which was the – which is the challenge there. That's the interest there, that's the...

Elisabeth: But I mean for me it's so real, for me it exists somewhere. And to be able to take something out of your head and put it somewhere where other people can go into it and experience it, that's something that's very cool, That's more than – you can do it in a book, in some sense, but it's not real in a book even for me. Once you take a book it's private. I mean it's the person's private experience with a world, they take it and they put it in their head and they can experience it. But with the game and with being online I can put it outside of myself and into the world and then people can come to it. It's a totally – the dynamics are completely different for that. Even in a sense of book it's not real.. footsteps don't echo in a book. In my mind I can – as long as people are interacting in that space it still lives in some way. Because it's so many minds centred on one thing. And it makes it – and with each person who interacts – they are constantly adding to it.

Torill: So you feel it's constantly recreated

Elisabeth: yes

Torill: And changing in essence and adding new depth at each step, every time it's being used by someone else.

Elisabeth: And not even that, the world, the world is like revolving around – in some sense there's a virtual

sun that rises and sets over it. There's a sense of time, there's a sense of – you get a sense of space, and you get a sense that... yes, exactly, with every person who comes in they add something to it, they see something there that I didn't put in. And that's the coolest thing that someone walks in and they put the chair in the corner that really should have been there – in my mind it was there. But it's not in the description. But when they walk into the room they put the chair in the right place. And that's the – that's really incredibly powerful, for someone to see something in your head that you – that's not physically anywhere else. Because then it's moved beyond the description, it's moved beyond the words that are sitting there.

Chapter 10: A place in the MUD

In role-playing MUDs, the arena is defined by the program and the builders, and mapping it is complicated and occasionally made even more so by those who create the arena. Still the metaphor of space is powerful and enduring, and players speak of the different little bits of text describing different settings in the MUD as rooms. They talk of movement and speed, of roads and paths, when what is really happening when the character moves from Haven or Azur is that the program lets you browse through its stored information in a certain manner. Only the administrators have power to access the information directly, all others need to follow some path that creates an illusion of space and particularly of place. This illusion of place is not restricted to MUDs: the metaphors of physical movement are powerful and enduring, to the point that Sherry Turkle suggests that online is its own place. But is the 'place' I am accessing, when I log on to the Net so alien compared to physical places?

Computer space

The space in front of the screen, the computer itself, the mechanical object and everything around it has a role in my flesh-world, even in my flesh-home. But when I turn on the computer I become focused on a space of departure rather than a place to dwell in. In front of the computer the potential of absorption of attention becomes evident. I am focused elsewhere.

Janice Radway, in her study of women reading romances and other popular literature, found that one of the reasons women gave for reading was that they could enter into a sphere of privacy, or even a sphere which was 'elsewhere'. Radway quotes one of her interviewees, Dot.: "For a while Dan was not thrilled that I was reading a lot. Because I think men do feel threatened. They want their wife to be in the room with them. And I think my body is in the room but the rest of me is not (when I am reading)." (Radway 1984:87)

While Radway's interviewees reported how their families resented this absence or being elsewhere, it was accepted that they did not respond to the demands of their family while absorbed by reading. 'Mommy reads' to the women in Radway's study was as good a reason for not paying constant attention to others, as was the physical absence of the men when they attend to sports or other activities described by the women in the study. They also put emphasis on the sensation of departure, when prompted by the question "Why do you read":

Ann: To be entertained; escapism, armchair traveling. One of the things I enjoy about Harlequins is that they are so geographically correct - in their facts. I had a friend who traveled to Ireland every year. She's the one who got me to read them. She had hers classified - her collection [of Harlequins] - she'd rip the front cover off and classify them by place.

She'd travel to one of these places, and she'd say, "I was there this time. It was just like so and so wrote. You turn that one corner and there's that well, and that tree, and there's that.... (1984:110)

This inner absence or inner exile is a state of absorption and detachment, easily recognised in the computer game player. The acts and attention are turned elsewhere, and by aid of the metaphor of geographical space, the computer games create a different location: A home away from home, similar to the experience quoted in chapter 9, where one of Turkle's interviewees says: "I feel like I have more stuff in my room on the MUD than I have off it" (Turkle 1995:240). In a culture where home can be said to be less where the heart is and more where we store our favourite possessions, the entrance to the Internet leads to the home away from home - a space with no physical definition but heavily infused with social and symbolic definition where her favourite possessions in the shape of tiny bits of programming are stored.

This space online resembles what Henri Lefebvre (1974) describes as a social space:

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. At the same time there is nothing imagined, unreal of 'ideal' about it as compared, for example, with science, representations, ideas or dreams. Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. Among these actions, some serve production, others consumption (i.e. the enjoyment of the fruits of production). (Lefebvre 1974:73)

The space in MUDs and MOOs and in playMUDs particularly, are distinguished by these qualities. Certain operations has created the space and defined the role of the player's representation within it. Fresh action occurs, both of production: programming and building, or consumption: playing.

Computer games offer this same sensation of having a 'home away from home' which Turkle's interviewee describes. Most of them offer a feature that makes the statistics of the character viewable, "you" can see "your" possessions and abilities. In a mimicry of the manner in which I will keep the proof of my education, civil status, credit cards and vital possessions of every kind in a place where I can keep it safe but still have access to it, the stats-page of a character lets you see what you have 'got'.

To play a game is to let yourself take off into this space, obeying Huizinga's rules of the nature of a game: "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration. This is the third main characteristic of play: its secludedness, its limitedness. It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning" (1950:9). Single-user computer games display this characteristic flawlessly. The computer itself functions as a limitation and a manner to seclude - to penetrate into the space of the game becomes impossible unless invited or permitted, achievement being the key to invitation through advancement. Even in top-level football matches there is a potential for intrusion,

for supporters storming the arena, or dogs to escape their owners to join in the happy chase of the ball on the turf. In a single-user computer game the intrusion can not be into the game itself, only into the entrance-point: the interface where fingers touches keys.

The importance of being identified

Multiple-User Dungeons are secluded, exclusive arenas of play, which represent themselves as places rather than non-places. They demand the same manner of identification as crossing the borders of countries - they ask for a name and a password - identification unique to the player. In the games included in this study there is a penalty for assuming the identity of another upon entering. The reaction is very similar to the punishment for entering a country under false pretensions: the player will be rejected and banned

To steal another person's persona is a type of power play reminiscent of Mr. Bungle in Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" (1998), where he made the avatars of others speak his words. While playing with identity is accepted in the gaming-sites, playing with identification is not, as this is the only way for others to know who they are relating to – or rather, which aspect of a certain flesh-and-blood player they are relating to. As Mariah says:

Mariah: I think everybody play shadows of themselves. I don't think you can ever get away from yourself. As hard as you are trying, you are still playing yourself playing something. You are still you. And so, all of it is going to be at least a shade of yourself, because at the very least you are portraying something you believe the thing is like. So it is always you, it might be just a shade of you which might not be what you are used to be every day. (Mariah, interview 16.9.99)

What the different passwords do, is permit others to be certain that while they might not be talking, chatting, playing or in other manners interacting with a faithful representation of the person behind a personae, they are interacting with the same controller of the 'shade of you' in every session.

This need for identification is also necessary to be able to maintain the secrecy of the play-arena. As Huizinga (1950:12) states, this is an important factor of maintaining the nature of play: "The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy. Even in early childhood play is enhanced by making a "secret" out of it." To keep a secret restricted access to the play is necessary. In online games like *Dragon Realms*, *Aarinfel* and *Lu'Tamohr*, the restrictions went beyond demanding a password when entering. A new player had to go through a process of screening. In *Dragon Realms* you had to be approached by an administrator – an immortal – to be permitted to play at all. The main purpose of this check was to make certain no player had two characters in the game at the same time. Once you were approved, you were permitted to enter into the game, but with certain limitations. On the 'who-list' (the list of characters in the game displayed when typing *who* and hitting enter while playing the game) a new player would be shown as belonging to the clan 'Haven':

[Hum Mal] Xeziar Borealis Silverdew, Bardic High Mage of [ARCANA]
[Mer Mal] Zalgi Hirdar. [ARCANA]

[Elf Fem] Zindwyn Borealis Silverdew, Magister of [ARCANA]
 [Pix Fem] Ylara, Justice of [ARCANA]
 [Dwa Mal] (Busy) Wotrac [HAVEN]
 [Mer Mal] Soumanl, Lord Marshall of the [RED GAUNTLET]
 [Elf Fem] Erinn [HAVEN]
 [Elf Fem] Essiadora [HAVEN]
 [Dwa Mal] (BATTLE) Cromath Wigdi. The last Balserazian
 [Orc Mal] Corthcorth, Seeking Scars, Cook of the Skinshields [ORCS]
 [Hum Mal] (Outlaw) Beobey [DRAGONLORD]
 [Elf Mal] Handion [HAVEN]
 [Elf Mal] (BATTLE) Hynomynon Barru

The **[HAVEN]** flag was yellow and very visible on the black background, to warn all other players of the privileges granted new players, as well as to remind the player that this character was not yet approved for being fully integrated into the intrigues and play among the different clans. *Aarinfel* had no initial screening, but they limited the abilities of the new players, and gave them another flag, also in very visible yellow (visible against the black screen of most MUD-clients): **(New Player)**. Both *Dragon Realms* and *Aarinfel* had certain rules for when to remove the different flags, on *Dragon Realms* the character had to write a public and private background, rise 10 levels and be rewarded a favour point (FP) On *Aarinfel* the players have to write a private background and be sponsored by an established player.

This ensures the secrecy and the sensation of being apart from the real world, even if it is taking place in a space where everybody with a computer in principle has access. The sensation of being different and secret is also enhanced by wearing and addressing each other with something other than the real names, using the names and relating to the appearance of the personae. Or, as Huizinga says:

The “differentness” and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in “dressing up”. Here the “extra-ordinary” nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual “plays” another part, another being. He *is* another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises. (1950:13)

MUD-characters are perfect for playing ‘dressing up’. Erinn, the character I played, even as a newbie with little custom-fitted equipment, looked very different from myself:

A tall, slim elven woman with golden hair like a river flowing down her back, and two golden eyes that watches everything about her calmly. Her hands are slim, but look strong and useful. Graceful movements and her shape bear witness of a well-trained body.

Erinn is in perfect health.

Erinn is using:	
<worn on head>	a leather headband
<worn on ear>	a silvered earring
<worn around neck>	a warm-looking cloak
<worn on body>	a cloth vest
<worn about body>	a woollen cape
<worn about waist>	a leather belt
<worn on legs>	a pair of cloth leggings
<worn on feet>	a pair of worn leather boots
<worn on arms>	a pair of cloth sleeves
<worn around wrist>	a cloth bracer
<worn around wrist>	a cloth bracer
<worn on hands>	a pair of cloth gloves
<worn as shield>	a small shield [Worn]
<wielded>	a dagger
<held>	a needle [Flawed]
<floating nearby>	(Glowing) a bright ball of light

Almost a year later her personality had changed and filled out, and my skill at playing had grown. I had received a lot of favour points, and these could be used to enhance the look of the character through asking for renames from the administrators. This is what Erinn looked like after a rename-spree in the late days of the game, when she was one of the most influential persons in the court of Arcana, no longer acting as their undercover agent, and married to Eristeth, a powerful healer and second in command in the clan:

A tall, slim elven woman, with golden hair falling like a river down her back to her waist. In her fey face, two calm golden eyes watch the world from over accentuated cheekbones. She moves with the grace of a dancer, her shape hinting at a well-trained body. Slim, long hands look strong and efficient, and she keeps them calm and visible. Dressed in dark colours, she does not stand out in any environment, her sombre dress muting the sense of watching a very young elf, a lost child of some ancient dawn. Erinn is in perfect health.

Erinn is using:	
<worn on head>	a long tan velvet ribbon twined through her hair
<worn on ear>	a tiger's eye set against an enamel stud
<worn on ear>	a tiger's eye set against an enamel stud
<worn on eyes>	a pair of spectacles rimmed with darkened bone
<worn around neck>	a pendant of onyx, with a stylized falcon etched in gold
<worn on body>	a vest of charcoal black leather, lined with tan fur
<worn about body>	a cloak of soft, oiled silk
<worn about waist>	a broad, grey leather belt
<worn on legs>	a grey skirt lined with black silk
<worn on feet>	a pair of soft soled, black leather boots
<worn on arms>	a grey silk shirt with pale threads

<worn around wrist>	a gold bracelet
<worn around wrist>	a gold bracelet
<worn on hands>	dark grey fingerless gloves
<worn on finger>	(Glowing) A circle of moonstone with a silver fox
<worn on finger>	a ring set with a watery aquamarine
<worn as shield>	a shield studded with rusty nails
<wielded>	a crystal epee
<held>	a smooth, brown stone
<floating nearby>	(Glowing) a golden mageball, wrapped in dark iron

When playing Erinn I imagined that I was her, and even as I write these lines, the description brings back the sensation of being Erinn as I remember the different items. Almost everything was renamed according to Erinn's nature and looks. This memory of being Erinn is not the surrogate memory of the post-card, as Catharina Gabrielsson (2000) describes it in the catalog to the exhibition *Common places* by Mikael Levin:

The postcard as 'surrogate memory', as verification of 'I was there' resonates in the complex construction of passing time and traces of events that once took place there. If the postcard is the epitome of a collective and therefore to some extent 'false' memory, then these images tell the opposite: of memory as the most personal of cultural constructions, the subjective pointing-out of 'I knew someone who lived there' or 'I remember what you used to be there'. The place in these images becomes, in effect, the presence of absence. What appears is what no longer is.

The most important function of memory is to shape identity. Without memory, one is 'nobody'; without shared memory nothing collective can exist. (Gabrielsson 2000)

I have no postcards from *Dragon Realms*, what I have is shared memories – and a lot of them trivial. While the highlights of playing Erinn were the dramatic moments of role-playing, sneaky attacks or spectacular battles, what gave her an identity was the time spent in the game doing trivial tasks related to advancing and maintaining a character. To gain levels, explore areas, find out where the other characters liked to hang out, check out items – the MUD equivalent of everyday life – was the base of the identity of Erinn. That was what turned her from an avatar into a personae with skills and knowledge specific to the place she 'lived' in.

Dragon Realms absorbed the players, to the point that the immortals would ask some of them to archive for a week or a month, and play a different character. Huizinga points out this as one of the characteristics of games: "Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players" (1950:8). One of the immortals, William, the player of Azhanith, touches on this in an interview:

William: I think a lot of it is also that people get into fights much on these Muds, and competition gets really intense, again because there's not much to lose except the pride-issues, and so you can just build your character up and get revenge in a way, and you can plot forever the revenge in some way, and devote yourself to that – to this unhealthy insane passion, where a lot of the breakers would kick in in real life, like say the police, or restraining orders, they don't come up in a MUD. (interview 18.09.1999)

When in a game, there is no reason for outside breakers to “kick in”, because a game is a world of its own with rules of its own:

These rules in their turn are a very important factor in the play-concept. All play has its rules. They determine what “holds” in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. (...) Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed, the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire’s whistle breaks the spell and sets “real” life going again. (Huizinga 1950:11)

Creating history and culture along the information highway

Surfing the Net for chat-rooms, the traveller often encounters territorial behaviour. This according to Augé should be a sign that I have found a place rather than a non-place: “The place held in common by the ethnologist and those he talks about is simply a place: the one occupied by the indigenous inhabitants who live in it, cultivate it, defend it, mark its strong points and keep its frontiers under surveillance” (1995:42).

Chatters tend to become protective of the room and what they understand as the benefits of their regular meeting ‘place’, the URL or online connection point where they find the software to let everybody connect. Strangers are questioned and tested before being accepted, and offensive behaviour is punished by flaming or shunning. The games with their space of mystery and drama are even more protective. Not only are people asked to identify themselves at entering, they also have to learn the history of the place – both the fictional history, which is the frame of the stories created, experienced and told, but also the history of the different characters.

One example of the creation of a new ‘immortal’ and the creation of a historical ‘marker’ in the game, was the advent of Azhanith. Azhanith in the flesh-world is my interviewee William, but I had no idea of that when I learned the history of Azhanith. That was the kind of history that traveled through hearsay, not written anywhere. The help-files says this about him:

Azhanith: As the patron of Mystery and Illusion, it is fitting that Azhanith should be largely an enigma to the Realms. It (even gender is not evident) is apparently a recent phenomenon, appearing only well after the escape of Balpherus. However, there are references to Azhanith in ancient, arcane texts, and it claims to remember the Great War clearly. There are rumors that Azhanith is not a God at all, but is of the Fey, or is even one of the Princes of Hell. In any case, wherever the moon shines, Azhanith might be found, granting double-edged wisdom and pursuing inscrutable ends.

The ‘true story’ of Azhanith was that he was a mage of Arcana, who happened to stumble upon the moon palace and its innermost secret:

The Court Of Mystery

[Exits: down]

Standing here, you can no longer be sure of anything. This is an elegant theatre of a chamber, in which the walls hold windows to the night sky, but themselves contain all

the bright stars as well. Above you, the ceiling reveals a moon, looming imposingly in a way which should be impossible. You are not sure if there is a floor beneath you at all, or just a descent through heatless silver flame into endless mystery.

(Glowing) An eddy of moonlight drifts through the air.

(Glowing) (Humming) An immense sphere of silver hangs motionless in the air.

The silver heart – the humming sphere of silver, was a repository of power, which Azhanith could use in the fight to keep Opal and Arcana safe in the struggle against the Dragon Lords. This gave him such immense power that he was taken to be a god, and he became immortal for all practical purposes. The history of William in the game is that he himself built the Moon Palace, and then the character Azhanith was created to rule the palace. The ‘real power’ behind the Palace is forgotten, or not revealed. This gave Azhanith/William a wide field to play on: it might be evil, and twist Azhanith’s intent of aiding Arcana into serving Dragon.

This becomes part of the history of the game, which some of its players experience through their characters, In the same manner as we experience the history of the world. At an other level there is the private history of the characters – the Court of Mystery became where Erinn and Eristeth left their stillborn child after a disastrous birth. That is also the place where Eristeth came back to life after having given his life up to Azhanith in the body of Eystyx. And this is just the private history of two characters; the game became packed with such events that made it a *place* for its players.

We can argue that it is not really a place, there is nowhere to put your feet, or even your fingers, down on a physical spot. But are not territories claimed and defined in the minds of its inhabitants, rather than by geological phenomena?

The place common to the ethnologist and its indigenous inhabitants is in one sense (the sense of the Latin word *invenire*) an invention: it has been discovered by those who claim it as their own. Foundation narrative are only rarely narratives about autochthony; more often they are narratives that bring the spirits of the place together with the first inhabitants in the common adventure of the group in movement. (Augé 1995:43)

The players and the administrators weave the stories of their characters together, and the intruder, the stranger strolling by and deciding to linger finds that there is history to each and every one of the characters about him, history on several levels, just as it is to the people in a flesh-world geographical space.

How can I talk about *place* though, when there is no physical surrounding *space*? Augé (1995:53) answers this for me, when he addresses Louis Marin. Louis Marin, for his part, borrows Furetière’s Aristotelian definition of place (‘primary and immobile surface of a body which surrounds another body or, to speak more clearly, the space in which a body is placed’¹) and quotes his example: ‘every body occupies its place.’

Adhering to such a definition of *place* I could make no claim to such status for a game,

¹ Augé quotes Louis Marin: “Le lieu du pouvoir à Versailles”, in *La Production des lieux exemplaires*, Les Dossiers des seminaries TTS, 1991, p 89.

which is, physically, a certain arrangement of electromagnetic pulses stored in RAM. However, Augé continues:

But this singular and exclusive occupation is more that of a cadaver in its grave than of the nascent living body. In the order of birth and life, the proper place, like absolute individuality, becomes more difficult to define and think about. Michel de Certeau² perceives the place, of whatever sort, as containing the order 'in whose terms elements are distributed in relations of coexistence' and, although he rules out the possibility of two things occupying the same 'spot', although he admits that every element in the place adjoins other, in a specific 'location', he defines the place as an 'instantaneous configuration of positions'. (Augé 1995:53-54)

While it is a long stretch to claim that a MUD is a physical place, to claim that it is a social place is easier. One indication of this is the territorial behaviour mentioned before. There is also the social behaviour, the way the inhabitants tend to seek each other out in certain clusters, which are resistant to outside pressures or attempts to split them. One player whose character Sylais was a member of Privateer (independent seafaring mercenaries/pirates) admitted that he would like to play in Arcana (the mages' clan fighting against Dragon), but if he did, he would betray his IC clanmates to his Out Of Character friends. The game did not only have the characteristics of an arena with teams, it had the characteristics of a place where humans dwell. It might not be MacLuhan's global village, more of a global city - with many OOC neighbourhoods, cultures and subcultures occupying a commonly perceived area with history, culture, rules, codes of conduct and intertwining relationships of love, like, dislike and aversion.

The idea that there might be actual places, as in anthropological or social sense, on the Net, is denied by Bolter and Grusin, who also use Augé for their discussion of the Net as a non-place:

To Augé's list of non-places we would add cyberspace itself: the Internet and other manifestations of networked digital media. Cyberspace is not, as some assert, a parallel universe. It is not a place of escape from contemporary society, or indeed from the physical world. It is considered a non-place, with much of the same characteristics as other highly mediated nonplaces. Cyberspace is the shopping mall in the ether; it fits smoothly into our contemporary networks of transportation, communication, and economic exchange. (1999:176)

However, this argument does not give credit to the places that are experienced as more than shopping malls online. They give an example of the characteristics of a non-place:

Non-places, such as theme parks and malls, function as public places only during designated hours of operation. There is nothing as eerie as an airport at three o'clock in

² Here Augé quotes Michel de Certeau (1990 edn): *L'Invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire*, Gallimard, 'Folio-Essais'.

the morning, or a theme park after closing hours. When the careful grids of railings and ropes that during the day serve to shepherd thousands of visitors to ticket counters or roller coasters stand completely empty. Such spaces then seems drained of meaning. (Bolter and Grusin 1999:177)

This gives the assumption that the *places* in Cyberspace actually stand empty. *Dragon Realms* was never empty, unless something had happened to empty it out, like the server being down. There were always at least 4-5 people logged on. It was a meeting-place without closing hours. If you logged off at bedtime, you could expect something to have happened before you logged on the next day – the game lived on, it was not an amusement park where the carousels were turned off at 10 pm.

This was of course caused by the fact that *Dragon Realms* had players from all over the world. An older, well-established online place that is also distinguished by the fact that it is never empty, closed and turned off, is *The Well*. Just like the large, popular MUDs, *The Well* has participants from all over the world. This is their declaration of internationality:

Where Is The WELL?

The WELL is a cluster of electronic villages on the Internet, inhabited by people from from all over the world. A discussion on the great eateries of Paris might include playful banter from people typing to one another from San Jose, Tokyo, Boston... as well as the Left Bank. Yet the ambiance is all WELL. More than just another “site”, The WELL has a sense of place that is nearly palpable. (The Well 2001)

As Augé distinguishes between places and non-places, they are distinguished by the fact that people pass through the non-places and pass by the places, not by the signs, or what Bolter and Grusin call remediation. Remediation, the act of translating or transferring content from one medium to another, does not create a non-place, more than anything a non-place is distinguished by a certain feeling, ‘something resembling freedom’:

When an international flight crosses Saudi Arabia, the hostess announces that during the overflight the drinking of alcohol will be forbidden in the aircraft. This signifies the intrusion of territory into space. Land = society = nation = culture = religion: the equation of anthropological place, fleetingly inscribed in space. Returning after an hour or so to the non-place of space, escaping from the totalitarian constraints of place, will be just like returning to something resembling freedom. (Augé 1995:116)

This is the same opposition between the non-places of the Net and the more closed places of games, chat-rooms and other areas where the participants have invested effort and resources in their identities, where the individual is no longer passing through, but returns in order to be distinguishable. This distinction does not defy anonymity, as a handle or an avatar over time acquires history and identity and becomes a personae. “The totalitarian constraints of place” are imposed on the players in a MUD, and logging off the game is returning to something resembling freedom... the return to the place of departure, which is not going home.

Social construction of Cyberspace

Mapping out the landscape of Cyberspace seems like a mission impossible. The places as well as non-places shift and move constantly. But if we approach the problem from another angle, the topography of Cyberspace creates Cyberspace. This is reminiscent of Umberto Eco's playful dilemma when he writes of the impossibility of drawing a map of the kingdom in the scale 1:1. Eco's essay contains six demands of a 1:1 scale map, of which I translate the sixth:

6. That the map at the end becomes a semiotic tool, which means that it is able to signify the kingdom or refer to it, particularly when the kingdom cannot be realised in other ways. The latter demand excludes the possibility of the map being a transparent cover stretched over the kingdom, and where the landscape of the territory would be reproduced precisely. In that case any extrapolation on the map would mean a simultaneous extrapolation on the territory beneath, the map would lose its function as a maximally existential diagram.

This is why it is necessary that (a) the map is opaque, or (b) that it is not on top of the territory, or (c) that it is placed so that the points of the map are not touching corresponding points on the territory.

It will turn out that all these three solutions lead to insurmountable practical difficulties and theoretical paradoxes. (Eco 1994:166)³

Eco's essay continues through a wide range of amusing paradoxes, but the most important is that the use of such a map will change the territory which it maps out, and as such, the map will no longer be correct. Or, as Eco says: "At the moment the kingdom draws the map, the kingdom can no longer be represented" (1994:174).

This logic takes a different turn in Mark Nunes' discussion of "Virtual Topographies" (1999:61). His article points out how naming Cyberspace creates Cyberspace.

Topography serves as a highly appropriate word within the discussion of how these metaphors 'write' space. In the way J. Hillis Miller uses the term, topographies are performative speech acts that simultaneously map and create a territory (4-5). With Internet, this performative function is even more marked, since no reassuring "ground" rests beneath the writing of place. (Nune 1999:61)

Nunes goes on to point out that Cyberspace is perceived as a place by its users, "as real as the work and play conducted in it." (1999:61)

In his discussion of Cyberspace as a place, Nunes refers to Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of striated and smooth space, nomad space and sedentary space (Deleuze & Guattari (1987:474), and claims that a MOO is a striated space, a place not of departure, but of arrival:

³ This is translated to Norwegian by Siri Nergaard, and is a collection of playful essays covering a wide range of topics, all of them with humour, irony and a touch of sarcasm. Some of the essays are written in a scholarly genre, but they cover topics like: "How to be a Hollywood Indian", or "How to recognize pornography".

In a MOO your presence expresses itself in terms of proximity to other players within this “virtual space”. In fact, players literally inhabit rooms in the MOO; a player-object stays “inside” the MOO, waiting for its player to log on and “awaken” it. All actions occur within this closed, defined system of the MOO “as a whole” (a cybercity), and within the strictures of a hierarchical arrangement of permissions. (Nunes 1999:71)

At first glance this is obvious, if you think of the MOO of a small dwelling, a place to stop, to cease movement. This presupposes that:

- 1) There is no movement within the MOO, no surfing and shifting within it. *Dragon Relams* contained large areas through which to move, to the point that movement as a statistic was vital in order to play the game at a high level.
- 2) The player who uses the MOO stops there, and does not continue the movement in an other window, using the MOO as a place to touch down occasionally.
- 3) The MOO does not permit links out. A MOO with a web interface such as *lingua.moo* opens out and assists rather than hinder surfing, through the potential for sharing images, links and quotes.

Smooth space is, according to Nunes, represented through the surfing, as opposed to point-to-point contacts of telnet, email and ftp. But in Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of smooth and striated space, they emphasize the user, the nomad’s, experience of space in order to distinguish between smooth and striated space. The same area can be smooth for the nomad who pauses before moving on, and striated for the settled farmer who watches the nomads come and go. One example of a player who acts as a settler is Doris:

TM: you do surfing, you say, what do you do surfing after, how do you use it for surfing?
Doris: I don’t do a lot of it. What I do is basically just going back to places I’ve been before, and rereading.

TM: what kind of things are you looking for?

Doris: The places I go and the places I am looking for – one of them is a map-place and one of them is one of my friends’ homepages – it’s just – just thing I have picked up.

TM: How did you pick them up?

Doris: (laughing) Yes, let’s see. I needed to find a map, so I searched for a map-site, and then some of the places have been given to me by friends. Oh go here, look at this! My cousin’s Web-page was totally random, I found him by chance, I was attempting to find him and then I found his page!

TM: so you spend eight hours online, a day. And you spend it either on the MUD, or on this talker? And since you only surf to places that you know about, or have been told about, that means that your surfing time is relatively small.

Doris: (affirmative)

TM: so what do you do when you’re logged on? you chat or you play?

Doris: Sometimes I just sit. There’s no one there and I just go – Oh well. I just wait until someone arrives. Sometimes I – tinker – changing items. That’s fun. And sometimes I’ll just sit and talk to people, sometimes my sister’s online, and I’ll sit and talk to her, and a couple of people that I know. It depends on who’s on. If there’s nobody there, I’ll just go and do something else.

Torill: you don’t explore or search for other places, where things might be happening?

Doris: no, I've been to a couple of other muds, and I'll either walk in and find it's the same as the infinite point and I go what's the point of playing here, I've got the other one I can play at, or I walk in and it will be totally different, and I can't find my way around, I just go back to someplace I know. I've been to a couple of other ones, and hung around for a week, maybe two, and then I go OK, I am going back....

Doris inhabited the Mud where she used to meet her friends, and the few sites she used online were shown her by the friends she waited for. She was no nomad – she was the setter waiting for the nomads. This is not the common behaviour of a MUD player. Even if the other players might idle in a MUD or a MOO, they didn't dwell in it with this single-minded focus. It would be a spot to check in on when something happened, like keeping a channel open in a radio, and then to engage in the place for a while, a period of activity, before departing.

So where's the place of play?

In these dualistic settings of places and non-places, striated and smooth spaces, I find little room for the play. Bolter and Grusin claim that amusement parks or theme parks (1999:177) are non-places, which should make the non-places places of play. But are *playgrounds* in the understanding of Huizinga non-places? They fit with the limited locality, the different rules, the meeting of many, but are the playgrounds marked with signs and not with culture and history?

“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 1995:78). The question is – is the playground defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity or not?

If the playground isn't a non-place, by Augé's logic, it has to be a place. But it is still a place apart. The football field is apart from the home and daily life, just like a game of football is an experience apart:

More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga 1950:10)

The playground in relation to striated and smooth space defies definition. It is an area of strict rules, often a world apart: “Inside the play-ground absolute order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *isorder*. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme” (1950:10). This is the characteristics of striated space – but at

the same time, striated space represents the state, demands and restrictions (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:491), which play does not acknowledge: “Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task” (Huizinga 1950:8). This is a characteristic not of a hierarchical space, but of a movement dependent on pleasure, desire and enjoyment. According to this, play demands a smooth space, a space of something not just ‘like freedom’ but freedom itself. Play is freedom.

Where does players play?

Somewhere in smooth space, somewhere not a place and not a non-place, but touching and using both, we find the place of play, the playground. Even if I could map all the places where play is supposed to happen, the designated playgrounds, play happens elsewhere as well, simultaneously. Play happens on the mailing lists when they suddenly take off into the ritual of flame wars, and play happens in home-pages of institutions or individuals when there is excess. Because play is born from excess and from pleasure, and will slip out of any designated play-spot to happen elsewhere, be it sexual play or silliness, role-play or competition.

To be able to study play I have to accept that it will happen everywhere, and that the spots particularly assigned to play online are just theme parks on the Net – closed areas to escape into - while play wants to be free, and it breaks out, mutating and taking over any resource it can thwart to its purpose of pleasing and challenging the player.

Tenth interlude – Fey Circle

William mentioned Fey Circle as his ideal for a beautiful area. When a character moved through it, the different NPCs, visible and invisible, would respond in different manners. It was filled with laughter, odd little responses, mystical echoes and lovely descriptions. In the heart of fey dwelled the Queen, Rhianna, cruel and beautiful. This log also contains a riddle, the kind of quests that the players needed to solve in order to utilize the full range of the game: gain entrance to secret areas, find interesting or valuable items, or just for the fun of it. In this case the player who strayed into fey and didn't know about the riddle had a problem – something which is very much attuned to the myths of what happens to the person who falls asleep in the fey circle.

A Field Of Flowers

[Exits: north south]

The moon shines kindly down upon you, now tinged a little with gold. You wade through a field of fragile anemones, the flowers raising their fragrant heads to the moonlight.

(Invis) A beautiful Neriad sits singing a strange song to herself.

A Field Of Flowers

[Exits: south west]

To the south east, upon a hill, you can see the bright blaze of a bonfire and hear the strains of wild and racy music. You can see figures dancing about the fire. The scent of anemones is rising from fields to the south. To the west, a hill rises, its brow lit by moonbeams.

A Field Of Flowers

[Exits: east up]

You are at the base of a hill. To the east, fields of fragrant anemone bend and sway. The hill crest is bathed in moonlight and there is something magical and mysterious about it, that draws you towards it.

A Moonlit Hilltop

[Exits: up down]

How brightly the moon shines down upon this hill. Each beam seems to be almost a solid, translucent thing. Why, you could almost imagine they formed a bridge, rising up into the sky! If only you could fly and follow that strange bridge!

You are flying...

A Bridge Of Moonbeams

[Exits: north down]

You stand upon a bridge of slanting moonbeams. You can see right through their shimmering surface. It seems impossible that they could hold any weight. You are likely to fall to your death. At the far end of the beams, a castle rises, light streaming from its many windows.

You are flying...

A Bridge Of Moonbeams

[Exits: north south]

You have set your feet upon this delicate span, what else to do now but follow it? You can see the moonlit fields far below you. At the end of the bridge stands a castle of white, with towers and turrets and proud banners of bright silks flying in the light breeze.

You are flying...

A Bridge Of Moonbeams

[Exits: north south]

You walk upon a delicate arc of moonlight, made firm by you know not what magical enchantments. The surface shimmers and glitters and you can see clear through it. At the end of this span rises a castle of great beauty, light streaming from its many windows.

(White Aura) On a horse swift as the breeze, a Knight of the Sidhe rides past.

Gateway Of The Castle

[Exits: north south]

You stand before the arched gateway of the castle. The portcullis is raised, the gate stands open, light streams out. From within, music and laughter can be heard, the sound clutching your heart and filling you with longing.

(White Aura) On a horse swift as the breeze, a Knight of the Sidhe rides past.

A Courtyard

[Exits: north south]

You are in a wide courtyard, the flagstones of which gleam whitely. Statues of great beauty adorn the otherwise plain space. A raised portcullis is to the south while to the north stands an open doorway. Music and light stream from here,

A Foyer

[Exits: north south]

The castle foyer is paved with marble and twisted columns support its roof. To either side stand strange and glorious armours, enamelled and engraved with great art. Tapestries of colors more brilliant than you have ever seen adorn the walls, but the subjects are strange ones to you.

The corpse of a mortal servant is lying here.

The corpse of a fey noble is lying here.

(Invis) Servant to a noble Sidhe, a Fey Page waits to serve his master.

The Great Hall

[Exits: north east south west]

You enter into a great hall, tall twisted columns of carved marble

holding aloft the fantastically painted ceiling. At tables set about, beings of marvellous beauty are eating and sporting. Some raise their voices to the air, singing with heartbreaking sweetness. Others play pranks or stare, enamoured, into each other's eyes. Music, laughter and song surround you.

A Silent Servant waits upon the Sidhe, her face expressionless.

The Great Hall

[Exits: east south west]

You move across the hall, aware that those around you see you, but choose to ignore you. Some smile slyly, as if some joke were being played. Others whisper and laugh as you pass. The music and song are masks to the fact that all are studiously avoiding noticing you.

(2) (White Aura) A proud Knight of Sidhe guards his lord and lady.

Rhianna, Lady of the Sidhe, nods in greeting to one of the Fey Court.

Talisan, Lord of the Sidhe, presides in regal glory over the fairy host.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe nods to you slightly.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe gives you a thin smile.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Be welcome in the Court of the Sidhe, Mortal. Eat and Drink, I pray thee.'

Talisan, lord of the Sidhe inclines his head slightly in greeting.

(Fey) You say 'greetings, lady, would you give me a quest?'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe frowns at what you did.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Who told you to ask for this?'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'What makes you think you have the right, mortal?'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe pouts.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Well, you must ask me NICELY for your riddle!'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe smiles slyly.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Then we shall see, little mortal'

(Fey) You say 'Please, a riddle'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'I know a thousand faces'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'And count the tailed heads'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Feasing bright upon the eyes'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Of many who have died'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Wielding well a might power'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Who hath but humble stature'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Masses fall upon their knees'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'To behold my only side'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe laughs.

(Fey) You say 'That is as golden as my eyes, it is a coin'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe grits her teeth and rages furiously.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'So! You are clever, but are you brave?!'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'Are you willing to undertake a quest and earn our gratitude?'

(Fey) You say 'Sorry, but no'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe laughs at you mercilessly. Hmmmmp.

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'It is as I thought, all mortals are cowards!'

Rhianna, lady of the Sidhe says 'You tire me excessively, mortal. Begone!'

Chapter II: Concluding Paragraphs

The Digital Juggler

When I began this research project, a ‘player’ often brought to mind the image of a juggler. The people I played with; from the young and somewhat hyperactive boys and girls (men and women by now) at *World’s End*, where I played the feline Cissycat, to the more mature players at *Dragon Realms*, *Aarinfel* and *Lu’Tamohr*, were all able to multitask with impressive speed and precision. The idea of comparing players to jugglers is derived from this skill. Players are digital jugglers; able to keep metaphorical balls, flaming brands and china cups in the air. They are both focused and relaxed; going with the flow, but still in control.

The working title also refers to a ball game I used to play as a child, which I don’t see as often these days. It was a juggling type of game, where you had to execute certain patterns, both moving yourself and throwing the balls in certain sequences. One of the interesting aspects of the game was that it could be adjusted to the level of each single player, without becoming exclusive. The fumbler might play with one ball, the acrobat with three; but the basic rules of the game were the same. If one person was much more adept than the others, she would elevate the level of difficulty. Her turn would end when she made an error, and another player would take over the balls. Though the game definitely had a touch of performance and an element of competition, it also had a high degree of participation. During a 10-minute recess, all participants were permitted one or more turns, and social considerations regulated the level of difficulty for each individual player.

The role-playing MUDs had similar elements of competition, performance and social consideration. The players adjusted their role-playing as well as their hack’n’slash to ensure that everyone was allowed a turn. In clan wars, the level-100 players would challenge each other, while the lower-level players were guided towards targets they might be able to deal with, or given manageable tasks which did not involve Pkilling (Player-Character killing).

As I wrote this thesis, the concept of juggling also seemed relevant to many different aspects of the games and the research that I needed to control. Computer games are conglomerates when viewed as targets for humanistic research or social sciences. From game-engine to culture, from turn-based battle and die-rolls to textual presentation, from social interaction to spatial representation: studying games is an exercise in flexibility. At times, the metaphor of juggling has also been quite viable for the process of research. As a conclusion, I will try to catch the balls I still perceive as flying, and put them to rest.

The Nature of the Game.

Games differ from other social interactions through the limitations or rules. Social interaction is governed by different sets of varying, more-or-less unwritten and unspoken rules, while a game is characterized by the presence and nature of very specific rules; the rules define the game. Online role-playing games differ from chat-sites because the rules of interaction are different. The same technology can support both IRC chat and role-

playing games, and MUDs are frequently used for chatting. Chats can have the same playful nature as a game, but playing the role of a cat, when I appear in *lingua-MOO*, does not turn that environment into a play-MUD. One may distinguish a game from regular social interaction and general playfulness by looking for the rules and regulations which shield the players from the demands of ordinary life and limit their actions.

These rules are not the accepted conventions of general courtesy, which to a greater or lesser degree are used online, frequently under the name of netiquette. Netiquette is the adjustment of common-sense rules of conduct to the net. The rules of the online role-playing games are considerably more elaborate, and they govern details which chatters ordinarily do not need to consider. Such rules may determine whether the offspring of elves and humans are sterile or not, what energy sources a magician may use, or whether there should be a delay on 'stalk' when used repeatedly by a level-100 ranger.

When comparing games to performances, rules and limitations are less useful as a distinguishing characteristic. An actor might ask questions similar to those of a player creating a character in a MUD. He might also have to act in roles where telepathy is a viable option for communication, where the force of gravity is different, where items appear through the aid of magic, where speech is not allowed or where walking through the wrong door could mean instant death (or at least losing his equipment and waking up in the temple stark naked and blind). One comprehensive distinction between games and performances might be that performances have the arena, the set context, the costumes and the closed society – but performance is, in addition, defined by a factor that games do not need to consider: spectators or audience. A performance is directed towards those who do not participate. In rituals, the spectators might be abstract or unearthly: the gods, nature, the spirits, but performance always pre-supposes audience.

Games can have audience, and spectators can enhance the game by adding tension and consequences for loss or victory. Nevertheless, despite the fact that football is a huge international sport with fans and hooligans, giant arenas and radio and television broadcasting, it is still an exciting game which one may play with some friends or against a team from another neighbourhood. A game does not cease to be a game if nobody watches, but a scene that nobody (not even an omnipresent being) sees is either a rehearsal or a game of pretence, not a performance for an audience.

While Ragnhild Tronstad (2001) argues for the theatricality of MUDs (not limited to play-MUDs) and points out the performative qualities of MUDs, this does not mean that games are performances or theatre. Games – just like our daily lives – have performative and theatrical qualities, without becoming theatre or a performance.

One simile is more persistent than others, despite the frequent discussions it has engendered, or perhaps fed by them: that games are stories. Narrative theory aside; when we compare games and stories, it becomes quite obvious that they are not identical. The main difference is in how progress is made. In a story, the reader makes progress linearly or non-linearly, by accessing the information in a more or less restrictive order. It is irrelevant whether the story has been written in nodes of information and links to other similar links, or whether it is a multimedia story and can only be accessed on a computer or on the net. To become a game, a story has to demand something more than the non-trivial action of ergodic texts. A game demands not only some kind of action, but also decisions.

These decisions must have a consequence which alters the other potential choices in the

game. If you pick up the blue ball, the next time you pass that area, the blue ball will be gone, and you no longer have the option of picking it up. A game allows you to execute an action other than reading/watching/listening; and the action has a consequence. That you can save the game before you attack a particularly nasty enemy does not change this fact, it simply emphasises the difference between a story and a game. Why would one want to save a story before the scary part where the hero's friend dies? The scary part will not disappear. One might perhaps delay reading it by reading a other parts first or skip it all together, but the part where the hero's friend dies will remain. On the other hand, a player might 'freeze' a game before that scene because he could potentially change the outcome! He might be able to avoid the death of the hero's friend if he figures out the puzzle, uses the right weapons and magic in the right combination or is sufficiently quick and clever. A computer game permits change within its limitations and rules, and always contains the potential for the user to modify the outcome.

In conclusion, we can say that the types of action the games permit distinguish all games and make them unique, compared with deceptively similar texts. These actions are submissive to spatial, topical, temporary or social limitations, but a game will always permit player action. Medium, channel or topic is immaterial in determining whether it is a game or not. To the extent that medium or channel is relevant, its influence on the game depends on how it is utilised as an arena. Computer games use the computer as their arena, and with the net, the arena offers options that are new and developing in keeping with advances in computer soft- and hard-ware. Computers are versatile play-channels, but a channel does not make a story or a theatrical performance into a game, nor does text or writing turn a game into a narrative.

Ergodic or Ludic?

Another concept of text that haunts the theoretical discourse of computer text, is the idea of ergodic text, and perhaps also cybertext (Aarseth 1997). An ergodic text permits reader action, but not all are games or permit change. Espen Aarseth writes: "The successful ergodic work of art maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design and hidden principles at work in the work." (1997:179).

'Tension' and 'discovery' are both words that belong in a description of games as well as texts, and it is seductively easy to say that computer games are ergodic texts. However, the tension in a game is not provided by the text. The tension in a game is provided by the action and the interaction with the game and with the other players, rather than by the fictional aspect of the game. The fiction is a way to justify the rules of the game and make them less random and easier to remember, but the game is neither the fiction nor its literary aspect, no matter how well-written. My delight in playing *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn* (Muzkya and Zeschuk 2000) did not stem from the beautifully constructed narrator elements, but from the many puzzles and challenges the game contained. The fiction fulfils another of Huizinga's (1950:10) functions; "Play has a tendency to be beautiful", through adding mystery, poetry and narrative pleasure, but it is not a vital part of the game. Rather, the fiction surrounding the game has the same function as the visual aesthetic, as James Newman (2002) explains: "What I am saying is that the pleasures of videogame *play* are not

principally visual, but kinaesthetic.” The delight of playing can be enhanced by the visual or fictional elements, but the reason for playing rather than watching a movie or reading a book is the pleasure of the activity options available to the player.

What role-playing MUDs and ergodic texts have in common is that they require a certain effort to access and read or use. In the case of the MUDs, the user must have a computer, Internet access, the right software and the knowledge of how to use these components. This is still not trivial. Games go beyond this, and the computer, the connection and the software are tools to enter an arena rather than access a text. Newman claims that the participation of the by-players might be ergodic, as he claims to “note a level of ergodicity in non-controlling players.” (2002:5). I find that this is a misinterpretation of ergodic activity, because to comment on events played out in front of you and to direct the attention of others to certain objects of meaning is rather trivial. It happens in front of television screens or in movie theatres everywhere, without turning movies or television into ergodic texts.

The ergodic work makes the way a text is structured more apparent, uncovering the design of a text as many nodes of meaning pieced together randomly or through the choices of either the author or the reader. The game makes explicit the rules of the universe the text is supposed to exist within; and offers the player a chance to alter the nodes of text, or rather the experiences, beyond restructuring the sequence of the textual nodes. The ludic work, the game, offers challenges as well as limitations, and an opportunity to experience oneself as an individual.

Games make individuality obvious through such simple functions as high-score lists. When your name is on a high score list, you have become a subject within the game universe. In MUDs, individuality is expressed through many different channels. You may leave your mark where all can see it on the note-boards, participate in the discussions on the OOC global channel, wear a special, eye-catching title on the who-list or individually customise the character with such tools as the score sheet, weapons and armour, character description, renamed equipment and says and emotes in role-play. According to Aarseth, ergodic texts and cybertexts point towards simulated worlds:

“Instead of trying to create a surrogate author, efforts in computer-generated literature should focus on the computer as a literary instrument: a machine for cybertext and ergodic literature. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the computer as literary agent ultimately points beyond narrative and toward ergodic modes – dialogic forms of improvisation and free play between the cyborgs that today’s literate computer users (and their programs) have become. What we need in order to achieve this is not an automated playwright or narrator but simulated worlds with emergent intrigants, interesting enough to make real people want to spend time and creative energy there.” (Aarseth 1997:141)

This implies that ergodic texts and cybertexts permit individual expressions and combinations. Aarseth’s most ancient example of a cybertext is *I Ching*, the Chinese text of wisdom (Aarseth 1997:9). When discussing individuality, it is interesting to note that *I Ching* is used to tell fortunes: it is designed to address the concerns of individuals, and to give pseudo-unique, individualised responses.

Cybertexts and games obviously share characteristics, but one distinction might be that

games tend to be more specialised and carry more limitations than cybertexts. In the simulated world with “emergent intrigants” there is no mention of rules, of ritualised challenge and controlled, directed play. Emergence is a bottom-up system, while games are a combination of bottom-up and top-down (Johnson 2001:18, 230). The simulated world in Aarseth’s vision is a bottom-up organisation: open up the environment and see what happens; let the intrigants emerge. A game is regulated and has rules imposed from the top, while the players are given full freedom to play within these rules. Steven Johnson refers to games when he writes: “It’s a classic marriage of bottom-up growth and top-down management: let the neighbourhoods come from below, but build incentives into the system to encourage their growth.” (2001:230)

Flow and Control

In computer games, I recognize two experiences that we would expect to be distinctly separate, apparently antithetical. A flowing river is distinguished by the fact that it cannot be controlled. If we attempt to impose control on it, it temporarily ceases flowing. The pressure builds to the point that it might break down the dam and result in an uncontrollable flood.

Playing games balances between these two opposites. In the words of Johan Huizinga: “Play is ‘tense’, as we say.” (1950:11). As in juggling, the trick is not to attempt total control, but to be ready to improvise and tackle the unexpected, while at the same time directing the flow rather than yielding to it and being carried away. While a juggler must consider gravity and balance, speed, wind and distractions such as light, sound and physical jarring; the gamer in front of a computer has different concerns and different tools, albeit the same tension.

The flow in *Dragon Realms* depended on which aspect of the game one was playing with at the time. In levelling or questing, the flow was provided by the game-engine. In levelling, speed and impact were important considerations. NPCs provided the action and the speed and impact. Speed would depend on variables such as whether the NPC was aggressive and attacked you on sight, or if the PC would have the option of attacking first. One also had to know if the NPC had multiple attacks; if so, it might attack several times before the PC could react. If, for instance, the NPC had the ability to call others to its assistance or teleport to another location, one would have to defeat it quickly before it did so. Impact had to do with how hard the PC would be hit, measured in how many hitpoints it would lose at each strike.

To control speed, the player could speed up the PC using magic, or set up shortcuts allowing the player to react to the attack of an aggressive NPC with the speed of the game-engine, through aliases and scripts. To prepare for the impact, one might find armour with different properties and different influences on the PC. Regardless of how well-prepared the player was, something could always happen to tip the battle in one direction or the other. This might result from the randomness of the generator that controlled the impact of the strikes on both sides, or something more esoteric such as ‘lag’; delays in the connection between the server running the game and the player’s computer.

The randomness of attacks, the simulated die-roll, was one source of change, an aspect of flow. Most of the changes, however, were generated by the other players and the administrators. No program could generate the variations that the players would bring to

the game. A program is limited by the imagination of the programmers, while the explorations and experiments of a couple of hundred players are virtually unlimited. Due to the way players made their own characters and developed individual tactics and strategies for combat, the most intense feeling of flow was closely connected to player killing and combat between PCs. This is one reason why the battle function was used as a reward for players: when the situation is really unpredictable and the risk for failure is really high, the tension is higher as well.

At the other end of the scale come the puzzle-based quests. They offer a high degree of control. While they might be challenging and complicated, they do not change suddenly. They can be solved in an unhurried manner, through testing, analysis and covert questioning of the other players.

Role-playing offers the same tension between flow and control. In role-playing, that tension is generated by the struggle between the different players. One would think that the ideal situation for a role-player would be to control as many other players as possible, while preserving one's own autonomy; retaining the freedom to influence others, while not being influenced. The players who came closest to this status in *Dragon Realms* were the clan leaders. They were not obligated to answer to anyone but the immortals, while the majority of the players belonged to a clan and were thereby subordinate to at least one of the clan leaders.

This was not, however, necessarily an ideal situation for the clan leaders, even though they exercised almost total control and power. A clan leader was obliged to keep the game flowing for the other players, rather than let the clan itself stagnate so that it no longer presented new challenges for the role-players. To return to the metaphor of the running water; a clan leader who did not actively stimulate change, growth and tension within the clan, would either see the clan stagnate and die, or would be subjected to so much pressure from the players, that the dam would burst. The ideal state of flow and control in role-playing was not necessarily achieved by holding the most powerful position, but by acquiring a position with high potential. Playing a character was entertaining as long as there was enough insecurity to keep the player alert, observant and creative. The character also had to possess adequate experience and influence, so that the player wouldn't feel powerless, but not so much influence that the consequences of each action were more than the player could cope with.

Social manipulation was one popular aspect of control, where the player would scheme and manipulate the others through role-playing. The other form of control was through performance. A perfectly-executed scene where speech, emotes and appearance were smoothly coordinated could easily silence the other players, and this tool was frequently used by the more literate of the players to give an impression of control and skill. This baroque approach was as effective as similar performances in real life. In contrast to social manipulation and performance, role-playing could offer sensual experiences and pretence, going with the flow of the game.

Role-playing for sensual experience would mean playing for the sake of delight alone, giving oneself over to the moment and interaction with another. The role-playing high (see ch.5, 6, 9) is somewhat of a sensual experience, where the player ceases to control the character and goes with the flow, offering no directing resistance to the play. Pretence varies from performance through the player's approach to the role-playing situation. A 'per-

former' who had planned the scene and assessed the audience would, for instance, have different items prepared in advance: renames to be used as gifts. The 'pretender' would improvise and pass on whatever was in his bag at the moment. When I use the slightly disparaging term 'pretender' to designate a player who improvises, it is not intended to deride improvisation in itself, but rather of the risk of failure and the player's reaction to this threat. For a performer, the risk to the play was over-preparing to the point that the elements of surprise and suspense were eliminated, along with the potential for new experiences and revelations. For a pretender, the primary risk was the increased potential for doing something spectacularly wrong; for example, an improvisation might precipitate a war, place the PC in personal slavery or commit it to a course of action the player had never intended. The players who argued about such issues were normally players who played in the 'pretender' style, and who wanted to find OOC solutions to IC issues after they had improvised themselves into a disadvantage. Any derogatory connotations about 'pretenders' refer to this lack of willingness to accept the negative effects of role-playing along with the positive ones.

It was always more difficult to accept loss in role-playing than in combat, but players who managed to gracefully accept a disadvantage in role-playing had very high status as role-players. While their PCs sometimes lost status ICly, the players gained status OOCly.

Individuality

I have already mentioned individuality in the discussion about ergodic texts, but the active subject, the individual, is central to games in general and MUDs in particular. As I discussed in chapter 3, a MUD is very sensitive to the influence of the individual. This is not a design flaw, quite the contrary; it is one of the attractions of MUDs.

My chance to be an individual in Tetris' ends with the high-score list. I cannot choose the pieces I wish to put into the puzzle on the screen. I cannot even control the speed at which they appear, other than by choosing the level. If I want to play Tetris, I give in to the flow and struggle for control, knowing I will lose the battle. There is no possibility of beating the machine as it constantly generates more bricks; all I can hope for is to beat my own record, or beat some of the others on the high-score list.

In a single-user adventure game, I do not really have very many options, but I perceive it as more individualised due to the wider variety of responses the game gives to my actions. A game such as the *King's Quest* by Sierra Online gives me different types of puzzles, riddles and areas to explore; but ultimately they are the same kind of directed and controlled game as Tetris. In *King's Quest*, however, I cannot put my name on a high-score list. The individualisation has to be expressed abstractly through the meandering path I choose through the game, rather than through a visible mark on a list.

A first-person shooter is much more individualised than both a puzzle game or an adventure game, as it gives the player many more options. It provides not only the option of solving problems, but also the ability to choose different tactics; and frequently a choice of

¹ Vadim Gerasimov (1998): "Tetris: the story" at <http://vadim.www.media.mit.edu/Tetris.htm>, last visited Saturday, 02 November 2002

weapons and levels of complexity. When shooters became multi-player games, strategy, tactics and personalisation became more clearly expressed. At this point, nicknames began to be very important, and are now frequently chosen to express something the player finds significant.

If we think of *Tetris* and the other small puzzles as being on the far left of an individuality scale, we will find the role-playing games on the far right. Several graphic-interface adventure-type games that lean towards role-playing games offer the option of making the characters more individualised; among others *Baldur's Gate 2*, where the players can use their own sound-files and images for the characters they create and play with. The players can import their *Baldur's Gate* characters into the multiple user game *Neverwinter Nights*; and *Neverwinter Nights* offers tools for not just customising the characters, but also the areas. This places *Neverwinter Nights* far to the right on the scale of player-influence, and potentially will allow them to express themselves creatively and individually within the limits of the game. At the far right end of the scale I would expect to find the game developers; people who are not satisfied with simply playing games, but who want to design and build them as well.

On this scale, MUD playing, considering the restrictions of text-based games, comes rather close to playing *Neverwinter Nights*. MUD developers, administrators and programmers lie far to the right, right along with other developers who create games rather than just play them. MUD development might be even further to the right than other games, because the developers are rarely restricted by commercial or economic interests, but build to satisfy their own urge to play.

Seduction and Discipline

The rules of a game both restrain and liberate, but the rules are absolute. Without the rules, there is no game. Jean Baudrillard describes it in this manner in *Seduction* (1990:131):

“The *Diary of the Seducer* claims that in seduction the subject is never the master of his master plan, and even when the latter is deployed in full consciousness, it still submits to the rules of the game that goes beyond it. A ritual dramaturgy beyond the law, seduction is both game and fate, and as such pushes the protagonists towards their inevitable end without the rule being broken – for it is the rule that binds them. And the rule's basic dictum is that the game continues whatever the cost, be it death itself. There is, then, a sort of passion that binds the players to the rule that ties them together – without which the game would not be possible.”

In Baudrillard's discussion of seduction, rules and games are frequently-recurring topics. Seduction is described as a game, played through sexuality, power and within certain rules. He even discusses the ludic within the game of seduction:

“Obviously, the ludic cannot be equated with having fun. With its propensity for making connections, the ludic is more akin to detective work. More generally, it connotes networks and their mode of functioning, the forms of their permeation and manipulation. The ludic encompasses all the different ways one can ‘play’ with networks, not in

order to establish alternatives, but to discover their state of optimal functioning.” (1990:158)

Baudrillard’s view of the ludic can be compared to the behaviour of the MUD players. They were driven not only by the desire to have fun, but were also motivated by the desire to explore the game, see how it was put together, and then test it – play with it. Exploring *Dragon Realms*, they would search for bugs and, depending on their ethics, exploit or report them – or both. They would sometimes exploit a bug to their own advantage, and subsequently report it.

But this exploration of the network and its limitations was matched by the MUD-players’ obsession with the rules. Rules were discussed endlessly, and were the focus of some of the most serious controversies. This might have been due to the way the rules structured the interaction and interdependence of the players. Baudrillard finds that rules ties players together forcefully rather than through solidarity or in a moral manner:

“The players, however, are not separate or individualized: they are instituted in a dual and agonistic relation. They are not even solidary – solidarity supposing a *formal* conception of the social, the moral ideal of a group in competition. The players are *tied* to each other; their parity entails an obligation that does not require solidarity, at least not as something that needs to be conceptualized or interiorized.” (Baudrillard 1990:136) (italics in the original)

This view also indicates that rules negate individuality. While this might appear to be a contradiction after the discussion of individuality in games, with respect to the tension essential to play and expressed as flow and control, it ties neatly into the theme of this chapter.

The rules and the structure of the game impose order, while the anonymity of playing through the computer, through an avatar, as well as freedom from the laws of nature within a computer-mediated universe, advocates lawless chaos. This tension between chaos and rules is the counterpart of flow and control, and is essential to the attraction of the games.

A DIKU play-MUD is structured to make surveillance easy. The immortals have certain abilities which others don’t have, such as ‘wizinvis’, which is the ability to be invisible to all lower-ranking players and administrators; and ‘snoop’, which allows an immortal see all messages sent from a player to the game, regardless of whether the game reacts to them or not. These abilities were mainly used to spy on role-play in order to enhance it: an immortal would play through ‘echoes’, messages typed into the game without any sender, such as: ‘The wind picks up and the leaves dance in odd patterns creating a trail of golden leaves leading north.’

The abilities which can be used to make the playing more interesting and interactive, can also be used for surveillance, and therefore for discipline. This was one reason why interviewing the players while actually in the game was out of the question. A MUD is a panopticon, where one can see the many, but not be observed. Interestingly enough, Michel Foucault (1977) describes it as the opposite of the dungeon:

“The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of the supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.” (1977:200)

Rather than a dungeon where the many users could hide, a MUD is a structure made to highlight and display the acts and the actions of the players. The system of favour point spies (see ch.5) is reminiscent of the structure of surveillance in a modern society where all are given the opportunity to report on their neighbours to the local police, from whom reports go in stages upwards to the all-seeing regent. “We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.” (Foucault 1977:217)

Contrasting with the discipline of the panoptic structure of the MUD is the potential for anonymity. If you did not know how to hide your IP address, the players, particularly the ones logging on from public access terminals, would be one of many, disappearing in the multitude of possible users. This anonymity obscures the light of the panopticon and leaves the real identity, the flesh world itself, in the anonymous darkness of the dungeon. In this way, a multi-user computer game retains the tension of paradox even in the face of rule and discipline, through anonymity and the freedom of the carnevalesque mask of the avatar.

For the Sake of the Game

To conclude this chapter and this study, I want to recapitulate the usefulness and the pleasures of a MUD.

First of all, it is an arena for social interaction. This is an arena of participation, where individuals meet, interact and create. They can work alongside of each other, like toddlers playing separate, but similar games; without the social skills required to cooperate beyond inspiration through parallel play. They can compete: outplay or outdo each other, and perhaps do their best to sabotage the creations of their fellow players; as in the next stage of child development, when one topples the towers of another child who achieves something. But most wonderfully, MUD players can cooperate and create. They tend to form complicated social structures. In games, one may find IC clans and OOC social groups, either separately or overlapping. The structure contains all the stages of play development: parallel play, competitive play and cooperative play. MUDs open for interaction and participation over the entire range.

Secondly, games can be used for performance. Within a MUD, there is room for most well-known types of performance. Bards were particularly well-suited to MUDs, as the fragmented text-based communication is easily adapted to poetry. Strong, evocative and interconnected from message to message through form and style, poetry stands out from the less-formalised written texts. Other types of performance were also admired and desired: at a role-played ball in *Dragon Realms*, there were descriptions of dances, and small plays were acted out. *Dragon Realms* also allowed coronations, public religious rituals and the social performances of rites such as marriage and burial. From other games there have been reports of performances that transcend the IC/OOC border. SlashDot (2002) posted

a report that pointed towards the actions of the players in the MMORPG *Dark Age of Camelot* after the death of one of their players, the player of the character Warsinger. The players in his clan gathered in one particular part of the game called 'Beno', a keep they had taken in a raid in which Warsinger had participated. The other clans in the game either stayed out of the area at the time of the in-game 'funeral' or memorial service, or participated in it. Present were the characters of Warsinger's player's sister and his girlfriend. All the characters lined up in the formation of a heart, and the screen-shot was later made available online. This is performance within the game, but one that emphasises the connection between the IC character and the OOC player. As in the flesh world, performances were used in order to enhance the connection between members of the group, the sensation of belonging.

Ultimately, a game is a place where people play. Games are games. They are not stories, books, films nor theatre; despite the potential for using the same channels – even the same mediums – to contain and transfer all these categories of works. Like film and literature, games are a cultural expression. 200 years in the future, studies of the games and the logs and descriptions of games that survive will tell much more about the present society than we are perhaps ready to face and to reveal at present.

With the computer, games have found a technical medium, or perhaps more correctly, a channel almost perfectly suited to the demands of games. Computer environments can be programmed not only to simulate the natural laws of reality, but also the rules of any imagined alternative social reality. This allows game-creators to construct an endless variety of arenas for the players, and it offers the players a wide selection of games. Through the Internet, the computer offers not only a wide range of games, but also a wide range of playmates. With access to a worldwide net, one can always find other players awake somewhere in the world, in some time zone.

The ultimate pleasure of computer games is, however, not to be found in reading about them, talking about them or watching them. The pleasure of computer games is in the action; in the doing and the playing. Games are interesting because they can be played, and that playability is the ultimate distinction of the game.

Info: Erinn has left the game.

Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.

[They create desolation, and they call it peace.]

(log-out message at *Dragon Realms*)

Bibliography

A note on citation

As a general rule I have used the Modern Language Association style of bibliographical references. This is not an absolute rule, particularly not where I deal with corporate or anonymous authors and web-sites with no publishing date or limitation. When I cite anonymous texts available online I refer to the site where they are available, for instance the game where the conversation or remark took place: *Dragon Realms* 1998. When I cite computer games where there is no clearly defined author, I go with the citation style recommended by the developers of one of the games I cite: *Myst*, which is the same style recommended by the Columbia guide to Online Style for corporate authors. They recommend that the company which has developed the game stands in place of the author, while the company that publishes the game is publisher: Cyan Worlds, Inc. *Myst*, SA, Ubi Soft Entertainment, 1993. When I refer to MUDs, I cite the title of the MUD or MOO in question, and they are listed under the title of the game, not the names of the implementers.

When I cite interviewees I use their game pseudonyms for their real names, and when I cite characters (avatars, handles, nicknames) in chats or games I use the pseudonyms for the characters. In the bibliography the interviewees and the game developers are not mixed in with the literature, but instead located at the end of the bibliography in separate lists. The names of the interviewees and their handles are anonymized. I have not altered the names of the game developers. In the cases where they had their full names on the credits list I have kept that, while in the cases when they only used handles I have listed their handles rather than full names. In the text I use the handles of the administrators, and these have not been altered the way the player handles have been changed. In some cases this may have caused some minor problems, as there were for instance three different people behind the immortal character 'Stavo' at Aarinfel during the period I played there. Since I don't quote 'Stavo' at any point this is not really an issue, but 'Stavo I', 'Stavo II' and 'Stavo III' would have been the best solution.

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Interviews:

Green, Mortimer: Interview New York, New York 09.09.99

Seibert, Mark: Interview Seattle, Washington 14.09.99

Taylor, Matthew: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.09.99

Inthiadata, David: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.09.99

Kentley, Tom: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.9.99

Kentley, Mariah Pratt: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.9.99

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Sierro, Elisabeth: Interview Portland, Oregon 18.09.99

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Danner, Benjamin: Interview Portland, Oregon 19.09.99

Johnson, Beyne: Interview Portland, Oregon 19.09.99

MacLeod, Jack: Interview San Diego, California 24.09.99

Hunter, Levi: Interview San Diego, California 24.09.99

Black, Jason: Interview Los Angeles, California 31.09.99

Kovacz, Petrov: Interview New York, New York 05.11.99

I refer to logs and experiences from role-playing or building on these MUDs:

World's End 1997-1998

The Infinite Point 1997-1999

Dragon Realms 1998-1999

Aarinfel 1998-2001

Lu'Tamohr 1998-2001

MUD administrators:

Elwyn (Andrew South), Scarabae (Martin Dick) and Topaz (Kelly Grant) (administrators and creators): *Dragon Realms*

Linda: *World's End*, <http://cyberwizards.com/~hub/>, last visited Thursday, 06 September 2001

Kierae, Lorelei, Solandri, Stavo, Jarok, Ylandir (Administrators and creators): *Aarinfel* (The administrators of Aarinfel surrendered their nicknames as they surrendered their position in the administration/immortal pantheon, and before the game was

closed to players all of the original immortal names were used by new administrators.)

Dantra (Timothy Pratley), Isrejin (Robert Houston) and Mimosa (Nathan Rogers)
(Administrators and creators): *Lu'Tamohr* November 2001

Jasalm, Payakai, Sihashi, Ioraxu (Administrators and creators): *Azhad*

Sauron (Administrator and creator): *The Infinite Point*

Attachments

1. Green, Mortimer: Interview New York, New York 09.09.99
2. Seibert, Mark: Interview Seattle, Washington 14.09.99
3. Taylor, Matthew: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.09.99
4. Inthiadaka, David: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.09.99
5. Kentley, Tom: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.9.99
6. Kentley, Mariah Pratt: Interview Portland, Oregon 16.9.99
7. Sierro, Elisabeth: Interview Portland, Oregon 18.09.99
8. Marks, Dawn: Interview Portland, Oregon 18.09.99
9. Billoghwy, William: Interview Portland, Oregon 18.09.99
10. Olson, Doris: Interview Portland, Oregon 19.09.99
11. Danner, Benjamin: Interview Portland, Oregon 19.09.99
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13. Hunter, Levi: Interview San Diego, California 24.09.99
14. MacLeod, Jack: Interview San Diego, California 24.09.99
15. Black, Jason: Interview Los Angeles, California 31.09.99
16. Kovacz, Petrov: Interview New York, New York 05.11.99

Attachment 1

Mortimer Green
New York, September 9th 1999
Male, aged 24
English major

(this interview is done without a tape-recorder, and so it is based on notes taken during the interview and transcribed later)

Has played on Worlds End, Dragon Realms and Aarinfel, currently plays on Lu'Tamohr.
Worked as an admin at World's End, and a builder on Aarinfel.
Built and administrated a place called Dragon's Destiny, which was never opened to play.

He mainly plays single-user games, strategy games. An example of a good strategy-game is "Romance of the three kingdoms" produced by KOEI. This is a game situated in chinese history, and is a turnbased game of conquest and conflict, where the player fights the machine and chance.

When asked to make a list of genres of computergames, this is what he makes:

Action
Adventure
Role Play
Strategy
Sports
Fighting
Simulation

Adventure is distinguished from strategy by having one focus character, experienced either through a third-person or first person view.

Sports and fighting are parts of action, but action is wider than both, not focused on just one topic.

The challenge of playing computer games online is the challenge of writing out ideas and testing them on other people, seeing how they react and respond. The single-user games are for the puzzle-solving, the online games for the human interaction less than the competition.

The interest of putting ideas into motion and seeing how they work is the challenge of online multiuser games (repeated)

Reading compared to playing

Reading - the story never changes, it's static and it's other people's ideas. He reads to see how others think and plot.

Playing you affect the outcome for the better or for the worse (laughs and blushes and mentions Erinn and his interaction with her at the Worse-side)

Reads for entertainment

Best books - the death Gate cycle by Weiss and Hickman

It has the right intermingling of clichés and surprises.

Worst book:

The Fairy Queen by Spencer -

Too stuffed with metaphors to be comprehensible.

When playing he sees plot and execution as two different aspects, while in writing the plotting is the execution of it. The game has a set of rules that needs to be followed, a theme that needs to be obeyed. What is the challenge is what is done with the rules.

Personally, he feels playing has changed him from being a very introvert person to being an extrovert one. It was a way to learn social skills.

He also learned to understand that there's more to a problem than the apparent factors - the background being as important as the actual factors of the one problem. - the whys of it.

Attachment 2

Mark Seibert
September 1999, Tuesday 14th
10.30 am
Sierra Studios
Seattle, Washington

Male

39

ed: Bachelor's in music composition
bachelors in maths and computer science - not finished.

TORILL: Do you yourself play computer games?

MS: oh, yeah

TORILL: what kind of games do you prefer?

MS: I play role-playing games and strategy-games, I work on adventure-games so I don't play them that much.

TORILL: Oh, well, that makes sense

TORILL: Could you mention a role-play game that you like?

MS: Might and Magic series, I liked Diablo although that was pretty roleplay light, Stonekeep, Anvil of Dawn, there's been a few others, in that genre.

TORILL: and strategy-games?

MS: Strategy I like Assiv ??? I like the master-series from ???

TORILL: What makes the games that you like - the ones that you really like - better than others?

MS: I don't know if they are better than others, it's just that I like them. I think for the Roleplaying games I like a story that I am involved in. I think the thing what turned me off about adventure games is that the puzzles had become so complex they had become kind of obtuse, you almost had to get into the designers mind, and not think logically, but think what ever was this person up to, and when you got to a solution you'd think now that was ridiculous, why would anyone think that. In Roleplaying games I'd tend to be more straightforwards and strictly for the logical, less on the puzzle-side, more on the doing-side, they are more interactive - always lots of characters interacting. and things to do, I think I liked that a little better.

TORILL: Are these single-user-games or multi-user games?

MS: Both.

TORILL: Both?

MS: Uh hu

TORILL: And have you played Multi-user-games online?

MS: I have played them online. I tend to play - It took like the single player games better. The Multi-player-games - most of the games that I like to play are like long-term-games, where

you have to play for hours and days, and playing a multiplayer-game for days online is like..
.aww - i don't want to do that, I want to be able to sit down for half-an hour to forty-five minutes and play and then say all right, that was fun.

TORILL: I have already had you make a list of the different computer-games, you just answered to how much time you spend - from half an hour to 45 minutes - how often is that?
MS: Probably at least every day - and sometimes the half-hour to 45 minutes will run into like 5-8 hours and I'll suddenly become like Oh yeah I didn't sleep you know.

TORILL: Oh, yeah, that sounds familiar, but I do it all night, so my family comes down to say you still awake? Still logged on?
And you do most of this then offline - also the long sessions?

MS: actually, there has been some games that I have played online that I have enjoyed, though, I think perhaps the ones that I have enjoyed have been the games where you can come in and not have to you know start from scratch - you can have a multiplayer game that saves enough of what you did that make you feel like you're progressing through the game even if you're doing it in small bits and pieces and you may not be doing it with the same people - it's a different kind of multiplayer game from you know like a MUD, or a something like Diabolo where every time you start it up it's like a new instance of - or a strategy game where every time you start it up it's a new instance where you can multiplayer.

TORILL: You don't build or create or administrate any kind of multiplayer games somehow?
MS: I actually am working on one right now.

TORILL: Oh! That's interesting, is that something you could tell me about?

MS: Well, yeah, I actually can it's kind of my own design, and I actually just got started on the project, we've been working on it for about 9 months now, and the company just went yah, let's do it, and so we just got staffed up. But it's kind of like a long line, like I was saying, it's a multiplayer game where what you do gets saved in your character, so you can take your character on and off line, and certain flags will be set for you, so as you go between online and offline, or you go through instances of being online, and then going back online again later, you'll continue to progress, even though the world will be partially updating for you and not for others. I kind of worked on a project like this for about 7 years ago, which was like the first multiplayer game I've ever seen, which was Acerbious ??? On the CR-network?

TORILL: I have not seen that, but I - understand what you're talking about.

MS: So it's - it's that kind of a thing where you'll be able to play this long and expansive story and drama but be able to do it in little bits and pieces, and do it with other people, and they won't have to be the same people you play with each night. You can do it in little sections.

TORILL: But - but - how would you - that's actually very interesting, how would you solve that problem with when you play and create a story in a multiplayer environment, that you said don't have to play with the same people all the time? Are you making - thinking of it as several stories - or will this be a recreated story that you will go through, or will it be something that goes about in the environment that the story will be created by - the player?

MS: Have you played Baldur's Gate?

TORILL: No

MS: OK, that's a new role-playing game that recently came online - and it's kind of a similar idea that you can go online and play with a group of people and they encourage a little bit of co-operative play, pretty much what we're doing is that we pretty much the game is sold down the line of am, you pretty much have to cooperate with other people as opposed to you have to go out and kill each other - you have to work together. And there's no unique characters in the game, you are what ever you have made yourself to be, you create your own character. And so there isn't like a hero, in the story. Although, as you play through the game, you will develop your character, and your character will increase, and you will reveal the nature of the world that you are in, and the things that have been happening in it, such that you'll be able to affect a resolution to this drame which you have seen been kind of going on around you.

TORILL: Will that be the same drama - if you go back and create a new character, will that be the same drama the new character will go through?

MS: The main piece of it, yes, but it depends on what kind of a character you chose, and what paths you follow, the nature of the solutions will be different.

TORILL: OK Since I work with a MUD, this is very interesting, since that is a totally open environment.

MS: yah.. this is ah I am intrigued by the MUDS a little bit, and I actually saw, when I worked on Acerbius that it actually turned into a MUD, people kind of wanted to do that, so they kind of lured themselves into this world and they kind of they made their, you know, um groups and you know and stuff. So what I wanted to do is create an environment where it would be easier to do that, but wasn't like completely open, I feel that MUDs are so open that sometimes you don't know what to do or where to go, and if you don't spend like hundreds of hours, you just get, like, lost. And so I thought let's put down some restrictions and confine this a little bit, but let's leave it open enough that people can still feel like it's very open and explorative and stuff.

TORILL: yes.. yes.. it seems like you - I don't know if you have read anything by the ... the name just escapes me.... the one who created the first MUDs - he wrote an article about killers, explorers and socialisers, and the killers of course walk around and kill each other - the explorers they kind of walk around, explore all the features, and the more exotic puzzles they can find and combinations they want to make, the better - and the socialisers just want to chat. They are there to meet others.

MS: Yes, the thing we are working on sort of caters to those last two groups, in fact you can't kill other players unless you specifically - both players specifically set their character defines that says that I can be killed and I can kill. So you have to have both on to be able to fight against each other. So you won't have people-killers running around, which is, I think, really different.

TORILL: Yes, that is actually what I was thinking about - that you are trying to make a game which will and covers the socialisers and the explorers, and can curb the player killers a bit.

MS: Well, you know, if somebody wants to og on and DO that, they'd you know they can set themselves up to do that, they can do that, but they can't kill anybody who haven't...

TORILL: haven't agreed...

MS: haven't agreed to do that, so, I found that I rather... I don't know if you played Diablo, but I always found that annoying, you know, and actually it seemed like most people online found it annoying.

TORILL: I have played MUDs where there was a heavy percentage of player killers, you know and it's awfully annoying. I told you that I am administrating a MUD - for fun - right now. And what we are doing is that we are making the act of killing someone into a conscious decision you'll have to make, it's not something you do like you fight and you happen to end the fight by killing someone. You end the fight by incapacitating the one. Then if you kill, it becomes a murder, and you will be haunted by the person you killed.

MS: yea, cool!

TORILL: I like that, you can be resurrected as well, so you aren't totally dead. But we have a rpetty good coder, and he's working on getting a good haunt-code, so we're planning to make life very uncomfortable for the player-killers. Not out-lawing it, because we want the openness of having it possible.

MS: Yes, that is the same thing as we are saying, it is like, you know, for the people who want to do that, they should be able to do that. If I don't want to be killed, I should be able to close it off.

TORILL: well, they won't be able to do that here, but you will certainly regret it! If we get the code just the way we want it.

TORILL: Well, umm, compare this medium to other media, like books or television. Do you read a lot of books?

MS: Actually, I do. I have been reading like a... this game has a lot to do with like mythology and religion, and I like the ancient history and stuff so I read a lot of that stuff.

TORILL: And do you read like - fantasy literature?

MS: Not much, a little bit. I hate to admit it, but I am kind of a Star Trek-fan, so I read all of that. Silly paper-back startrek books, I read them in aeroplanes and everywhere...

TORILL: I have no problem with that - Star Trek hasn't actually been sent in Norway until last year, it hasn't been seen, so I've - People make all these references to it and I og like "what?" But I know all the theory about it, about like - about the "trekkies" and everything - so I know about the phenomenon. Theoretically.

MS: Well, I won't og that far, I won't og to the conventions, you know. That's where I draw the line.

TORILL: Okei.. and television, do you want television much?

MS: A bit, I won't say that I am much of a television-fan, I have a few shows that I watch, you know during the week.

TORILL: you prefer to play, to watch television?

MS: Yeah

TORILL: Would you say that time kind of on the screens... between television... books... games... would you say that the computer takes time from television rather than from reading books?

MS: definitively

TORILL: And... why?

MS: Because when I am sitting watching TV I feel like I am not doing anything. While when I am reading a book I feel like I am involved in it, I have to create the world in my mind, have to use my imagination - when I sit at the computer, I have to make decisions, and choose what path I have to go down and so on. To me that's more fun. That's more engaging.

TORILL: I totally agree...

TORILL: Umm.. You build and create computer games - actually a Multi-user game is what you're building right now. Would you call that an adventure-game or a role-playing game or what?

MS: We're calling it a role-playing game.

TORILL: any particular reason but that you could get a job, that you're doing this?

MS: yeah, I was a musician, I worked on the road, in a band, for years. And... Eh, we were doing OK, but it was tough being on the road all the time and we weren't making any amount of money, and my dad said hey, you should you know put in an application on this place, they are looking for a musician to work in computer-games. And I had never heard of that before and nobody had actually done music in Computer Games before, and so I put an application in at Sierra, and I had never heard of the company, and didn't think twice about it, and they called me up several months later, and offered me a job, so I came to work, and I worked on the very first game that actually had midi-music in it, which was King's Quest IV - and after I did that, and it was kind of fun, and so I continued working on and one thing turned into another and I ended up just staying with the company and I was really was getting involved with the games.

TORILL: When was this?

MS: Oh, gosh, that was back in 86 or was it 87..like that.

TORILL: About the time I bought my first computer....

TORILL: when you work on the production of a computer-game... can we just go through the stages?

MS: like - umm, just the process?

TORILL: yes

MS: Oh, OK, well, you know, first it's just the design-concept, that like a two or three page, here's my idea, this is like what I'd . this is what the game-play is to be like. And this is why lots of people are going to buy this game because it really has THIS, which is really like exciting or what ever. From that point we - Sierra will go on through a prototype-stage, which will go on for ammm, I don't know, for three months or so where you just go on like, you just hack together art, try to use you know maybe an engine that already exists just to try to get things up on the screen, try to flush out a design document where it might be like 20-30 pages of information, and if you can kind of get it past that stage, you get kind of funded to continue, at which point you umm, you've been working with maybe three or four people, at the most, and you go on to like full design where you have to have a complete design document, and you have to come up with you know sketches, models, and you know... that

kind of stuff. But still working with a very small team, trying to put together, until they say like here you are, fifteen people and we say GO.

TORILL: yah... umm.. when you..set up a story board, what I am after is the non-linearity as compared to the linearity - what I am interested in is how much you think of, on the choices and the possibilities of what can be going wrong and going right, and the many variations... won't this be an incredibly complex storyboard?

MS: ehh I think it's it's different for each game, each game kind of defines how the story is going to play out? Some games are more linear than others, some are more wide open than others, so, so I think that it's really dependant on the kind of game you're trying to, to develop. So I could walk you through a couple of instances, if that could help?

TORILL: yes

MS: OK, one of the most open games that I remember working on was A Kernel's (Colonels???) Bequest, and Roberta designed that so that you were in a world where time was moving forwards, and everything happened at a specific time. And you could either be there or not be there, but regardless of whether you where there, that thing happened. So, well, it was very open, you could go any places you wanted to at any time, and if you weren't at the right places at the right time, you'd miss important events that would happen, and so you'd have to try to put together not only the story, but also try to figure out where you needed to be to see these things happen, so you could try to figure out what was going on. That was a ridiculously open game, because you could actually finish the game, and og like - "I haven't a clue, what I have just got done seen . You know, I have no idea who did it," you know, and it was a murder-mystery, and at the end you were supposed to figure out who'd done it. That was real open. I think a lot of people had to play that game several times to actually come up with the solution. I kind of tend to think that people don't play through adventure games multiple times, if they kind of sorta figured it out, it's kind of like reading the book several times, it's just not quite as good as the first time. So I kind of tend to see things a little more, linear. Some structure. Some help to let the player know - like where to go, you know. One of the last previous adventure games I was working on, the last was Mask of Eternity, but the one before that was Larry VII, on Larry VII we were on a boat, a big sailing ship, and pretty much right at the beginning of the game you had to win these contests around the ship, to win the game. So basically you had five or six quest, so you could follow any quest down the story, you didn't have to stay on it, you could keep going down each of the six different quests. But there were like six different paths that you definitely knew you were on, and once you got stuck you could og ok, well, I am going to try this other one for a while, i think I have an other solution to that. So that was pretty open, you could kind of go in any direction you wanted, but you'd definitely go down these paths to this solution, and once you got to all six solutions, you got to the big puzzle of the game. So it was open, but structured.

TORILL: ja. Ja, I see. How was ...

TORILL: you would start up with to or three people, and you would end up with like fifteen.

MS: Yeah, usually like ten fifteen people here in the house, then you know, there would be like (???) people playing the game around the country and stuff like that. 40-50 people will

have actually touched the thing before we are done with it.

TORILL: That's a pretty large production

MS: yes, it is, with Phantasmagoria, I don't know if you're familiar with that, there was like a video, I worked on that, we had like 3 or 4 hundred people working on that staff. That was like way out of hand! Well, you know it was like, you were working with actors, and cameramen, and lights and all that kind of stuff. You know: Make up!

TORILL: that is like producing a film.

MS: It was

TORILL: at a point like that

MS: and it was really very interesting to learn all about how things work in LA

TORILL: Is that where you went to work on that?

MS: Well, you know, we got a lot of people from LA, to work on that, right out of Hollywood. It was an eye-opener. Now I know that i don't want to work in that industry.

TORILL: It's good to know all the things you don't have to do!

TORILL: Do you go by a formula? This has to be there, this has to be there???

MS: for - you mean in the design?

TORILL: yeah?

MS: Umm.. well, no, I wouldn't say a recipe, well, sort of, it's pretty loose structured, Sierra kind of treats all their producers like they are their own little business? And so i go to the guy who runs our division, and say like this is what I want to do and this is what I want to do. And if they like it, they go OK, and if they don't you try again and try again. So, ah, I think the formula is that if everybody think it's going to be fun, if it's going to be a fun game, that's the formula.

TORILL: yah, so you don't have any ideas of what you have, anything you have experienced as being particularly fun?

MS: Well, yeah, I think in games it's pretty easy to be derivative? So if you start saying OK this is how it works, then you start getting lots of, you know, cookie-????? And I don't know if that's fun. Sierra did that for a while, we had this gaming engine that made adventure games. But everything started feeling about the same, so we started getting away from that.

TORILL: so you don't do like soap-opera, this is the way it works and then one-hundred-and-fifty variations of the same events.

MS: i think people got tired of that, that's part of the problem.

TORILL: did you get any response from players saying that we have played this game a hundred times before?

MS: Well, yeah, you always get that. And you also get the ones that go like - you went to far, you know, I can't type what I want the little guy on the screen to do any more, you made me use the mouse and point and that was just the wrong thing to do. Or I don't read the text any more, you have so many speaking it, I can't put the character's voice to it, that was the wrong thing to do - so we get both sides of it.

TORILL: Do you think of this - we have touched on this as different from producing a film. But if you think of this as writing, as in writing a book, do you think of this as very different

from writing, except that this is a different technology which makes it a lot easier to work alone! But if you think of it as a communal writing process, do you see it as more like writing than producing films?

MS: Emm, I really don't consider myself a writer. So I have to say that from my point of view it's different from writing and producing films. Jane Jense, who works on the other side of the building, she writes books, and she also designs computer-games - I think from her point of view, it's a more like writing a book.

TORILL: what would you say you're doing, are you composing?

MS: Well, ah, I guess sort-of in a way. I look at games and see the things that I think are fun, and I think more about the game, you know, as in the game, and then I let the story work around what I think will be the fun factor in the game. I know that Jane always starts with a story, Roberta, when I worked with Roberta, she is always starting with a story, you know, these are the characters, and this is the story, and this is how they are going to get from point a to point b - and I typically just, I come from a completely different point of view.

TORILL: will you say that this makes the games you produce different from the others?

MS: No, because Roberta and I have worked together for like ten years, and I think that was actually kind of complementary, because Roberta had a real strong story side, and I just looked at it and said like - ok, that's a story, and what's the game. Show me how the game is fun to play, and I think that's what helped us, to work together, on projects. I have not worked with Jane, so I don't know how she works with those things, but I know that her games are very like, ah, story intensive.

TORILL: This new one that's your idea - would you say that is basically game, oriented, not so much story?

MS: Yes, actually, the I'd say I started with a concept of what the world's like and what the game-play is like, and then from there we built - you know fleshed out the world, and put in some characters - to work with, and I have been working on the puzzles, how does the puzzles work and how does the player interaction and the multi-player-interaction work. How does the path in the story-field open, and where can you go and stuff, and I have been thinking that once you get that whole structure up, we'll like flesh it in with the details of the story, and dialogue, but I feel like we'll get the structure up first.

TORILL: It's fun, it's exactly the way we're building the MUD. We're starting out with saying this is the world, this is what's possible within the world, these are the rules within the world and so on.

MS: Exactly!

TORILL: This is where you can go, these are the laws you are expected to obey.

MS: Yeah, I think once you've started laying those things down, it kind of defines how the flesh is going to be.

TORILL: Yeah, so we're creating history, creating religion, putting it all down - right now we are building areas, lot of areas, since this is all text it's a lot easier to build areas, a much lower technology than what you're working with. But it's fun to see the structure, the way you're thinking, it's very much alike, and when you've done the area it's time to build the bots, the mobs, and coding them to smaller quests, so the players have something to do when they go in there, and it will be up to us, as administrators, to see to it that there will be stories, that

something will be happening in this. But we're leaving it much more open, we'll create the stories like plots from point to point. A Friend of mine uses the words "Thematic Arch" instead of story. It's actually pretty good, because it allows you not to demand that story has to happen, to have to start and to have to finish.

MS: But it will though, through the course of the game, as you explore, the story unfolds instead of goes from line to line, instead of...

TORILL: I played a MUD, which was really incredible, the best role-play place I have ever seen, it was called Dragon Realms, and people were doing such wonderful roleplay in this place, and it was a beautiful game, and it was a detailed world where everything fitted so nicely. But they had one serious problem, they had a story which at one point would have to end. And the world doesn't end.

MS: No, not in a MUD, yeah.

TORILL: Not here either. But this had to end. So they would either have to allow the players to act on the story, and allow it to change, at which point it would have to change the end, or they would have to ignore a lot of the roleplay which happened, because they wanted the world to actually come to an end. This was the source of a lot of frustration.

MS: So, when the story ended, that was the end for everybody?

TORILL: yah. The whole world went down! The bad Dragons had won, the bad people took over!

MS: See, we're kind of taking the approach Diabolo took, every time you start a multi-player game it's an instance of the game, where ever you had last left it. And it kind of gets rebuilt for you and you're starting there. But everybody are in like their own little world.

TORILL: Oh, but they must have some kind of same kind of thing... you save your character from time to time, so you'll have all the skills and all the things, and you'll have all the quest-flags which were put on you when you logged out, and you log in and you start from that point again. But the world has changed around you.

MS: Yes, you're doing like - many, users, right? As many users as can possibly be online. We've got four people who can play it together at any time.

TORILL: Oh...

MS: So that's how we're kind of getting away with, you know, world didn't change since you left, it didn't exist while you were gone.

TORILL: Ah, I can see how you can do it that way. We are hoping it will, we have a lot of players from Dragon Realms, and the admin came from Dragon Realms, and we're hoping that we'll be able to recreate that again, just even better! And then we'll up to like a hundred players at a time. And then we'll have fun!

MS: you'll have to send me a link or something to this....

TORILL: I can give you the address....

(Addresses exchanged and phone-calls answered)

(quick lesson in telnet-use - and a firewall)

Chatting about Strive, and about MUD-text-based.....

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TORILL: when you work with computer-games, do you perceive any change in how you relate to other kind of text, do you think of a text differently because of you think of it in and for a game?

MS: I think I think of anything differently because of the game? We were just talking about that yesterday, we're working with a 3D environment, and we aim to get them to look realistic, we want them to look real. And it's gotten so bad I drive home and look at the hills and think like - you know, the hazing over the hills, it just doesn't look right... that tree, it looks a little flat, you know. You start looking at the world and everything is coloured by what you are looking for at the screen. And you start reading through a book and you start thinking Gee, what if I could have done this, what if I could have done that - how would that have affected the story.

TORILL: Have you ever wanted to have hyperlinks in a book?

MS: no, I have never actually thought about that, but I have read books where specifically you go, wow, that would make a great game. Some of them feel very linear and very structured, but sometimes you read a book that seems to have so many opportunities for game-like things to happen you just go AH, that would be a good story for a game.

TORILL: Do you have an example?

MS: Ah, well, some of the Indiana Jones, we were watching the first one the other night with the kids, I have two kids five and eight and they didn't know who Indiana Jones was. And we were watching the first one, and there were lots of possibilities for puzzles, you know, because a lot of what he was doing was working with puzzles, and that's how the story begins.

TORILL: yah, and that is what the movie is about, but isn't it a game already?

MS: Well, they took his persona and made other games, but they didn't take that story. But you know, that story would have made a good game even in itself, I mean. Now that everybody have seen it, it wouldn't be such a good game, because everybody know all the answers, but....

TORILL: Do your kids play a lot of computer-games?

MS: yeah, since they were - ah, two, they've been driving the computer. I remember my mam coming over when my daughter was 2 1/2, and she would say like "Well, you boot the computer up, then I type up win and I go into windows, and then I go to the start-window and..." And my Mam is going like: WHAT, there's this 2 1/2 years old telling her how to run a computer-game. So she knew how to get into the computer-game.

Attachment 3

Matthew Taylor
Portland 16.09.1999

The Infinite Point (World's End, Mithgard)

(Chatting, setting up equipment – the interview takes place in a hamburger restaurant. Chatting about the interview in Seattle, with Mark Seibert at Sierra)

MT: Oh yes, I have played the early space-quest as well – ever play Space-Quest, the old ones? They are really fun

TORILL: yes, yes... I like this guy – I really do... (describing an error in setting up the equipment while interviewing Gatties)

MT: are you going to be researching EverQuest as well?

TORILL: I am trying to get hold of them, but I'm – it's been really hard. They haven't answered any of my email, but I am going down to San Diego so... I'll nag a bit more when I get down there

MT: I just have a few friends who play Everquest, I just don't have the money to buy the 200\$ 3D graphics card

TORILL: That's something

MT: That's required for the MUD, so...

TORILL: Yes, I think the games are pushing technology a lot. They really... - I don't know if there is a conscious connection but I suspect that there is – between the production of hardware and the production of the games

MT: right. Yeah. That's just like producing Star Wars and producing all the things to go with it, it's the same thing

TORILL: ja...

MT: It's coming out on Video right before Christmas so...

TORILL: How come! Can that have been a conscious decision nahhh

MT: there's virtually no role-playing in EverQuest though, it's all just levelling and becoming as powerful as you can, I haven't heard of anybody ever roleplaying in it.

TORILL: Oh, I have heard of a few who were roleplaying in it.

MT: and people auction off a fifty-level wizard off on the internet – they just sold a fifty level ranger I believe, for 20 000 \$.

TORILL: Is fifty the top level?

MT: MmHm

TORILL: 20 000\$

MT: Mmhm – and he had some equipment you can't get – he went on his own particular quest and some of the administration helped him out and wrote out a quest for him and he got some really good equipment, and he auctioned that off as well with the character and he got 20 000\$ for it.

TORILL: People really pay that kind of money?

MT: yeah... my friend he's a 25 level right now, he has a little 26 level druid – my druid could

kick his butt, but... you know, I keep telling him that, but anyway . he's a 26 level druid, he's trying to make his equipment as good as possible nad sell his druid when he's level 50. That's one thing I like about EverQuest though, is that you can actually - being a level 50 you can still actually die. My character, Moon, he doesn't die any more, he can fight anything ...

TORILL: Well, that is a part of the internet culture, the game culture is really – interesting, you get so deep into it – the need – what's the fun with buying a character?

MT: you can beat other people up as long as you have money I guess. I don't know.

TORILL: You have 20 000\$ you can beat other people up. OK, that's life. It's on, and it's recording... and I even remembered to put a disc in here. I like having a recorder almost smarter than me...

TORILL: How old are you?

MT: 22

TM What kind of education do you have?

MT: third year in college

TORILL: and you have been studying...?

MT: Everything – biology, computer science, writing, drama, telecommunications, radio...

TORILL: that is everything!

MT: yeah

TORILL: How much do you play computer games?

MT: eeehhmm... It varies, I go in spurts, sometimes I don't play at all for two months, then I play every day for a whole month, I usually don't actually get into computer games – normal computer games, the last month I have been getting into one called starcraft, which is nothing associated with role-playing, but it's just kill a whole lot of aliens and it's fun that way. Mudding recently I have been doing daily five hours and most of that is roleplaying, and even that just started about – two weeks ago. So I am trying to wrap up story lines when I do so..

TM TIP is really that active with role-playing now?

MT: it is, it is – there is usually perhaps four people on, four regular people and two administration. I tend to get – you remember Lauren at all?

TORILL: Nnoo.

MT: OK, she's Doris's friend, she's a really good role-player, and she and I have two or three storylines going.

TORILL: Last time I had anything to do with Doris she was just very very...

MT: very shy, yes, she's quite active now.. Yeah, except when she makes "Flock of Sheep" characters, things like that, you can wonder what is that for (Flock of Sheep" is Matthew's ICQ handle).

She finally got rid of them and I said "thank you"... She's producing different actual characters now which is nice, but... anyway.

TORILL: I actually got into her about that, because I feel that as an administrator of any kind of game to do that is a little abusive.

MT: yeah – yeah...

TORILL: So I tyold her that OK, nothing happened, but to use somebody elses handle in a manner like that is ...

MT: She is, I know her, I wouldn't care, and it was like, you know, it was playing at... When you put them in the market place, you know, it kind of screws up the role-playing.

TORILL: Oh, that it does. And you know, she switched into him when I arrived. She switched into him and talked to me from the character. That's one of the reasons why I was so utterly confused. I thought that was you, that it was your character. And it was her having switched into it and .. that pissed me off.

MT: you didn't know it wasn't me.

TORILL: No, and I told her that I had known you for a very long time, and for her to do that was to impersonate you.

MT: I don't think she knew you... well, I did tell her I was on ICQ with you, so she probably did. I think the key word was that she didn't think.

TORILL: I think that as well, so I wasn't really angry. I told her to log on to strive and we could talk about what it is to be an immortal, and how to administrate a large group of people. That's also something Sauron hasn't done, hasn't been into, and hasn't too much experience. He codes, that's his speciality.

MT: She's actually started to hand out posts and ask people to do things, like write backgrounds for instance. I just post notes to her and not to everybody, I don't think it's so cool to be roleplaying and post the entire history to everyone on the MUD.

TORILL: That's something that could be suggested for Sauron, that's a background command (comparing different technical solutions to background)

TORILL: Compared to using other media, do you read books a lot?

MT: I like to. I have in the past. I started to, I want to finish two or three books before I make the big jump to Texas, but yeah, I like to read books.

TORILL: What kind of books?

MT: I like to read the Bible. I read the Bible, I read philosophical books, I read Tom Clancy, you know, Hunt for Red October, that kind of books, I read my mom's books.

TORILL: What does she write?

MT: She wrote, she's in process of writing her third, and I think it will be about the Middle Ages. She's extremely well versed as far as history in the Middle Ages, as unknown as it is, she's very good with that. And I am reading through it knowing I had to read my mom's because it is my mom's books, but I was actually quite surprised, it's almost the same kind of setting as I have my books in. I try not to get any ideas from her books because I want them to be my own. I read fantasy books and Star Wars books now that George Lucas has sold his soul to just about everybody who wants a piece of it, there are some people who write Star Wars, I could write better than them. But I like basically to read every type of book, I read just about everything. I like comedy books.

TORILL: Do you have an idea how much time you spend reading books compared to how much you play?

MT: I play more than I read books.

TORILL: How about television?

MT: Television – my brother doesn't have one, and I don't have one in my apartment. I never really got around to it, I like going to the movies, but I never really got television. I never was the type to schedule – the show is on at seven so I had to be at the television at seven. I usually remembered that it had been there and that it would have been nice, but always I missed it.

So I never really had – I mean there are shows I like, I like X-files, I like Frazier...

TM: Something I am discovering that suits the media statistics is that people who use computers a lot don't really watch television.

MT: Yeah, it's faster, and I think it is also that they are doing something. They are not just sitting there. They are actually participating, which I think is why role-playing is such a big thing.

TORILL: yes, is that what you like about role-playing?

MT: yeah, I like thinking about it, I like creating it, I like being a part of it, I like making a story. I watch television, I watch movies, and I think about who I am most likely to be in the movie or if I am not, who I could have been, who I could have added. Realistically, I am not about to bring myself in as superman and kill everybody, be a hero and all, but you know I am a – I roleplayed on... you were there a couple of times, it was online, it was a web-page...

TORILL: Yeah (Browser-based chat-area used for role-playing games) I logged on as a cat.

MT: yeah, you were trying to be a cat, and you were probably the most believable character on there at the time. It was – it could be really good or it could be really bad. There's a character on TIP right now, he could be really good but he just needs to get a real character. All of his characters are shrouded in blackness, they all have heads that look like skulls, they are all kind of demonish, and they are all foreboding and sadly he has the hitpoints to back it up because he was there during the – there are other unrealistic characters, they are all the same, they are all evil, they are just – it's all the same, and that's basically what you find on that particular place where I went on the internet before.

TORILL: Perhaps I should log Minnow on some time, she had a bit of a punch..

MT: Except he has – how many hitpoints does she have by now? Moon without any equipment has 6500 right now.

TORILL: 6500 – oh, she has more than that, she has about 30 000 or something...

MT: Doris made 16 000, there was a time when you could run around for character points, and when people discovered that – Sauron put a stop to it, but when people discovered you could just run all over the place and get character points for just moving from place to place, you could get 25 character points in five minutes. There was only a week of that, but that happened, and that's how Moon, in about a week, he went from 2000 up to about 6000... Which is how this particular guy, I think he has about 17 000... I don't know. I am anxious for the next Pwipe, (player character wipe) just to make everything even again.

TORILL: will there be one?

MT: I am pretty sure, he said and or if he gets his new world done, he'll do another one.

TORILL: his...?

MT: he's just basically restructuring a lot of the code. He's still doing that, and he's going to make it harder to get the best equipment.

TORILL: Ah, I'll have to ask him to save Minnow again

MT: yeah, I bet... I see you have equipment you can't get on the MUD, you got it from him. But like equipment like the shadowhawk talons and stuff like that, make it harder to get that. I told him the shadows edge – it's supposedly a dagger. Make it an exotic weapon. Make it so mostly only rangers use them, that sort of thing. Because there are these weapons which don't really have a form, you know, and they are not really daggers, I don't think, I told him they should be made exotic. I keep pushing him to make everything harder, and I mean I

pushed for him to put Doris in, because she spends more time on there than he does, and she could really learn, so...

TORILL: one thing which I think TIP really needs is a story, is a context. I find it very hard to role-play there. I mean I can roleplay...

MT: I have created my own context for my own characters outside of the realm of TIP, because you have to, you can't ...

TORILL: he doesn't, there is nothing in this realm which...

MT: it's interesting, because once you start role-playing, you kind of make boring characters, they are normal people, they have never been raped, they have never gone through hard times, they grew up in a temple and had a kind of quiet life. And I am developing the priesthood, the clerics, that kind of thing, as a regular part of – I don't know how you pronounce the name of that city –

TORILL: Muirthemne?

MT: Muirthemne? Is that it?

TORILL: I don't know...

MT: anyway I have no idea, I am just starting developing a normal lifestyle with these people, because Moon is so weird, and his story is just so far out there that I finally had to come up with something normal, same thing with Wolff and – Neo hasn't logged on for a long time.

TORILL: no, I haven't seen him. I haven't seen him on ICQ either, haven't heard from him for ages...

MT: he got married, he finished his degree...

TORILL: I guess he just has a life!

MT: yeah, basically...

TORILL: It is one and a half year ago that I really had anything to do with him, and a lot of that was because he was in a very pushed position... (chatting about mutual friends)

MT: Do you know James at all? He played Lindain? I took Arakus on, the dragon, and he's a dragon with an attitude, he's real fun to play with, because I have developed his character real sarcastically and cynically, he's real fun to mess around with people. I was in a group with Mintor, I don't know if you met him, he was actually a good roleplayer too. HE moved to California I guess... anyway, Ainor married Mintor, and then Mintor apparently died, because he didn't show up any more, so he ended up getting wiped. But I brought on Arakus, and I just really – I intimidated Lindain again, like I just intimidated everybody. And Mintor apparently hit a wrong button, and we were all grouped together, which meant the whole group attacked me, but the only person I saw attacking me was Lindain. So I fled and came back and just flew right in her face, just calling her a bastard and a crispy critter. And we were on Mithgard, and James was just really upset – he was not really pissed off, he was just upset that now somebody else was out to kill him, and he didn't realise that it was me. So he just went on about how some people were on power-trips and I thought it was just good role-play, personally, I mean an accidental hit, and I just came back and yelled at him, and Mintor of course could just kill me with one look, and he was just keeping me back and that kind of stuff. And I said: "That's me, James", and he went "oh, Oh OK". And I thought hey, wait a minute, that has nothing to do with it.

TORILL: I had a lot to do with him for a while and he was... so overly sensitive and taking so

much of what happened online into his life, he was really trying to live out very much of his life – or testing out a lot of what he wanted from his life – online.

MT: The biggest thing I think was that he thought that if he was a woman people would like him more.

TORILL: yeah

MT: which is why he played the woman. I was thinking bringing on a female character just to see how playing a female character would be.

TORILL: I had incredible fun recently with a male gay elf.

MT: A male gay – where did you play this guy?

TORILL: At a place called Aarinfel – it is an incredibly good role-play place, the admins are some of the people I ran into at Dragon Realms, I have been quarrelling with some of them and there's been all this emotional stuff... but the place is very good for role-playing and I made this elf, because I was not going to – I knew this place was one with a lot of MUDsex going on and I was not going into that. So I was not going to go in as a woman. And if I went into it as a man, there are a lot of pretty aggressive women on that place as well, and I was not going in there to have sex with a woman, so I figured that if he was gay I would be safe from the women, and the men would be too homophobic to hit on me... so I made this incredibly beautiful dancer who'd just compliment everybody, really just drown everybody in compliments and perfumed kisses and everything..

MT: so, did anybody try to kill him or

TORILL: Oh no, because he was also – I played him like this and then he would suddenly have this edge of danger. You would turn around for a moment, and when you looked back, he would have changed a little bit, just enough that you would know that this was not a kitten you were playing with. And then he would be oh so smooth again. And people were like: Oh no, Oh no what is going on? That was so much fun...

MT: Aarinfel, I think I remember going on there once

TORILL: you can't really Pkill there.

MT: you can't Pkill there?

TORILL: you can if you really go for it, but you have to have a very very good reason. And you are told that if you do this it's murder, and so on.

MT: I figure – I like role-playing and fantasy worlds where magic is abundant and I can just think of the drink I like and pop it's right there, but role-playing, the stuff that I really like is the stuff that's real. A lot more real, like – killing for my character is about as realistic as me killing somebody you know, it wouldn't even cross my mind, and it's, I would try to not walk down dark alleys and I try to ... that for me is probably the most realistic role-playing.

TORILL: I think Aarinfel would suit you, because that is set up like that. Sometimes, when you are there alone, it gets a little boring, because there's nothing to do. If you have nobody to role-play with you can't level, and you can't – you level through quests, and it's go fetch this, go get that, and go back and forth and back and forth. So the best way to level is to level through favour points, which function somewhat like when I am giving character points on TIP. So you – the best way to level is to role-play, because you can level through that. And for that you need people to be around. Me playing from a different time-zone, that got a little complicated, because I could only be on at certain times. I did get a lot of favour points with Eigar, but that's... I used them for equipment – he had these fancy outfits, he was all covered

in silk and brocades, and he couldn't move without light flickering over jewels and pullign his hands through the silk of his hair.

That was my stint as a man – which was very very funny.

TORILL: do you administrate any computer games?

MT: No

TORILL: you don't, you haven't been an admin anywhere.

MT: I thought I wanted to be one on TIP once, I was on there so much. But then I quit for so long, it was too sporadic, I had asked to be one at it once but I just cancelled that, because I was there a lots of time at one point, and then not at all at an other time. I almost did get voted in, but that was just a chat, a talker, similar to a MUD but no role-playing. And I ...

TORILL: you got almost voted on, but you missed the vote ..

MT: actually, it was not the number of votes, they were just going to take the five with the highest vote and I was number six, I missed their vote by three points or something. Which is fine because I spent a lot of time on there but then I just stopped after a while. So it's probably better I didn't get voted in because I wouldn't be doing my job.

TORILL: Hmm, yah...there's that

TORILL: Could you make me a list of computer games, different games, not just MUDs but all kind of different computer games that you play.

MT: the only two I played in the past was MacWarrior II

TORILL: What kind of game I sthat?

MT: did you ever see these movies where people drive these robots with a lot of rockets and layers and all kind of stuff, and they just blow each other up. That's what the game is, you are inside this big contraption and you go around blowing up other things. It's quite fun, good graphics. Aaahnd that game and then Star Craft. My friend, at 5-6 o'clock we are going to network some computers and that's the game we are going to play today. And we'll go kill some Zorg... That's the game I spend a lot of time on, we want to play through the whole plot before I go into the airforce. And I am almost there.

TORILL: Oh, then you have a task!

TORILL: What kind of games, could you put them in a category, these games?

MT: MacWarrior is braindead. You just hit buttons and blow things up, and it's more relaxing, Starcraft is...

TORILL: would you call that an action game?

MT: yeah. Star Craft is strategy, there's things in that game that you can't win by just sending everything you have to the guy, you have to send different groups of this and that. So I call it more a strategy wargame.

TORILL: you wouldn't call that an adventure game?

MT: sort of, but you don't really – adventure game I'd turn king's quest, space quest, that kind of thing, because you actually have participation in it. Yeah, they guide you, but you do most of the talking, most of the doing. Star Craft you – somebody – you are sitting back and they do all the stuff, all the strategy. So... it's not really – I don't think it would be considered an adventure game really.

TORILL: did you play any single-user or CD-rom based games that you would call role-play games?

MT: I played a lot of them shoot'em'up games, Jedi knight, and I played that, and you know... and that is a little similar I suppose, but I'd rather turn that more kind of along the same lines as star craft, because they are guiding you and then they play the story, and then they give you a gun and you shoot a whole lot of stuff... and they play the story and it goes on just like that. I have heard of Baldur's Gate but I have never actually played it, it's a single-user or multi-user role-play game.

TORILL: that is a multi-user game which is called a role-play game...

TORILL: Why do you play computer games?

MT: they are fun, it's a hobby, I started when I was – I started with my spectrum Sinclair – did you ever hear of a spectrum Sinclair? They were about this big and a foot long, and half a foot wide, and you load them with audiotapes, and you hook it up the computer to your tape-recorder and you hook it up to your regular television and you play these little game. I was perhaps six, seven years old, and I was limited to an hour, half an hour a day. I played these cute little role-playing games. There was a span of 10-15 years and got caught by the hobbit. IT was this game "the hobbit", where you had to... I moved from that to a capero – that's a computer, the screen is really tiny and the computer is really big, and you bang on the keyboard and it makes a whole lot of noise, one of these really old computers. Then we moved up in the world to an AT 88, one of those big powerful machines.

My dad paid a few hundred dollars for it too.. And then we moved up to a 386, and then he bought a 486 laptop, and today everybody in the family have fast, updated computers. Except me, I gave mine away, so I am going to buy another one. I just played them because they were fun, they never really took over my life because I was limited to an hour a day. But...

TORILL: That was your parents setting that limit?

MT: yeah, they would just make me go outside and play, or make me play with my legoes or something. I am actually very grateful that they did, because I think I developed a lot more of my creative side than I would have if I ...

TORILL: you don't do much building and administrating, so I don't think we'll go to deeply into this... What I am really looking for is how people use texts which are not linear: A book, an article most kind of texts we meet are linear texts, they go from A to B to C and end up somewhere at the other end. But when you go online... actually windows is multi linear, you have several layers, a lot of different things happening, you switch from the one to the other, you don't just go in there and continue through it but you jump around . the working title of my thesis is "the digital juggler", how you juggle things continuously, how you skip around. Is this familiar to you, is this an experience that you...

MT: The mudding?

TORILL: no, the juggling, the skipping, the multi-tasking, the fact that you don't read in one direction, but you have to refer to several different points...

MT: Right – not sure I quite understand – I understand multi-tasking, I have roleplayed three different characters in three different places before.

TORILL: I am thinking of the openness of the game. When you read a book, the things are set in there, and you go through the story. When you enter into a role-play situation, these points where you would, writing a story you would see that at this point the hero can do this and this and this... and I choose him to go there. But in the role-playing game this is open,

and this choice is not something which is served to you by the author but something you have to...

MT: and it's also – added to that is giving your character realistic choices. Like I said, I have encountered characters who were god and they killed people and that's all they do for a living. You wouldn't believe how many assassins I have met.

TORILL: I do – My character on Dragon Realms was an assassin and she was incredibly successful actually. She was the highest level assassin on the board.

MT: Well, but she was probably actually an assassin and could actually be killed if somebody managed to.

TORILL: Oh, it would be very stupid of them, because they would have been murdered by just about half the MUD.

(chatting about Dragon realms and Erinn the assassin, and about the popularity of assassins)

TORILL: the point being – after I created her, there was a burst of assassins on Dragon Realms.

MT: I guess – they wanted the level 80 without the work.

TORILL: yeah... that was something like that they wanted to get into. They saw this character and they saw it worked, so they wanted to do something like that, so yeah, I believe the number of assassins you have encountered.

MT: the sad thing too is that the chatline where I used to go online, to roleplay, you could be an assassin there, because it would be a lot easier, there were no levels. That is actually a lot more free for all than a MUD is, because a MUD has levels, you have to – you know – even if you are a really lousy role-player you still have to work to get to where you want to get. With this you could just go in there and be whoever you wanted to be. Which allowed for really good roleplaying. I have broken the rules of the MUD and started the character out at a different age. To start every single character out at 17 years old, that to me isn't very realistic. And so I have chosen 31. I can do that at the other place... I also got hammered by someone at TIP for, saying I couldn't have a human description for my dragon ranger, but that's part of his storyline...

TORILL: If he's a shapechanger, why not?

MT: he isn't though, he has been changed. Shapechangers are one of these powerful characters that have been overused, because they can change into a mouse and to a dragon and this and that. And I actually have rules in my own head to guide myself to avoid doing something stupid like that. He was changed and he can't go back, which is his dilemma. He wants to go back but if he did go back he'd be hunted down and killed. It's complicated anyway... Hopefully I'll come out with a book and send you a free copy. But anyway, as far as I think what you are saying you are asking is how creative, am I used to the creativeness that allows me to create anything I want, basically?

TORILL: MmmHmm

MT: yeah, I try to stay within the reasonable bounds that something would actually happen. I would like to be able to do anything with my characters. Ironically, one of the characters I really am getting to like right now, his name is Stefan, because they wouldn't let me do a steven with an e at the end, so I just make it in German, he's the one roleplaying with this other cleric. I told you that I read the bible, I believe in God and everything, but my character

doesn't. He doesn't believe in God, he goes by the whole presupposition that there's too much crap happening in the world. He understands that you balance free will with God letting you have your free will to – you know, why did God let Hitler do that, versus why does he let you go steal that candybar, for instance. If he was to stop you from doing that, you'd be pissed. So he's giving you your free will. But he's mad because of that. He wishes God would – if he even exists – would find a happy medium between the candy-bar and Hitler. He's upset about that. But he hasn't told anybody that. He just drills the other clerics with so do you believe in God, but why not? So he just hammers on them for their disbelief, and all those kind of things. It's interesting. It allows me to play out situations like that it allows me to do that kind of things. Anyway, it's – I enjoy having the freedom to do all that, and the fact is that I have gotten a lot better at it since 1995, about four years now... Yeah, there's a group of people at my college that started a particular chatline, it's called the Red Dragon Inn, and they actually started to pretend that it was a real inn and then it got really crappy and they had to move to an other one and an other one and an other one as all the wannabes were following the people who were actually doing... And the place where I took you, that's finally been overrun with – and the person who runs that too is really arrogant.

TORILL: I tried to get back on that, but they...

MT: the address has totally changed, they kept going down and up and down and back up. It's fun, there's one person there I really like role-playing with because she's a really good role-player, and – but I can't do it with my 486 lap-top, especially when I am on Zmud and ICQ internet and multitasking... So.. anyway

.....

Attachment 4

David Inthiadaka

16.09.1999, Portland Oregon

Dragon Realms, Aarinfel, LinguaMOO: Eystyx, Eristeth, Solandri, Sol

(Preparations)

TORILL: Let's just go quickly through the standard things.

TORILL: How old are you?

DI: 22 American system

TORILL: what education do you have?

DI: American college degree, bachelor in classics

TORILL: What kind of media do you use normally. Do you watch television a lot?

DI: yes, I watch television... sometimes... read books, listen to tapes. I don't use the radio a lot, I hardly use the radio at all.

TORILL: Compared to these media: how much time do you spend on computer games?

DI: I guess it's a significant amount. I'd say as much as television, but maybe less than books.

TORILL: Yeah. Would you feel that the computer takes time from television or reading books?

DI: I haven't really thought of it as either way. It's just another activity. If I want to watch television I watch television, if I want to read books I read books, if I want to use the computer I use the computer.

TORILL: MmHm – you haven't thought about it as one screen activity taking time from an other screen activity?

DI: No

TORILL: If you had a choice, between spending your evening watching television, reading a book or playing computer games

DI: which book is it?

TORILL: OK, it's a fairly entertaining one but not totally...

DI: Probably reading books. Also depends on what's on television and so forth, but all things beign fairly equal...

TORILL: so you would choose from – all things being fairly equal you'd prefer the book, but you'd mostly choose from the content?

DI: yes

TORILL: ja - ... What kind of computer games do you play?

DI: DO you want a general category?

TORILL: yes, I'd like categories yes.

DI: IN general I tend towards strategy games but not real time? Mostly Risk and something called Empire Masters, Civilization – StarCraft is an other exception to that but – Star Craft, it's for the graphics.

TORILL: It is – I know others who like starcraft very much...

TORILL: If you were to make a list of types, categories of computer games, what would that list include?

DI: How broad would you like the categories?

TORILL: Oh, like Adventure, Strategy – like you already mentioned..

DI: I guess – I'd have one with strategy, an other one as – I am not sure if I can use adventure, because a lot of the adventure games also fall in under strategy. I think I'll leave that one for now. After that I'd characterise a game as a shooter where it isn't really dependent on strategy at all, but mostly on eye-hand coordination, how fast you can click the mouse. Just pulling up things most of them. Puzzle games, which I guess most adventure games would be a sub-class of. When you say computer games, are you talking about mostly single player or all kinds of computer games?

TORILL: Both. All kinds of computer games. single player multiplayer online offline.

DI: OK... Mmmm –

TORILL: would you say the role-play games are their own category?

DI: yes, but the definition I use of role-playing games would be different, where I am not sure I can think of a good definition of role-playing games? Some of them would tend to fall under puzzle or strategy games. I guess some more – yes, I would have a role-playing game category. But I think I'd use them only for role-playing in the pure sense, say for MUDs or Mushes.

TORILL: So you wouldn't – have you tried out any games like Baldur's Gate or EverQuest or anything like that?

DI: I haven't tried out those games your're mentioning, I think I have tried out something similar.. Are you asking for my opinion on them or are you asking

TORILL: I am asking what category you'd like to put them in. I would just like to check because some of the others have mentioned these as role-playing games so I think it's interesting that you don't. you say role-playing games are MUDs and MUSHes, while others put these games into the role-playing game category.

DI: I am not sure about Baldur's Gate, because I haven't had any experience with it – but something like Ultima... Ultima I, I haven't seen any Ultima's beyond that. I'd put Ultima One into a strategy game as opposed to a role-playing game.

TORILL: Oh, OK. That's interesting.

DI: And I'd put – what's an other good example – Like Realm's, Exile – to me a lot of the classic role-playing games are closer to strategy or puzzle -playing games.

TORILL: yeah, thank you.

TORILL: you have been making a game – and the game you have been building, would you put that in a role-playing or would you put that in a strategy...

DI: Which game?

TORILL: well, the one I was thinking of was Aarinfel, but you have been making other games as well.

DI: well... Teiress isn't – the Teiress thing probably isn't really a game it's more of a setting. But from the Aarinfel viewpoint... What was the question again?

TORILL: First, what kind of category would you put these games in – or that game in?

DI: Aarinfel – when we were making it our objective was for role-playing.

TORILL: When you say “When we were making it, the objective was for role-playing” are you implying that it has changed?

DI: I don’t know, I can’t speak for it now since I am no longer...

TORILL: No, but you can have an opinion?

DI: I think it still is a role-playing game.

TORILL: Would you be able to say how much time you spend with computer games – how much time do you spend at the computer? That’s what you work with now, isn’t it?

DI: Depends on the day?

TORILL: An average day – approximately?

DI: I’d say – work-related... Approximately something between 20 and 25 % work-related?

Non-work-related – and discounting sleep time I’d say... hmmm... 5-10 %?

TORILL: Well, that is a while? How many hours would you make that a day?

DI: Non-work?

TORILL: yeah?

DI: an hour – maybe two hours?

TORILL: Used to be a lot more, hmm?

DI: yes, used to be a lot more.

TORILL: What basically made you change that? Was that when you lost the access at Reed or was it when you started to work?

DI: It was mostly when losing the access at Reed. I would have to walk a longer distance, it’s no longer so easy.

TORILL: that’s true... And now you spend most of your time on online games or offline games now?

DI: Offline games.

TORILL: And those being... Games like StarCraft?

DI: StarCraft, Risk – a little bit of Serf

TORILL: When you make the distinctions between the different kind of games you didn’t mention for instance action games and simulation games... Any particular reason why you left out that?

DI: The simulation in terms of fighter-craft simulation, I put those in the category of I think I called it a shooter?

TORILL: OK... You put them in that category

DI: yes, I put that in that category, I could probably come up with a better name for it. And sport-games, I am not sure I haven’t had much experience with those.

TORILL: Action games? Would you put them anywhere?

RM Hmmm...

TORILL: Cause some people would put these shooters into the action games categories, and also some of the sports games such as the martial arts games, they would be in between these two categories...

DI: I think for me it would depend on the specific action game? In games where you are mostly depending on short-term reactions or short-term responses, I put them towards shooter, in games where if you do one thing and it has an effect on the game a very very long time later, I edge them towards strategy or – I don’t know, perhaps they deserve their own category but so far I don’t think so. Also a lot of, also some of them would also go into puzzle-games.

TORILL: Ok, Oh, well that's reasonable.

TORILL: Why do you play computer games? Why do you play them?

DI: I hate to say this, but – the answer that comes into my mind is – they are fun.

(Laughter)

TORILL: That's OK, that's a good reason.

DI: It takes my mind off of real life.

TORILL: Oh, but that's a good excuse. Ehm... Do you feel that they take your mind off real life better than other ways of escaping?

DI: which other ways are you talking about?

TORILL: Well, we were talking about reading or watching television earlier.

DI: Hmm – no, I don't think, I wouldn't say that they are on the average better.

TORILL: OK. In what situations do you use them.. When you are tired, when you are alert, when you are bored...?

DI: When I am bored. Well, sometimes when I am tired also, but if I am tired it would have to be a very good reason why I am not in bed or eating or something like that. I guess mostly because I am bored.

TORILL: OK... What's the most attractive thing to you about the computer games you play. What makes you say that "this game is good"?

DI: I don't know. A lot of them are on a case-by-case basis. I mentioned StarCraft earlier and that one has graphics – I think it's the fact that they are simple and I can play them without fully concentrating on playing them if I so want? But if you hand me a computer game and you ask me whether I like it and why, I am not sure if I can tell you. Or if you describe characteristics, I am not sure if I can say whether I like it in advance, or not.

TORILL: OK – so you would have to play it to kind of get into it, before you know whether this is something you like or not.

DI: yes. And even if it is I might get bored with it after a while.

TORILL: yeah, but are there games that you would absolutely not play, that you have been bored with at first glance or... you just wouldn't care touching?

DI: Hmmmm. I can't think of any of those off the top of my head either.

TORILL: Myst, Doom – do you play these?

DI: I played Doom for a little while, I haven't played MYST yet.

TORILL: would you? You probably know about it, heard a lot about it, seen pictures...

DI: I actually haven't heard about it, I know – all I know is it's out there and I see it in the stores occasionally.

TORILL: All those macs up at Reed and people don't load Myst into it and play like mad? I thought it was the ultimate mac-user game.

DI: Oh, we loaded StarCraft into that already.

TORILL: Oh, so that's what you loaded into there

DI: and saying that Myst is the ultimate mac-user game, I don't know if that's true. There are some games – Realms was created only for the mac – the person who created it was using a macintosh.

TORILL: and is that more popular than something like Myst, but do you know that?

DI: I don't know

TORILL: probably not, because I have heard about Myst, but I haven't heard about Realms

DI: yes, Myst is probably much more popular.

TORILL: and Myst is not played on PCs... you don't get that for a PC, that's for mac

DI: interesting, I wonder if that has something to do with the processors.

TORILL: I don't know... Probably...

TORILL: When you play computer games, do you feel that this changes any of your approach to things like the story, to the perception of reality, perception of the game, perception of how a narrative is built? Does it change anything – of your understanding of the world?

DI: Well, in terms of the mindless strategy games, no. but that's because they are supposed to be mindless. In terms of some of the MUDs I have been on – I'd have to say yes.

TORILL: Any examples?

DI: Dragon Realms

TORILL: Which of course was a mind-expanding experience? (ironic)

DI: not really, but I learned a whole lot about people.

TORILL: which is interesting when it comes to multi-player games... you know pretty much what I am looking for, I am looking for the multi-linear stories and the approach to telling and creating stories in an environment which allows you to jump between story-lines, instead of reading a book where you are caught by the one story-line. Do you feel that the freedom of writing and creating story-lines, which you have in a place like the MUD, is attractive to you?

DI: Compared to what?

TORILL: Compared to reading a book, where it gets laid out for you in advance by a writer?

DI: I think for me at least, a MUD has is hung in between a couple of extremes, while a book can follow one story-line and expand on certain aspects, and put forwards certain descriptions, basically do one story line and do that storyline really well. A MUD can't do that because – well, sometimes the players just won't play with that – with some story lines, and it turns out really bad sometimes... On the other hand, on the other end of the spectrum for me – there's the actual table-top role-playing games. And I see them as being much more free than a MUD would be? Because in a MUD you are limited by the other characters and most importantly by the imms and knowledge of things you expected to have a lot of consequences, and then ultimately it turned out it didn't...

TORILL: OK

DI: you really expected. Where as in table-top your game-master would most likely look at that and may think that's neat or you might just have to mention it to him or her, and you might just start a story-line right there.

TORILL: do you have any thoughts as to why you can start a story-line easier in a table-top game than in a MUD? Is it because the games-master is there all the time while the imm may not?

DI: That's part of it I think, an other part of it is the number of players and the types of players. Where if you play table-top role-playing, in most cases you are going to have people who are relatively similar, and if you have an idea which is particularly neat they will probably go with that- or at least you can convince them. And where we have seen on Dragon Realms that there are all sorts of players and they have all sorts of different ideas, and you can create a story-line with – if you approach the right people or the right characters. However you can't necessary get everyone in the MUD to agree with that storyline.

TORILL: yes, that has basically to do with the amount of people involved in it?

DI: yes.

TORILL: so I na smaller MUD environment or a larger table-top game environment...

DI: it gets harder

TORILL: you could have the situations reverse?

DI: aahhh – not necessarily, I also see the issue of coding and building to also limit MUDs a little bit more. Whereas in a role-playing game, if you want it to be winter or you want it to be snowing (snap of fingers) it's snowing. In a MUD you probably have to go through perhaps thirty or so rooms (at least) and change all the room-descriptions.

TORILL: Or you can do like Mark does and put in a wiz-invisible mob that says: It's snowing.

DI: yes, but that's the problem that then you get people misinterpreting things like how much snow is there? Like, I have a friend who likes using, in haven, the fountain square, in DR. Where we have talked to a lot of people, and it seems that every time we talk to someone we find a different view of the fountain square. Where some people – I was oen of them – thought there was actually buildings in it but there isn't, at least not in the room descriptions.

TORILL: There isn't? I was absolutely certain there were buildings all around fountain square.

DI: And somebody put in a tree, people put in grass

TORILL: I remember trees, they annoyed me, because they were not in the room-description and people kept putting them in...

DI: yes, there's an extrapolation – on a table-top you have the referee who's right there who can say: no, there's only one foot of snow, or there's only one inch or – while on a MUD you just get the message: it's snowing. And you can emo wading through knee-high snow and then five minutes later someone can walk in and just – you know – gather up most of the snow that's around in a handful and

TORILL: Throw it

DI: Throw it, yeah

TORILL: that's ... you are completely right...

TORILL: Why do you like to – why do you like to build and create games? What kind of reward is there in that?

DI: I am not sure how to explain it. I guess in some sense there is the idea of or joy of some sort of contribution, a contribution that will last at least a little while. So maybe – a mark or something, a way to say "I have had an effect on the world". On the other hand – I am really not sure.

TORILL: Let's go back to what you sad: I have had an effect on the world. That fits very neatly with what you say about the reason why – the difference between MUDs and table-top games, in table-top games it's a lot easier to actually have an effect on the world.

DI: yes, it is?

TORILL: So, is that part of the satisfaction, that you can actually change something and you can actually make something happen?

DI: yes, I think so.

TORILL: And you are working with two different kind of – or you have been working with one and you are working with an other game – or context – what your is your primary as you build,

as you create, these games.

DI: It varies on the game. Although for Aarinfel my primary concern was making sure the theme lined up was logical, made sense. Creating a setting. When I game-master table-top there's also that sense of trying to make sense of the setting, but I think it's more along the lines of entertaining the players – or rather have – getting the characters to do certain things or hitting the characters with consequences of their actions.

TORILL: So when you administrate any kind of game, your primary concern is to entertain and engage the characters?

DI: yes.

TORILL: are you concerned with getting your own story through?

DI: in – for Aarinfel, yes, because at that point we were the ones making the story. In table-top I generally preferred – what I think the story is going to be? From Experience when the characters are getting to your story generally nothing goes as planned, so you have to make it up as you go along most of the time.

TORILL: you have any goal with the games, apart from entertaining?

DI: As an administrator? No.

TORILL: so, like pointing out who wins and who loses is not important for you? No victory, no loss?

DI: I am not sure how you explain victory or how you would describe victory?

TORILL: oh well, that's true, that's a question, who can win a role-playing game? Would you say it's possible to win a role-playing game?

DI: I guess it all depends on what your attitude is going in. I mean, if I believe that characters can win a session or at least succeed in their goals, but I am not sure if the players can win. Unless you can define winning as having fun, in which case it's really easy to define it then.

TORILL: if we take the case of our mutual friend Magrath, he did have the idea that it was possible to win, and he was willing to do quite a lot to do that. Would you say he could win? Or in your opinion, was he losing while winning?

DI: From his perspective?

TORILL: From yours. He was certain he had to do this in order to win.

DI: From my perspective... I guess that the answer will have to be yes and no. I mean he was having a great deal of fun, so in that sense he was winning – but he was also getting a lot of people angry at him, and that wasn't good either.

TORILL: I don't think he thought that was so funny.

DI: MmHmmm – he's – well – (pause) I guess for the most part I can't say if he was winning or losing. He would have the attitude that he was winning and after a while it just seemed like he thought it was winning and nothing else mattered.

TORILL: Yeah.... But you feel that having fun is what matters? Or what matters to you in a situation like that?

DI: yeah, it's mostly having fun.

TORILL: So you'd say that the primary goal from any side, administration or playing, would be to have fun?

DI: To enjoy yourself, yes. Or at least from an administrator's point of view make sure someone else is enjoying themselves. Because you can't always enjoy yourself as an administrator.

TORILL: would you make a list of the responsibilities of an administrator? What does an

administrator have to do – a good administrator. What does a good administrator of a game do?

DI: Are you talking about MUDs or in terms of all sorts of role-playing games.

TORILL: all sorts of role-playing games.

(David opens the window)

DI: Well.. for the most part it really depends a lot on the players and what the players want. For some groups I have seen it works really well for the game-master to just create a single storyline and just push the characters along the story-line, while some other players like to have the possibilities before them. In terms of - I guess part of the duties would be – well – I definitely have to put serving as an arbitrator in there – arbitrator /referee, since that's one of the reasons why it's there, otherwise the players could just play by themselves. A setting or storyline as I mentioned before may or may not be important depending on what the players are like and - well – one of the things I guess the administrators wouldn't do is stop them if they are having fun which isn't hurting other people. Easier to do in table-top role-playing, a bit harder to do in a MUD. I think that's it, I really can't see that much else.

TORILL: If you go to the creation of a story-line or.. yes, let's take the creation of a story-line. You want to write books as well, don't you?

DI: yes

TORILL: yeah. So you are familiar with the process of creating a storyline for a book?

DI: So what is the process? I wasn't aware that there was a formal process?

TORILL: Oh, yeah, the way you are often taught to approach the writing process of setting down – plotting down the plot and then fleshing it out afterwards.

DI: I am not sure, I'd expect that people do it differently, so I didn't expect that there is a ...

TORILL: Sure, people do it differently, but you still have the difference between the plot and the discourse, where the plot is what actually happens and the discourse is how it happens.

DI: mmmm

TORILL: And the plot – there's a – very often what happens is that writers set different markers in the plot: they want this and this to happen. And then they say: how does this happen? And that's the actual writing process, how to make this happen?

DI: That's one way to look at it. And I guess, from that standpoint you're actually trying to make something happen or you have something on your mind.

TORILL: Well, what often happens is that the plot changes as the discourse grows.

DI: yes, that's the other way I think you'd do it where you'd have initial conditions and then drop the characters in there, and if you created the characters well then the characters would have natural tendencies to do certain things or in a certain – so in that process the plot would be almost self-creating, or created through the various discourses.

TORILL: yeah – would you say that that is what happens in a game?

DI: it depends on the administrators – as I said some administrators do this one storyline

TORILL: do the one plot they want to...

TORILL: I think you have a game-oriented approach to wanting to write stories.

DI: It could be

TORILL: Which I don't have a problem with at all, it could be very healthy.

DI: I actually look at it from both ways.

TORILL: I think I have more or less come through all the questions.

(General chit-chat)

Attachment 5

Tom Kentley
Portland, 16.09.1999

Dragonrealms: Ronitho
Aarinfel: Stavo (the original)

Testing...

TORILL: Just a few formal questions to start up with.

TORILL: How old are you?

TK: I am 23

TORILL: What kind of education do you have?

TK: I have a bachelors degree in chemistry from a liberal arts college, I have a masters degree in teaching from a Lutheran University.

TORILL: What kind of Media do you use? Like – do you watch television? Read books?

TK: I watch television, I watch video, both in VHS and DVD format, I read a lot of books, I read a number of graphic novels, I surf the WWW, I read email, downloaded content, such as news, entertainment news... Watch movies, listen to the radio, listen to commercial CDs, I think that's about it

TORILL: Yah, you generally use a lot of different media?

TK: definitely.

TORILL: Ja, is there any preference, if given the same kind of content – what medium do you choose? What's your favourite?

TK: I'll say my choices are mostly dictated by convenience? And so they change over a lifetime as I have access to better equipment, for instance if I had a lap-top available right now, which was portable and light weight, I'd probably favour internet based content. Because of the hyperlinks and the ability to move from one piece of information to another almost instantaneously? And because I am on the go a lot, I find books and newspapers a lot more useful to me. That's my preference, because I can carry them everywhere and they are light weight.

TORILL: OK, but given the access to something which is as portable as a book, you'd prefer something which has hyperlinks and a different reading mode.

TK: Yes, definitely, one of the reasons I like email-based direct content is that I subscribe to an internet service that mails me just the news that I am interested in, and I am able to specify that I have particular interest in a special kind of news and they send me nothing else. I really like that. As well as providing me with links that allows me to get access to almost anything I want, almost instantaneously, since when I am reading it, I am reading it with my computer hooked up to the internet.

TORILL: OK.. eh.. How much time would you say that you spend on consuming different media?

TK: I have some very set times when I consume.. At breakfast, I read while I eat... On an average day, I'd probably say if it's strictly receiving end of media, like if it's just reading, I'd say 3-4 hours. But I also play a lot of video games and online games, and that's not just receiving, actually.

TORILL: Oh, yeah, that's the next question, how much time do you spend on books and how much time do you spend on games.

TK: I'd say, on the average I spend about 2 ½ hours on books and other forms of non-interactive media. I'd say I spend about an hour on email and other more interactive media, and then probably an hour more or two hours in terms of games. But that would vary very widely, in a day, as to what I am in the mood for.

TORILL: Yes – what kind of games do you play?

TK: Ohm, I play MUDs which are typically online interactive roleplaying games with a very simple physics model for interacting with the world, I play video-games, which have typically a lot more sophisticated physics model for interacting with the world, but nowhere near the same level of role-playing – ahm – I play some computergames, but I have really drifted away from that market or that market has drifted away from me.

TORILL: Oh – so you prefer the multiplayer online version of games?

TK: Yeah, I tend to either prefer to either have... humans behind... either gaming with humans or have something very sophisticated and fast. I don't like playing games that create sort of a MUD that's all computer intelligence based, like a lot of the popular role-playing games right now. They have a MUD-like feel in that you walk around and interact with all different people, but it's almost all keyboard- and computer-controlled, and that has never been a favourite to me.

TORILL: OK.. now if you were to make a list of categories of computer-games, what would the list contain?

TK: Arcade-games, adventure- or quest-games, puzzle-games, games designed - as I'd say –party-games, multi player, for people to do that kind of... there's six categories that are just one category all wrapped together built as merchandise to use content to make a successful game rather than starting with a game that is successful, Tarzan, a big success movie this summer, there are games being produced for it, they are producing the game, because of the movie, they are not choosing a movie to make a game.

TORILL: Would you say... an other question first: Can you give me examples of these games you have mentioned, strategy-games, role-playing games?

TK: Ah, OK – Roleplaying games I mentioned, an example would be Final Fantasy seven or eight, or street-fighter or any of the games that are pitting opponents against each other in some sort of setting. Quest- or adventure-games there are the legends of Zolda (?), a game that combines a lot of different elements but which is driven towards completing a specific quest or solving a specific problem.

Multiplayer. Or games to bring people together: Doom or Quake, games that are designed explicitly for human opponents to interact competitively. Hybrids would be MUDs to some degree would fit in that category for me, because they tend to have an adventure basis in terms of solving a quest or trying to get from point a to point b – there is

a role-playing aspect in interacting with personas **but** they also fall under the multiplayer category because they're explicitly designed for multiple users participating in the games at the same time, then games for the purpose of merchandising – Tarzan is a good example – I have no idea of how good a game Tarzan is, but it strikes me as a good example, I have seen a lot of games based on movies and books that are just sort of selling the name of the thing and hopes that you liked the initial experience enough that you'll like the next product they are selling you under the same name.

TORILL: Yeah – if you were to say what distinguishes a good game for you, what would that be?

TK: Well, first and foremost I am a consumer, and I spend time and money, so dollar value – how expensive it is – MUDs for instance are essentially free. I'd say, professionally, and personally I have a reason to have an internet service provider, and MUDs are free, I specifically avoid MUDs that I have to pay for because in my experience it's never been as rewarding to me that I see something much better in the ones that I pay money for, so first off, I want to get what I feel is a reasonable product for the money I am paying. I like to see ideas, I'd say is my next big thing, the series that I read, the kind of things that captivates my interest is what's new, one of the reason why I follow the news, the reason is I am captivated by new ideas – anything that bids itself as new, as innovative or is from somebody whose innovations or creativity I have been inspired by before, or how long they will hold my interest. Recently I have become very interested in how other people can participate, purely in my gameconsumer years I was very into a selfish set of choices, but my wife and I like to play games together, so I particularly like to play games that have a cooperative element so we can work together towards and objective and those are pretty rare, because most consumers... aren't. At that point gaming consists for a lot of people of a solo-activity. And then whether it has an interesting story, whether it has enough theme that I can truly immerse myself in the experience or the challenges, or whether it strictly feels like a series of competitive actions. Most games in general demand that you do the same thing thousands or tens of thousands of times, pressing the button or making a special move or a certain decision, unless there's enough atmosphere or enough story that I have an ability to relate to the story or the persona that I put into the game – then I am not interested.

TORILL: Oh, well, you pretty much answered the other question as well, that is a bad – what is a bad computer game?

TK: Yeah, Games where there's just not enough going on, or the alternative of most frustrating aspect for me, is when they get the story right, they get the theme right, but they don't get the interface right, they put the controls or the camera-control or what ever... and I get the feeling that WOW there's some great ideas here and I just can't access them, and it kind of reminds you how the technology is interfering with the experience. As an example, there's a game that I played the Nintendo 64 – it feels like it's got the theme right and it feels like it's got the environment right, and I can really really like the character but the camera control is so clunky that I can never see what I want to be seen. I am often seeing the periferal view for my characters, then I slowly gets behind them again as they turn, and likewise in MUDs if there's some really good description writing and a really good theme and rooms sound really cool but the interface is – is a – quanky, or frustrating and limiting, it's, it's the

worst experience of all. It's much easier to dismiss something that clearly has no content in the worth getting to, than it is to, to deal with the frustration of not being able to access that content because I can't get into the game

TORILL: But that means that you'd also dismiss things that would technically function perfectly, but had no content.

TK: Right. There have been some games that I have seen recently that I can really admire for the innovations or the controls that they have, but content-wise it doesn't appeal to me, for instance the sega-dreamcast-system went on sale September 9th (1999) here in the United States, it's the next generation of console, for home video gaming, which is really interesting to me, because I have purchased a number of home video game consoles, so I am clearly a member of the consumer market, but so far I haven't seen anything for sale or coming for that system that contentwise are appealing to me. I mean I have seen the graphics, the graphics are amazing, I have seen the gameplay the controls, the controls are spot on, there's no frustration there, but I don't relate to the content they are really trying to sell me.

TORILL: Ja, OK, Ah. You have been building games. What kind of games you have been building?

TK: Ahh.. Primarily I build roleplaying games and table-top roleplaying games, Worlds, roles, and systems for interacting with the worlds. Ahm, creating alternative universes, starting with an earth model and then saying what if, what if we had this technology, what if we had this social change, what if these environments were in effect, what if these superstitions or myths were actually true—I have also built one MUD, built on an other MUD, and I am working on an other MUD. Ahm, it tends to be much of the same, starting from one model and asking "what if" questions, implementing a solution but with a bit more emphasis on the deficient model of interacting with the world the code, and the nitty gritty boring details, which is the reason I'd say why most of my creativity tends to lead towards tabletop as the interaction is between people, and it's not through the third party of the computer, I don't have to teach the computer what to say to the player as a gamemaster interacting with somebody live in the room, I can directly tell them what they are experiencing, and entail them on the fly, so if they get the wrong impression I can immediately correct the interactions. I have also done level-editing, a lot of games that come out get official or get it hacked level editors to them, a lot of the 3D first person shooters like doom and quake and marathon and a lot of others you can name out on the internet have some way to build levels nowadays, like Doom, it's a 3D space where someone shoot and you get to walk around them and see what you have done. And then as far back as I can remember, I have always been fascinated by things they let you make, spaces, make games, or even programming simple C-programs, it's amazing that you can walk through them and create a number of little games.

TORILL: Why do you make games? What's your primary concern as builder, or administrator, or creator of a game.

TK: Well, based on my experiences of billions of dollars, countless hours of time, of so many people trying to get it right, trying to make a great game, it my primary motivation is that—can I—can I catch their attention long enough to show that I have some good ideas? I mean

as a consumer, I log into a mud, I walk around for five to ten minutes, and I leave – and that’s the choice I make, and I know I am running the risk that maybe later on it gets better, but it’s really a buyers market. There’s countless MUDs there’s countless games that are made, and people wholeheartedly believe they are going to ??? and they utterly fail. And so I know that I am constantly competing against my kind of consumer, who’ll discard something over details, or over just getting enough of successive small trivial details wrong that they decided that it’s not worth going further with. And the same thing with tabletop roleplaynign games, when I create a world or a story, I tend to make it fairly sophisticated, with a complex set of motivations and plots, but I know that if I don’t make it interesting enough right off the bat, then am my players won’t enjoy it, they won’t interact with it, they won’t engage it. On the other hand, in tabletop I have been gaming with a lot of the same people for so long that they trust me and I now have the luxury of starting out slow and go on from there or make mistakes further on and go farther from there, but there’s no trust I think in the consumer market, unless you are purchasing a game that’s a sequel to soemthign else or by the creators of something else – it’s a fear-motivation, my primary motivation with games is: what will they think, oh gosh I made this and it’s sad, because the flipside of that is my strong motivation is make strong choices artistically . I really respect strong choices, I’d really rather see somebody make a strong choice and see it fail, than see somebody make a weak choice and it succeed. As an example, there are some very classic games in the gaming industry, they are so successful because they did something new. And I occasionally will see a game that basically copies the old thing and it doesn’t really do anything new with it, so it’s not making a strong choice, and it’s not, it’s not an appealing game to me. On the other hand I will see somebody make a strong choice in a game and come up with some wacky new interface or some wacky new theme for the world – and that at first interests me, I have been in some muds that start off so different from what I am used to, that alone captivates me, but I know, for most consumers, if it start soff with a strog choice and its weird, that’s so odd that they don’t want to go for it, that’s my impression that most people don’t want to risk their dollar or their time on something gnaw. It’s easier to – I mean, the successors of something really successful games, I mean Final Fantasy has been through 8 editions, and the 8th version of the game and the first version of the game is essentially the same game, the technology has become better, the interface has become better, they have fixed the problem in the older ones in the later ones, but it’s a game people feel is worth purchasing because they know what they are paying for, and that’s kind of sad to me, I mean I like seeing it in fiction I like long stories, I like beign in book two and know there’s a long series ahead, but in terms of books I like the ones that made strong choices and took the risks, that you could convince yourself that yes, if you actually wanted to learn how to deal with this new interface, thing would get better. As an example – the Nintendo 64 when it first came out had an analogue control stick, rather than a control-pad on it, and I can show you what I am talking about later, if you are interested, but everybody were using a controlpad which is essentially a button which you push with your thumb, and then Nintendo 64 came out with a little stick, which was essentially a little joystick, a wiggling stick – and the advantage with the analogue stick, since it was sending analogue and not digital signals, it wasn’t on or off, it was how ever gradient of 90 degrees the stick was moving in any direction. So that one stick could let the tip-toe dude slow walk, jog, run, sprint depending on how far you shifted the stick off of 90 degrees, and to me that was great, that was like WOW they have never – I have never

seen this before and nobody have ever doen anything like it. And a lot of people were really turned off by it, because they had to learn a new trick, and they weren't convince that ah – that it was worth while for them to invest time and learning that new trick. That they would actually get a profit in terms of money or in terms of time by learning that new trick

TORILL: Interesting taking the technology into this – pause

When you make a game, one goal is obviously to captivate people's interest, but do you think of it as a process – creative process, which you can liken to writing. Are you writing a book?

TK: (pause) To some degree. The possible turn off is very akin to "Don't judge a book by it's cover," that – that – saying... Umm... when we were working on Aarinfel though, for a while of it a friend of ours named Benjamin Danner, which we tomorrow may meet, David's roommate, was part of the project

TORILL: I met him yesterday

TK: Oh, so you've met, it's great

TORILL: with his incredible red hairdo

TK: It changes – it was black recently

TORILL: It was red yesterday (laughter)

TK: ahmat one point Benjamin said that he was dropping out, of the project, because he felt he kept asking the question "what's this about. What's the story. Give me the 25 words or less, give me the bookjacket, give me the cover. What are we making here. And nobody really had an answer for him. And we kind of had an answer, but we didn't have one that satisfied him. In fact we didn't have one that satisfied me. And that's something I really want from games, something that tells me that this is your... eh.. misunderstood hero with super power fighting against social injustice in the form of an actually accepted supervillain. Or your.. a dolphin and you are trying to save your local section of the eco-system by solving these puzzles – and they are both real games, mind you – the encapsulated versions of them. And so it is to some degree like writing a book, but I think it's more like writing a choose your own adventure book or something similar to that, where each reader doesn't have the same experience I mean, I got really into choose-your-own-adventure books, that's paragraph by paragraph and at the end of the paragraph it says: Do you get into the car with the strange man or do you run down the alley-way. If you get into the car turn to page what ever, and if you don't, do this. And so you read it cover to cover, because sooner or later you get to the end, or you get to it and you dies, so in one of the choices on the bottom it says "you're dead", so you have to start over or go to the last paragraph. And – but over all there should be some sense of what the whole story is about. If it's a MUD and it's simulating a world, it's be what's the story of this world. Is it like our world, where we have come to this point of conflict between ah – social ethics and environmental responsibility versus the destruction of our eco system and genocidal wars? What's the overall story, is it that the gods are fighting, or is it that they are trying to escape something . and so.... But, of the muds I have seen that are based on books, and of the ones I have worked on which say that they are building a game or building a mud that is like writing a book, it doesn't translate very well in the metaphor, it's not one that I'd actually use. I'd say it's more like a.. it's a lot more like making a puzzle – that – has a finite number of pieces, but that you can make different results out of. Or like lego-blocks... They only come in so many sizes and shapes, but somebody chooses how to make and what to make of it. Books despite the fact that there's many many interpretations

of a single book, have a certain limit to the experience a person can get out of them. And the best games have a different margins of what somebody can get out of them. For example one of my favourite games, of all time is called system shock, and it has four different settings, and each of those setting have different settings, so you have a four by four matrix, so you have combat, how difficult do you want it to be, do you want it to exist at all, second is puzzles, how difficult do you want them to be do you want them to exist at all, third one was story, how sophisticated do you want the story, do you want to know it all, and the fourth one was – hacking, there was a hacking aspect to it, it was like a game within the game. And you could set those to what ever level you wanted. And it was great, because you could really say: “I want to play a fighting game, I don’t want to have to solve puzzles, I don’t want to play a hacking game I just want to go in and kill things.” Or you know, I am not into combat, I just want to play a roleplaying game, turn off all the monsters, but I like the puzzles – or any variation between them. And it was also good, because if this was a MUD for instance, you had that kind of flexibility at the parameter, you could have somebody saying well I want an easy experience, I don’t want this to be stressful, I want to be my recreation when I get home, but I also want to participate in some aspects of it. Or somebody would say: “I am a powergamer, I gain a great deal of enjoyment by going up against the greatest difficulties and succeeding, so I want all choices set on max. and eventually, that’s where I got, in that game, I played it so many times that I wanted to know that I could beat it at it’s best, and I could!

And – that’s sort of my definition of the best kind of games, it’s that they are really used by the most, and the flipside of that is that those are the most successful, because they market the most people. The more people can get enjoyment out of it than the games that are made for ??? audiences.

TORILL: Ja? Let’s see. You are answering incredibly efficiently and you drew up some interesting consequences, this question also answered one of my majot questions here, which goes to the linearity and the non-linearity of the games, and ... it goes exactly to the difference between reading books and the multilinearity in a game or most hyperlinked texts which become non-linear in different structures. You may have been so efficient you have gone through it all here!

Yes, one thing I want to go back to is why do you do this, why do you play these games?

TK: Ah. MMm. Inspiration? Is one of the biggest and most important things in my life, it’s almost a spiritual element in my life? It’s the reason – why one of the things I really like to do is – checking out a volume of science fiction stories and start reading them through, and then thinking about each one after I read it, and then just go WOW, that’s such a great deia, that’s such a cool idea, or just an amazing idea, Ah H.G.Well, science fiction author, said that civilisation is a race between civilisation and catastrophe, and that’s one of my favourite quotes of all time, because I am a teacher, so I am en educator and I am a game maker and a game player, and I read science fiction, and it all sort of comes together in the that idea of the tension between the brilliance that leads to destructive technology and the brilliance that leads to inspirational and educational technology – we get movies teaching us lessons, we get stories teaching us lessons, George Lukaz said of Starwars that – eh, George Lukaz

studied mythology in college that was like this big thing, and he wanted to make a modern mythology, so he came up with this idea of the force, this supernatural power that could be used for good or evil, and it all came back to human agency, not Zevs sitting on the temple Olympus tempting mortals, but it was a human choice what we do with a power like the force. We don't have the force, that I know of, umm, but we do have power, we have genetic engineering, we have nuclear power, we have utterly destroyed our eco-system and we have certainly demonstrated the potential to destroy species, to drive species to extinction and extinction, for instance, is something that I think generations from now, human beings if we survive, will look back and just go WOW did we really so casually eliminate pieces of an ecosystem like that, the diversity and the potential of a unique genetic code that generates whatever species it was we eliminated – or the species we don't even know we eliminate by destroying sections of the rainforest.

And so, as a teacher, I am really into discovering learning, I am not into the old professorial telling and learning, telling people how it is, convincing them how it is. I am much more into giving my students as much information as I can, and fostering in them an appetite to find more information on something that they are interested in, and then making a strong choice, not making a weak choice, being a voter, not being passive, being a participant in the experience that for better or for worse they are at least consenting to by participation in our civilisation. And so, it's kind of what I am to do with my games, I don't do it at a minute by minute level, but with my players – I am not trying to persuade my players to think one thing and not another, but more to work with them in a collaborative way of – a – frequently use elements of technology, of some marvel of technology, being discovered and then being misused. And sort of playing with them along the ideas of what kind of responsibility and what kind of stewardship do we have in dealing with technology issues, I don't go up to the players and say, hey, what did you learn about technology ethics from Tom's games that have anything coherent to say about that, it's fine, we get to do it together for recreation, not study ethics, if we want ethics we can take it on the local college campus. More... Fostering waking minds, fostering people who think about issues and who think about – ah – responsibility. I have been on MUDs where magic was the power, and the use or misuse of magic was argued and discussed, and the responsibility and so on and so forth, I mean it's a popular theme in fiction that a mage's character will discuss responsibility, and in the Dragonrealms novels mages are reminded that they have responsibility, and have to declare whether they are good evil or neutral and wear robes of that color – in much the same way as we might take genetic scientists and put them in white, red or black depending on whether they want to increase harvest or euthenise defective children. So – and I think that's where gaming is so great for this, because it demands from the player participation that – if you are not participating it's a movie, it's a book – well, books aren't a pretty good example as there's an element of imagination there which isn't in a movie. Movie.. you watch a movie, if you're not participating in it it's just a one-way experience, and I think most people – more people than I like to think participate in life as a one-way experience – stuff happens to them. And there are plenty of people out there who are not making it a one-way experience, who are making it a two-way experience, who are making decisions about a foreign, or investment policy, or military policy, using our children, money, votes, citizenship whatever, to make decisions. And since there are two-way participants in the world who use the world like a game and don't use it like a movie, who change things and don't let things just happen to them, I am

into to try people to ge, get my students and players to be two-way participants, and that is why game is so great, because it gets us to beign two-way participants, and it gets us searching for that kidn of participation that started this long diatribe, searching for the inspiration and the creativity and the problem solving and that's why I like reading science-fiction stories, because the author's often times look at current events or looking at last recent events then take the next logical step of now that we have got this it is eventually going to lead to this – once we that, what are the kind of decisions we are going to make about it. And that's in some ways what gaming does, I mean (sigh) a lot of time stuff comes out of nowhere, and it we don't know what to expect, so when it does happen it surprises us, I mean the internet for instance, I had no idea that it was coming and I was quite surprise when it reached the point it did. But now that it's here, science-fiction writers, science fiction gamers online computer gamers are going crazy with it, exploring all the possibilities of what it is, the matrix is an example of a virtual reality – I playtest for a science fiction game and it has a virtual reality component to it, I run a table top bame which has a huge virtual reality potential to it, of participatory virtual reality game – I am – it's great to to be wiling to keep our minds elastic and reflexive and willing to problem-solve rather than just – be helpless....

TORILL: (laughter) I don't think I have any more good questions, I am very happy about this, I think you are very very reflective as to what you do here, and the things about the game that you have be thinking of is impressive.

TK: Well, it's something which I plan on doing for the rest of my life, I cannot ever imaging losing interest in it, I wouldn't be the same person if I wasn't a two-way participant, and so I do think about it a lot, I feel that at some point I need to be involved or I'll just be talking about it for the rest of my life and drive everybody crazy – so I like knowing what's going on, and I am thinking about it.

.....

chatting to round off... pleasantries exchanged.

Attachment 6

Mariah Pratt Kentley 22
Portland 16.9.99

Zindwyn on Dragon Realms, Kierae (the first) on Aarinfel

TORILL: Some basic questions at first

MPK: The easy questions

TORILL: Yes, the easy questions... Gender..

MPK: Female

TORILL: Age

MPK: 22

TORILL: Education?

MPK: I have a bachelor's degree

TORILL: in?

MPK: Gender studies and social science

TORILL: What kind of media do you use?

MPK: In school?

TORILL: No, generally

MPK: you mean like computers and books and magazines.. that kind of media?

TORILL: Yes, television?

MPK: Television, radio, I listen to public broadcasting, and ahm – gamesystems like Nintendo and the gameboy, I think that's everything. And I read newspapers, I read magazines, I read Reader's Digest,

TORILL: ja. If you were to choose between these media, if you – given equal conditions you would have to choose one of these media, what's your favourite?

MPK: I'd say the internet

TORILL: OK – any reason why?

MPK: It's the easiest to use that gives you the broadest search where you can obtain any information you want from one thing, so if I were restricted to one, or I was just at the beginning of a research project, I'd use the internet to get a basic idea of what I was going for. If it was a more advanced project I would go back to pick through books and newspapers and magazines, because I find the internet to be mostly the basic, the beginning.

TORILL: For entertainment?

MPK: For entertaining? That changes from month to month what is the most entertaining for me. Ehm. A few months ago it was computers, and eh – I was going on to muds and that.. Lately it's been more books. I have been more into reading.

TORILL: MMhmhmm how much time do you spend reading books, would you say?

MPK: A week or a day?

TORILL: A day

MPK: Does this include schoolwork, or just for fun?

TORILL: For fun.

MPK: I'd say at least two hours.

TORILL: And how much time do you spend watching television?

MPK: I'd say about two hours also

TORILL: Aaand – on the computer?

MPK: Now that varies from day to day too, but I'd say lately it's about one hour. In the past it's been more like six hours.

TORILL: (laughter)

What kind of computer games do you play?

MPK: On the computer?

TORILL: yeah

MPK: Mostly I play games like strategy games, like Heroes of might and Magic, or games where you are commanding an army, or trying to reach new tactic. I prefer games like that to – shoot them up games. I also like roleplaying games, but I get enough of that in table-top, so I'd say strategy-games.

TORILL: So when you play roleplaying games you play table-top games?

MPK: yes.

TORILL: Could you make me a list of existing types of games?

MPK: Roleplaying games?

TORILL: No, of computer games

MPK: Do you mean including Nintendo, or just...

TORILL: You may include Nintendo, yes.

MPK: the games that I have?

TORILL: No, any games, like – categories, types of them.

MPK: There's the 3D shooters, like Duke Nuke'em (MMHMM) Coom – there's the adventure-shoot'ems, like, eh, tombrailer, where you are an actual person going through and solving problems, eh.. There are roleplayingadventures with a character trying to solve a mystery or – a – work your way through various things, and strategy-games, which are a lot like chess, in their own ways, and ah, there are , ah – arcade games or something, shooting, the very basic games.

TORILL: MhM, Eh... what would you say is the difference between an adventure game or a strategy game?

MPK: How much of your mind you are using. Ahm.. A strategy game you are using your mind a lot, because you are trying to figure out how to solve a problem. Shoot'em game you are just engaging in mindless violence, and in a roleplaying adventure you're trying to think like your character so it's almost levels of how involved you are in the things you are trying to solve, and how much you think.

TORILL: Do you spend much time playing games online now?

MPK: As in MUDs?

TORILL: MMHMM?

MPK: No, I am working on creating a MUD though. I've been in 13 muds, I have gone through at least 32 in the last week and a half, and I can't find any that is what I want. It's been really difficult. I think if I'd found one I really liked I'd be mudding more. But it's been difficult for me – I don't know why, I am maybe just having bad luck or something.

TORILL: Well, I haven't found anything to satisfy me after dragon realms went down yet, so..

MPK: Yeah, so you are in the same way, heh

TORILL: I understand, I understand perfectly. Tryign to – I hope that we'll manage to make Strive into something like that actually...

MPK: Yeah, I hope so.. I think that the highest imms in that though they are sort of scattered, they are in – aren't they all college boys?

TORILL: There aren't many left of those yet, there's Tim and Rob – and Tim is coding and Rob is desperately discovering that he's losing the grip on us.

MPK: On what's happening

TORILL: eh he – there's me and – me and Luke, and he is taking over more and more of –

MPK: Luke is a really nice guy

TORILL: Very much so, we are having a lot of fun, and – so I think Strive can get into something

MPK: yeah, it sounds like – if you have gotten it down to four people it can lead to something.

TORILL: Well, there's – I never remember his name – Isfael, that's it, he's young, just fourteen, fifteen, but he's very very sweet and nice – so he will definitely grow with the game. But Darion, used to be Malcolm – he's odd, really odd.

MPK: yeah, I think it started out without much discipline and that hurt them I think.

TORILL: I don't know if that hurt them, because it was – it has things I liked with that place. Basically it's: If we can't argue through this and decide to have fun, then it's not working – which is something I love with this place.

MPK: Yeah..

TORILL: Ok, if this is so important that we want to fight over it, then...

MPK: But they'd like anybody who appeared build though, without any theme or restrictions on that.

TORILL: That's gone, that's over

MPK: Is it gone now?

TORILL: Yes, that's gone now.

MPK: I haven't been on there, I haven't been – I've been away from there.

TORILL: Luke's head of building now.

MPK: Ah, Luke's really good, he's **the** builder – a powerbuilder – he's like 20 rooms a day.

TN: yeah, I just idle next to him and nod.

MPK: He's like – woosh – I went after that guy, and letting him loose on our mud for a while: here you go.

TORILL: Let's get back to the questions here

Yah – you are making computer games as well

MPK: yes

TORILL: In what category would you place the games you are making?

MPK: Eh... I am only working on the making of a MUD... and... I don't know how to classify

‘cause there’s a lot of themes at once – I should hope that our MUD is a Roleplaying MUD, and along the lines of – where the focus is on roleplaying and adventure, and so a mix of adventure and strategy.

TORILL: That’s the “We That Dream”, is it?

MPK: Right now, that’s what it is, yeah.

TORILL: What’s important about the distinctions between the games you have made, strategy, adventure, shoot’em’ups? Why wouldn’t you say that these are...

MPK: The same thing?

TORILL: Ja?

MPK: Ehm..... Varying roles of engagement. It doesn’t take a lot of personality to shoot somebody or But it takes a lot more effort to go through a quest, to get the experience, or to... figure out a solution or to do something in character that would make sense while you got a certain skill? Instead of just being able to run around and – train it, because it’s your class. Story – story is a big one

TORILL: MMHMM? Ja, OK

Ehm.. What about playing? Why do you play computer games?

MPK: I like the contact with other people. It’s something you do with other people. It’s something also that you – discover. And I am also – I’m a social science major, so I am very interested in people and how they interact with things, and how – ah – the communities form and break up, and how people are choosing to portray a specific character – you are.. hopefully you are not playing yourself all the time, but you have a character in your mind, and if you think – ok this is it – My character is shy, then you have to use the stereotype of shy and portray this character as shy, and I am very interested in what people think shy is, and what people think angry is and what people think cold is... icy, and angry, and I’m very interested in how people are choosing to portray a specific person, and I think that the really good people are the ones who are willing to sacrifice their own personal way of doing things in order to do something in the way of the character in a stuck situation...

TORILL: What kind of situations do you choose to play computer games in?

When you are tired, when you are awake, when you are bored?

MPK: Oh, definitely at night when I am alone. Whenever I am alone, I’d rather be on the computer than to be – I was going to say reading a book. But I guess reading a book also passes time. I read a lot also.. so I usually play at night when I can’t sleep – I just can’t go to sleep.

TORILL: OK... What’s your favourite kind of game?

MPK: One that has an intense mood that you can involve yourself in. A place that’s very different from where I am with my computer. In front of my computer... I want to be in a place where my imagination is stretched to it’s furthest and engaged... I really like the room descriptions, because I can paint rooms easily then, in my mind, and I can really be there, I can feel it, I can imagine what the illusions would be, what the attitudes would be, what the agenda’s are, and I can lose the here and the now to kind of escape into the world for

TORILL: So if you are to say what's attractive for you about the games you play is this factor or ability for escape?

MPK: Yes, but it's also for – full senses engagement, I am fully engaged in what I am doing. It's not just an escape, it's also delving into an other reality, an other place that is fully capturing of all of my attention

TORILL: Have you felt that your perception of things have changed after you have played computer games?

MPK: Oh yeah, to see the way that people – choose to lead or choose to follow or choose to group themselves.. I definitely think my image of humanity has changed. There was a time when I am certain I have lived a very secure and cozy life, and there was a time when they said that the MUD I was on was going to close, and everybody went wild, and it was the only time – it was the riot mentality, it was people doing various crazy and strange thing they'd never do if they didn't think the MUD was closing down, and I've never been in that mentality before, and I never understood why riots happen, why that mentality is there, but now I really believe there's this primal thing inside people which wakes up and they go Oh well there's no reason why I should be restricted by rules, here I go! And it's pretty scary that that capacity is there. And so I definitely think that it has changed me and plus coming into contact with people who are different or strangers to you, having a close relationship with anybody changes you, I mean for a long time I was more contact with people on the computer than I was in real life, so, those people ARE my friends. I mean if you look at Ben, he doesn't have any other friends except the people on the computer, that's his whole world, that's all the people he talks to every day, and so that's .. it's a community in itself.

TORILL: Well. Emm When you build a game... what's your primary concern as a builder? What do you want to do, what's your goal as you build?

MPK: Well, since my favourite thing to do as a player is to be fully engaged in a theme or a story... when I am building a world... Well, first of all, I build the world for players. My primary goal is that the players have a place where they like, that they can be, where they can lose themselves in... that they can be surrounded by and focused on. And so I don't build for myself, I build – except for as myself, as a player – I build for the players, and I totally, totally believe a MUD should be for it's players, it's one of the reasons why Aarinfel was just a ---- - to us, because many of the imms there who weren't us, were not as involved with the – they lost sight of the fact that if you don't have players, you don't have a MUD. And I think that the players are the most important part of the MUD.

TORILL: Well, it's kind of hard to get any roleplay done without players, that's ... (laughter)

MPK: and why are you going to build anything if noone is going to appreciate it too?

TORILL: so your primary concern as an administrator as well as the goals with the game is to attract players.

MPK: yeah. Well, players who want to roleplay.

TORILL: eh.. do you have any other goal with a game like it, when you administrate, and when you build?

MPK: Well, eh..yeah.. I really want.. I don't like portraying women in situations of subordination all the time. You have lots of cultures where you can have one culture like that.. but I don't want to copy medieval society, I don't want to – em – I think that there should be some realism, there's always prejudice in a society, but I don't want it to be so rote – and I do like, as a personal thing, I do like to push women into positions of power as much as possible, at least equally as the men. And that might not be as realistic as it could be, but it's my personal agenda. And I also – em – really like seeing spaces and ideas I being used to, and so I am of the opinion that if players don't pick it up, then wait a while, and reintroduce it, and see if new players pick it up.

TORILL: We have been through a lot of what I wanted to talk about. Yes. About – one of the things I am trying to, is to address the difference between the linearity and the nonlinear texts. And the muds, and all computer games, I think of them as non-linear texts, texts which do not progress from a to b to c, but which skip around in different manner. And so I would like to ask you... when you, when you build or create a game, do you feel that you are writing a book, or are you doing something else?

MPK: It's not writing a book.

TORILL: Why not?

MPK: Because, your building is a setting. You are not building a plot, you are guiding a plot, but you are not building it. You are creating a culture but you are not running that culture. Once the world is put into place, everything changes, because you never know what a player is going to do. And the world changes according to its players. And so at the beginning you have created a history, and you have created a world, and you have created a setting and you may nudge certain plots along, but in the end the story is written by the characters, not by you.

TORILL: Ja, I think this has been very efficient. We do after all know much of the background here.

MPK: I do think that people who MUD think differently about the world. Because it's a different way of thinking – if you have never mudded before and you have never been in that sort of mindset or thoughts – I think roleplayers or actors have the same kind of sense, you have never... I don't think people look at stereotypes as clearly as they do, when creating a character, or at emm.. they, you don't look at society the same after that, and you don't think about.. you.. you wouldn't think about things unless you were mudding, I mean there are things about being a character or being in a situation where you are not your self when you can really study yourself a lot – when in roleplay. Well, I am sure there are some people who don't see themselves at all, and there just go through it – pixies, for instance, I have a thing against pixies, but that's what I think Muddin, is't about a different perspective on life.

TORILL: Do you like exploring different kind of persons, personalities?

MPK: Oh yes, very much! Never a lot, or just a blur of one part of me, or a blur of an other part of me, it's like you have this original set of digits, and you flip one, and then you flip the other one, and you flip a third, and then in the beginning you are a lot like yourself, and with each character you get farther and farther away from yourself, it's neat to see what works and what doesn't in the situations, behind the safe society of the character.

TORILL: Do you feel that you are going further away from yourself in this? Or further into yourself.

MPK: Personally I... go back and forth. I roleplay something similar to myself, then I play something radically different from myself. Then I come back in and play something more like myself, and then more not like myself.

TORILL: No, but what I would like to know – what I am really asking is – are these very different, will this which you think of as very different from yourself, are they really outside yourself?

MPK: I think everybody play shadows of themselves. I don't think you can ever get away from yourself. As hard as you are trying, you are still playing yourself playing something. You are still you. And so, all of it is going to be at least a shade of yourself, because at the very least you are portraying something you believe thing is like. So it's always you, it might be just a shade of you which might not be what you are used to be every day.

TORILL: Ja, that's a nice metaphor.

MPK: I have thought about that one a lot, we have talked about it quite a bit.

TORILL: I think I'll stop it here, unless there's something else you feel I should have asked you?

MPK: no...

Attachment 7

Elisabeth Sierro

Portland 18.09.1999

Interviewed in a public place, a tea-room.

Dragon Realms and Aarinfel (Sarisei and Lorelei)

(Later Azhad)

ES: Elisabeth Sierro, and I am 22 years old

TORILL: What's your education?

ES: I am a psychology major. I have studied both fine arts and art history as well, but my major will be in psychology.

TORILL: For how many years?

ES: Studying? For four years.

TORILL: What kind of media do you use – in terms of radio, television –

ES: In terms of consumer?

TORILL: yes

ES: I mostly touch the computer. I don't watch television, I don't go to movies, usually. I do listen to the radio..

TORILL: Do you read books?

ES: And I read books, definitely.

(Interlude with the waitress)

TORILL: What kind of books do you prefer?

ES: I read – mostly I read – I read a very wide range of things. I guess... most would be considered fiction in some way but anything from recent fantasy, recent science fiction – the classics, I tend to also read a lot on religions, right now I am going through the Koran. In very small pieces.

(laughter)

TORILL: I started that once – let's say I am still reading it, I have been doing that for 15 years.

ES: A couple of books that happen with... I am still reading, Well, just a wide range of things and a lot of history, what ever, you know. What is interesting at the time.

TORILL: do you play a lot of different computer games?

ES: I tend to actually almost exclusively MUD. My interest is in the role-playing and the writing. I don't – no other

TORILL: you don't play single user games...

ES: No single user

TORILL: you don't buy CdRoms, you don't play starcraft or..

ES: No Starcraft or Quake or Doom (laughter)

ES: No, I never have – the interest, the stepping stone was really into the role-playing.

TORILL: you say that you – you play computer games because you want to write, primarily.
ES: yes. As a form of expression and as a – to me it's more equivalent to reading a book, it's more an interactive book than a game, in some sense. The ... I think that is the best way to express it. The writing to me is very fascinating, the creation,, the building of the world, the building of the background – those things are very appealing to me, but I don't, but you know – games have never – one-player games like the game-boys even as a kid I wouldn't play those.

TORILL: you compare this to a book. Would you say that the process of MUDDing can be actually compared to writing a book?

ES: Actually I think it can. But it's writing a book with many other people in a world where you may or may not have had exclusive control over the background of it. But it definitely at least is writing the storyline of one character, interacting with that world. Which I think it's the most fascinating, I mean to me that's what's fascinating and what I loved reading and I would spend hours and hours reading. But the book is static and you read it once and that's the story and the book is over. I can go back in my head and rewrite pieces if I don't like, but it's not dynamic in the way that a MUD is.

TORILL: so what appeals to you with MUDs Is that compared to the book is the dynamics, the change... This is interesting because what I am looking for is this point where the multilinear text diverts from the linear text. So this is actually what I am looking for with everything.

(Laughter)

TORILL: How much time do you spend on the computer?

ES: More than I should. Aaahh – I probably at least three hours a day at this point. If I had the time I might spend as much as ten but given school and everything it's probably about 2-3 hours a day, every day.

TORILL: So you spend as much time as you feel that you can?

ES: Yeah

TORILL: That's how you prefer to spend your free time?

ES: IT's usually how I spend my free time when other people aren't available. I do paint and write on my own as well, but I guess I consider it an other – it's also a social interaction as well, so I spend time doing things with my friends in real life – and then when that's not occurring, when I feel the need to using a more creative... I can't even explain it, it's like it's a different...

(Interlude with the waiter – food arriving)

TORILL: We were talking about the social aspect of the MUDs

ES: yes, the social aspect...I do prefer to – I prefer to deal with people face to face. It isn't yet at – I mean you can convey a lot through text but – you lose facial expressions, you lose gestures, you lose – I need my hands to talk so I am somewhat crippled when they have to be typing. But I certainly think there is a very strong social aspect to it, particularly as it enables you to go beyond your physical locality. It's everyone who's been chosen to be in that environment instead of everybody who – you get people who have chosen to be in a physical environment too, but you get a more wide range of people.

TORILL: do you feel that it's easier to find people who share your interest this way?

ES: yes. Definitely. It's – because people who are playing with the same kind of things tend to gravitate to certain arenas, and then it's much easier to find than...

TORILL: Certainly, that's one of the things which are both frightening and good about the internet

ES: yes.

TORILL: All the Nazis will find their friends too.

ES: yes, and I think it's dangerous in the sense that you can find people that - if what you want is to find people that – you get a similar situation because – If you really need to have your views reinforced, if you need to have them confirmed, then you can go to a place where you're only going to get them confirmed in some sense. It's not just about race, you'll find people who are – other than you if that's what you are seeking, but on the other hand if you are looking for someone to say yes, then that is very easy to find. And I – a group who'll sit there and say exactly what you think, and therefore that's a – no, I do think it's both easier to find people who support you, who are inclined to believe the same things, who are interested in the same things and who are interested in – and I think you can get people who have an other perspective than at your locality, it's a much more international community than what I could find walking around Portland Oregon.

TORILL: Well – I don't know about Portland Oregon. But about most towns.

ES: Most towns at least...

(chatting about the food – smoked salmon on a bagel...)

(chatting about social experiences transferring from net-connections to real-life connections, - eating)

TORILL: you are making and building games as well. What kind of game will you call the game you are trying to build?

ES: I have never actually been asked of the design of it. Type of game. It definitely is a role-playing game, on the most general level. But I am not sure that I can define it more than that. For me it was a role-playing game, very clearly, that's what I actually got – that's what I wanted to create, that's what I had in mind. But I am not sure that I can define the MUD for everybody, because I think it's really as – after a certain point you lose, even if you are the person who put the primary – yourself into the creation of it, the minute you have an other person on it it ceases to be simply yours, it's now theirs as well and now they bring to it, what they see in it is completely not what you had intended. And I don't know if I can define it further than that because...

TORILL: Can you make a list of different types of games? The way conceive – they exist for you

ES: I guess I see games almost as – at the top of my head I can put them in three categories, I can put them in categories that are role-playing games which to me are almost a social game. I can put them into hack'n'slash or fighting. And I guess the only third category I can think of is almost puzzles or – I think the best way to put it is a puzzle game, your interest is not in the interaction, your interest is not in the other person and how is their response to

you when you are solving some kind of pre-determined – you know, puzzles. When you are working on a quest or – even things like tetris. I am trying to think of things which are not in the line of maybe not an online game, but you know. Oh, I almost think of a lot of things, what I have seen of Doom and starcraft and that, what seems appealing is not just the fighting but the tactical solutions? That's an element that appeals to people.

TORILL: so the strategy

ES: the strategy. And I would almost put quests under that same appeal. Although they are not quite the same – there's more of a puzzle than a strategy, there's a certain cognitive element, you have got to think through, work through something and you can do it by yourself.

TORILL: Would you add simulation games to your list?

ES: I don't know what you mean by simulation games?

TORILL: Like simulating – airplanes, cars...

ES: Would I put it as a separate category?

TORILL: Ja?

ES: Yes, I think I would put that as a separate category. I don't think I ever played one of those so... I think that's very far out of my league of...

TORILL: you never really wanted to be an airplane pilot?

ES: Yeah – no.

TORILL: That's one of the categories that all the boys I interview just dive into.

ES: do you actually find that there's gender differences in what people answer?

TORILL: oh, yes, there are certainly gender differences, perhaps not as large as you might have expected, but there's one thing almost everybody I talk to have in common, that they all write – just about everybody I have interviewed so far are writing something. Are you writing a book?

ES: yes. (laughter)

TORILL: and more or less seriously, but everybody I talk to are writing and want to be writers and do this because they want to write. And this is very common and also ties into the creativity; they do this because they want to be creative. And that is not related to gender at all. But when you get over to other kinds of games, when you talk of the offline games and single user games and that stuff, that's when you get the gender difference (At this point I had only interviewed three women). Which is fun, I kind of expected it but now it's confirmed. That's always good for a researcher. Suspicions confirmed

TORILL: Do you feel that the way you conceive things, the way you perceive has been changed by playing games?

(pause)

ES: I have got to take a moment to think about that.

TORILL: please do.

ES: I would definitely say yes, I am not entirely sure of on what level or how profound it's been, but I mean I definitely think that my – I mean for me especially in the terms of the psychology of it, the way that, I mean – and I definitely think I get insights from it. I don't know how much that has change .. for me – ah... (pause) I think what has always interested me on almost an experimental level was always people's assumptions of things. People's assumptions of what a relationship was – you can learn a lot from what people – I think the

definitions come across very clearly - it's a difficult thing to articulate. I think because they have to express everything I guess verbally in some sense, at least in a written form, what they think a table is, what they think a room is, especially if you look at a room-description. You can learn a lot from people by what they assume is in the world, like how you can basically get a sense of how they're perceiving the environment and how they are perceiving interaction, and how they categorise things and how they - I guess for me it's just how much of life is assumed, I mean it's ... How much we really do categorise things in that way, how much we label them and how much - It's not as easy to see when you are walking around in life as when you have to sit and really spell out everything what you are doing, spell out every element of the interaction. I think it's actually in terms of a learning experience it helps to clarify things, it's a simple model, it's a simpler model of how things really work. A microcosm of people's lives, and the world and social interactions and how - but you get it on this, almost this condensed abstracted playing-field and then you can pick things apart a lot easier. So I guess I can say it has changed me in the way that I think that I have learned from it in some way and I see myself doing things in that environment and I can sit back later and go - particularly when somebody contradicts you and I can sit back later and go "where did that come from?" "Why did I assume that element of a relationship was necessary." Or "why did I assume that" - you know, when I walk into a room I do this gesture. You know, you have to pick apart all the little social gestures and you become very aware of how much is unconscious you know, everything has to be spelled out. I don't realise now that I am waving my hand when I talk as much, but when I have to emote it I have to be aware that that is what I am doing and I guess that puts a level of awareness on to -

TORILL: you told me that you also paint?

ES: yes.

TORILL: if you were to compare these two different worlds of creating, would you say that - do you use your observations skills - that's what we are talking about, your observation skills become different when you have to translate it into a lower bandwidth experience than when you just translate it over to painting.

ES: definitely. I mean - I think it's - In some ways the interaction is simplified, but in terms of forms of expression it's actually much more complicated I think to try to express something on a MUD than to express something on a painting. Then again a painting is to me almost more equivalent to writing a book. Or perhaps even less so, it depends on the media. I do water colour, and once you put something down on a water colour it's down, it's onto the paper. You can go to a new painting, and try to redo it, and you can revolve it through these layered elements, you know these very static elements, but again it does not have the dynamics that a MUD does. And it is a .. I think it requires a lot more attention to express something on the MUD if only because of the complexity, the layeredness of it, the fact that if you act something onto it, it acts back. Which does require you - both in the element that in fact it is text, and it is a limited bandwidth, you only have one colour, one brush, it's only one way you can get everything across, so you have to concentrate everything into that one medium. And in the fact that it's constantly throwing - in the painting it's you put the brush down on the canvas, and the painting shifts underneath what you have done, and it changes from what you intended the stroke to be. And then you have to react to something that's moving with you, sort of as you involve yourself with it. (Insecure look and gesture after this long period of fast and intense talking)

TORILL: You are being very clear, this is very interesting, and it's very clear images you are creating, so I am perfectly happy

ES: No, but that's actually, on some level I think that it's definitely improved – it's improved my writing tremendously and it's improved my ability to verbalise things tremendously and it's – I mean I don't think I used analogy as much as I ever did when I was building. And I mean not even in the interaction but you know, doing a room – especially that silly palace, that big Eisle of Fast (The palace of the court of Et'Thalior, in which we both at times had player characters), There's just only so many – it forces you, it's like it's an other big large fancy elaborate room with marble floors, and it's two hundred of them and you have to describe each one different. You have to you know: how does the light strike this texture, how does the you know – how many ways can you describe that it's – how many gilded things can you put in a room before you run out of descriptions of marble? I definitely think it forces you to not only deal with expanding your vocabulary, you have to meet the challenge of it... (laughter)

I am so tired of it. IT was fortunate that I didn't burn myself out on that one, isn't it?

TORILL: you need to make a totally plain village or something.

ES: Exactly, or a swamp or marsh or something

TORILL: yeah

ES: yes, something really grunchy and dirty and...

TORILL: Get really into the texture of dirt.

ES: exactly. Trees, slimy little bugs... but if I have to describe one more stained-glass window it's all over you know.

(laughter)

TORILL: When you build, what's your primary concern? What do you really think about that you want to do?

ES: For me it's actually it's giving a sense of real space. I have these images in my mind – I think of Eisle of Fast particularly, because I think for me it was the biggest project I ever had to tackle, the biggest one I completed. But I mean I had an image of what spaces I knew in real life, and it was all based off bysantine architecture, I mean Mosques – cathedrals – what I would picture Constantinople to be.

TORILL: I know I told that to you that it reminded me of Alhambra in Spain at one point.

ES: But for me it was I had a very clear image of what it would be like. I mean I can walk around that space in my head, I have a very clear idea of what it looks like, and I wanted to, as best I could, and the way that didn't overwhelm people, to make it feel like you were really in something. IT was multi-sensory, it wasn't just visual, you knew what it smelt like, you knew what it felt like – like an added sort of illusion of reality. With just words, which was the – which is the challenge there. That's the interest there, that's the...

(interlude with the waiter)

ES: But I mean for me it's so real, for me it exists somewhere. And to be able to take something out of your head and put it somewhere where other people can go into it and experience it, that's something that's very cool, That's more than – you can do it in a book, in some sense, but it's not real in a book even for me. Once you take a book it's private. I mean it's the person's private experience with a world, they take it and they put it in their head and

they can experience it. But with the game and with being online I can put it outside of myself and into the world and then people can come to it. It's a totally – the dynamics are completely different for that. Even in a sense of book it's not real.. footsteps don't echo in a book. In my mind I can – as long as people are interacting in that space it still lives in some way. Because it's so many minds centred on one thing. And it makes it – and with each person who interacts – they are constantly adding to it.

TORILL: So you feel it's constantly recreated

ES: yes

TORILL: And changing in essence and adding new depth at each step, everytime it's being used by someone else.

ES: And not even that, the world, the world is like revolving around – in some sense there's a virtual sun that rises and sets over it. There's a sense of time, there's a sense of – you get a sense of space, and you get a sense that... yes, exactly, with every person who comes in they add something to it, they see something there that I didn't put in. And that's the coolest thing, that someone walks in and they put the chair in the corner that really should have been there – in my mind it was there. But it's not in the description. But when they walk into the room they put the chair in the right place. And that's the – that's really incredibly powerful, for someone to see something in your head that you – that's not physically anywhere else. Because then it's moved beyond the description, it's moved beyond the words that are sitting there... and I don't know what it is, it's just...

TORILL: I see what you mean. It's the recreation of the text within the – when the user interact with the game, when the text is open enough to allow for this recreation, where it has not defined everything so that one enters it and in this case very literally enters in, is allowed to play with it, to expand it, to put in and to translate – interpret into it in this case their own image of what this text is and how it's used. It's reception theory. Reader-response theory.

(laughter)

TORILL: When you administrate the game, what's your primary concern?

ES: as an administrator?

TORILL: yes

ES: I actually have a very – the question for me is a difficult one because I, I do not like being an administrator, I really hate being an administrator. I love being a player in a world that doesn't interfere with – in a world that doesn't break the reality for me. And I am – I guess my most important thing for me as an administrator along that line is to try to maintain for as most people – to stop things that would interfere with what for me is – oh that's so hard, I mean – to me actually the goals, I get goal conflict. Because to me what you have to do as an administrator is that you have to maintain the good of the community, which very much interferes with individuals rights to make – and express what they want and maintain what they want. Because you need to maintain some sense of continuity, otherwise it fragments, it's not a whole. So in some senses as an administrator what you have to do is to impose the vague will of the community over the individual in some attempt to preserve the integrity of the community. And it's – it's a really difficult thing, because I am always and constantly aware of the fact that if I was the player, what I would be doing to myself would piss me off. I mean I'd – but in some sense it's almost a necessary evil, because if everybody are living in

their own reality you stop getting it stops becoming something that everyone can go to. It fragments back into a lot of little books. I mean it... so in some sense I guess that the goal of being an administrator is to maintain the world environment, to maintain the – I mean, theme would be the MUDterm I call up for that, you really become – you become a force of stasis, your goal is basically on some level to keep the status quo and to keep change at least on a level at which other people can catch up. I think as – I really get a sense of it as in that everyone is running full force away from it. All the players are off in their worlds and their tents and their things and their lives and their little plot-lines, and your job is really to get as many leashes together as possible and hold on, really really tightly, in some attempt to do something which is... I mean the dynamic aspect of it is what makes it incredible, but it's also the – there's always the danger that just everything will evolve into chaos and you'll have nothing again. You have to maintain the rules, you have got to keep... You got to meet a lot of people who have problems. And that's just the, I almost think that's the mentality you get. I know that's because that's what salient, I know that it's almost ... ah... I mean being in that position almost entirely forces you to take these really horrible us stands on what you are doing and it becomes your quest to preserve your vision over other people's, only because that's what's in your head. If you have to maintain something you have to maintain what you understand and what you know... it's very hard for me to maintain someone else's image, because it's not in their head and it's not what they perceive, and they're – so I think the goal of the administrator really is at least on some level to impose what's in their head on everybody else, to maintain a sense of order but – ahm – I hate it. I wish that it didn't have to exist. My greatest desire would be for an environment that is self-maintaining. But unfortunately that requires – at some level there need to be a process of weeding out of the people who aren't responsible. Everyone – it's a government. Everyone is responsible if everyone just did the right thing obeyed the rules respected the others and respected the environment you wouldn't need anyone there. And the problem is unless you handpick your fifty best – fifty people in the world that you know will be able to handle it, unless you pick the community and created the community, it necessitates the police and the governments and with that comes all the problems of bureaucracy. Basically that's what it is, I mean again it's a model, it's real life, I mean it's – if the community was self-monitoring, and I'd love for it to exist, that for me would be incredible. To not have to have to be the cop, to not have to be the person who for the sake of the community maintains the community because, there's just no way to do that. This is not the best way to handle it. It really is the best way when every member of the community is involved, is involved in the space, in the dynamics of it. I think I have fallen off topic.

TORILL: let's leave the community. Next question. Last question. What do you feel is the goal of the game. When you administrate the game, what's your goal?

ES: I think it's the same as – it's almost the same as building. Ultimately the goal is to create a story, to create a world and to create some place where people can come and contribute to it and to add to.. And for me it's a very selfish thing, for me it's actually – I want to have a place where other people can come and play with me. I love the role-playing, I love having my characters and I love being able to engage something creatively at such a complex level. And I want to have an environment in which I can do that. And so I guess it's for me it really is

creating a space in which the story exists and the story is creative, and in which all the dynamics of all the other players and all imms and everyone is sort of working together in a manner that best benefits everybody. Because that's the environment I want to be in and I want to play in. I mean... it's not really altruistic at all. (laughter)

TORILL: Self interest is a very good motivation.

ES: yes.

Attachment

Attachment 8

Dawn Marks
Portland, 18.09.99

TORILL: how old are you?

DM: 22 years old

TORILL: Can you say your name?

DM: Dawn Marks

TORILL: What kind of educations do you have?

DM: 2 1/2 years of college

TORILL: And what subjects have you been studying?

DM: I have an English major changed to a psychology major

TORILL: How long until you have your bachelors degree?

DM: The gods only know.

TORILL: OK...

DM: I have to get back to school again.

TORILL: Are you planning on studying here?

DM: I am going to study here in the west coast. But, it might be the winter, might be the spring, might be next fall.

TORILL: What do you do in the mean time?

DM: I work with people with developmental disabilities. And so no matter where I go there is a need for me to work.

TORILL: Sounds like you would be safe with that

DM: Oh yeah, no matter where I go there are many ads in the papers. I walked into one place and walked out with a job.

TORILL: What kind of media do you use? Television, books, radio...

DM: Books, radio, cdplayer, computer in all forms, games, online and off. Not so much TV, We have a TV but haven't got it hooked up.

TORILL: If you were to choose, online and off, all things equal, what's your favourite medium?

DM: That's hard to... it depends on what I am doing. If I want to be to be interactive, it's the computer, if I am in the mood by myself, it's a book.

TORILL: OK... how much time do you spend on the computer

DM: Online or just on the computer...?

TORILL: Take both, and then I'd like to know how much of that time is online afterwards.

DM: 25 hours a week

TORILL: and how much of that would be online?

DM: 20 at least maybe 23 - a little hard to define.

TORILL: So what you prefer is the online experience - what do you do when you are online?

DM: Research for a large part - a lot of what I did has been research for moving out here. (Has just moved to Portland to be closer to her friends whom she met on the MUD.) and then also keeping in touch with friends that I know either from real life or from online games in the

past and then mudding

TORILL: How much of this will be playing?

DM: Playing...??

TORILL: yes, how much of this...

DM: would I be on the mud?

TORILL: yeah

DM: I multitask, so I guess 20 - 23 hours a week will I be on the mud. I'll be doing other things as well, but I ...

(Chatting about tea and biscuits)...

TORILL: When you play computer-games, what kind of games do you play, online and offline?

DM: Strategygames, ranging from Allies and Risk to the Warcraft and Starcraft-series offline - online it will be exclusively MUDs.

TORILL: so you don't go for Doom or Quake or DreamQuest, or...

DM: No first person shooters.

TORILL: you want the roleplay games.

DM: I have played Starcraft across the net, but that has been with people I knew already.

TORILL: Is that an experience you enjoy, meeting with people and playing Starcraft with them over the net?

DM: I can't right now, I don't have a fast enough modem.

TORILL: Well, that's a good enough reason

DM: I only did it a couple of times and it was more for... It was fun, I'd probably do it again. It's one of the things we do around here, except it's not online, we set up like six computers in a network and play against each other, with Starcraft.

TORILL: It's one of the things we do at the computer-lab in the university

DM: We do it down at Reed.

DM: That's how I learned to play Starcraft, they threw me in and said everyone against everyone.

TORILL: My supervisor calls me canonfood when I play Warcraft with him.

DM: That was what I was to Beyne. I was Beyne's ally, and he even wiped me out once. It was like "you're too slow - Sssshhht".

TORILL: That's kind

DM: When I played across the net with Lyle (Dragonlord, Dragon Realms) and I was so slow, and he was quicker than I so he tried to help me, so the computer just wiped us out. I made a bad decision but I definitely learned that playing against other people and playing by yourself is two different experiences.

TORILL: What would you say is the difference between these two experiences?

DM: By yourself and with...

TORILL: yeah?

DM: Computer AI, no matter how intelligent, is still an AI, it doesn't make the same decisions as a human would, so...

TORILL: What would you say is the main difference between these positions?

H; Humans are a lot quicker to react to what you are doing in those games.

TORILL: So you will say an AI is actually slower to react?

DM: It's pre-programmed, and it's not always pre-programmed for what the person is going to do, and because you know it's pre-programmed you can adapt to it, while a player is adapting to you at the same time.

TORILL: yeah... So it's the adaptation-speed that's the main difference?

DM: yeah...

.....

TORILL: Could you make me a list of different types of computer games?

DM: That I have played?

TORILL: Not necessarily that you have played, if you were to define a universe of computer games, and you were to make a list of types, of categories...

DM: Educational, Arcade, Strategy, First person shooters, Third person shooters, that sometimes are put under strategy, but that's like your Starcraft versus your Doom, role-play games, fantasy, sci-fi, shooters like redneck rampage, and I swear to you there is a game called redneck rampage with lots of little ... Oh, they are shooting things, but there are actually expansions to it too, hunting games, racing games, casino games, all that's coming into my mind, but I am sure there is a vast majority that I am not thinking of at the moment.

TORILL: That's OK. A lot of these games that you mentioned could be put into other categories, you could say that this group is all action games, this group is all simulation games, this group is all sports games, but still you choose to sort them by content. Is there any reason for this?

DM: A lot of games if you do like simulation, or action, or sport, they are going to overlap. So it's larger categories with sub-categories. It also has a package on the shelf where I have to stack them.

TORILL: That is important... genres are often created for the consumers, so the consumers can find things and know what they are looking for. Very convenient also for the commercial producers.

TORILL: you are working with building and creating computer games. What kind of game do you build?

DM: Well, a MUD that is a crossbreed between a MUD and a MUSH, and it is a role-play intensive world that has its own theme.

TORILL: Would you call it an adventure game? Role-play game?

DM: It's more of a straight role-play, it's role-play and strategy.

TORILL: Why not... why do you sort out the adventure part of it?

DM: Because right now there's not such a high level of action, and if there will be at any point, That's still up in the air, but we can only build so fast..

TORILL: how much of the time that you spend on the game, would you say is spent building and administrating as opposed to playing?

DM: I think administrating... at least have 10 15, depending on the week and on how many backgrounds.

.....

TORILL: Why do you play computer games?

DM: Why do I play computer games?

TORILL: Yeah?

DM: I don't know why... but I can tell you the reason it got to the symptoms level it did. I was working graveyard and swingshift, so I got to work at six at night and came home at three or four in the morning. And nobody else in Maine was awake or so it seemed, but people on the west-coast or in Australia were awake if I jumped on the game, so it's also...

TORILL: So that would be the social interaction at the time...

DM: yes, it was also a way to break other addictions, to, in the past.

TORILL: Do you feel that games are addictive? Have the games been addictive? Are you addicted to computergames?

DM: I am not addicted in that sense of use would be right, I definitely enjoy it, but the weeks I was not at the games I was feeling quite fine. But it's a running joke that yes, I must be addicted because there were days when I spent over 13 hours online - straight.

TORILL: Oh, I am addicted, I have withdrawal symptoms now.

DM: No, it was not...

TORILL: I just.. need to get connected.

TORILL: Oooohh, those questions you have answered, in what situations and for how long do you play. Actually, we can go into that one point. Do you play to relax, to be challenged, do you play when you are tired, or do you feel alert or awake....

DM: It depends on which games and what am I going to be doing. I can play when I am not really awake, because by then most people are asleep, so my character doesn't have to think so I won't either... It's really nice so... Other times especially with the games currently I'd be thinking... either when I get up in the morning or when I go to sleep, not all at once, but it's different moods that you will get me in on the computer.

TORILL: If you were to choose an absolute favourite kind of computergame. What's that?

DM: Probably mudding, because of the interactions with other people.

TORILL: So you choose the mud because of the social interactions?

DM: Oh that, and also because I have a stake in it. It's got interactions, and there are people who are on the games I am playing now that I have been playing with for two or three years, not even on Dragon Realms, there are people who followed me to Dragon Realms so.... And you know, after that long you get to know the person to some degree and you have things in common outside the game, so it's nice to catch up, yeah...

TORILL: If you were to compare playing, with other activities, like reading, writing, would you say that these are the same or are they different?

DM: They are both, you can't take an absolute and say they are totally different, because there are elements of writing in both in building and in even in playing, you are going to have to build a character... and even when I was nobody I spent half the time writing notes to people, and now I spend even more time writing notes to people. And then reading - I think reading is a little different because when I am reading for enjoyment or for school, I have to pay more attention. When it's on the screen I can get the context quicker. And that's something you learn, you never realise it until someone who doesn't play looks over your shoulder and say: How can you follow all this, isn't it scrolling too quickly? No, this person is doing this and this person is doing...

TORILL: And so – how do you think you can follow all this scrolling text, what do you do when you read the screen which is different from when you read books?

DM: In a book, especially when I am doing a book for class, I have to follow my new concepts, and screen – there can be a delay in catching up to where the conversation is, so even if I saw and didn't comprehend it right away, the next line will lock it in, while in a book that's not always the case. Reading for enjoyment, that's like that too, because you skim, you think you read everything but you don't you really do skim

TORILL: you have to learn the trick of skimming a school-text as well.

DM: I don't – well, I can skim school-texts as well, but I prefer to read it all, and then re-read it.

TORILL: I promise you, you know when you do it enough.

DM: I have done it – it depends on the subject, History I can do it in, psychology I can do it in... sociology I couldn't do it in.

TORILL: HmmmHm.

DM: Philosophy I couldn't do it in.

TORILL: What are your main subjects, are those history and psychology?

DM: Ahm.. it was English and psychology, but I was taking a lot of history classes too... history is more filling up the lectures that I want to take rather than any sort of degree program. But... the schools that I have gone to only did western civilisations; so moving into Japanese and Chinese histories was very interesting when I was taking that. Or even Western Civilisation from the European view rather than the American view.

TORILL: Um, yeah, I can imagine that would be different.

DM: IT is, because you, if you take American histories in the grade school, everything happening in Europe was leading up to America, that's how they teach history. But you have to understand, they go through like from the 14th century till now, it's a year, so I can see that they skip the rest of it. But going back and taking Western Civilisation from an European view is much different.

TORILL: IT would be – sure, right! Can there be anything but an European view on Western Civilisation?

DM: Yes, there can be the American view.

TORILL: I think I would love to see an Asian view on western history, that would be interesting.

DM: Yes, I would too, because we have our view on eastern cultures, but they must have their view of ours.

TORILL: Yes, they have to have it the other way, that's one of the things I'd really like to see.

TM Emmm...I was getting somewhere with these questions.

DM: Reading and writing...

TORILL: Yes, it was reading and writing, but also this skipping between the skimming and the way you perceive things very fast on computer games...

DM: It could also be the colouring.

TORILL: Yes, I guess that would help.

DM: I don't know if you play with colour, but you can distinguish between says and emotes and clan talk and ooc and tells, while in a book they are all sort of squished together.

TORILL: That's right. Ehhmm But when you are a new player. Do you feel overwhelmed by

the scrolling then? When you enter a new area in a new game, and you don't know the people, and you don't know the area and you don't know the lay-out...

DM: It takes a little while, but room-descriptions are usually so little compared to what's going on, it takes me a lot longer to figure out who is who... and especially if people have names which are similar... Which one of the elven women am I talking to? The elven Et'ses am I talking to this week. BUT the first game I played was on a white screen with black text... and there was no colour to it, and it was huge, and it was huge and there were 300 people on the game. So I learned pretty quickly to follow the conversation or lose, so you could have 40 people in a room and you could easily lose track of it, so that was probably where I picked it up.

TORILL: so you feel like you have this skill independent of if you know the context or not, it's just the way you read.

DM: Yeah, Because you perceive the name, and then what they say, and if it's relevant you might remember it, and if it's not relevant to who you are at that moment, you can forget about it.

TORILL: So you are also very selective in this reading.

DM: I can follow most of it, it's only if there are more than 10 people in the room that I have problem with the scroll...

TORILL: YOU are good, I am lost after 5

DM: Without trouble I can follow an in character conversation, three tell-conversations, a court-talk conversation and a snoop. So that's two windows at least and 6 channels going.

TORILL: That's impressive.

DM: I multitask really well, I have said that.

TORILL: I can multitask, but I have problems with keeping up on conversations while I Multitask.

DM: I want to be able to put different people's tells in different colours, and then I'd be set.

TORILL: Can't you do that on ZMUD?

DM: I don't have ZMUD, I am on a mac – you can change the colour of the tells, but not for every person.

TORILL: I know I have talked to people who have done that on zmud... It's one of the things I heard about years ago. I was on a MUD that didn't have any colour, and one of the players, he was setting up ZMUD – configuration his new version of ZMUD, and he put it up with different colours for the people he really wanted to pick out.

DM: Wow, I am just not that talented.

TORILL: ME neither, I haven't done it. But I think it should be... from that conversation I think that should be possible.

DM: That would just encourage me to make more conversations at once.

TORILL: Then you would have like 12 conversations.

DM: There is a limit to how much data you can process before you start sending people back wrong answers to call, which gets kind of interesting.

TORILL: Yes, the joys of mistells.

DM: Oh – oh yeah, yeah. Because My character in DR had somebody whose tells went to Ashen, and Ashlyn came on. Second in command to Dragon or the leader of Inquisition, there was just a small difference there...

TORILL: Slightly, yes.

DM: That could have been sorry if they hadn't been so nice about mistells...

TORILL: I had fun with disguise with that.

DM: I remember getting these tells from – I don't remember – the wounded merman or something, it was Jurall hiding from other tells coming to him.

TORILL: Oh, right

DM: Or Ashen, Ashen had disguise too, and I'd get these obnoxious little tells from somebody and I tried to reply and it said he had lost link. And he had changed the disguise that quick.

TORILL: I would disguise as a player with a name that was fairly similar, I didn't mean to do it in the beginning, but that's when I discovered that people only use abbreviations? So I'd disguise as a new player with a fairly similar name, hide out somewhere and get

DM: Get these very interesting conversation... I got the interesting conversations anyway, they were out of character though. The Brisbane boys drunk were always very interesting.

TORILL: The ?

DM: The Brisbane boys, from Australia, they drank a lot... I had many standing invites to go and crash on their couches, which I politely declined.

TORILL: Oh well.... I work with the Brisbane boys

DM: On Strive, yeah

TORILL: But I think I am intimidating them. Strict mother keeping them in place. No no no, no swearing online, no no.

TORILL: You feel that... you have already described how you feel you have learned to read faster. But otherwise, your perception of things, how you understand things, the way you perceive things, do you feel that has changed in any manners?

DM: Du to anything related to the game – no. As it comes to perceptions... I am not sure. As in interactions with people in what might be a second language, and things which I have always taken for granted in slang, beign asked "what's that" and trying to explain concepts like keebler, which I don't know if you understand but they are the little elves which make keebler cookies?

TORILL: I have heard about them, and I had no idea in the beginning what they were.

DM: And, you know, I just made a comment, and there are a lot of non-american people on these games, and they are going: what are you talking about. And also the perception of other people, at least in these communities towards America, it has been very interesting to the point that at times I have wanted to deny that I am an American.

TORILL: Why do you want to – why do you like to build and administrate a game, what's your motivation? It takes a lot of time, effort...

DM: I got into building the first time when DR was closing for a friend, for a MUD that never went anywhere. And that was fun to learn all of the new things that could be ???? Ah.. I do it as a creative outlet for partially partially because .. the imms are the most put-upon people on the face of an earth, and you know, I never thought I'd respect Topaz to the point that once you get into administrative power you think like: maybe she wasn't such a hard-ass. So it's finding people that can work together in this type of situation isn't easy, and anyway it's a good experience for the real world where you have to learn how to compromise, and listen

to other people, and gives lots of real life experience for an administrative tasks. And then again it also can be frustrating and aggravating... and I have dealt with at-risk youths for a long time – At risk youths, homeless youths, gay youths, that sort of thing, and I think this is a way of punishing myself for stopping that, because now I get to deal with the same sort of problems.

But it's also an interesting way to learn about people.

TORILL: so you – got into this mainly because of the social aspect – or is the creative outlet important as well?

DM: IT's a creative outlet as well, and it's even if it's a social thing it's also a creative way for me to look at the world. And then bring it back to writings or readings, or papers...

TORILL: Are you writing anything, are you writing a book or something?

DM: I have done on and off books and various – right now there's not one in the works, but for a long time... I joke that building has taken its place, it's ... least other people are actually going to see what I build and the themes I write for that. But... there have been very poor, sad efforts which I go back two years later and just laugh at.

TORILL: I asked that question because I don't think I have talked to any players yet who don't write, you all write.

DM: It depends on any.. there's different styles of MUDs, but I think if you are going into a roleplay-MUD, you are going to know ...???, adjectives, actions... the flow is going to get into it to the point that you are almost writing while you are doing the character, because you have to have it up here whether it's on paper somewhere, and it helps to write.

TORILL: Yeah. I am just noting this

DM: I noticed it because most roleplay-MUDs unlike other MUDs would have a storyboard. That's how you know you're on a fairly decent roleplay-MUD.

TORILL: When you administrate, what's your primary concern? What are you concerned about?

DM: When I am doing it... I normally end up with the book-keeping. I do the back-grounds, the renames, any.. I also run between the players and the rest of the administration because my imm doesn't have an IC persona, so it's a lot easier for them to see me as neutral, and not as – people have trouble at that level separating the OOC from IC, and therefore if you're upset with the priest of Adera and Adera comes down to talk to you, they are going to think that you're going to take the side of Adera. And I also have training in dealing with people who are very volatile, so... I do what I can.

TORILL: What's your goal with this? If you have a goal with this game? Anything you really want to do?

DM: No... I am along for the ride on this more than... It was other people's project, and I enjoy doing it and I enjoy playing, but it's... relaxation, it's not much of a goal-oriented... I'd love to see it out of beta, though, with a good player-base and some other... well. There are no long-term goals, it's not a novel-in-progress, like Dragon Realms was.

TORILL: I think it's time to see if there's anything I have not asked you about. What I am working with, what I am trying to get to is – my thesis, I am working with the difference between different kinds of text, linear text and a multilinear text and the – reading and

writing a book, that's working with a linear text, you can just cut them up, each sentence and glue them together like a long line... if you're really really into reading a book like that. While I find that games are when you use text on the web – or just windows – the ability of skipping through the different windows allows for a multi-linear way of reading, you skip from this node to this node to this node, and then you create – an understanding and a context out of this skipping about. So what I am looking for is this approach to reading, which is different, people who have been doing this for a long time... some of the players I have talked to have been doing this for years... you tell me that you have been doing this for three to four years...

DM: Consistently, with dragon Gate to now, I started when I was fourteen and I dropped out for a while. Levi and I was having this discussion three nights ago.

TORILL: So that means that a lot of people I have been talking to have been doing this for years, and the strangest thing is that most of you have a very clear concept of what you are doing, what you are actually doing, which is how this is different from other media and which is how this is different from a kind of – consumption. And that's one of the things I am looking for, it's why I am travelling all over to meet you...

I am just chatting a bit, I am trying to think if there's anything I should have asked you. Is there anything you feel I should have asked?

DM: It's your research study

TORILL: Yeah, but is there anything you feel I should have asked about MUDDing which you'd like to tell me?

DM: Saturday mornings my brain doesn't work .. so... Jack and I were up until after two last night – after he drove all day – so.. And he was up when I got home this morning.

END

Attachment 9

William Billoghwy
18.09.1999
Portland, Oregon.

Dragon Realms: Azanith, Aarinfel: Ylandir

TORILL: OK, try to say something.

WB: Hello, my name is William Billoghwy

TORILL: It works. And you are – how old?

WB: 23.

TORILL: And you have what education?

WB: Bachelors of arts in anthropology. So four years of college.

TORILL: Interesting. And what do you do now?

WB: Right now I work for a temp-service. Do I do a variety of jobs. I just finished an extended assignment at a computer-software-company, which made software for banking-companies. And they needed me to go through their records and match various disparate sources of information together, to see if they actually fit, if they had the right variation.

TORILL: Oh. You read – what kind of media do you use?

WB: Media?

TORILL: Yeah? Television, radio, cd's...

WB: The works. Mostly I read a lot of books. To a far lesser extent I watch television and cruise the web. Although the last is pretty limited, because I don't have the same kind of access with my computer at home that I did at work.

TORILL: How much time would you say that you spend on consuming different media?

WB: Ohh.. OK, pro week – that would be at least 10-15 hours

TORILL: In a week

WB: In a week. Probably more, but it's hard to estimate.

TORILL: How much of that time is spent online?

WB: At work it was quite a bit, because I could keep open a window at all times, but now that I have to use my home-line, and that's only the phone, probably it would be much closer to just.. ah.. at most ten hours a week.

TORILL: Do you play any other computer games, offline computer games.

WB: I used to, but my computer is a little behind the technology-curve, so at the moment there isn't anything available for me to play. For a while I played Starcraft, a real-time strategy game. But I had to play that through my friends and the computer-lab at Reed (Reed College).

TORILL: Ok, I have heard about the computer-lab at Reed and setting up Starcraft there...
(laughter)

WB: Yeah, it's always an adventure.

TORILL: If you were to pick any particular game that you prefer...

WB: Civilisation.

TORILL: OK...

WB: I'd go for the newest version, I understand they have updated it quite a bit and they've added many more features to play with.

TORILL: So what you prefer is strategy-games?

WB: yes

TORILL: Can you make me a list of different computer-games? Types of games, not names but.. Put the universe of computer games into types?

WB: I imagine there'd be strategy-games, ahhh.. the roleplaying-fantasy games for the computers, which aren't really roleplaying, but... essentially hack'n'slash, and action-games and shoot'em ups, car-driving.....

TORILL: Simulation?

WB: Ah, simulation, yes that'd be an other category, and then there'd be the very small games, the solitaire, and card-games essentially.

TORILL: Yeah, OK – Ummm why would you say that a game like.. OK, let's not start there. Where would you put a game like starcraft. What kind of game would that be?

WB: I think it mostly counts as strategy.

TORILL: you wouldn't call that an action game?

WB: No, not really, there isn't enough fine control for your reflexes to matter very much, it's mostly point and click. And action-game would be closer to a video-game, or Doom.

TORILL: Yeah, that would be kind of... the reaction

WB: Yes

TORILL: How much do you read?

WB: Oh, quite a bit. I usually end up going through a couple of books a week if I am lucky. Again – a couple of hours a week, it's the commuting to work's by bus, so that's half an hour there and half an hour back, at least.

TORILL: MMhhmmmm.. what kind of books do you prefer. What do you like to read?

WB: Mostly Science fiction, I have been trying to extend my taste a little bit... I tend to read popular science things every so often, like Oliver Sacks: *An antropologist on Mars*. And I.. I keep trying to get into history books, Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* I read that a couple of weeks ago...but – it's mostly science fiction.

TORILL: HMM yeah... why do you play computer games?

WB: I suppose... for the entertainment. It attracts the mind for a while, it's more interactive than sitting down watching a sit-com.

TORILL: Mmhhh So – what would you say is the main attraction for you to a computer-game as compare to a sit-com?

WB: You can move things around yourself, and decide how things are going to go. Your actions have some kind of response to them. It's specifically sucking you in, it's not as though you can get up and – ah – go get a sandwich and come back and half of it is gone... or that the action you take are still necessary for the thing to occur, you are personally involved.

TORILL: Ehhh... When you get into an interplay or a game-session, how long can it become?
WB: Oh, it can go on for hours... I have - the starcraft-sessions in the basement at Reed for instance, we'd frequently get there some time in the evening, and not leave until three in the morning, we'd just all get sucked in and keep playing until we all were so tired our eyes hurt. It depends on whether or not there's some kind of scheduled activities that'll keep me from being sucked in too long.

TORILL: So you just play on - if you have nothing else to pull you out, you play until you drop?
WB: Basically. Or until I become completely sick of the game. But normally I drop first.

TORILL: Oh.. it's OK. In the games that you play, what's the most attractive part?
WB: I think it's the numbers of options available, the number of things you can do that gives some kind of response, the things you can build in strategy games for instance. It's - in Starcraft for instance, a lot of the real effective strategies don't require you to do very much, you can start at the basics with a very large number of simple troops and send them off to attack your enemies, but it's a lot more fun to come up with the really bizarre intricate strategies, add in twenty-three different things, and build up different types of troops and try to use them in combination. And it's probably not more effective that way, it might slow a player down quite a bit, to be wasting your time doing all those various things, but it's a lot more interesting than going through the same rote activities.

TORILL: You do also build and administrate.
WB: Yes.

TORILL: What kind of games - where would you place those games in this universe of...
WB: I think they would probably fill a category of their own because of the other players involved. It's a - because all the computer-games I have played, except star-craft... even with star-craft, you get fairly simple interaction between players. They attack each other with various things, and occasionally they work together and attack something else, but there's nowhere near the depth of - ah - options put into interacting with others that are put into roleplaying games, the online roleplaying games with other people. So I'd say they are their own category.

TORILL: OK, you wouldn't call them adventure games or roleplay games or strategy games...

WB: I'd call them roleplaying games, I guess - and I'd have to draw a distinction between roleplaying games like MUDs and MUSHES, and computer roleplaying games which I guess would be better termed adventure games.

TORILL: Have you tried any games like Everquest, or Quake or anything like that?
WB: No, I haven't. I tried Doom a couple of times, but not really with other people.
TORILL: Because like Everquest claims to be a roleplay game, and I was just curious as to if you had been trying that and could compare that. But that's OK.

TORILL: Why do you like to build?
WB: It's a change for creative expression. It's a - you can create scenery for people to interact with and props for them to wear, and in a lot of cases you can make intricate puzzles for them

to take part in, and it's interesting to see how they respond to it and the various things they can go through with it.

TORILL: I just want to take the opportunity to say that I love the silver Palace!

WB: I haven't even had a chance to come even close to topping that. Building on Aarinfel is so much more rigorous and realistic, I can't come up with anything half as silly and fun as...

TORILL: That was really... there was so much going on there, I think parts of it was really poetic. It was like poetry going on there. I think it was so creative and so beautiful, it was really worth...

WB: See, that's the other advantage of building on MUDs, you get all this praise!

TORILL: But for that, I really think you deserve it. One of my friends is building an educational MOO right now, a shakespearean moo - tries to put the Midsummer night's Dream into the..

WB: That would be the perfect one to pick! The mischief and all the various elaborate things going on, it's lighthearted and pressing... children through Hamlet could be a little bit depressing, or Macbeth, good god!

TORILL: And before DR went down I had a chance to take her in and show her the Silver palace, and she was just: OOOoohhhh I want to do this, this would just be so perfect... To compare with the Midsummer Night's dream, because it's so playful and so ... she was so impressed by that area. I think it's a go - forget about reality and Aarinfel and play! Create! Because as a player, that's the...

That shows such - it's a rare mind that can come up with that many odd things... just the metaphors, the imagery used there.. I was impressed. Now I have said that. I felt that was important.

WB: Well, had a lot more spare time in College.

TORILL: well, what you achieved on your spare time was a lot more impressive than what professional coders manage today

WB: I think it might be that they are professionals - they design this for an audience, they can't just pick a random thing and go with it.

TORILL: Pretty much they can - well, when you work experimentally on a research-grant, you can do whatever you want. But they haven't played, I think is what lacks. What I see with what you build is that this is very playable. You can go in there and play with it and it has a wide range of possibilities. That is one of the wonderful things with that which makes it something other than for instance a play - or a poem, or what... It's a playable game

WB: it's an entirely different media

TORILL: it shows that you really knew the medium

TORILL: SOOO, what's your primary concern as a builder? What do you really want to do?

WB: As a builder? I think my primary concern is just making something that looks good and is durable. That's one of the major differences between Aarinfel and Dragon Realms, we had to step up - we did step up realism a lot. You couldn't have a city street where it was always night, for instance. You couldn't have quests where when you went through a second time it would react the same way. You couldn't have a treasure chest you could raid for the same materials several times, because that had to belong to somebody. So - that currently a lot of

that is to try to find a way to integrate – a lot of my major concerns is try to find a way to integrate realism with something that's playable and entertaining. I think entertainment would probably be the most significant concern – as a builder.

TORILL: MMHMM. Do you think that's a...is that a problem to get these two things to work together, is it difficult?

WB: It has been so far.

TORILL: Why is that?

WB: I think a lot of it is just that our instincts were... I learned all my instincts on Dragon Realms, where you didn't have to worry about realism, you could have the infinitely raidable treasure chest, or orcs would come back every time you killed them, and there'd never be any legal punishment for it. So, it's a thing to get used to – and realism is in many ways to try to mimic the real world, which is an incredibly complicated place. All of these tiny little variables to match up, and work out how something would go differently if somebody said this instead of this...

TORILL: So that's what you feel is the greatest challenge, to get to that point where you manage to – to make it realistic but still enjoyable?

WB: It seems to be – I mean, it's been a great challenge so far.

TORILL: What is the standard for enjoyable? Or fun?

WB: I guess that would be my standard. If I can enjoy it, then it's enjoyable.

TORILL: What would you think is fun?

WB: I don't know how to define that properly. It's... something stimulating and believable? And – ah...

TORILL: you can use an example, for something which has been fun?

WB: In terms of the MUD – well, I always like the fey circle for instance, that was always a lot of fun, that was I think one of Kelly's better areas. And just all of the various things going on there – there was always something going on there. And all the time you could spend just gawking slackjawed at the scenery, there was always something going on there, little bells in the trees... and detail. And the various odd little things.. the – the ah the characters and the way they would talk and come to life. Oh, that was great entertainment, it was like a virtual amusement park.

TORILL: yeah, that's a good example. So what you like then is the detail and the interaction. When you administrate.. will you say that building and administration is two different things?

WB: Completely different.

TORILL: What is your primary concern as an administrator?

WB: Ahh, maintain a consistent atmosphere and theme, and get everyone to move in the same direction without hurting too many people's feelings. We – we have this was mentioned in the car, we had somebody leave because we weren't thought to be fantastic enough, we criticised his background for being completely incoherent and unmatched to the world, it was – something which was obviously composed mostly off blind, had nothing whatever to do with the stuff he'd actually encounter. We get that a lot with people who get to be the Prince of an undersea kingdom raided by airbreathing orcs or something. Actually that was a Dragon Realms one – but most of the administration is right now just approving

backgrounds and dealing with the crises which pop up when a player does something really... well, we get a lot of fights between players, or players breaking rules, and then we sort of have to sweep up afterwards. Ehh... WE had a rash of headhunting recently which we had to resolve. Basically it was just one who was approaching every single person she knew asking them if they wanted to come imm on her MUD. And it wasn't until she came to one of our builders that we really found out about it. We didn't actually lose any players except her and one person who was losing interest anyhow. But it was still an uncomfortable and aggravating situation for everybody concerned. Which is what administration ends up being in a mud, in my experience.

TORILL: How about the story-side of the administration.

WB: I haven't had much chance to deal with that. We only have one phone-line where I am, so I have to stay offline a lot more than I used to back on DR.

TORILL: If you were to compare – but you did a lot of that on DR. If you were to compare creating a storyline for a MUD and writing? How would you say that these two things... or would you write a book?

WB: Well, when you write a book all of your characters do what you tell them. When you write a storyline for a MUD, nobody will do what you imply they should. Nobody. The best you can hope for is to give them enough options, or to plan for enough options, that you can sort of keep things moving in the right direction that you want. We find it's a lot easier to get the players to be on the same side than it is to be on different sides, because they are also involved out of character, their friendships overlap and interlink, and very few people like being adversarial – at the moment, anyway. On Dragon Realms it was a lot easier to get everyone on different sides, but it was a lot harder to get everyone on the same side, because they wanted to be at each others' throats.

TORILL: OK... you are... are you writing a book?

WB: No, I am not.

TORILL: you're not writing anything?

WB: No, I haven't written anything for a while, the occasional story-note on Aarinfel...

TORILL: YOU don't write anything, short stories, poems, anything?

So what you feel that what you do with writing, you get quite satisfied with writing on the MUD?

WB: as I said, I haven't been writing on the MUD either. So.. it's a, it's very different. Writing is a lot more like building, I mean it's a lot more just composing things and putting everything in place. And – eh... administrating a storyline in a mud is almost nothing like writing. You can toss in a storyline if you want, but it's more – it's directing, almost, but directing improv. So you – there's not much you can do, everybody will do what they want.

TORILL: so you'd rather compare it to acting for instance then?

WB: I think so, yeah... the whole thing is basically method acting, the problem is providing material good enough for them to come up with good scripts.

TORILL: That's a good image. You are actually incredibly efficient, you keep answering my questions to the point.

WB: I am sorry, I'll try to digress more.

TORILL: (Laughter) No, it's wonderful, it's just that all these interviews take from 45

minutes to an hour, and we are at 22 minutes and you have answered almost all I have to ask you.

Do you have any goals for what you want to do with this, anything in particular you want to do?

WB: there are a lot of different themes that I'd like to explore, it's ahhh I think with the cutbacks in purely over the top fantastic elements in Aarinfel, we also opened up a lot of options for more subtle themes, the fear of death and how people manage to cope with that for instance. But I have no idea how to approach those in the game.

TORILL: Are these the – do you feel that these are themes which are available to the players, that they'd actually be able to play with them?

WB: I honestly don't know. It's part of the problem. I don't know if any of them would be interested in that. If none of the players are interested, there's no point in bringing it up in a MUD, you might as well write your own short story.. which might e why everybody is writing.

I think there are a lot of players who are very good at what they are doing and who are very intelligent, who'd love to play with this, but for the most part they are all imms at this point.

TORILL: All bugged down by administration?

WB: Yeah

Although from what I have seen, it seems to be more effective to administrate a story from within the storyline. People have more success making mortal characters and playing those and steering the storyline along by being part of it than by being above it and drop parts of it in here and there. Because they can actually take part in all the conversations, and know what's going on, people will come to them and explain what's going on. Where as if you're up above, everybody is busy dealing with each other, they don't have time to send the reports – oh by the way these twelve people are doing these twelve things, and that's going to result from that.

TORILL: Ehm – have you ever felt that playing the games have changed your perception of things, how you see, how you perceive how... or understand things?

WB: I am honestly not sure. I don't know where I would begin with that. I mean every so often I am watching a movie, and I'll – or reading a book and it will come across almost like a mob-prog. Everything I set up like if one will go and make this acquired action to create this specific effect. But...

TORILL: One of the things I am looking for is the way people approach linearity. Some of the things I am working with... the difference between the linear media – like television, a book... although a picture can be non-linear as well, but we tend to create linearity, and we are taught to, we are taught to read from A to somewhere out there, in line, our arguments are supposed to be consistent, and build on what has been said before – and then the computer comes along, and it breaks down this linearity. It opens for multitasking, and for switching from one place or task to an other, people start to reading things like in – you read a little here and you skip up to an other link there, and you skip bback, and you end up somewhere totally different, you start out looking up a recipe and you end up reading about – horrors in East Timor...

WB: Which is more like holding a conversation works, how it drifts... from subject to

subject, as opposed to formal argument. Or something written.

TORILL: Yes, exactly, and – and so what I am looking for is – is this something you have been aware of in MUDs, is this something you become more aware of while playing games? IS this one of the things you enjoy with the games?

WB: The change in linearity?

TORILL: Yes?

WB: In all honesty, I really hadn't noticed... I am having trouble pinning down exactly how you would see the difference between linearity and non-linearity in a MUD setting. In terms of creating programs for mobs, for instance, you have to be fairly linear as to how they go forward, but you could create a couple of different options and branches for them – I mean, you can set them up so that they have to fulfill three conditions, but can do them in any order.

TORILL: But in a larger setting, you would have like three conversations going on at the same time, five.. Heather told me she could cope with six or eight conversations at the same time – I am impressed! Eh... And this is also – this multitasking is a kind of non-linearity, when you kind of skip from one to the other... and then you have the intertextuality, which is also a kind of non-linearity – now, when you refer to other things- like I feel that the moon-palace is just filled with inter-textuality, it has a lot of references to things outside of the game, like when you and Bill were talking right now in the car, and you kept referring to

WB: To various TV-shows

TORILL: Yeah, and that's a non-linear way of talking. When you pack a lot of meaning which you refer to instead of saying out, and so you get connotations which spread out in different directions, instead of going straight like that... A lot of ritual communication has this – you refer to the formal meaning of things, rather than what you are actually saying. So you communicate in nodes – so “hello how are you doing” means this bunch of things, it doesn't just mean...

WB: Hello, how are you doing?

TORILL: I am greeting you, I am seeing you, we are in this world, in this context..... (chatter about greetings from me)

So what I am thinking of is – you haven't been thinking of these things when you work, you don't feel that computer games are closer to conversations than they are to books?

WB: I hadn't been really the games in themselves definitely aren't, but... no, that's not true, the games themselves I haven't noticed that they are. And in a lot of ways they are. I mean there are references and sub-references, and just in the way the area is set up, you are going to have different types of nodes, people are going to wander into a certain part and then are not required to go straight forwards to the next part, very few areas are straight forwards A to B to C, they are big mazes, they are gardens to wander through.

TORILL: you haven't read Michael Joyce's hypertext literature, have you?

WB: No, I haven't.

TORILL: Ahhh you might enjoy that. There's one called – the garden something (Victory Garden)

TORILL: I think I am more or less--- I have asked you some of this.

IS there anything I should have asked you? Anything you'd like to tell me about computer games, about playing them, using them, enjoying them, being fascinated by them, being

addicted to them?

WB: That last one is actually a subject that's come up . we have recently, within a month or two, we had someone to stay up online – well, this is just a quirk of how the system is set up: The Who-list at Aarinfel, it isn't alphabetic, it's just set up the way it is in a lot of muds, because apparently alphabetic who-lists are incredibly complicated to code, and if John ever does it he's going to have to steal the code from somewhere else pretty much, unless he wants to spend hours and hours on it. Ehh.. it's chronological – people show up, and in the order they show up they stay on the least. And as people show up and leave, those who stay on for a long amount of the time will move to the bottom. And this actually caused people to get into bragging contests over how long – over holding the bottom slot. Because the bottom slot means you're on for the longest. And people would get into little joking struggles for it – nothing serious. We did however have one player, one character, who stayed on in access of 24 hours online, awake – partly because she was avoiding doing real work, maybe she was also trying to set a record or get a thing to brag about, but it was intensely disturbing, I think someone else jumped in and asked her to get off line for her own good, you know to take a nap or a rest or go for a walk or something. People can get into these unhealthy behaviours very easily. It's an easy allusion to fall into, and it's more than worrying, as to how many negative side-effects you can have in an environment like this.

TORILL: Any examples?

BH: Well, it's that one right there. And Nicole has told me on several occasions that one of the worst things a depressed person can do is start spending all of their time on line. Because it feels more real than social human interaction because there's no cost, there is no risk. People can tell you they are your friends, and it doesn't matter whether or not you don't really know them. They are not giving anything up by telling you they are your friend, they don't have to pay for coffee, they don't have to deal with you when you're absolutely a complete mess, and incapable of coherency, you don't have to sit up with them through a long night.... Or anything like that. It's costless, and so it's very easy, but people can mistake it for the real thing and so they can be sucked in and it leads to a cycle where they are not getting what they need, they are not getting social interaction, but they are getting a very convincing illusion. And this is a lot worse for depressed people than just isolation, because it's isolation which convinces them that they are not isolated and they don't need to change it. And that worries me a lot. It's... we're not always getting the psychologically most healthy people on MUDs. It goes without saying. I am sure you remember from DR some of the players were more than a little bit creepy. There were torture sessions and ... endless lists of things.

TORILL: Yeah.. you do know what Magrath is doing in real life?

WB: HE's teaching children, isn't he? Someone mentioned that.

WB: Yes, that's one little bit of worrying right there, but we can just hope that he won't have that much influence on them or that we have misjudged him or something.

TORILL: Well, actually, he – it's a little bit fun, because he played on Strive, and he played a totally different character from Magrath. He turned it – he was this very low-key, shy, powerless servant. He was just deferring to everybody, he was incredibly polite, and he was terribly careful, and he was walking with tiny mincing steps...

WB: So some of it might have been that he was just caught in the character, there was nowhere to go from Magrath to go but down.

TORILL: Yes, I think he was just caught up in Magrath and how he was, and how he would naturally react, and played that out too far and too much. Because the characters I have seen him with on strive are very very different.

WB: I think a lot of it is also that people get into fights much on these muds, and competition gets really intense, again because there's not much to lose except the pride-issues, and so you can just build your character up and get revenge in a way, and you can plot forever the revenge in some way, and devote yourself to that – to this unhealthy insane passion, where a lot of the breakers would kick in in real life, like say the police, or restraining orders, they don't come up in a MUD.

TM Yes, somebody told me that – it might have been David or Benjamin... Somebody had been building up a character on Everquest. And sold it, for 20 000 \$

WB: Yes, I have been hearing about the same thing on Ultima Online, People would build up the stats of a character and sell it for real money.

TORILL: What do you want a character you have paid 20 000\$ for – it has to be just for the power-kick.

WB: Yes, just to go out and kill all the other characters.

TORILL: That's one of the things I don't understand, I try to be pretty open, but that I don't understand.

TORILL: Ok, I think I have covered most of what I wanted to talk about, so... I'll just turn this off.

Attachment 10

Doris Olson

Portland, Oregon: 19.09.1999

"Yva" – immortal, The Infinite point.

Education: High school, one year of college

Current occupation: pre-school assistant

Interests: friends and surfing the net.

Age: 18

(The first minute is a limited write-out of notes due to technical difficulties.)

TORILL: Do you use other media much, television, music...

DO: Not really, don't watch much television, is mostly online

TORILL: Do you play computer games?

DO: only the infinite point, only MUDs.

TM what do you use the net for?

DO: Mostly for chatting with friends, and then to log on to the Infinite Point.

DO: As for games, that's it I think... and then I do my surfing and all that.

TM you do surfing, you say, what do you do surfing after, how do you use it for surfing?

DO: I don't do a lot of it. What I do is basically just going back to places I've been before, and rereading.

TORILL: what kind of things are you looking for?

DO: Eeehhh. The places I go and the places I am looking for – one of them is a map-place and one of them is one of my friends' homepages – it's just – just thing I have picked up.

TORILL: How did you pick them up?

DO: (silence)

TORILL: you have to have found something to bookmark somehow!

DO: (laughing) Yes, let's see. I needed to find a map, so I searched for a map-site, and then some of the places have been given to me by friends. Oh go here, look at this! My cousin's Web-page was totally random, I found him by chance, I was attempting to find him and then I found his page!

TORILL: so you spend eight hours online, a day. And you spend it either on the MUD, or on this talker? And since you only surfe to places that you know about, or have been told about, that means that your surfing time is relatively small.

DO: MmmHm

TORILL: so what do you do when you're logged on? you chat or you play?

DO: Sometimes I just sit. There's noone there and I just go – Oh well. I just wait until someone arrives. Sometimes I – tinker – changing items. That's fun. Aaand – sometimes I'll just sit and talk to people, sometimes my sister's online, and I'll sit and talk to her, and a couple of people that I know. It depends on who's on. If there's nobody there, I'll just go and do something else.

TORILL: you don't explore or search for other places, where things might be happening?

DO: no, I've been to a couple of other muds, and I'll either walk in and find it's the same as the infinite point and I go what's the point of playing here, I've got the other one I can play at, or I walk in and it will be totally different, and I can't find my way around, I just go back to someplace I know. I've been to a couple of other ones, and hung around for a week, maybe two, and then I go OK, I am going back....

TORILL: If you were to make a list of how you perceive a world of games, put different games into different categories – or rather just list me the categories and games... could you do that? Make me a list like that?

DO: I.. don't know? What sort of categories are you looking for?

TORILL: Oh, like adventure games, fantasy games...

DO: I don't know if I have seen enough to know what's out there.

TORILL: but what do you think is out there?

DO: Oh, probably everything. I just haven't seen it.

TORILL: Oh? But why don't you – like make a guess on the grounds of what advertising and things like that you have seen?

DO: I know there are a couple of big games out there, that people play, I don't know what they are... I've heard the names a couple of times, but I don't know what they are... ultimate.. ultimate something?

TORILL: Ultima Online?

DO: That might be it. And quake. And I don't know what they are, and they seem to be pretty big, because I keep hearing about them from different places. But other than that

TORILL: You don't know what kind of games those are?

DO: No, I've heard the names a couple of times, and I've been told a couple of times that I should come and see what's going on, but nooo, I am just going to stay here... I don't have much interest in going to something really big, because then you don't get to really know the people!

TORILL: So your main interest is in meeting people.

DO: I don't like it in a morass, and in a large group of people. I like it where it's smaller, and in contact with more regular people, it's not different people all the time. You develop some sort of a relationship, and with people you see. I just don't like lots of people. You get lost in the row.

TORILL: do you know the difference between a hack'n'slash and roleplay, and have any of

the MUDs you've been to been any different as to that regard?

DO: I was at one for a while where player-killing was allowed. And that was something different, to have someone come and attack you just for no reason.

TORILL: Oh, but they do that, at the infinite point as well.

DO: Oh, yah, but they're supposed to get in trouble for it, unless there's a roleplay reason. That was a little bit different. Then, go out and group with other people and attack things. That was interesting, the whole system was different. IT was interesting to see how somebody else had sat up their MUD. But I didn't stay there very long either.

TORILL: What kind of game would you say that the infinite Point is?

DO: It's supposed to be a roleplay game. But there are never enough people.

TORILL: So, what is it then?

DO: An Empty MUD.

TORILL: THAT sounds very interesting.

DO: Yeah!

TORILL: Sounds like a real nice social place, yeah.

DO: A lot of the time – there's just like one or two other people there, and most of the time it's my sister, and we'll sit and talk. Or it's Matthew, and he'll test the mobs I am trying to create, so that no one will kill them, and he kills them anyway – so – I am not doing very well with that. Or Nick's there, and we'll sit and talk, and I'll cause problems and he'll have to go and fix them.

TORILL: But I think it's a good thing that the players are able to kill the mobs. Because most of them are supposed to be killable by humans.

DO: yea – but some of the players are so strong now, they are able to kill the strongest mobs in just a few hits. There's not much of a challenge there anymore. To be able to try and figure out what works against this mob, how am I going to try to get this one.

TORILL: and you see that as an important part of the game?

DO: I think it would cause a little more interest from some of our strongest players, who are looking for other places, and it's nobody there to roleplay with.

TORILL: so your main concern when you're administrating this kind of a game is to keep the interest of the players...

DO: I am trying

TORILL: how do you try to do that? You are trying to do that through making stronger mobs to give them more challenges?

DO: I am working on building one that I just put out every now and then, since I don't know how to make it stay. And I have been trying to come up with some quest ideas, something they can go and do, and not be totally sure of what they're doing, but it's there and it's something new and...

TORILL: Nick hasn't shown you how to make resets, how to reset mobs?

DO: I can't make any mobs stay... I don't have that level of immnety yet.

TORILL: You can't reset it?

DO: I don't.. think so.

TORILL: It's very simple, just have Nick show you how to reset a mob, it's very simple.

DO: OK.. I haven't learned all my commands yet, so I don't know what I can do yet.

TORILL: You probably have it. The reason why if you don't, is that he'd want you to be

careful, because if you want to reset equipment, on the mob, you have to do it right, or the game won't boot again.

DO: Oh no – well that's it then!

TORILL: But it's very simple. Once you've done it once... just write down how it's done, and repeat that every time. It's very simple.

DO: the day I was trying to restring my equipment for my imm-character, and he (Nick) wasn't there and I was restringing. And a few moments later this player comes up to me, and he asks "is this a new item?" and hands me a boot I had been creating. He had gotten that off a mob. And I went Oooops.

TORILL: you probably didn't have the item you were trying to restring in your inventory. Because I have done that, I have done exactly the same thing. Then the system searches for the one that comes up first, because they'll all come up in a list – and you will be restringing – or renaming – the one that comes up first. And so, if you don't have it in your inventory, it chooses to restring – something else.

DO: Right. Then I was nervous that I had changed something.

TORILL: you had changed that one item. I have renamed items which had already been renamed! Very nice items which were supposed to be used in the game, and I renamed them, into something I wanted. And then some player would go "Oh my god what happened to my valuable what ever".

So anyway, all these things can be fixed quite easily, it's just that you have to be very precise, like knitting or something, it's actually very dull.

TORILL: so, what you are doing is – you tinker with the mobs, and you work on quests.

DO: Yeah, I think I have only thought of two so far.

TORILL: How about the world of The Infinite Point, do you feel it has a history?

DO: I think there's a history there, but I don't know a lot of it – because a lot of the players left before I came? And all of the players who made the history... So I missed out on a lot of that. I recognise some of the names when people come back, but I don't know who they are or what's behind their character.

TORILL: So history that exists on TIP is something that's made by the players.

DO: Yeah, the history that I know of.

TORILL: So there's no history planned by the immortals, given to the land.

DO: Not that I have heard of.

TORILL: So Nick hasn't given you any kind of timelines or contexts or what kind of world this is or anything like that?

DO: No, not yet.

TORILL: OK, then it probably doesn't exist.

DO: It might be coming still, he's got that long list of todo-things.

TORILL: Absolutely. He's working a lot on the code though, isn't he?

DO: Yes, he's refused to hire anybody to do the code for him, so he's doing a lot of the coding.

TORILL: I think that's his fun stuff actually.

TORILL: Why do you play?

DO: Well, I started because it's like the only time I'd see people. You know, Matthew and... Well, she wasn't there yet. I started because it was the only way to talk to Matthew. It was

either that or hoping that sometime in the next couple of weeks I'd get a response to that email. So I asked him, I knew he spent time online, so I asked him OK where do you go? And he gave me the address for the talker first. And so we'd go there and sit there and he'd mud and I'd sit on the talker. So I was going OK, OK, where are you. So I said OK, OK, I'll come there. So I started that way. And then - my best friend asked, you're always on your computer, what are you doing? So I gave her the address so she came down and I'd sit there and talk to the two of them, and my sister's there now, so, when they are there we sit and talk about what's going on, and we'll go OK, we'll have an out of character conversation now, and we'll have our conversations there. What was the question? How far have I strayed?

TORILL: Oh, you haven't strayed very far – the question was why – why do you use these games and your answer was because you meet people.

DO: Yes, yeah, that's what the answer is. Yeah, OK.

TORILL: How about the roleplay part of it.

DO: I did that for a while, I had a lot of fun with it – and I kind of got out of it because all the people who were there I knew, and we'd almost out of habit go into the how are you, how was your day, and it would be very hard to get back to roleplaying with them.

TORILL: Do you miss it?

DO: I don't know. A little bit I guess. But there are always new players I can go down and bug. And that works. Sit and roleplay with them for a while, bring my other character on. but when it's people I know... actually, no, it's harder to roleplay with them, because we are not in a habit of it.

TORILL: You don't play tabletop-games, roleplay games, or anything when you're offline – and away from the computer?

DO: MmHm. (denial)

TORILL: Ever considered doing that?

DO: No. That's not been something I thought about.

TORILL: Do you know people who do?

DO: I don't think so. I – no, I don't think anybody who does.

TORILL: Have you played magic, the gathering . the cards? Anything like that?

DO: Uh hu.

TORILL: What kind of books do you read? Do you read books?

DO: Yeah, I read.. most of what I read is Christian fiction. And Mysteries, I like mysteries. Like Dick Francis.

TORILL: What kind of mysteries – Oh ah ha.

DO: Yea, those – those ones! I think that mostly – basically sums up what I have read.

TORILL: You read fantasy literature?

DO: I am one chapter into one now. And that's the first one I've read.

TORILL: Never read anything by Tolkien?

DO: No, never.

TORILL: A lot of what TIP is based on, is taken from Tolkien, Lord of the Rings.

DO: No, I have never really read that. But he has got a link through to that site, through his page. And I looked around a little bit, but I have never read any of that. I don't like trying new books very much. I've got to know that I'll like it, before I start it. If it's recommended to me,

I'll sit—I'll read it. And that's—the fantasy-book I am reading now was recommended to me.

TORILL: Which one is that?

DO: Oh oh.. The sun of Albion? It was recommended to me by my cousin and I said OK, I'll try it and see if I like it. So I borrowed it and now I am one chapter into it.

TORILL: I think I could recommend something you'd like – we can do that afterwards.

TORILL: Mmmm, the quests you have been working on? What kind of quests are those?

DO: Start small!

TORILL: Yeah

AH; I made this character... who has a two year old son. I thought OK, I've got to do something about this character. So I put them in down in one of the southern towns. And he has been programmed to run up through the city and all that, and I have given him a diaper which he's been programmed to drop and keep running. So there's this diaper sitting out there and there's this kid running round. And there's this mother going around "Where's my kid!". OK, and hopefully someone will find this kid and give him the diaper, and he'll follow this person back through the town to find his mother. But we have to see if it works, because I haven't tried it on anybody yet.

TORILL: You can try it on your own.

DO: Oh, he drops the diaper and follows and everything. But I have him running through a part of town now where the mobs are aggressive and he gets killed! So it isn't too good! I've got to figure out some way to keep that from happening, or have him run around somewhere else.

TORILL: Is there a reward then, when he comes back to his mother?

DO: Yeah, I've got the object I created, it's a token. The tokens I've created, in exchange for them, I'll restring some armour. So you can have your shadowhawk talons, but you can rename them to travelworn boots, so people don't know what good armour they really are. And you can fit a little better in with your character in the roleplay and all that, but you've still got your armour. So, I figured OK, that'll work.

TORILL: Yeah, it sounds like that's a good idea.

DO: the only problem in that is if you drop your armour somewhere but can't find it again, because it looks the same.

TORILL: Oh, dear, I am just happy it doesn't disappear when you drop it any more, because it used to og up in smoke! And you'd lose it! And once I tried to drop one item and I dropped everything, and I went screaming, Nick, you have to change this CODE!

DO: Oh, I think I would have asked him to change that as well. It makes sense to be able to put everything down for a moment.

TORILL: oh, you wouldn't be able to put anything down, if you had a picnic, you couldn't put the food down, it would be gone if you dropped it.

DO: I am glad that's changed!

TORILL: Oh yeah, it's changed now, that was slightly annoying.

TORILL: eh... What do you want to do with the game? Do you have a goal?

DO: No. I like to keep coming up with ideas for the quests, I like doing that. But I don't know how.... Now, let's see, how do I want to say that. I am not sure how committed I am to the whole online thing. You know if something else came up in my life, and I needed to do

something else, I don't think my internet would have priority. But ... as for my internet time, The Infinite Point **is** one of my priorities, because I don't have much else to be doing there. How far have I strayed again?

TORILL: Oh, not far, don't worry at all. We were talking about your goal with the game, and we're definitely still talking about that.

DO: My goals.. yeah... I don't know that I have thought enough about it to actually have a goal, although being an imm was a goal for a while. Okay, I am sitting down here, can I come up and talk to you? Since I am the only one here? And sitting there, it's well, let's see... I can roleplay with myself, or I can go and kill mobs. Will you give Me something to do Nick? Can I do something? And he started to give me access to the helpfiles, at the web-page. And I went through and edited some of those, and... then I was finished And I went OK, what next! Well, Matthew pestered him for a while, and he finally made me an imm once I outright asked for it. So that's been – that's been fine then. I'd like to make it a little more interesting for some of those players who are always asking for something to do. But my brain doesn't always keep up with all these ideas.

TORILL: I think that's more or less what I wanted to ask you about. Quite – quite interesting.

Attachment II

Benjamin Danner
Portland 19.09.1999

This interview disk starts with a long period of chatting to the others in the room about the work I am doing.

My name is Benjamin Danner, and I am 24 years old.

I have a bachelors of arts in biology from Reed College.

TORILL: Bachelor of arts, how many years is that?

BD: That's four years.

TORILL: What kind of media do you use? Which media, television, radio, video, computer...

BD: For.. ahm... Computer and CD-player, tape-player as far as electronic goes, I watch TV sometimes, when people are watching Simpsons or Futurama or what ever

TORILL: Do you read books?

BD: No I have in the past, but very rarely do I read books. I don't know why, but...I am lazy. Reading books is work.

TORILL: Nahh, reading books is being lazy

How do you share your time with the media, which media do you use the most?

BD: Probably like music, CD-player, there's one at work, and so it's basically my eight hours at work I am always playing different music, and then to a lesser extent, the computer, which I am always checking email... or looking for stuff..

TORILL: How do you use the computer? What do you basically use it for?

BD: Basically finding out stuff. Recently I have been looking at websites and dragging down sound-files and... things like that, to see what a certain band sounds like and so...

TORILL: And – to play games?

BD: aah – YES

TORILL: Some question, ah?

BD: YES! An easy one!

TORILL: Which games?

BD: Which games. Ahh, I do role-playing... so recently there's a friend of mine who's been running kind of his own – it doesn't have a name, it's a recently opening game. And then I played some earps, and used to play white wolf, and then there's card-games, trading card games, and ah... I played a little bit of L5R (?) recently, ahm.. let's see, way back when I used to MUD – about a year ago?

Let's see... normal card zipping now and then?

TORILL: Do you play offline computer games?

BD: Offline, like the role-playing games? Or offline, like tabletop?

TORILL: I am thinking of computer-games, offline computer-games.

BD: Yah, Starcraft! Which can be either online, or offline, you can play it against the computer if you want to, or against... other people. I actually play it mostly offline.

TORILL: What do you like about Starcraft, why do you play that?

BD: Eyecandy. It's pretty colours.

TORILL: That's OK

BD: Yeah, exactly. I get to blow things up?

TORILL: Sowe could just set the screen up with pretty colours in front of you and that would be OK?

BD: It's nice to be able to control it, too. But... yeah, and it's got the cool sounds. Between the neat sounds and the colours... yeah.. it also had . eh easy representation of the different units, and you see this little cool unit running across the screen when you tell it to do something. "ha, hey" It can drive you into thinking you have these units which are actually fighting, as opposed to your self.

TORILL: What kind of game would you call Starcraft?

BD: what is it.. Strategy, wargame, real time? I said that? Oh, real time strategy, that's the order (addresses Beyne listening in)

TORILL: That's cheating (to Beyne) I'll let you say all these right things afterwards!

BD: (Laughing) So... yeah.

TORILL: Could you make me a list of categories of games?

BD: Categories of games. Ah, jees... well, we can make an easy one: Fun games and not fun games.

TORILL: That's pretty round categories, yes. What would you put in each of them, I'd really like to hear that.

BD: categories of games.... There's so many different kinds of games and so many different ways you could categorise them. I mean, you could say... you know there's computer-games, there are roleplaying games, there are card games... if you have to put them in a category...

TORILL: If you had to categorise computer games? And stay with the computer-games.

BD: Categories of computer-games... Gosh... you got the real time strategies, you have got the first-person shooters, like Quake and doom. You have games like ateroid, where you shoot things. You have things like muds, we're talking .. and Mushes. You have got the adventure games, where you are running through... getting your character buffer... ahm... I think that's kind of.. and then you have the games like minesweeper and solitary and that kind of games that you play, which are just little short games... that don't take up much space.

TORILL: your favourite type of games in that universe of games, would be?

BD: gosh... I can tell you what are not my favourite type of game. I don't like the first person shooter, cause they suck. Ahm... I like the real time strategy, and even when it's not real time, just strategy, like... Warlords 2 – I like the ones where I can see all the pieces on the board and are able to control them, as opposed to the ones where I can't quite get that view of what's going on. So... it's also fun to play a good asteroid game, and get out of it like... and I also like the ones that have neat graphics, I think. So that's like my criteria, neat graphics

TORILL: Nice pictures...?

BD: yeah

TORILL: You have been playing a lot on one of the MUDs I have been looking at and I'd like to know why you have been spending quite a lot of time on this MUD? What was attractive about it?

BD: OK. It's it's... I don't know... well, it's a way for.... Because you get sucked in and then it's like, you're always playing. One thing I have compared it to is like it's this coffee-shop you go to? And it's always someone there and someone you can talk to. So you can always go there and hang out. So if you ever want social interaction to some degree, you can always go there and hang out and like: talk to people. Although it's a kind of weird social interaction because you're not actually seeing people. Very limited. But... at a certain point, you can get to be expressive, even though it's only text. There's also the thing of a little bit of competitiveness. So the more hours you spend online, the stronger your character gets. So you want to spend more time, so you can get stronger, so you can pass up this other person who's been annoying you, beat them up, that kind of thing. That never works. Because there's always someone who can spend more time online than you, that's more annoying than you. So.. I don't know. It's also free long distance.

TORILL: You get to talk to people you wouldn't talk to..

BD: On the phone, yes.

TORILL: So what you're saying is that the social aspect is attractive and the competition is attractive.

BD: I don't know if the competition is attractive, but it definitely makes you want to spend more hours online. It's part of the addictive nature of it all.

TORILL: OK... eh.. but.. at least Dragon Realms was pretty heavily role-play oriented, so you couldn't just stay around chatting and running around levelling?

BD: Ahh, well... you actually could do a fair amount of that. Altair at one point basically, the only thing he'd do was come online and chat with everybody, send tells. And I spent a lot of time just like – it's in the ocean. But the role-play was fun, depending on what the role-playing was. And I liked being a part of things as opposed to just purely hack'n'slash. Where there's actually like your character actually has a concept of what they are and it fits into that world, and you can be a part of that world, and still not get too far behind. Because if you go on to like other MUDs where everybody are like killing things, then it's like: what's your character? Kill things! So you have to make your character something that would go out in hunting groups and kill everything that is the right level to gain experience points. You know. So I was able to for Souman to kill fish: look, it's fish, kill it. So I couldn't eat it but yeah, that's OK. Yeah, I mean... role-playing experiences on there were fun, the big meetings, you know, to see everyone kind of try to do their best at doing things.. their emotes. And there were some.. it kind of faded, the role-play aspect was kind of fading towards the end, but there was some history, at least while I was at the first 50 levels there was some history for some of the characters that had some closer to epic level story-line stuff happening, which is neat, to be part of, yeah. Or at least watch happen.

TORILL: so you liked this unfolding of the story then?

BD: yeah, yeah. And it also, it was with the clans it was a society, you know it's a bunch of.. you know.... Young people trying to act like adults in courts and clans, but you still... there was kind of that political struggl between clans, and military stuff that was neat to watch. Basically gangs, but you know. It was interesting to be part of a struggle where you could kill each other, but it wasn't really killing people. You know... so it's like - it's just a computer game, but it still got the kind of things that go along with wars, etc.

TORILL: So you.. is there any reason why you spend so much time online looking for things instead of reading books? Why do you feel that is easier? You say you don't read books

because you are lazy . but you are looking for things online.

BD: Yeah... It's actually not really easy, because you ---

TORILL: No, it's not easy, so I am curious about what makes it seem easier to you.

BD: First everything is short, everything is just one line, it's always just one line. Unless there's three people saying different things at the same time, then it's not, but then you can just go back and filter through it, and read it. Ahm... so it's, it's - and it's not, I mean you can go through a book and read page after page after page - and you know read a lot of dribble, but at least on like a MUD you can add to that dribble, you can type in something and do something, so there's a certain level of activity that you are throwing in through it that's keeping you awake, so to speak. So... yeah...

TORILL: And outside of MUDs, if you use the computer just to look for things, like you use it for music and stuff... well, that is of course very accessible. Do you use it for anything else, like research?

BD: Yes, yes, at work, when I am trying to research for things like different protocols for the science thing, I am a laboratory technician, working to do research on molecular ??? allergy???, so... When we think that, you know, certain characteristic of our protein has certain ways we can test it, we look up articles on how to do it, and things like that, and...

TORILL: And you prefer to do it online instead of going to the library.

BD: You have to do it online, because there's so much, you can't just flip through periodicals, you have to do it online to find what you need. And, I mean, I think the web was originally used by, you know, scientists, so the - it's set up currently for finding articles, any article is entered into a database, basically, so you're going to be able to find it via the net as opposed to... it's on computers, that's where it is. There's not file-cards to look through, it's on the net, which is nice. And they are actually starting to get some of the journals online, so you can access the article that way, at this point, you can pretty much access an abstract of every article that you are, looking for, and sometimes it has the information you need.

TORILL: If you have to read an article... yeah, if you have to read an article, a story or something: do you prefer to read it online or offline, do you prefer to print it out or read it on the screen?

BD: I like hard copy - to read, ahhh, Especially when I also have to reference, cause when you flip from page, you have to find them, when I make a search for an abstract, but also... I will, if the page isn't too hard to read, read something on a hard-copy on a subject, but I will, if the text is too hard to read based on the background colour and print, I'll copy and paste it into word and then change... fix it up, clean it up, and I'll read it on the screen, or print it out - mostly I'll read it on the screen - or print it out for to - to save a copy, to save for later.

TORILL: so you don't prefer like, utilise the hyper-links which might be on there?

BD: Ahhh, if it's something really interesting, I'll read it on the page, but... usually ... hyperlinks, ah... If there's hyperlinks, it's not the page that I want to read, it's more like: this is a page about x, if you want to read about that, go here, and this is a link to this page... So I won't copy that, because it's basically information directing to where the information is. And then if it's the actual document of what I am looking for, then the hyperlink is like a definition or something, that's like - eh - I'll figure that on my own, so yeah...

TORILL: OK. Do you feel that you perceive things differently from playing games on the computer, have you learned anything from this? Has it changed your way of - understanding

things - has that changed?

BD: No. I am pretty much, i think I am a global thinker, I kind of just takes everything and throws it into the big world-view of things and it fits into it's spot, and it modifies everything and fits into it's spot... I don't think I am much a miniature, detailed kind of person anyway, so it's just like: everything goes into the pot anyway, so ... and... so... I don't think my perceptions have changed - but I might not be the best judge of that because I am - I mean, you know... you change slightly, you don't always notice it.

TORILL: Well, you could notice if something you have been doing your way of understanding something you have been doing has changed.

BD: Well, one thing I can say is - I can type faster.

TORILL: Yeah... (laughter)

BD: I can also - my communication skills in getting a short little message across, at least in text form, has increased. What with the spit out a sentence at a time, and keep the conversation going pretty quickly. At least online, I don't know if it has affected my verbal skills at all. So..

TORILL: did you have any goals for your play?

BD: Any goals?

TORILL: Anywhere you wanted to go except level 100 and take out all the annoying...

BD: Well, that was actually a good goal! Gosh... Actually it was kind of a short term goal thing: I wanted to get this skill or that, so I could get to this level and help my people... or I wanted to, you know... and then there was kind of the general trend of my character, where I wanted to help the good people, keep the bad people away kind of thing, basic kind of...

TORILL: And was that your goal as a clan leader as well?

BD: Which...

TORILL: TO help the good people and keep the bad people away.

BD: I think so, I think that was basically - and survival. There was a point where we were pretty stripped as far as pfiles, our strength was not very strong. We couldn't kill as much or defend as much as some other clans. (pointed clearing of throat)

TORILL: Don't look at me!

BD: I am not looking at you! So, ah... you know, it was a lot more towards survival, and it became more, when I became a clan leader, towards defendign and protecting MY people, I can't protect everybody, because there's a lot of big fish, and I mean much bigger fish, and I just can't protect them all, let's just keep it at my people, and put up a wall of bravado or something, to keep people from messing with my people. So that became what it was, survive and protect my people. So...

TORILL: Did you learn to know these people out of character as well, did they become part of your social sphere, where you would...

BD: Oh yeah, the clan people yeah, basically everyone, not that I knew their phone.numbers and addresses in real life, but we'd talk over.. yeah... so... it

TORILL: So it would be some of the people in the coffe-shop that you you'd...

BD: Yes, exactly, some of the coffee-shop people: It' s my clannies!

TORILL: I am trying to think... now that I have forgotten my notes, if there's anything I have forgotten about this.... I think I have the most - is there anything I should have asked you? Anything you want to tell me about playing computer games, fooling around with computers, playing other games? Anything about the experience of playing games you think that

you really ought to share with me?

BD: this is the part in interviews where it always shine through because I am like - I don't know...

TORILL: That's an honest answer.

BD: I can tell you the reason why I stopped playing, basically, I have come to see both socially and emotionally it's a bunch of high-schoolers. So you have a bunch of immature people running around interacting with each other, and it's like: I don't need this... It's a coffee-shop full of 16 year olds! Oh, sorry, emotionally, socially and sexually immature - or repressed. It's like... so, yeah, I don't need that. So. Not that there weren't good roleplayers and there weren't some good people, but the amount of immature people outweighed that and was swaying things towards something which wasn't fun.

TORILL: And fun is the most important part of this of course...

BD: yes, it's what the game is about, it's a game, and fun is what games are about.

TORILL: But people tend to easily forget that.

BD: yes... yes, I guess, people tend to... Socially we are at high school and in power-struggles and all that...

TORILL: I think that's it for me, that I can remember to ask for.

END

Attachment 12

Beyne Peterson
Portland 19.09.1999
Dragon Realms. Short time as an imm on Aarinfel

(TORILL: presentation of myself. Chatting about background and topics)

TORILL: For the sake of the microphone and to start this up, tell me your name and how old you are.

BP: Beyne Peterson, 23.

TORILL: And what education do you have?

BP: Bachelor of arts and biology. It's a four year degree.

TORILL: Do you play computer games?

BP: I'd say so, yeah.

TORILL: What kind of games?

BP: Ahh – by kind, you kind of expect me to set up the categories, don't you?

TORILL: By kind, forst I want to know what kind of games you play, and then I want you to set up all the categories in the world, yeah.

BP: All right, so let's be broad right now. On computer only? On computer...

I don't play MUDs any more, any more being like the last year, not usually. I play real-time strategy games, basically in games where you do things in the time you take to do things matters. And I occasionally play action games that aren't strategy, so these are games where you do something and time passes and if you don't do anything you might lose. But there's not necessarily any strategy involved, sometimes it's just pushing buttons. So that's what I do.

(David comes in with a camera)

TORILL: IF you want to make a list of games, so if you'd make a list of what games exist.

BP: This is sort of a hobby of mine, so you're going to get an exhaustive one. Gaming is my thing. All games have some sort of conflict involved, something you want to change, whether it's good or bad – games give you a position and you want to change that position or what ever it is. So categorising them by conflict doesn't help very much, because whether you want to shoot something or build a bridge it's all conflict. The bridge wasn't there before, that person who's just breathing now you don't want to breathe any more. So I say: two main categories are an intellectual opponent, or a human opponent or a human opponent. Intellectual component is more in the lien of puzzle games. I actually consider artificial intelligence, that are computer controlled humans, human positions, to be intellectual too, because most of our artificial intelligence which we see on games use componites suck hard. Which means that they aren't imaginative, they aren't creative, they aren't actually particularly intelligent. So you basically therefore, you have an intellectual opponent, you have a puzzle. It's a challenge – it's back to rubick's cube, it's always the same thing it's the same way, so it's really up to you to cause the variability. So there's either the human element or an intellectual element: you're challenging yourself. So that's two big categories.

The smaller ones depend on what you kind of do: the medium, board games, as opposed

to computer games. There's a kind of continuum thought, because modern computer games are no longer limited to things like pong, so I can put board games and computer games next to each other and they are exactly the same. You can play monopoly on the computer, there's no difference. So board-game no longer means the medium it sort of means the lay-out. You have a bunch of little dohickeys and – that are permanent and you move it around and represent stuff. And it's usually – it can be intellect or human opponent dependently... Monopoly is human most of the time...

So – that one issue. Then there's action games where you reflexes matter. That's one issue. And any game where the speed – the reaction time in which you have to do something, that's an action game, that's easy.

Usually that involves beating stuff up but not always. It also means building things very fast. And then there are puzzle games. Puzzle games are games – they are always intellectual. There may be a few human versus human puzzle games – well, actually, tetris head to head that's a human versus human puzzle game. You give it a set amount – you give a pattern, and you got to make that pattern do something else. That's the type of game. I hate those. Oh, I love those. It's completely personal, it's a matter of opinion. I just can't understand how I am expected to sit in front of a little machine and push buttons and get a pellet afterwards. I just - I just don't like it. Most of the time. I can play things like minesweeper, I don't know if you have seen minesweeper. You probably have, it's obiquitous. I can play things like that occasionally but Myst, which is breathtakingly beautiful and I can look at it – I can't sit in front of the computer for more than five minutes cause nothing happens. And personally I play these games... - I know, I am jumping questions.

TORILL: No, that OK, it is perfect. It's a so-called open interview.

BP: Oh, good good, because I saw you didn't have a clip-board, good... Although I would have liked a white lab-coat, that would have been cool.

TORILL: it didn't get into my backpack (laughter)

BP: Oh, OK, OK – yeah, it's ... I like games where the conflict is at least simulated human. I prefer human opponents and I like the computer at least to pretend to be human. And in games like that there's obviously not a person behind there making anything going wrong. If I want to face nature I just go out and live in the real world rather than make problems on a machine. That's a personal thing though, I know these things can be fun, I have had fun with some puzzle games – so –

So those are some basic categories and there are sub-categories within those, such as what kind of puzzle games, whether they are math or language or... although you can all bring that back down to math most of the time. Under action games there's a plethora of categories. You can do – what I haven't studied that much really, but just for the same of activate argument, there's things like fighting games which are supposed to represent a human opponent most of the time, or they give you one. The object is to beat each other up. There are real-time strategy games which share category with board-games. They are resource based games. They are like “magic” or “lesson of the five rings”. You have a set amount of abilities as the games are beginning. And using those abilities, you gain an economic structure which is used to buy more abilities. So it's basically a – it's a math game like any other, but you're paying for stuff, so rather than shooting your opponent you're buying the gun. This can be fun, this can be not fun, it's a matter of opinion. That's probably category – and some social games actually are like MUDs, they are sort of, they are resource

based you know, they are everything but a lot of the time they are to – to – to get the sword of spam-slaying I need to go through the hall of molded cheese and find a pile of gold, buy a bunch of celery from a vendor, take the celery in.. so I am basically spending resources to get to something else, so I eventually buy my way through it all, trade all the way through the system to get the sword of spam-slaying. God only knows what that would be good for but it's probably pretty cool. At least from a distance before the smell hits you. Ahhm. So, those are categories, remember I made all, and this is what I like to do, I like to analyze it, so when – it's pretty specific.

TORILL: And your favourite game is..?

BP: I don't have one. Honestly I don't. I honestly don't have a favourite game. I have a game I play a lot more often than the others – that's always been, I have always had something I have been playing lately which I get more pleasure out of than the other when I am in the mood. I have played a lot of star-craft lately, but that's because there's not much to play for me but StarCraft, in my opinion, economically and physically. And I like the game – and I happen to be in the mood to play it a lot. But... It just so happens that there are times when I don't want to play StarCraft, and there was a time when I didn't play StarCraft at all although I had the opportunity to do so. So it's – I don't really have a favourite. I have classes that I have favourites of, I think I – strategy means more than anything else, and I like games where I face humans more than anything else.

TORILL: Would you say that there's anything in particular that makes a game good?

BP: oh, yeah. Depends on what you want to do. Should I answer this for me or for what people generally

TORILL: yourself

BP: For myself, OK I want out of most games – to be someplace else with a character and to be doing something else than I am doing now. If I played a game where I was basically playing myself even if the problems were different it would be a lame game, because the entire point of it is to get me someplace else. So the appeal of the game to me most of the time is to – the experience of doing .. it's like acting or improv. I am somewhere else doing something else – it's like reading the book. It may not be in first person but you certainly sympathise with the character. I play 'cause it lets me be elsewhere and do something else.

TM : do you read a lot of books?

BP: Not much more now, no. I stopped reading lots of books in college, because in college, reading lots of books, we call that to work. So I went from being an avid reader to reading almost never. I haven't fully recovered. I read a lot more non-fiction than fiction now, for some reason, but I don't read that much.

TORILL: OK. Have you read anything lately, of fiction?

BP: Ahhh – what was the last fiction book I read? Ahh, geez, it obviously hasn't been that lately as in the last few months, because I don't remember... Oh yeah, I know what the last book I read was – ahhh: It was Foucault's Pendulum. I don't read that often, that may be because of the genres I like, which is fantasy and science fiction, are terribly clichéd and hackneyed, and it's started to get boring to me before I came to college anyway. And when time became an issue to me, I don't have a lot of time to be doing what ever I do, I just started saying that what makes me happy is to read a novel, which is basically a rip-off of these five other novels that I have read that have made me very happy. So when the genres became no

longer that much fun for me, I didn't read much of any genre at all, because naturally I could go to the library and return empty handed because my favourite genre wasn't available or any fun to me any more.

TORILL: so you just read Foucault's Pendulum?

BP: Yeah, I read Foucault's Pendulum recently.

TORILL: What did you think of that?

BP: Yeah, I thought it was – do you read it have you read it?

TORILL: yes, I have read it.

BP: Ahhhh – OK.

TORILL: I have read just about everything by Umberto Eco also – well, he's a reader response theorist so he is – I am basing my work on Eco and what I'll do is to – well – argue against and also rewrite some of the theories of Umberto Eco. So ... it's just Me and Umberto.

BP: Ah, gosh, yah, I am definitely coming... I read it completely for entertainment because I am a conspiracy buff and it's a book a conspiracy buff recommended I read.

TORILL: yes, definitely.

BP: Yes, definitely – it is a good read – did you read in the original Italian?

TORILL: no, I don't read Italian.

BP: Oh, Ok...

TORILL: I only speak English, German and Norwegian.

BP: Oh, OK, that makes you far more wrought that I am, but not that much, I'd have been really depressed if you read it in the original Italian, I would have felt very inferior.

TORILL: I would have loved to, but (laughter)

BP: I thought the book was – really heavy into academic references. And I wasn't sure who his audience was for this for I sure as hell didn't get him. OK, that's common to all Americans though, for none of us are terribly academic in the first place. Still – it was pretty out there. I found myself scrambling for reference materials for the communication, I really wanted to know what he was talking about. Aaammm, I generally liked it, I found some of the characters irritating, I always find some of the characters irritating, it's how I am. I thought it was good, because I liked the plot – I really liked the plot. Beside character and plot are always a big deal for me, aside the setting, the setting is nigh meaningless for me. And the – the plot I adored even though it took a long time to get on with it sometimes. That's just the way novels seem to work. I loved the elaborate clichés and parodies of the entire conspiracy subculture, that was beautiful, it's a laugh that entire – you know. I mean some of it was just, by the end of the book when all thigns were basically made clear of how real the conspiracy is, that it's basically just a bunch of psychopaths, that are dangerous because they are real, the absurdity – I don't know how long it is since you read the book, at the very end, to give you an example of why I loved it, it's just that last part, I really loved it. During a big brawl, where an innocent victim is killed by the conspiracy while the various conspiracy members are starting raving, chanting various pseudo-cult things. Among those things he rants. Parts from the actual acronyms and bits and pieces of the cabbala and everything else ise ya ya ka fo footah. Now does this mean anything to you?

TORILL: no

BP: The reason why this is so incredibly funny is because H. P. Lovecraft who wrote the chutulhu maivos??? Kafoolo (?) is this big monster in the ocean that will one day rise up and eat everybody. The Kafoolo Maivos is a big monster that looks about that it's got a bunch of

tentacles. I know I am digressing a little bit but this is interesting. The idea behind this short story – he made a lot of short stories and occasional poems, he’s a horrible poet but he’s – ah – the entire point of all of that was that in his whole background the universe was populated by strange, cosmic malefic forces. IT was basically a malpheimism. Everything we know of religion and physics and everything else is completely horribly wrong, and these horrible horrible things are waiting just outside our dimension, and if they ever pay attention to us we’ll all be squished flat. We have absolutely no power. The best we can do is sell out to them, become totally depraved and evil, and then maybe we won’t be eaten. But we’ll be depraved and evil and we’ll be eating each other, for their service. So it’s really horrible, it’s so horrible that it’s really funny. And there is a role-playing game of cause based on this, which is called “The Call of Chutulhu”, based on that world background and the player characters, the PC’s struggle violently against these evil characters, because of course these are all powerful, they are evil gods, so if they want something, they get it, so you’re basically struggling against omnipotent beings. And – so – that’s basically the point of that game. Now Chutulhu doesn’t exist. He has nothing to do with any real religion or any real monster mythically or anything – he’s patchwork. Everything H. P. Lovecraft ever did he stole liberally from sources and made it all up. There’s absolutely no relevance to any of it. People know this, everybody with half a brain knows this, H. P. Lovecraft was a hoaxer, he was writing stories. But it made it into the cult paraphernalia, of somebody taking it seriously. Which is really absurd, this isn’t even a hoax, it’s recent, he was writing it in the twenties! So that complete absurdity of that, in the end, where he’s chanting out – it’s, it’s – it made me laugh out loud, it was great.

TORILL: That is very much Umberto Eco and it’s why I let you go on about Foucault’s pendulum, because I think that is one of those books which are not exactly linear. That book is multi-linear. That book leaps in so many different directions, particularly through the use of intertextuality, so it goes from – it refers to so much more that it functions almost like a hyperlinked text.

BP: So it has several stories going on at the same time.

TORILL: IT has several stories going on and so many references that are loaded into it, it’s so compact it breaks down the linearity. And like you said you have to stop and look up references to be able to read this, but that is one of the things this book does, it stops you and it makes you go elsewhere to fetch information and then you go back into it.

BP: yeah – I agree, there’s the basic social story about that guy and his current girlfriends whatever and whether or not he has a kid, that’s one story, that’s the boring part which uses this – real past. There’s the immediate story, the classic story of man’s struggle against impossible odds, there’s the subtext of the reader who knows about the conspiracy theory in the background who’s laughing at Umberto Eco pointing out whacky things in that culture which is basically Umberto Eco going on a soap-box saying look at me, I am goofy. It’s – plus others, it’s confusing it’s...

TORILL: yes, because Umberto Eco is a writer who is so very well versed in popular culture and in so much else than when you read one of his books you really need to have a couple of degrees (laughter)

BP: I agree

TORILL: To really be one of his model readers...

BP: I think I – I am not sure if I was the classic audience

TORILL: I am not either.

(laughter)

BP: Good I am not alone!

TORILL: I was also struggling to get through that.

BP: But I think it's useful that you get the chutulhu reference, that's like slapstick, that's like pie in the face.

TORILL: but Umberto Eco does that quite happily. He's written about all of this. One of the things I love about him is that he does very serious academic analysis of things like Superman.

BP: yes!

TORILL: And he says he needs to read that kind of stuff after he's been using his brain too much. So he sits and reads superman.

BP: Actually, we only have 200 – I talked to, I have a Chinese friend, one of my Chinese friends when I was walking into a room one day talking about history, and I said American history in passing, I said that free, American history, and she started laughing this little laugh – ha ha ha ha ha – and I backed up and thought I might regret this and I asked: What are you laughing at? And she said: American history? (Laughter) Ohhh, that was painful. 200 years, we don't have a past, 200 years is a drop in a bucket. I mean look at England – China of course is the most exaggerated, the horrible case scenario, they measure their – 200 years doesn't even cover some of their dynasties. So we are making a culture up as we go along, because we have abandoned most of the stuff that we had from Europe, and most people who are not here from Europe over here, which is most people, aren't here by choice, they are from Mexico or brought over from Africa and have absolutely no idea of what's going on from there... so we are making it up as we go along, so Superman is a vital part of our culture. It's – I think it's a viable cultural study to look at things like Superman, Batman, Spiderman... Conspiracy theory, X-files...

TORILL: Even from the viewpoint of Italy, which has more than enough history, looking at something like that is quite valid and I think it's interesting because it shows what is. It tells you more about what is and may happen if this is happening – than looking backwards, which is why instead of studying history I am studying computer games.

BP: exactly! If we were still a classical culture and we looked back with that particular reverence to a western civilisation. I mean, people in general don't revere...

TORILL: What oh yes, look at the postmodern architecture for instance.

BP: So most people don't know, and those that know don't give a damn. So the average man on the street wouldn't know what a hoplite is. But that's cool. But even if he did know he probably wouldn't care. That's the issue. Academics ---, we we we – well

TORILL: Well, let's get back to the computer games. We have been a little swing around multilinear texts, and now to games. We have just finished categorising – my list would have helped – you told me what you like, you told me what you consider good in a game

BP: Reading, we have talked about reading

TORILL: Yes, we have talked about reading, and you have told me what you like reading – do you write anything?

BP: I try. I am playing around with the – I have a lot of ideas for novels, but they are novels, so even if I finish writing them it doesn't mean it's going to get published, I mean it's a lot

of work. I don't like investing in something that comes to naught even if it's amusing, I mean it's a LOT of work. So I have been trying to wrack my brain for a short story, so I can go out into the wide horrible evil chew you up and spit you out world of writing. So – I like to think I can write. And I do a lot of actually, actually I do a lot of writing for role-playing games for my friends, and I play. I do an awful lot of writing for that.

TORILL: to compare – if you are to compare the process of writing and the process of playing a role-playing game...

BP: Writing for a role-playing game gives you a completely different kind of pleasure from playing it. If you are – they are parallel – they are different issues. There are people who play and love to write and there are people who really don't get much out of playing. You are in control of the situation when you sit down and write a world background. When I am playing at making a fantasy race up, it's a generic medieval world, I can make this race however I want to, there's no meddling players who are going to put their own imagination in on it, so it's sort of a creative process. And also, I am not obliged to write a story, I don't have to follow – I am not obligated to a story's obligations. Linearity of plot, character development, consistent descriptions of what the single characters are doing, I don't have to do any of that, I just need to describe what I want to describe, and what's coming out of my head. So it's very relaxing, it's a lot of fun, because it's very few artificial constraints. I am not communicating something very difficult. Communicating a story is more difficult than giving an analysis of a race that I made up. When you are playing the game, using almost a different part of the game, you're – even if you are the GM, Game Master person refereeing – running the game, running and refereeing, depends on the type of game, we are talking about role-playing games. I mean if you are the GM, you are still like the player-character's – PCs – playing a character. It's just that if you're the GM you're playing a lot of characters. So at that point those background issues about the race kind of fall into the background, and you pick up other personalities sometimes, and doing strange things that would be perfect for that character, if not for you. It's the difference between doing a light-heart historical study, and improv acting. You can see it's a weird juxtaposition of those things. You get different things out of them, and sometimes the acting is so much fun that the history goes right out of the window. It's – the history was fun to write, but it exists to make the acting fun.

TORILL: you said that you use different parts of the brains. Would you say that these are totally different processes then?

BP: I think they are, I think they are, you keep into account – you keep into account what's going on. A person is doing a stage for a play. He's painting a set and cutting wood for props. He's – he needs to know what the play is about, he needs to know the script. But is he worried about the blacking (?), not really. He just worries about the set, he just needs to make it appropriate for the blacking. And the blacking made shoes... (hva betyr blocking?? Blackin?? I denne sammenhengen?) – does he need to know the exact lines, no, he just needs to know what props to make and take lines into account. There's the – the emphasis is on the making of the physical props, even if you take into account that they are for a specific play. There would be different props if they were for instance for display in an office. They would be somewhat more functional. So it's a different process but you one into account of the other. It's a little different what you actually do in an improv and what you do in a play. You don't have to give a damn about anything that history did and what's right or wrong, because it's your game. And you can do what ever you want. You use him as a context to make sure

what you do has significance, to make sure that you are all communicating. Otherwise you're not on the same world-background and you don't have any – you don't meet. That's bad, that's what happens to a lot of MUDs. Ohh – most of them actually. So you want to be able to meet, half way, so your character can be able to communicate, and be relevant to one another. But – so that part of the history is getting relevant. But at any point, at any point your history impedes you having fun, either you stop having as much fun, or you change the history without knowing it. And that's what always happens, history just... that part of it, that part of the process is gone now, just – strictly – it's gone (At this point I assumed LJ was talking about his experiences at Aarinfel, where he was briefly involved in building the game, and Dragon Realms, where he was a very active player for a while.)

TORILL: you have been playing online and offline.

BP: Yes.

TORILL: you have been playing – would you tell me a little bit about what you have been doing in the MUDs – you played at Dragon Realms?

BP: yeah.

TORILL: And I heard about – one of the things that I heard about long gone when I started playing more than a year ago – and people would talk about the mythic characters...

BP: Mythic characters that just made a place for themselves?

TORILL: Yeah

BP: Oh God, I hope I was one of them

TORILL: And then this serpent priest showed up, yes. And What I understood was that you actually tried to do something in the MUD

BP: yeah, because I am an idiot.

TORILL: weeeeee, everything is contextual, so let's not judge here. But you tried to do something, would you tell me about what you tried to do?

BP: OK, the background is I made a character I called Brizzial of the ancient Fang. Dragon Realms had – I know you know all this, but for the sake of the microphone: Dragon Realms has a race called the serpent folk, known to themselves as the Xersians, and they have their own language: Xersian. This is a race that conceptually, in the one paragraph it is given on the entire MUD, for its world-background was a really powerful race a long time ago, bigger than any other race. It fell into complete and utter decadence, and I do mean decadence, became basically nasty and slovenly, and their entire empire crumbled. They seemed to have had a monolithic empire which completely fell apart, and now they are a slave-race, to another race of really bad people called the drow, dark elves. Ahhhh – the character concept was revolutionary, which was actually fitting into the world background, no breaks there. I had a character who wanted to take the serpent folk and not only retain their freedom but also retain their integrity, build them up as something bigger. As a sidenote to that the character was basically a rat bastard. He was nasty and not a nice person. This doesn't mean he was mean, he just had a very soldier-like mentality: there was the enemy, and there was the friend. And most people were the enemy. Then there was an other class of people called people that could be used against the enemy. So – he was manipulative, scheming and quite willing to do anything necessary to reach his goals, because in his opinion his goals were paramount. His entire race was being destroyed, systematically, by outside forces and by themselves. So I had a lot of pathos there, the character runs itself. I don't have to make up

motivations here .. I mean he's fanatic. I come online, something happens and I immediately know what my response is because he's fanatic and you know how fanatics think, they respond one way or another way to everything. His only saving grace which is the reason why he isn't boring is because he can hide the fact that he's fanatic, he doesn't have to tell you that he thinks you're scum, or that when the revolution comes you'll be the first up against the wall. He doesn't tell you this, he is that manipulative, he's that subtle. So he's a lot of fun. Now what I was trying to do was both make room for my character make a revolution possible, because there was some background for that, I should have had support for that. What was bigger, and bigger than my character, was trying to make one of the races on dragon Realms something more than a paragraph. Because a paragraph of text for me is not a lot of fun. It doesn't give my character a lot of room to act, it doesn't give the world background that much depth, it doesn't give much context. If an elf and a serpentfolk are talking and we have a paragraph between us about our races, you know that's not a lot of interchange. If you are doing some improv acting and one of you are supposed to be French and the other is supposed to be Italian, you know a paragraph of Italy's history and you know a paragraph of France's history, you're not going to be getting very far. And so the problem is obvious, and I wanted – I thought people might enjoy more depth. And some of them did, some of them – ah – some people liked any attempt from any quarter to take a faction a race, a faction, a clan, any sort of faction in the game, and give it life, give it some breadth. Not enough of these people would be imms. For one thing – we are getting into issues of power. One of the things about gaming – I – there's lots of reasons why people game. One of the reasons why people game is because it gives them control. Another reason why people game is the control give them power. Usually because they have problems in their own lives, so they want power over this game. Ahhh – and – there was at least one imm who was power-made. And any attempt to alter the plot-line would be of course infringing upon that power. I mean, luckily that imm wasn't running a small country some place, but if that imm was, we probably would have had these problems anyway, we might not have had that hold on power this person wanted...

So I was in conflict with that person, but that wasn't anything new, because that person was in conflict with everybody. Her want to make the game her way put her in conflict with everyone else because everyone makes the game their own little way, it's part of the role-playing experience that they all add to the game. I just had a very straight forward and literate way of conflicting with her because I had written out a manifesto, a series of possible changes – not even changes, additions, some were changes yes, and those obviously I was a little sensitive about, because obviously it's harder to change something but definitely easy to add. And the additions were viewed with nonchalance from some imms to amusement from other imms – not actually amusement – to just simply unwelcome by her. So... it was difficult, I mean it was made more difficult by the fact that the players, as Benjamin mentioned, varied in quality, not everybody play for the same reason, most people played it to work out some aggression, a lot of kids. You don't play badminton with three-year olds, they just don't know what's going on, and for fun they might end up beating up the racket against the wall. Which actually is kind of amusing in a certain bizarre way, but it's not badminton now, is it? I think cricket involves a bit more than to strike people's shins with a big bat, but that's what a four-year-old with a cricket bat would do, if you made him play cricket. God help you with baseball. At the same time, 12-year-olds have serious problems

with the concept of being a different person or a different character. And living in this artificial world where you are all adding to it by, you know, adding to it when you're all interacting – most people just don't get it. Honestly. The role-playing aspect of a MUD is just flying over people's heads. It's just how it is. So what I am trying to do is just a waste of time to them because they don't see the benefits of it. If they are the majority, this creates a problem. It's hard to improve what people don't recognize as a problem, I mean – it's like a car, when I try to put an engine in it and everybody is telling me not to even if it doesn't drive any place because they think the point of a car is to sit in it. So they are sitting in the car rather than going anywhere in it. Oh, and I am making out myself to look really good this way by the way. This is ignoring all the obnoxiousness I might have caused, I am sure I am as obnoxious as anyone else there. I try to be nice, I have friends checking me out when I know I am obnoxious, so... it was difficult. I was trying to be co-writer. And I wasn't overstepping my bounds because we were all supposed to be co-writers. And there were examples of people who were doing that sort of things. Lots of them. Little things here and there. Little books in the game, which we could flip through and read the history of this faction. Very specific: There's a book about each clan. There's a book about each race. But that was a paragraph again, so we have gone from one paragraph to two paragraphs. Still not talking about a gold-mine here. We, players, who would stay online deliberately would be fountains of information, almost walking libraries. I became an authority on the serpent-folk because I was basically obnoxious about them. People would ask me about – you know, even out of character issues about them. Who should I talk to about this and that, and in character stuff, because I made myself available on that basically. So there were sources of information for people who wanted it, but it was still difficult, because you're role-playing at odds with other. OK, I'll use the mer-folk as an example. They are a great example from DR: The mer-folk were about 7 races. Because they were given a paragraph of information: They were never defined in that paragraph, physically. Ever. They breathe water, they breathe air, that's all we know. We don't know what colour they are, we don't know what their skin looks like, we don't know what their eyes look like, we don't even know if they have a basic humanoid structure. We assume they do, because in fantasy races everybody looks basically like people. And this was taken with a wild amount of diversity. There were people who came on that had – they had tails, always, and legs. They were basically people with tails. There were people who came on and said they didn't have tails because it didn't matter, they looked like fish. They had gills, they had big bulbous eyes, they had blue skin, the whole nine yards. Then... side note, digression. I tend to prefer races that look less human, or races that have more imagination. Less human is more imagination. The more human you look, the less work it takes. There was the other class of people who said they look just like people and act like people. Then there was another group of people who said that they looked just like on Disney's splash. (track mark 7) They have legs on ground and tails in the water. It's amazing that a game can go on for a year and a half without this sort of thing being defined. I mean: it's happened to serpent folk too although to a smaller extent, I don't know if we had tails or not. I had to ask for a month to find out whether we had legs! Excuse me, legs. Because there were descriptions of serpentfolk in the game with legs and there were descriptions of them without. That was – you know, it was very confusing. You know, distress of the flag – it was rather important.

TORILL: Legs are rather more important than flags...

BP: Yeah, exactly. Without legs, how do we get around. And I don't think I overstepped my bounds by being particularly obnoxious by asking "do we have legs? I am in trouble! I don't know if I can kick someone! I don't know how I walk! Should I be wearing boots?" Course of course equipment is a big part of the game, equipment is power in that game, it's how you beat stuff up. So, I don't know how much is supposed to be role-playing and how much I am supposed to be covering my eyes, you know. So – one of the imms actually came down from the high, on the mer-folk and got to pestering the other imms – this is Topaz – to give an answer. And that was: just do splash. Yeah, that was pretty grating. Yeah, it's – it was very different from what a lot of people were role-playing. When it comes right down to it, you should – as a GM you only have so much power and if people want it in a different way, you give up GM-ing or go their way, because there's nothing really to do about that. The rules are as they see fit. It's their play. If you're a referee to a football match and you don't like the text that the coach is using, that's too bad. It's their game, all you do is call bad calls. And so there was contradiction, there was people who was playing it differently... Jonathan was playing Jural. Jural was afish, he was fishy, with blue skin. Some of his opponents in the other clans were very humanoid, and in my opinion less creative. Which, if I may make a completely random call or slam was basically less creative was how they played mostly everything on that MUD. Man – that felt good!

(laughter)

TORILL: that's OK, just get it out!

BP: well, yeah... There were, they were – that sort of thing was an issue there. Unlike tabletop RP there's less of a standard on MUDs of what should be and what isn't. This is a random book on a world background that's sort of a dark modern day. OK? I flip it open, and I am reading about the history of (a certain set of) Islands. This places explains those (???) islands, and how that really happened in that dark shadowy world-background. And that's really specific, and that's what role-players use in order know about their world background. Studying Italy I learned about the birth-place of rome and how that affected modern culture. It lets me do a lot of things, with limits, I have freedom. Without those limits of where I come from no character has any context and therefore has no true freedom. I can't do everything I want to do because I don't have anything to push against. And in MUDs there's very little to push against, as you may know. You are making a lot of stuff up on your own. Which is fine, if what you are making up stands, and you're an author. If you're the first person to get to marsh-wiggles on DR, my god, how they stole that completely I don't understand that, you're the first person to get to marsh-wiggles and you say they like peaches, and you eat peaches a lot, that's really cool cause you have added something to the game, and now people knows something about marsh-wiggles and it's part of conversation and social interaction. If someone comes on and says that peaches are poisonous to marsh-wiggles, causing extreme allergic reactions resulting in a horrible death with lots of spots – oh, well, this is not only a problem because you disagree, you have actually destroyed the context, one of you needs to be right. It doesn't really matter who, so now you have a void, a contradiction within MUDs. The void is because of apathy within the game itself, both between the imms and the players, and the contradiction is because of the apathy between the imms. Because the imms are there to say: no, he's right! You know, pointing down from up high. It's a problem, it's what makes people that want to roleplay stop playing MUDs or stop playing MUDs for a little while and go to different MUDs. They go to a new MUD, everything is new and fresh, they

have fun for a while, and it gets old and tiresome, and they realise that there is nothing there and they go on to do something else. It's how MUD's work.

TORILL: It's how most things work.

BP: I agree, I agree – MUDs have a lot of potential, but – ahm..

TORILL: but you have obviously – this has obviously made you think a lot about

BP: I think a lot about games in general. I can't be – I can not say that, MUDs. I will say that MUDs specifically have made me think a lot about games in general. Games are something I am interested in, it's something I want to do, I want to go into computer gaming, I want to design games. So it's not just the MUD's fault. But a MUD is a wealth of information about human psychology and about gaming in general. It is, don't get me wrong. But I – I am also the kind of person that would utilise that, that loves to delve into it. Yeah, there is – I learned a lot about games from MUDs, you learn what is important.

TORILL: Have you learned any – do you feel that by playing not just MUDs but any kind of computer games that your perception of games have changed?

BP: Well – I have got a reasonably categorised sense of perception even if it is kind of dull, so I can say that it has influenced a few things, not much – usually what I learn about games, and let us stick with games: Here's a thing, I play a lot of games that reflect reality, they are designed to reflect reality. So you tend to learn about reality in that. Role-playing games attempt to categorise all reality to broad sense – you can pretend to be somewhere else. StarCraft is a wargame that pretends to take some kind of task of reality including the economic factors, you have so many resources to put against war – and encapsulate them. So you can be – you can, I can say that I have learned something about warfare from a game about warfare. It makes sense, unless the game is really horrible, even chess, which is very abstract, you learn about warfare, there are many modern tacticians who think that chess is a good way of training yourself for real life conflicts, even though it has nothing to do with it in general, since in real warfare, more pieces move at the same time! So yeah, I think I learn a bunch of little things, I can't think of any – I learn a little bit of warfare from StarCraft, and MUDs I learned about human behaviour that doing something irritating is comforting enough that you'll seek it out, if only because it's comforting. So one thing you do in MUDs is level. Not all. Most. Levelling is getting character power. And equipment hunting. You can always encapsulate it, levelling usually includes equipment hunting. Basically it's improving your character's ability to do more of that, to beat things up. Or beat up other players, that also an issue. Levelling is generally not fun. It generally isn't! It's – there's no – very little visceral pleasure in levelling. There's – it's hardly orgasmic to watch screens scroll by on a game telling you you beat something up, especially since the game is styled to make sure you win. Any even nine-year old can go on a MUD and even if they are risking their character's life, never die, because they take advantage of the saves the game gives them to survive. So there's no risk! Is a monotonous task, making it boring. But MUDDers do it with a passion! Because it's something they can easily do, it's familiar, and it doesn't fail them. Which is why when they can't level for whatever reason it's extremely frustrating because they don't expect this to fail at all. It's the one part in the character's life they have control over, even if it isn't terribly entertaining. That's not a – that was quite a revelation in psychology for me. (laughter) I mean it's one thing to study what people do under duress and that is interesting and everything, but most of the time we are not under duress, and this

is to study people under mild stress, and basically people will find things to do, and do them, even if they don't enjoy them. Especially if there is a possibility for enjoyment. We'll go on, and we'll go on to level, but say we find a friend in the MUD and role-play with them! Or maybe we can form a hunting party and hunt down that one schmuck from that other clan who has been annoying us. And the possibility of that, even if you're probably not going to do that, is enough to get you on, and you level in the mean time, even if that's not what you wanted to do either.

TORILL: Let's take one last question, which I suspect will become a large one. You say that you want to work with games, you want to design games professionally?

BP: yeah.

TORILL: How will that perfect game look?

BP: Ohhh, if, well, first, let's design perfect real fast, that will be perfect for like the genre or the audience, that's a game that makes people happy, basically. I can never make a game that makes everyone happy.

TORILL: That could be very difficult

BP: yes, that would require infinite resources. Once we have infinite resources, we can talk. Ahh,, yeah, basically it would – a game should hold a person's attention. It needs to appeal to them, to the point that it is an attractive thing to do, in and of itself. Not something that you do just to pass the time. I think about the game therefore I want to play it. That's actually an element of playability. Because if I think about the game and I have played it before and I don't want to play it any more, that check like tic-tac-toe. I think about the game, I know I can't lose, because if you move a certain way you can't lose, therefore I don't want to play it, it's playability is gone. I need to have a challenge that is flexible and changing as the user changes. Otherwise it becomes less playable. If there is one struggle to overcome and the user overcomes it consistently over time, he won't want to overcome it any more. He can't even pretend he's not overcoming it. Other things. Playability. Nowadays, eyecandy, graphics. Things that are intrinsically aesthetically pleasing. Eyecandy is obviously optical, but this could be sounds, this could be clichés, jokes, things that have nothing to do with the game itself but which make the game more of a social activity from the game-designer to you comes these things to amuse. So they are like add-ons. So part of the car is transportation, but the CD-player is a nice to have in the car. And you're rather glad you have a CD-player in the car. Aaahhh... So the perfect game would have add-ons, like that. After that things get fuzzy. Let me just talk... a perfect role-playing game? Cause – that's probably best, it depends on the game. You want the car to have good mileage, but you wouldn't want it to have – say – light anti-tank weapons. You might want a mobile military vehicle to have that, but you wouldn't want that in a car. So same thing here, role-playing games need to have, a perfect MUD would need to have a world background that is simple to understand, completely comprehensive where everyone can pick up what they need, cross referenced so that anyone can find in and out of it easily, utterly creative, that means alien, basically. Different world still familiar, which is why nobody have made a perfect game yet, because it needs to be utterly alien so that you have some sort of "boy, that's so different I want to do that, so strange I am interested, but still familiar, so that they have some point of relationship: like living the world of a proteist (???), would be an alien experience but not something we can relate to, we wouldn't know where to start. What was it like not to have a cerebral

cortex, for instance? You need to be able to do both those things. Finally, actually I can say this about all games, there are a lot of different things but this is the biggest one: A game needs to have a pleasing form of interaction. There's lots of games where the game is great visually, it's like an action game, but when you sit down at the controls, your character can't do what ever you want to do. It needs, you need to feel in control of what's going on, that's the biggest issue. People would say that they playing just of the pretty lights, but they really want control. If you mess up their mass when they are playing the game, they will scream like babies. Because what they really want to do is be able to do what they really want to do with the game, and sort of in the context. There needs to be lots of points of control, lots of perceived freedom. Whether this be a role-playing game, an action game, or anything. That effects playability, that effects how involved we are in the role-background, that effects everything. Which is why MUDs are so liked I think, because you can be everything and do everything, it's why role-playing games are liked too. MUDs are actually more limited, it's harder to do things. Oh, yeah, after all's said and done control is the biggest issue of them all, and it becomes like, oh, yeah, the perfect game. Which is the single difference between books and MUDs, because in a book, I can't change the fact that the main character is an idiot. Nothing I can do will make captain Ahab less fanatical. He's fanatical now, if I pick up the book later he's still fanatic. Obsessing over a porpoise. I can't do anything about that. In a MUD – I can shoot him. The very least. Most MUDs allow that sort of thing. Of course they repop in five minutes, but at least then I can shoot him again, and maybe that's self-satisfying. If I am the imm I can just delete him. I hope that there are less violent things I can do to him, afterward. Control, it's the main difference. Between the gaming- element, you know. Then there's the human action part of the gaming too, which is really important. But remember said there's different kinds of games, like the puzzle-games where there's not a human element. Remember that for for me that's important but not for everybody, so I don't want to say that. In my opinion the perfect game definitely have... Actually the perfect game would have a human brain, in a box, attach the game because you want to be able to play this game at all times. You want to be able to wake up at 3 am and go "hey, let's go play a video game." You want to be able to do it any time. That would be perfect, right? So you need a perfect person in the box, because you wouldn't want a computer in the box that's pretending to be a computer, because you want a human being. Even if it's a smart computer, if it thinks like a computer, it's still an intellectual game. So what I'd want is a human being in a box, to play with all the time. That's it.

TORILL: So all you need is to find a brain and put it in a box, and then start to play around with it.

BP: Yeah, and in about 200 years of neurobiology, yeah, exactly. (laughter) Getting past that brain needs body and blood to survive barrier – outside minor technical details like that, I am this close to perfecting game theory in general. But people are looking for that in MUDs, because people are complaining bitterly about the lack of intelligence in and the depth in mobile action and the NPC's don't play character actions. So people looking for the same thing that I am, in muds in the intellectual aspect too. They do look for intellectual challenge and puzzle and things, they do look for that in a Mud, that's one of the things that's cool about a MUD it has multiple games in one. It's buying lots and lots of software at the same time. But... consistently, always, the biggest complaint as we drag them down, is how much fun they are having is – human interaction. I started playing DR – before DR shut down, not

because the plot was thin, everyone knew the plot was thin, people were making it up as it went along. And not because I hated the systems, because the systems were appalling, they had nothing to do with reality and had a horrible game-effect, I mean – my skills don't matter but my equipment does, and the fact that I wear this helmet makes me a better fighter than the fact that I have been fighting for 20 years. That's an important thing, but we can ignore those things and role-play past them. What made me stop playing, makes a lot of people stop playing before the server actually goes down, is the lack of social involvement, there was just not anybody on that I wanted to play with. I had a ball in the middle of the street and I just didn't want to play with anybody there. So I just took it home and bounced it a few times and put it in the corner, you know. And that's the thing.

TORILL: I think I'll just end it there...

Attachment 13

Levi Hunter

San Diego 24.09.1999

Laughter... setting up and bantering about jokes and slang between Levi Hunter, Jack MacLeod, who's present, and me.

TORILL: OK, just for the sake of the interview here, a few things I'd like to have on tape – if you would say your name and your age?

LH: Full name? OK, Levi Walter Hunter, spelled with a J, and I am 19.

TORILL: And what kind of education do you have?

LH: Ehh, high school, and I am currently attending My first full semester at college.

TORILL: And you are studying...?

LH: Philosophy.

TORILL: Yeah.. You do read a lot of books, don't you?

LH: A fair amount.

TORILL: What kind of books do you prefer?

LH: Ahh, Generally fiction, although I have found there are a few really really interesting – ah – political type umm.. books, analysis of systems, stuff like that – ahm...Like.. do you want me to say any titles?

TORILL: Yeah, if you have any favourites, I'd like to hear

LH: One thing I picked up a while ago is a White Paper, called Imperium and Imperial by Craig Hulet, I heard him speak a few times and the subject interested me enough so I picked up a white book like . a thick tome.. I have never really finished it, but it's good for flipping through. And that's my absolute favourite, on that subject...

TORILL: Yah, if you have a favourite fantasy?, Fiction, Science fiction?

LH: Ahhh... ok... probably... and I cannot say this name. Edmyun? Edmynium? Something like that? A Dan Simmons? (Endymion)

TORILL: Yeah, I think I have seen the title

LH: A four-part think, Hyperion is the other part of it.

TORILL: What do you like about it?

LH: ahhh, the narrative style, and some of the aspects of how he incorporated titbits of modern day, and reflected on them in the story, they picked up on a few theological things – ahm – one of the things he probably butchered, but you can only use so much... what's his name, I can't remember the guy's name – modern days theol... no, not modern day, 1930'ies 1940ies theologian, Telly hart something, he had some theories about man's relations to god, how we can evolve to the godhead, I can't really explain it quickly.

TORILL: That's OK, so what you liked about it was the way it was written, and the way it was lined up...

LH: It floats...

TORILL: And the theory is that it's also placed into this mixture...

LH: Yeah

TORILL: Oh well, anything that you're read that you hated?

LH: Aaah... OK, many people in the fantasy genre will probably hate me for this, but eh... the Tolkien book- Silmarion... Silmarillion? Couldn't stand that one. (Laughter)

TORILL: I don't think you will be hated for that, he didn't write it to be read, I think.

LH: No, his son published it and all... And... just.. ach

TORILL: Any particular reason why you hate that book?

LH: Probably twofold? When I tried to read that I had just finished the other books, you know, eight grade, six may – it was like too thick..too full too... thick. Yeach.

TORILL: Yes, too... it isn't any thicker than the others

LH: Yeah, but the content is drastically different. It sort of lacks the majority of the story aspect is biblical in nature.

TORILL: Yeah, exactly... eehhh...

What kind of media do you use apart from books? What kind of – different media?

LH: Ahhm, I like to listen, or well, music, radio, CDs, records – actually have vinyl – surprise – of course can't be in modern-day America without watching some TV... As much as I hate myself for it – and.. the computer.. Not as often as I should or as often as 'd like sometimes I go to museums and stuff too... not that often (laughter)

TORILL: if you were to part your time up in using different things for different periods of time – how much would you say that you spend on reading... watching television.. listening to music... begin on the computer?

LH: Well, I do a lot of the things at the same time, so.. I don't know (thinking sounds) maybe daily or weekly or what ever...

TORILL: weekly would be fine – daily if that's easier

LH: TV... maybe ten hours a week, perhaps something around there. Almost constantly I have the radio on, I always listen to that. Even if I have the TV on, even if I have other CDs on I kind of focus on several noises. Aaaaahh Computer – quite a fair amount maybe two thirds... no, that would include sleeping time... half a week? Three fifths of the week on the computer. Ten hours reading maybe? If I actually find something to read? Usually I actually find something, devour it and have lulls. If I can't find anything else to read.

TORILL: You say that you use a lot of things at the same time, which media do you mix, then?

LH: like I said, radio always in the background, sometimes I have the TV on, sometimes I have the computer on, sometimes I actually use both computers.

TORILL: yah, I know (laughter)

LH: yes, so.. generally no more than those three things going on, sometimes I sort of have the computer on in the background and the radio on in the background, while I read as well. Just having the radio while I read. And really sometimes I actually do turn it all off! And read, and, you know, to that, for silence and time.

TORILL: Yeah, but you would say that most of your time you'd be doing several things at the same time?

LH: yeah

TORILL: And sometimes as said also use – both computers?

LH: yeah!

TORILL: let me see what we should go into here... Do you ever play computer games.

LH: (laughter) Let me think about that! SURE!

(laughter)

TORILL: That was one of the harder questions, I think. But – how much of this time do you spend playing games on the computer?

LH: Not as much as I am just on the computer – maybe well, it's gone down a lot recently, so maybe... ten hours a week? 15 hours a week?

TORILL: What kind of games do you play?

LH aaahhhmmm several. The MUDs – the Multi-Used online.. stuff, eh, and then there's a couple of – like real-time strategy games I play and recently I have been playing like an RPG? Action adventure type thing? Ummm, those are – I also play the first person shooters sometimes, but not much.

TORILL: Would you make me a list of types of games, categories of games. Not necessarily just the ones that you play, but if you were to categorise the universe of existing computer games what would it sound like?

LH: Aaahhhmmm.. Steal an old title: the good, the bad and the ugly.

TORILL: (Laughter) That would be the categories?

LH: Yeah

TORILL: If you were to put them into genres?

LH: Oh, that I can more specific on... ahhmmm... There's the first person ...???, the first person shooters, the free force overhead, the strategy, the #Dimension shooters, the roleplay type, the puzzle types, and then there's eyecandy as well, which generally doesn't serve any real purpose, but it's a game, and it does something...

TORILL: What would you place into the category of eyecandy?

LH: Mostly the puzzle-games, because they.. just need to draw you in more... they don't attract the typical audience, so they kind of have to cater to the – more normal people, I'd say, almost.

TORILL: DO you have any games which you'd say is your favourite?

LH: Uuummmm, yeah, I would.

TORILL: AND which?

LH: Digdug.

TORILL: Digdug?

LH: Yeah. Old, old, old arcade game. I found, like – it's a very small file, it plays perfectly, it's fun, it's simple, it's entertaining.

TORILL: Yeah. It sounds like it has everything a game should have.

LH: Yeah, it doesn't have all the distracting graphics, you know.. it works. And... I favour the older type games, actually.

TORILL: OK. And.. If you ere to construct a perfect game – what would it contain?

LH: Ohh, ammm. What type of game? Like just for one person, or for...?

TORILL: Oh, I'd say, a lot of the games that you playing lately have been multi-user, online roleplay games – but you have been into games like – quake? Have you tried out Everquest?

LH: No, I didn't want to pay for the service

TORILL: Right, right... another one that you mentioned

LH: Ultima?

TORILL: Yes, have you tried that?

LH: I looked in briefly. It seemed like too many people packed in too densely. It has to be some... most online games have like a loose coherence of gamers, like a community that is..

TORILL: Do you play think like starcraft?

LH: Ahh Yeah, the Westwood alternative. I won't go into them.. it's...

TORILL: Yeah.. If you were given free reins and all of the sources you needed, and you were allowed to create a game the way you think a perfect game would work – it doesn't have to be single-user of multi-user games, what kind of game that would be your perfect computergame?

LH: Aahm, something fairly simple. I most things try to be too complex. I – I don't know... graphics would be fairly important, they are expected now, so you should see them – also something that could be ... be played over and over and over again. Because there's only so much life in games mostly, 'cause... you can only write so much. Well, beforehand. And every bit that the writer writes, the player goes through in one second. Ahhmm Let's see... I can't think of anything else which would qualify as important – I guess interaction with other people would classify... like "high up there?"

TORILL:(Mutters, interrupts, an ant is crawling into the equipment... LH apologizes)

LH: Sooo ammmm, playability, simplicity in approach, ahmmm, easeness to the eye, not clashy or anything, but you know, something that's easy to interact with so it has to be easy to look at. And something you can do with other people.

TORILL: yeah, good... would it be.. have you ever thought about setting for something like that?

LH: Aaahhhhhmmm... honestly, no , I haven't

TORILL: The concept of having endless resources to play the perfect game hasn't...

LH: Actually... Ummm.. the only real resource in creating a game I think is the user. WE have got to tailor it to them, and I don't know – I have a slight marketing approach to it, the perfect game would probably have to sell, so, you have to know what people want.

TORILL: Yeah, exactly. So, let's see Oh yea, you build games

LH: Yeah, sort of

TORILL: You are building one... what kind of game would you say this is?

LH: A multi-User online game, it's text, it's kind of – loosely based on the games like dungeon and dragona type of game, and it's roleplaying you know . and I am – playing a character...

TORILL: What are you going to do with this game,, what's your main purpose of building it?

LH: Ahh, Creating a place for people to interact. To see if I can, too.

TORILL: and you do all.. a lot of coding as well

LH: yeah, although it's sloppy work.

TORILL: Sloppy as to which standards? What makes you call your own work sloppy in this context?

LH: Personally because of the environment that I am working in, the standards that the things I am assimilating into my own personal knowledge, I know, like in comparison, aren't the best ways to handle anything. And so... Well, it functions, it doesn't function at commercial level, where it runs without flaw it gets – bogged down.

TORILL: So you are measuring yourself against the commercial level when you thought of this...

LH: I am measuring myself up against, the perfect. So.

TORILL: Perfection, so what would you say was perfection in this case?

LH: Eeehm – the least amount of stuff doing... the least amount of stuff doing the ... eh .. the least amount of **written** stuff doing the most like.. possible with the writing.

TORILL: Have you seen anything like that?

LH: Yeah, I have tried to pick up on it – something – I don't want to tear down the whole system, there's already scaffolding in place it's kind of like doing the details on a sculpture or something.

[Levi is here talking about the development of his own MUD, We That Dream, which was in it's early phase at this point.]

TORILL: Yeah, that – that image works. Yeah. That was fine.

Now let me see, I have to back to this once in a while, just to make sure I am getting everything, right? Make open interviews – but I still have to check.

Why do you play games?

LH: Something to do, it's like a distraction, sort of, and they're fun. And it's also, most of the online games I do, it's to meet people I'd otherwise not meet.

TORILL: So you use it as a social function?

LH: yeah

TORILL: IS that very important to you, the social function?

LH: Yeah, I think so. It's.. One of the things like modern travel, you know, people get more and more impersonalised. And I think there's a very powerful potential on computers and text, just communicating. Annnnd... create certain bonds that wouldn't normally form.

TORILL: Yeah, you would – how much of the time that you actually spend on the computer would you say that you spend like that, for actually talking to people?

LH: Most of it, if not all of it.

TORILL: So it goes through everything you do, the games, do you use the computer for anything.. do you WORK on it?

LH: actually, yes I do, you know like for workd-processing, for outlines, for that type of stuff. And you know, for certain problems, you know I do handy-work for ah... parents when they can't get to their accounts and stuff, you know, and watch various other things for them, you know.

TORILL: Use it for school-work? To look up – do you use it as an information resource?

LH: Yeah, sometimes, but if I want a research-tool, I am going to the library and I am looking up articles and books. (laughter)

TORILL: OK...

LH: I don't trust the internet as a reliable source.

TORILL: That's wise... it's possible to find a references there though.

LH: That's possible, but it's easier to go into a library, find what ever hard index they have, flip through it, you know.

TORILL: Yeah, there's something about the physical which you just can't get on the computer.

LH: And having photo-copies and stuff, very different from a printout.

TORILL: Have you felt, when you have been playing games, or using the computer, that your perception of things have changed?

LH: yeah. Not like, towards being completely immersed, but more like taking an other look at ah... things around me, and just thinking of – giving me some second thoughts and stuff.

TORILL: Mmmm.... A lot of what I am looking for is – well, you know a lot of what I am looking for, I have been discussing this with you all the time, but you know what I am looking for is the breaking down of linearity, and the multilinear approach to reading – and... do you feel – how do you feel about using the computer for anything, or for what ever you do, as compared to, for instance a conversation?

LH: I think there's certain things in a conversation which can be expressed which can't be in a computer? Like gestures, tone of voice – and to lack that always, is not the best of things, but also there are other options in text, where although it may not be like as true of – for the moment, it's often more well thought out and you know, more effective sometimes, because you have to order your thoughts better, we see them on the screen, you know. You know that there are just some things which can't be communicated either. So, you go to extra length.

TORILL: Oh yeah.. that's right...

TORILL: So, an other angle. You have been administrating games.

LH: Bleeh, yeah

TORILL: (Laughter) yeah. And you were administrating the Dragon Realms.

LH: Yeah

TORILL: What would you say when you administrate the game, what's your main concern?

LH: Keeping order you know, keeping things functioning. You know, maybe boost morale now and then and, you know.. never mind prime thought... Making sure people also have a good time, all the work that's gone into it before is paying off for the users, so it's not wasted.

TORILL: Do you administrate for the sake of the game, or for the sake of the pleasure of the people who play there, or..?

LH: Ahhh

TORILL: Who do you work for?

LH: I don't know. I have thought about that one a bit too – I think I do work for the pleasure of the players, but when I am actually doing it, it sort of takes on a different mentality. You know, things are supposed to go on this order, and doing it for the sake of just – doing it.

TORILL: Oh, that's huge! It's about four times the size of mine! (Cat arrives on the couch,

almost on top of the microphone)
(Cat-chat, 10 seconds)

TORILL: Ahhh, let's see – did you have any goal with the game, while you were administering it?

LH: Hmm, let's see, it was kind of like ideas, things I'd like to see done, see what would happen to the actual game, and the people... and... that's... I also towards the end sort of took keen interest in how the people were reacting. Why were they doing it – behaviorist voyeurism almost .. not the kindest connotation I have heard, but...

TORILL: Well, it works. That's OK, but you are as an administrator of a game you are directing a play

LH: Yah

TORILL: So of course, you have to see it

TORILL: Let me see if there's anything I have forgotten. We have been through most I think – you haven't produced anything for other media, you haven't worked with other media?

LH: Aahh, I have done like, very limited like minor bits of computer-oriented art, like photo-paint and stuff, but never really anything like published or . just for my own sake. And I sometimes write poetry – but – for my own sake again.

TORILL: Ehh.. are you writing something? Are you writing a book or something?

LH: No, not really.

TORILL: You're not writing, but you write occasional poetry?

LH: Yes, and sometimes I jot down thoughts and - get away from that recorder...

TORILL: But it's so fascinating and then the microphone, I can rub against the microphone, and then purr, and we'll not here anything but the purr, and – it's somebody else getting attention but you, hmm? (Cat on the recording equipment again)

Eehhmm If you were to compare the process of creating graphic arts, writing poems, as to working, creating a game, would you say there's a difference?

LH: Aaahhhh... definitely. There's more things to consider, like – my feeling with words is – ahm – if they can be done, even if it's against convention, it can be done, so almost anything can flow, while ahhh... it's almost always you know, like off the top of my head. With art, it's you know, some planning, you have to actually get the image in your head and work on developing it.. ahm with a game there's technical aspects, you actually have to consider the user, the person who's going to view it, because poetry and art, you know, you generally just produce it. Aaammm if you wanted to sell, sometimes you pander...

TORILL: OK, well, I think I have been through most of what I wanted to ask for – you have answered – you have been very good at answering and it's been interesting – is there anything you think I should have asked you about?

Anything you'd like to tell me about this?

LH: Not really. Not good at coming up with questions off the top of my head.

TORILL: Ah, you'll probably be able to tell me some time later, and I'll quote you anyway.

LH: OK!

TORILL: OK, thank you

(End)

Attachment 14

Jack Lewis 23

Jacob Morgan Peter MacLeod

24.09.99 (This interview was conducted in his car, on the way to San Diego. Jack Lewis lives in Arizona)

General degree, associates level, Northern Arizona University

JM: It's actually just a general undecided study, I have mostly tended towards philosophy, psychology and computer sciences.

TORILL: OK What kind of books do you prefer to read?

JM: I'mmmm pretty much read just what ever comes within my grasp, but most of what I go out and seek to buy is science fiction and fantasy.

TORILL: any particular thing that you really like?

JM: I'd say mostly the science fiction, it's ahhh

TORILL: If you were to choose one book to - ah - say that is the best one you ever read?

JM: Very hard thing to choose, but, I'd have to go with desolation road, by Ian McDonald.

TORILL: Hmm. What kind of book is that?

JM: It's a science fiction. It has some very interesting metaphors about society and the influences... and it's very much a Heinlenesque approach to ummm... science fiction and fiction writing in general, where it seeks to give more of a message, explore some social worries, and societal interpretation varies a lot of things. To put it one way: it's a book that tries to have a message.

TORILL: What other media do you use?

JM: For..what type of media do you mean?

TORILL: Like - television, music, radio, newspapers

JM: The entire gamut - I don't tend to read paper newspapers much, I just access that information online, from certain newsgroups and ah... like the microsoft network, the daily news update, the USA today.com, that sort of thing. I watch a good amount of television, but not excessive in my opinion, there's only a couple shows that I actually try to catch - I listen to the radio all the time, as I drive, and I tend to listen to various cd's, and different music while I am online, so I pick up a lot of different media formats.

TORILL: How much time would you say that you spend on media, using different media a week

JM: Broken down into particular media, or just in general?

TORILL: First just in general, I want to ask you about computers afterwards

JM: Tada tada tada - Say, I probably spend 30 - 40 hours a week accessing different forms of media. At least.

TORILL: That sounds like a good work-week?

JM: I'll usually access media - I usually spend three or four hours online, and I usually spend hours in an other window while I am doing other entertainment.

TORILL: Three or four hours, that's a day?

JM: Yes, I normally spend four-five- or even six if I get really involved, but I try to limit myself to three or four... ahm... but that's only my home-usage. I also spend a couple of hours at work accessing various different media. As I work graveyards, I often have enough time while printing something that (He works at a Kinko's copying shop) I don't have to attend the machines hand and foot, and so I often do a lot of my checking the newsgroups and seeing what the current events are at that time. And then - I watch maybe about an hour of tv or so.

TORILL: The time you spend at computers, do you spend all that online, or do you spend time offline as well?

JM: Easily 95% of what I do is online, yes.

TORILL: Do you use computer-games at all? Do you play computergames on the computer then?

JM: When I can.

TORILL: So, what kind of games do you prefer, offline or online games?

JM: Pretty much online games. I also admittedly play games that are not necessarily in the computer format, they are play-station or nintendo 64, and if you go by that, I occasionally go into a binge and play a lot of that, but definitely online, multi-user gaming.

TORILL: Multi-user gaming, does that mean that you primarily stay on the MUDs or that you use other things, like go in to play quake, Starcraft, Doom?

JM: I have done a bit of that, but I really don't care for it, it's ahhh, there seems to be a certain barrier to interaction in my opinion. When I am on a Mud I can sit there, and play with a person, and talk to them real time, and have a mutual story-line or some sense of shared development that can last over a period of time, whereas when you go in and play quake and doom and all that, pretty much all you are doing is running around and shooting things. And if I am doing that I might as well play offline. I might occasionally get suckered in to go and play against some of my friends. And that's good because you know who it is, and the insults can always be quite entertaining. And - I'd say no, most of my time is spent at the multi-user dungeons.

TORILL: And what's your main attraction at the games? Multiple user dungeons - playing - what kind of games are the MUDs you approach. Roleplaying, hack and slash, what are they?

JM: Roleplaying all the way. I used to do hack'n'slash a few years ago, but I got out of it, because it pretty much fell into my opinion of playing quake and that sort of thing also, where if you're going to be running around and trying to build your character up, you might as well be playing by yourself, and I find the visual effects of offline gaming far exceeds online gaming all the way for me.

TORILL: And what is the attraction, what attracts you with the online roleplay.

JM: The strive for the roleplaying high. It's a lot like impromptu acting for me. It's basically getting up on a stage and putting on a different mask, and playing out a different facet of my personality or interests, for the mutual benefit of the storyline. Be it a positive or a negative benefit, it's the roleplay that really attracts me.

TORILL: You talk about storyline - how do you create a story, within a MUD, and how is that in relation to something like writing a story?

JM: I think when you are writing a story it's pretty much something you bring entirely from inside yourself and it's entirely set to the dictates of what you want to write. Whereas when you are playing on a multi-user dungeon, there's definitely an air of not knowing what's going to happen. It's random, and people - you can often predict what some sort of people can do due to their character and their interests and just who they are, but even here then, you never really know. And something that worked perfectly if you phrased it one way would be a total bum for that person if you phrased it another way, and I find that for building up the story-line it's more of a mutual endeavour, and more creative therefrom.

TORILL: you also administrate a game.

JM: yes I do

TORILL: are you concerned with the storyline as you administrate?

JM: I definitely try to put a little of my administrative abilities behind when I do a roleplay, and try to develop certain storylines some more. Sometimes I find that there's a storyline that's been a little left to the wayside, or hasn't been - developed as much, and I may try to find a way to bring it into the game and added into, but a lot of the time when I am just playing, I like to leave my administrative stuff to the side and play rather than administrate so much. I know the stories are out there, and I know that people are doing them, I don't feel that it's my duty to take all of them and bring them out. It would be nice, but it's a lot of work, and I just don't need the headaches.

TORILL: eh.... What's your primary concern when you administrate the game?

JM: That the players have fun - that is the entire thing above and beyond all else in my opinion.

TORILL: And what do you feel that it takes to make players have fun?

JM: I feel that it takes - first off, a good strong background for the world. It's like casting a setting for a play. You need to have the set there, the props, the interaction, from which the players can make their own future. I also think it takes good players, the players that seek progressing a certain storyline, or progressing their character in a certain aspect that interests them. ahm - admittedly within that there are certain bounds of what is allowable and what isn't, just to keep people from going overboard and being something like in a mood, where players just basically all pretend that they are minor demigods and you get into a very childish construct of well, I am cooler than you, no I am cooler than you. And I find that having a certain basis of role, regulations, a little bit of proper behaviour, nothing very stringent, but pretty much something like a modern socialistic dictates, the be polite and that sort of thing, because a character just goes into a bar and picking a fight because they are just looking for a fight, admittedly that does happen in real life but usually there's a good reason for it, and if they can come up with a good reason, well, that's one thing. But - it's very much, I think very much like modern society, just a different format. I like people to be polite, that's the biggest thing.

TORILL: Do you have any goal with the game, when you administrate it?

JM: Aahhmmm I am really not any big overwhelming aesthetic thing. The biggest thing I want to do when I administrate is, I want to go out and make sure the people have fun. The

particular place where I do administrate, there have been some complaints in the past about the administrators not being especially friendly, and almost a touch abrupt if not rude, and one thing I have tried to do is to try and dispel that attitude. Sadly, I think it still exists, but I can only do my part.

TORILL: yeah, of course.

TORILL: Can you explain the roleplay high to me?

JM: The roleplaying high is just a pet theory of mine, which I find a lot of other roleplayers understand, and necessarily a lot of actors and writers, people who seek to achieve almost a mentality out side of their own. And it is the point at which you have stopped thinking about ahh given this situation, what would my character say. Given this situation, what would my character do - and start thinking from the point of view of your character and say what you want to say and do what you want to do. To fully immerse yourself into the character. I find that it's very enthralling.

TORILL: Do you feel that you can expand your own understanding of your own character this way? Of your self, of you personality?

JM: Most definitely. Kind of my worldview, the way people are - kind of like a large gem. And there are different facets to that gem, how people are, how they interact with different aspects of that gem, different feelings and how they interact with other feelings - everyone has a dark side and a light side, there is the altruistic side and the darker more evil kind of aspirations, and I find that overtime I make a character, I base a little bit of them on myself. Experiences I have had - and admittedly I take those particular facets I want to expand upon, and then I heighten them a little bit more than what I think is normal for me, because I feel that in the hypin, the focus of those facets, it gives you more of an atunement to concentrate on them. and I think it's a very healthy way for people to explore sides of their psyche without becoming social misfits.

TORILL: I want to chase the social misfits-part because of all the rumours gamers and being social misfits.... But I'll just skip that part...

TORILL: If you were to make me a list of genres of computer-games, how would that list look?

JM: A list of the genres of computer games..?

TORILL: Yeah

JM: Aaaeeehhhmmm.... (silence) I think I'd base that list off - what kind of market the computer game was necessarily targeted towards. Ehm... for instance quake and doom, that sort of thing, while they are admittedly first person shooters, they are very science fiction kind of first person shooters. And ... Sadly so many computer games try to go for so many different markets, there would be games that would fir into many different markets in my book. There's the game aliens versus predator, which is a first person shooter, but which preys mostly upon its science fiction aspect in the movies and the comic books and all of that. So a lot of people are going into that game not for the first-person-shooter, but for the fact that it's Aliens and Predator too. I would classify out roleplaying games versus puzzle

games, simulation versus aaahhhh, I think simulations and I think fight simulations, but there are a lot of other simulations, like civilisation and sim city and that sort of thing, which is a structural simulation in tryign to create a balanced system - and - that's pretty much how I'd break them down - if you can dex out for all those ramblings.

TM Oh yeah, that will work. I just wanted to have your view on it. If you were to place the MUD that you prefer to play in any of those categories, where would you put it?

JM: I'd have to put it under roleplaying. It's a text-based universe, so it's not exactly like goign out there and tryign to wow everyone with really cool looking pictures and full motion videos and all that. It just doesn't have that. IT takes a little more imagination and requires being a little more indept, I suppose.

TORILL: You wouldn't call this a strategy game?

JM: Sometimes it's fairly similar, but when I normally think of a strategy game, it's almost more of a tactical. Strategy is the movement of large forces and large-scale military tactics - large-scale military movement. Ah.. the clashes of armies and armies. As something like the game commander, as something like that would be. There are aspects of tactic to it, which is the small units, where you focus upon the individual rather than on the squadron, but it's the tactic of that individuality - ahmmm - where it isn't so much tactics as politics and interaction. The concept isn't so much to just go out and killing things, it's to interact and to develop. And I think the real benefit of it comes purely based upon the person who's doing it.

TORILL: Yyeah. That sounds reasonable.

TORILL: Why do you play computer games?

JM: It's eyecandy, entertainment, definitely for the roleplaying high, I am an avid reader and I love reading out the storylines. Quite often I'll play games where the graphics or the play-controller just frustrates me no end, but I'll continue playing it, because it has an excellent storyline. And I love seeing the concepts that people come up with, and how they play with different people and different roles, and how they would cast certain people reacting within it. It's almost a reverse study of the people who write this particular game, because it's like you are looking at their version of how they see the world, and how they would see people within this world would react and do things. And that aspect of this media has always fascinated me.

TORILL: I had a lot of other questions here... but I just... OK

TORILL: Do you write anything? Books or anything?

JM: Not per se... I do build on the MUD, and write in the text-based format there, and I have been kicking around some ideas, about writing a book, but they have been kicking around for a few years, and they'll probably be kicking aroundn for a while yet before I sit down and do anything about it.

TORILL: But you do actually have a wish to create something, you have ideas for it.

JM: Most definitely. Very few weeks go by that I don't sit down and write out something, some form of poetry, or something that catches my eye - quite often I'll be driving along and see something which just inspires me, and I want to write about it. And write how I felt about it, so that I can convey the - the very ephemeral experience of that time to someone else. And within that I have thought about writing a book and all that, but I know it will happen some

time. And when I know I get that inspiration, I'll probably just sit down and really start working on it.

TORILL: Have you ever felt that you have - the perception - something has changed as a result of you playing games?

JM: Most definitely. Ehhmmm... there are many things that if I hadn't seen them in a certain light, or experienced them through the games, even if it's something I have never done, I get this different aspect from studying how someone else do it, how someone else studied it. I can look back and analyse my own experiences, or take experiences that I have later of something similar, and I can relate them and correlate, and I definitely find I tend to think about the things more. Sometimes just a simple little thing that I never thought about before come up, and be part of the game, and suddenly it stops me and makes me think about what it was I was doing, and what I am thinking about. And very definitely it changed the way I perceived a lot of things.

TORILL: If you were to create - this is my last question, so you can expand on this as much as you like - if you were to create the perfect game, what would it contain?

JM: I'd say forst off, the perfect game can only be tailored to one person. So - and even then perfection is highly overrated. I think if a perfect game were created, people wouldn't be happy with it because it would be too perfect. But, I don't think I - odd as it is to say, I think the only perfect game is life itself. And... the games we play are just different ways of experiencing different parts of our own lives. It's really one of those things of... it will always be biased to the eye of the beholder, and if the person wishes it to become part of their lives, it will, if not, then it won't. I don't know, I am kind of rambling now, my thoughts on this are kind of dis coherent, but I truly don't believe any perfect game could be made other than real life.

TORILL: OK... that's OK, that works

Attachment 15

Jason Black 18

Los Angeles 31.09.1999

I have got a master's degree in geology, and a bachelor in the same.

TORILL: DO you play computer-games?

JB: I play a great deal of computer-games, but fewer than I used to.

TORILL: Any particular games you like to play?

JB: Aside from you know MUDs and online games, I play mostly strategy games.

TORILL: Any one game in particular?

JB: Ohh, goodness. I think the last one i got seriously addicted to was Alpha Centauri

TORILL: As a science fiction type of game?

JB: Oh, it's a sequel to civilisation, which is not at all a sci-fi type of game. The setting is almost irrelevant, it's a kind of conquer the world game, sort of slow turn-based game that takes all day to play?

TORILL: Ahhh, ok, that's a single user game?

JB: Mhm

TORILL: What kind of games do you prefer, do you play single user games? Multi-user games?

JB: Depends on the mood - recently more multi-player but it's changed with time.

TORILL: Do you use other media, like television? CD's?

JB: I never watched television at all. I never did. We didn't have a television in the house when I was growing up. We have got one now but I never use it. I listen to a lot of music. And I read a great deal, I read anything I can get my hands on. That's ..

TORILL: Anything - you prefer to read? Any particular topic?

JB: That changes. I go through phases in what I am reading. I was a science fiction buff for a while ahm - right now I am sort of wading my way through a long set of classics. It's various - I'll read which ever things just doesn't bore me. Which kind of mean what ever friends are handing me at the moment.

TORILL: Well, that works How much time would you say that you spend a week at the computer?

JB: Do you want now or over the last year - because it's changed, now, I don't spend more than an hour a day, so that would be seven a week...

TORILL: So it used to be?

JB: It used to be a good deal more than that. At CalTech I played on the computer and worked on the computer and I was on probably 10-12 hours a day, one way or an other.

TORILL: And how much do you read?

JB: Again, that varies. Right now, probably about 3 hours a day.

TORILL: And has that changed? When you play less and are less on the computer?

JB: That's relatively constant. The way that it changes the most is when it depends on how I am commuting. That's when I read when I am on the train.

TORILL: Oh yeah, so now when you don't have a car you are...

JB: yeah, I'd get in at least an hour or so of reading at least even when I was commuting and spending most of the day on the computer. Wasn't doing leisure-reading, all of that was technical reading.

TORILL: Would you - given a choice of media which is your favourite?

JB: That's a hard question. Probably books. I enjoy reading a good book more than reading.

TORILL: Ah, OK. And you told me you were mostly reading science fiction and classics, so I'll just jump past that.

TORILL: If you were to make a list of computer games, existing computer games, not the ones you play, can you do that for me? Like genres, a list of genres?

JB: Genres, or specific games?

TORILL: Genres. Types.

JB: I can do that - there's strategy war-games, there's the shooters, shooters are sort of a broad category, ahm, There's real time strategy games, which are a little different - eeehhh - there's the various sports-games which have never interested me much, and there's the computerisations of card-games and computerization of board games which are basically the same as the original version. There's roleplaying games, which are basically similar to the muds, and there are some which have ceased to exist, like your text-based you know info-com style games, those don't seem to come about any longer. That's probably - There are adventure games which have some overlap to RPGs, I am not sure if there is a firm distinction.

TORILL: Oh, some of those who produce games say that there are firm distinctions, quite interesting distinctions they make. Depends on if you can customize your character or not. And mostly adventure-games, you just go into one certain viewpoint.

JB: You play the character that the game wants you to play, and you go through the adventure in the order the game wants you to go through it.

TORILL: Yeah

Ehm - any reason why you prefer the strategy games?

JB: They are more of a challenge. If nothing else, I'll take an adventure-game or a roleplay-game and play it for ten hours and beat it. And - yeah, it might puzzle me a couple of times in the ten hours, or however long it takes, and I won't play it again, when you have played one once you it gets pretty dull, it's just repetition. I have certainly played a fair number of them, I spend a lot more absolute time playing at Civilisation or Alpha Centauri or Master of Orion cause I crank it up to highest difficulty and set it up to lose most of my games. Each one might take six hours or ten and .. so.. they hold my interest longer because they are different every time and they are harder.

TORILL: Why do you play games?

JB: Why I play games...? Gee, I don't know. I was brought on computer games I may not be characteristic of the people you interview, because we have had a computer in the house since I was two. My parents are both as much or more computer geeks as I am.

TORILL: It seems like everybody I interview grew up with computers.

JB: I grew up watching my parents playing computer games. And - I don't know, I play them for different reasons, I mud for different reasons than I play something like alpha Centauri

or Civilisation, that's a lot like playing chess with somebody, it's an intellectual exercise. Can I, you know twist the rules, and figure out how to work around the silly rules system enough to win this. That's a mental exercise.

TORILL: yeah

JB: That's a lot different from mudding.

TORILL: Why do you MUD then? What is the mudding experience that attracts you?

JB: That's more analogous to a role-playing game outside of the computer game. I don't think there's much similarity between computer role-playing games and table-top games or LARPs, there might be similar styles of worlds, but the structure of the games are totally different. The computer games are not open ended. And... It comes from the same kind of a ??drum?? you get out of writing stories or telling stories or writing fiction. I think it sort of fullfills the same need.

TORILL: So - do you write anything?

JB: Not anything good. No, I have not written fiction or that sort of classes no. Writing fiction is pretty incorporated into MUDs. I have written fiction which was part of MUDs you know, and in the game-world. No, I have never sat down outside of class and written a story, no.

TORILL: No poetry

JB: I have done a lot of technical writing. That's different.

TORILL: Yeah, it is - but you do writing in the MUDs, you are building in the MUDs.

JB: Yes

TORILL: What attracts you in that, what's the challenge in building for a MUD?

JB: I am not entirely certain. I enjoy it. I am not able to put the finger on why. I suspect it's for the same reasons that people write, tell stories. It's a chance to ramble, or do art or anything. Once I have finished an area and I am reasonably happy with it, I get proud of my creations, I confess that. I am not as prolific a builder as most people on Aarinfel I have not written a huge amount. I Don't feel the drive to build as strongly as some do. I built a good chunk of Precipice - I started building because I wanted Aarinfel to be open. Probably the majority of what I have done is just because I have wanted the place to be started. I have done some to the place since then, but the volume is a lot less. Some of it was just out of a sense of obligation. We needed to get this place going, there's thousands of rooms to write. Somebody better do is.

TORILL: We aren't all that avid writers, like Luke.

But you also administrate the game. What do you want to do - what is your goal with it?

JB: I was dragged into administrating, sort of kicking and screaming. I knew all the people who were founding Aarinfel, and was talking with them from the moments when they were talking - when they were starting to discuss creating it. And I entered into it with an understanding that I would be a builder, because I wanted to get it up and running and nothing more, and I only exceeded to becoming an imm because I realised that - at the time when I became an imm there was not enough people staffing. Too many questions going unanswered and things just weren't getting done. And so I sort of reluctantly took up the mantle. I, I to some extent I don't have a huge vision, I am perfectly happy to let Eric or an other determine - I trust Eric's vision, I trust Beth's judgement - they both put in more time there than I do. I trust William's judgement, I am pretty good with letting the MUD go where they lead it, and helping scoot over details. I enjoy playing more than being an immortal.

TORILL: And when you play, what kind of goal do you have with playing in a place like that? You can't figure out the rules there.

JB: I don't have a goal. It's entirely different, it's social interaction. It's more analogous to going out talking with friends.

TORILL: So you do it for the social aspect of it?

JB: Yeah. And I think just about everybody who plays role-playing MUDs does. You know, I think roleplaying MUDs are a totally different kind of creature than your hack'n'slash MUD. People play in those for different reasons.

TORILL: DO you play any hack'n'slash MUDs?

JB: The closest I ever got to a hack'n'slash MUD - I started out on a hack'n'slash MUD I played half-heartedly because some other friends did. That was the first MUD I ever played on, I never put much time in there. I came across Dragon realms .. incidentally, I was just playing around with a web-browser, and I found Axion's web-page. It was probably before your time - he was the Magister of Arcana before I was.

TORILL: Okey... I never even saw that.

JB: That was many moons ago. He runs Eternal Visions now, an other Dragon Realms spin off. And I just followed this link on a whimsy. Dragon Realms is the closest I have ever got to a hack'n'slash MUD that I played with any regularity. I played that regularly.

TORILL: Oh yes, you played that one rather regularly, I think we can say that, you spent quite a few hours on that, didn't you?

JB: I spent a lot of hours on Dragon Realms, more than I should.

TORILL: What was the attraction at that time?

JB: What was the attraction. They were numerous. I had formed a lot of good friendships online, and that was a lot of it. I had... at that point I had little social life outside, I mean I had friends, I had good friends, but they were at school also, and they were also not at Caltech. When I changed schools to Caltech I did not ever become particularly close with people there, I didn't really like the culture among the grown up students. There were a lot of heavy drinkers and a lot of parties - and - no, that was not a role-playing game crowd.

TORILL: Do you play live role-playing games? Table-top games?

JB: I do, when ever I get the chance. Yes

TORILL: DO you spend much time playing that kind of games?

JB: It varies, that is more a matter of convenience. When somebody will find the time to run or host a game, yeah I spend a fair amount of time. Probably a weekend of two a month.

TORILL: Yeah.. do you go on LARPs?

JB: yes

TORILL: DO they take a lot of time?

JB: I consider that almost indistinguishable from table-top gaming. Good table-top gaming take on some of the aspects of a LARP

TORILL: you don't spend a lot of time preparing, and making up costumes, and all of that.

JB: some... I am not as much into that as some people are. I don't like it nor have the time to spend - nor the inclination.

TORILL: Why is that?

JB: The costumes are cool but I am not sure if I want to put that much time into them?

TORILL: I can perfectly well understand that.

JB: Particularly not being very artistically minded and only moderately handy with a sewing machine,

TORILL: Yes, it will take time ... I'll see where I am in this...

TORILL: What kind of game will you say that Aarinfel is?

JB: It's a roleplaying game. It's a hard-core roleplaying game - it's almost closer to a MUSH. I have never played on something which called itself a MUSH, not extensively. I logged into some and they bored me. They quickly turn into chatrooms. I have not extensively looked into them. I looked into the one you said I could find you on once, but that was for all of five minutes.

TORILL: Oh, that's a MOO, and it's an academic place, it's not a place where any play goes on.

JB: I am not sure I entirely understand the distinctions between MOOs and MUSHes. I have not played in a huge number of MOOs for any length of time. The two I have played for any length of time is Aarinfel and Dragon Realms. I have poked my nose into a lot.

TORILL: It's basically the code-base which is different. MOO means Multiple User Dungeon, Object Oriented, and so it's a - it allows you to manipulate objects easier, and anybody who logs on and has a character, not a guest, but a on, like lingua MOO where I stay can create objects and build rooms, because the code is put up to be very very stable and tolerate all these JB: weird objects

TORILL: Yeah. And while on a MUD the code is set up for the playability in an other manner, set up with all these different rules of what you can and what you cannot do, and the MUSHES are actually neither, they are more your basic chatrooms.

JB: I am not sure how Aarinfel fits into different categories, the MUDs they are more similar to ar things like Armageddon and Wastelands. Which are other hard-core role-playing MUDs. They include a combat system, but they go for a lot of realism.

TORILL: I would say that Aarinfel...

JB: They tried to remove it more from being an abstract computer game..

TORILL: Aarinfel is a MUSH that tried to create... it's a MOO that tries to - it's a MUD that goes more and more in the direction of a MUSH, because they have taken out a lot of the code that allows for the points and the hack'n'slash...

JB: The combat system is perfectly functional, it just very seldom comes up, so it's an iffy question what kind of category it fits into.

TORILL: Yes

JB: And you know, OK, and that is something we decided right away that it should be a realistic world and that combat shouldn't be so common. And even in your brutal nasty medieval world, well, people didn't go and get in sword-fights every day. Nothing common place about it, nothing trivial about it, and yeah, if you're dead you are dead. I was pushing for permanent death when I was...

TM And did you get it?

JB: No, I didn't, I lost... We are in for a fair amount of realism in that department. The combat code is there, it's perfectly functional, Eric is putting a fair amount of time into perfecting it and making it more complex. Lots of spells, he coded most of those, they just never get used.

TORILL: That's almost a pity. We should do some hacking and slashing just to get the spells used.

TORILL: How do you feel about that, the realism in Aarinfel, so you feel that it's actually a realistic kind of realism, or do you feel ... what is it?

JB: Only in some regards. The medium is not realistic. People don't get on and roleplay sitting at a desk and filling out papers, that's boring. People would not roleplay, you know... finding someplace to eat dinner and trudging home, and getting up early in the morning to go to work, and... the PCs that are played lead somewhat realistic lives, and I like the depths, of course, of - I mean, the medium is so much slower, a conversation which would take a few minutes in real life will take hours in a MUD, just because - you write a line or two, then you wait a couple of minutes for a response - it depends on how animated the conversation is. The longest conversation I ever had in a MUD would have taken perhaps 15 or 20 minutes - instead of taking - far too many hours. And furthermore people can't spend all their time online, you can't create a character with the depth of a real person, it's shallower, no question. And people would do things with their characters, they'd create characters which are not particularly realistic because they can, there is no risk associated with it. You can create a character which will attack at the merest insult, or will sleep with everybody, or... you can't do that in real life, because hey, there is no penalty here. Nobody really cares, so - so...

TORILL: That's another aspect. Do you feel that there is no penalty to playing, or is there? Does it have any meaning to play?

JB: It depends on the players, I believe that's a very personal - very personally varying thing. I try to keep a fair amount of emotional detachment from my character, I realised that was a good idea a long time ago on Dragon Realms. I have fun with it... Some people take it more seriously than others, and honestly, I don't think the ones who take it the most seriously should be mudding, I think it's too dangerous. Katie went suicidal on us, and admittedly I tend to think it was a temper tantrum to get her way, but there are people who take it seriously enough to get depressed over something happening online... I think that's a bad idea, and I don't I don't think you can make a general statement about how seriously people take it. For some people it's entirely remote.... I mean I create characters that are intricate enough that I can't help empathize with them, and I do not create characters that are absolutely nothing like me. They are not echoes of my personality by any means either. I don't get terribly upset over bad things happening to them or fall in love with characters' lovers. I mean... I think that's a mistake. And I have seen people do it.

TORILL: Well, sometimes it works.

JB: It does. And... you know... I ... you look at the latter case. If you decide that you like roleplaying with somebody enough, I mean that's that's almost my criteria more than anything: "She's a lot of fun. I like her." I have fun roleplaying with this character, and I am willing to let my character get involved with theirs, and that's fine with me. And this can be an indicator that this is the kind of person you'd enjoy, people reflect their personalities in their characters often. On the other hand because they probably play their character more frivolously than they would in real life, I don't know... I don't think - taking mud-character relationships out of character is a good idea. And more than anything I take my own character impressions of people and those definitely translate into real life, I mean I have met a lot of people from the mud in real life, and in fact a lot of them are close personal friends. The people I table-top with a lot are people I met on Dragon Realms that go to the USC, five miles that way, and my character hated a couple of theirs.

TORILL: And they are your friends.

JB: Yes, they are very good friends. I may have hated them. but I enjoyed role-playing with them. And there's a distinction there, and some people miss that entirely. Some people take slights against their character as this horrible offense, and I can see it being easy to slip into that mood, it's something you need to be on guard against, particularly if you are really much getting into character.

TORILL: And when you talk about this, it sounds like role-play has its own reward?

JB: Yes. In my opinion.

TORILL: And what do you feel that this reward is? What kind of reward do you get?

JB: I get the same kind of ... It's a combination. On one side it's a purely social thing, it's the same kind of satisfaction you get from going out and spending a day with friends, chatting with them. and on the other end I find it's almost an artistic thing. I'll put a great deal of effort into making a consistent character, and a detailed one and an interesting one. And I try to write him a history, and it's almost like writing fiction and writing for artistic purposes, and that's entirely different from the social ... I enjoy creating intricate characters, intricate stories...

TORILL: And... Have you ever felt that your perspective has been changed by what you have been playing?

JB: not much. No.

TORILL: spending time online... you learned anything?

JB: yes

TORILL: What have you been learning?

JB: I meet a much wider spectre of people online than I do in person. The people I am exposed to in person are for the most part academics and for the most part really smart. And - ah, they have got a different sort of interests. I mean I started at the early entrance program, I started college at 11. And... From there I went to the best graduate school in the United States, probably in the world, in technical fields, and they don't accept anybody who's not - pretty damned smart. And... I will confess the people I am exposed to most often are just different kind of people. You are put in situations that are ... the... I am expressing myself poorly. You get put in some strange ethical situations. That happens all the time. There are various levels of confidentiality you have to keep as an imm or as a builder... as a player with a certain rank, some of those levels are in character and some of them are out of character, and... eh... there's a certain amount of being delicate to people you have to do, because some of them do take the mud very seriously, and on the other hand there's this aspect of well, they shouldn't, and how much can I avoid stepping on their toes because they are more delicate than they ought to be? You gain experience in dealing with people, and probably more strained relationships than are usual in real life. Because a lot of the time when you're talking to people it's just pleasantries. Your interaction with people that aren't friends is mostly don't pleasantries is mostly just pleasantries, you don't get into very deep conversations or interactions... and you get faced with ethical situations and odd scenarios... odd scenarios involving people that are unlikely to come up in real life.

TORILL: And you feel that is - is that a part of the attraction with computer games - with MUDs?

JB: yes, I think so.

TORILL: So it's the social aspect, but also the safe way of meeting other people'?

JB: MmHm. And I have pretty universally enjoyed meeting people in real life that I have met online.

TORILL: What I am after... part of what I am looking for is the the way to use a text differently, and a way to be active compared to the text, a way to be not just interactive, as they'd claim that you are in any kind of computer game where you act together with the code of the game, but a a way to contribute something yourself. Do you feel that you do that? That you contribute something, that you create something?

JB: On Aarinfel? Yeah, absolutely. – Probably more as a builder and immortal than as a player.

TORILL: If you think of yourself as a reader... do you feel that you create through reading, or when you read a normal book, do you create anything then?

JB: I think the idea is you create what the author intends you to create. You form mental images as you read, and you form any number of mental images, and you pick up ideas of a world that may or may not be exactly what the author intended. But yeah, I think that's sort of the point of fiction, you're creating a world... well, the author is trying to lead you to create one, whether you do it or not – that may vary, but...

TORILL: Which do you feel is the more creative process, to build, to administrate, to read a book?

JB: Build, yeah definitely.

TORILL: And which part is – you said that you prefer to read books, if you were to choose between computers and books you'd choose books....

JB: books – books serve a different role, again. I enjoy reading because I enjoy listening to intricate stories, that's another matter entirely. Reading a book may to some extent be a creative process, but I like sitting back, listening, reading... I suppose it's a somewhat more active process than listening, but then again no, I read unconsciously. I don't think it fullfills the same need or desire as building, no.

TORILL: So, so you wouldn't really rate them as something that can be compared?

JB: Yeah

TORILL: do you think that if you would not have the computer games and the MUDs that you would be writing?

JB: Well, no, probably not. I didn't discover MUDs until three years ago, and I didn't write fiction before then.

TORILL: So you don't think you have any particular need to be creative in that direction?

JB: No, I have not got a muse so to speak.

TORILL: Ah... I think I am starting to get to the end of this.

JB: OK

TORILL: IF there's anything I should have asked you, I think I have most of it. (Consulting notes) Rambling, mostly – it's what open interviews are, after all
Anything I should have asked you?

JB: Anything you should have asked me? Oh my!

TORILL: Anything you'd like to tell me, about yourself and computer games? You need to confess?

JB: They usually do grow addictive, and at various times I spend a lot more time playing computer games than I should, that applies to both MUDs and single-player games. I am not sure if they are addictive for the same reason or not.

TORILL: Why do you think they are addictive, what do you think makes them addictive?

JB: That's a hard question to say. People get --- (long silence) --- I think there are definitely different reasons. When I played too much in the MUDs well, it was... well, I was at Cal Tech and there wasn't much else to do, and I wasn't really good friends with anybody on Campus, that's where my friends were. And so I spent much too much time online, because that was where my friends were, for the most part. And I have a more difficult time saying why strategy games are addictive. Admittedly I haven't spent as much time playing Civilisation or Alpha Centauri as I have playing Dragon Realms for instance. But I have a harder time saying what the appeal of playing those games over and over and over again is – to some extent I will even play them after I know that I have pretty much mastered this game, I know them inside out and know I can beat them at the hardest level and get ludicrously high scores. Yeah, I get to that point, I am good at strategy games. I am not sure why one plays them again.

TORILL: I think if you can figure that out, you will become very rich.

JB: Yes. It's familiar, it's vaguely soothing, it's sort of a way of unlinking the mind. It's a form of relaxation which doesn't require too much active thought after a while, I suspect playing strategy games has most in common with things like sitting back and watching television. After you have had a go at them... Early on it's still the challenge of mastering them.

TORILL: You still prefer them to watching television?

JB: Oh, I do, I can't stand television, that's appalling.

TM...

JB: There's very little television I watch, here and there, there are little spots. The vast majority of what's produced bores me.

TORILL: You can do like me and start doing research on it. It gets a lot more fun then.

JB: I suppose...

TORILL: OK, I think we'll just end it there...

(end)

Attachment 16

Petrov Kovacz

Nov. 5th 1999

In the Manhattan Mall, Mortimer Green watching.

TORILL: Will you, just for the sake of the tape, tell me your name and how old you are?

PK: Petrov Kovacz, age 22.

TORILL: and... what kind of education do you have?

PK: Highschool, and continuing study, and College.

TORILL: How many years in college?

PK: Three years, already.

TORILL: What kind of media do you use for entertainment?

PK: TV, VCR, Computer, player, tape-player, CD-player...

TORILL: How much time do you generally use on consuming different media?

PK: Different? Almost all the time.

TORILL: Almost all the time?

PK: Especially walkman, that should be distinguished as a category in itself.

TORILL: Mhmm? How about computers. How much time in a week would you say that you spend ...

PK: In a week, if I could, I'd rather say about half of waking hours.

TORILL: Hehe, so you'd be like 40 – 60 hours online?

PK: Not necessarily, but that's the information I can give

TORILL: But how much can you stay online – or at computers.

PK: Depending on the situation, up to fourteen hours or so

TORILL: A week?

PK: No, at once –

TORILL: Oh, a day!

PK: Ja

TORILL: Oh, umm, do you read books?

PK: Certainly

TORILL: What kind of books?

PK: A tough one – oh, any books which would be of any interest of mine, which means more or less all books.

TORILL: All kind of books? Any favourites?

PK: Fantasy and science fiction mainly, but also some historical novels.

TORILL: What's the best book you have read recently?

PK: Recently? That was a fantasy parody by Terry Pratchett, which I have in my backpack, I just finished it.

TORILL: Oah, hehehe so that's like a favourite that you've read?

PK: I couldn't say I have a favourite book. But I do like Terry Pratchett, which I have read, recently, and something a little more serious is Heinlein, from science fiction.

TORILL: I wonder if you have a favourite book EVER, what's that?

PK: I couldn't say. Frankly, I couldn't say.

TORILL: You don't know?

PK: No, there are just so many good books and I don't find any ways of just putting them against each other.

TORILL: If you were to recommend a fantasy book for me then, one you would like me to read

PK: Silence. Fantasy or science fiction, by the way?

TORILL: Fantasy.

PK: Fantasy. Oh... Dragon and George Series are pretty good, that's by Donaldson or Dickson... Gordon R. Dickson.

TORILL: Oh, OK

I haven't read that

PK: Oh really? It's about dragons.

TORILL: I only recently became a dragon. I used to be a sneaky elf assassin.

(MG: Oh, boy (Mortimer))

TORILL: Look at him

PK: An other one??

(Mortimer speaks outside the scope of the microphone)

PK: Oh, for how long, five minutes?

TORILL: That was like a year.

PK: In one body, I mean?

TORILL: That was almost a year in that body.

PK: I was asking him about how long he was in his body after he met you (indicates Mortimer)

TORILL: Oohh (laughter)

(Mortimer answers)

(Laughter)

TORILL: We have been playing around at more sites

PK: Oh, at least you have an excuse

TORILL: Oh, yes it's research Very serious, has to be done, even my supervisor told me I had to play muds. Eehhm...

You play computer games.

PK: Yes, I do

TORILL: What kind of games do you play?

PK: Roleplaying and simulators or something like simulators – for instance macWarrior

TORILL: Single-user or multi-user games?

PK: I have not had any chance of going against others until recently.

TORILL: So it's basically been single-user?

PK: Yes.

TORILL: Eehhm... and your favourite computergame?

PK: I would say McWarrior II

TORILL: Oh, Ok.. Ahh.. If you were to make a list of existing computer-games as categories – types... could you do that for me?

PK: Right now?

TORILL: Yeah?

PK: Out of my head?

TORILL: Yeah?

PK: No.

TORILL: Why? Not all existing computergames, but types of games.

PK: Yes, precisely, you have sports-games, but there are different types of games. Some are – which I don't play by the way – you can categorize sport games into games that are basically out of the head, without any realistic elements in them, and there could be something called sports-simulators. And the same goes with all types of games, well except for roleplaying with is unspecified anyway.

TORILL: Mmm hhh ehhs So you would...

PK: It's a hard drop. I could certainly go with the established pattern, in which there are roleplaying games and then there are either some – some classify certain games as tactic, as opposed to certain games which are more of a spectacle. There are also games with an adventure element, which I haven't seen much recently – simulators or shoot'em'up games... I mean it's not that easy, you can't categorize that easily in my opinion

TORILL: OK, that's your opinion, that's what I am asking for. Ehhm.. Are you
You said that you are building a polish MUD?

PK: Yes, a little bit

TORILL: Can you tell me a bit about that? How it is organized? What kind of place it is?

PK: It was basically run With some modification to the core, and some areas written for that MUD – still it was a stark MUD, there wasn't much of a theme, it was by no means a roleplaying mud, it was just hack'N'Slash, and mostly what they were looking for when I came into that game was just ideas to expand the core base of the MUD – basically skills and spells.

TORILL: Have you any other experience with making or creating games?

PK: I did write a game, a Mastermind in connotation, in Turbo-pascal (?), and I was playing around with another game which was in polish called (???), which means star merchant. It was a game I think which was translated into polish, it had pretty difficult roles, so I never ended up doing that, but in addition to that some customising of existing games, building scenarios and so forth.

TORILL: That's interesting – ahm

When you – if you were to build the perfect game – what would it look like?

PK: Either a science fiction space simulator with some economical somethings, such as Allied, which was never really developed – or Privateer which wasn't either... there's one coming out called Freelancer, I think, and that's close to what I believe to be a game for most people, or a role-playing fantasy Mud. A MUD. Which I don't really care about the graphics as long as there's a crowd that's in it, but it would have to be really realistic, if we can say that about any computer game

TORILL: How do you define realism then?

PK: As close as you can get to real life – basically – to compare it to for example armour – the combat system will be much different – much different. I can understand that it's hard to cope, but we are speaking of the perfect game here.

TORILL: Oh yeah, definitely speaking of...

PK: It should take into account physical elements as well as fantasy, if you have a body it has to function somehow, and it can get in different areas and – it would have some importance in what you can do or not.

TORILL: Would you feel that the combat system would be very important to create the perfect game?

PK: It depends on the type of game. Since I would be rather more inclined to write a fantasy game, there is obviously a lot of combat going on in there – other areas should be developed as well, I feel, even the building of the whole world would have to be different because right now you have only two dimensions and they can't be easily translated into a three dimensional environment. And the idea for a perfect game is that what ever you can do in real life, you can do there, and this I will try to achieve as I can have the means and time and knowledge and all of that the list goes on and on

TORILL: Well, we will assume you can have all of that to build the perfect game.

Ehhh Why do you play games? Computergame?

PK: For entertainment.

TORILL: Do you play any other games than computer games, do you play roleplaying games offline?

PK: No, haven't had chance doing that, I was thinking about it, but never ended up doing that.

TORILL: Is that because you don't have any contacts around here?

PK: Probably, because otherwise I believe I'd be probably as much into it as , well...

TORILL: Do you read the game-books?

PK: I have read a few but I didn't like the simplicity of what they were representing, so...

TORILL: OK

When you play a game, what's the most attractive feature about it, what is it that makes you go on playing a game?

PK: Taking character details, which come in different terms, in realism or in even in graphics if we are speaking of a higher level of ... game, but basically realism, I'd say, and consistency, which is a flaw that quite a few games have, because they go against what ever was said in print. In the next chapter, or...

TORILL: When you play games, do you have any feeling for the way the story unfolds? Do you have any manner in which you'd prefer to discover it, to explore it?

PK: Frankly, no, because I'd rather see what other people came up with and then try to find loopholes in it, which is my form of entertainment.

TORILL: Yeah.. and do you feel – have you ever felt that your perception has been changed by playing games?

PK: It could be said it helps developing skills for solving problems, as I found a lot of times I am not actually playing it, but looking for the easiest way to solve what ever the problem is within the game. So that could be useful.

TORILL: Do you surfe a lot?

PK: More or less yes, it means that I can't connect to the MUD, or I am at a terminal that can't reach the mud or... and.. or I am on the MUD but nobody is in there.

TORILL: Which sadly happens

PK: Yes, quite often

TORILL: And do you have any sensation of that manner of reading, the way of leaping through the text instead of reading it linearly?

PK: I can say that I find many differences, not between books and what ever is supposed to be online, because often it's articles or full essays, but I is useful to have a link that leads to some more material in some manner, instead of having to go through the full chapter.

TORILL: You haven't really role-played much before you started playing on Lu'Tamohr? So that's a new experience for you?

PK: Yes

TORILL: Yeah – how do you feel about it as compared to reading books for instance?

PK: Well, the dialogues are pretty interesting but the plot so far has been pretty limited.

TORILL: You will just have to plot some yourself, that's the basics

PK: Well, that's what I am trying to do, but... People just slap me and walk away, I don't know why, just because I happen to be there and they can see me a lot.

TORILL: I am not going to go into that discussion at all... (Petrov is here referring to the interaction of Cilidiein, the character of the interviewer, and Triton, his own character. The respondent is not aware at this point that Cilidiein is the interviewer's character)

Do you have any thoughts... about what you would like to do with a game like that? What do you think is the most important feature? How to create a good environment and a good story?

PK: Once again, consistency and level of realism.

TORILL: Mmhmm?

And when you say consistency and level of realism, to what extremity do you think it's needful to pull this to have a good game?

PK: It depends on the people who are playing it.

TORILL: MmmHmm

PK: So if somebody likes a simplified version of things, that's fine with me, I can always go on imagining what ever I want to, and – but it shouldn't be too simple – the simpler the system is, the less options you have to do – what ever you want to do. And that's one of the features that are usually limiting the playability.

TORILL: Hmm

And when you play... - looks like I am horribly efficient, I must have learned to interview people... when you play, what's your primary goals as a player?

PK: To have fun. To enjoy myself.

TORILL: And what does that include? Do you think you can win this game for instance?

PK: Win it? How? No, basically it's just you have seen the character I have – well, at some point it's also curiosity, how people would react to certain things being done, and which in real life would never have been tried, for example – and just basically trying to be that character. Which is what roleplaying is about, as far as I can tell.

TORILL: Yeah... Are you writing. Are you writing anything?

PK: More precisely?

TORILL: Are you writing fiction?

PK: Done that, tried that, didn't come up really well – but I like to write, especially for a game, that's one of the things I like to do. Recently I sent some material on mecarro and one of the assassins that is at Strive – and that was fun.

TORILL: Yeah

Because one of the things I have discovered is that a lot of the people who are into this kind of playing, they also write a lot

PK: Sure

I can see why, because if you are going into a roleplaying game, that means you are working with your imagination, where the writing comes from.

TORILL: I think we'll just end it there, thank you very much

PK: You are very welcome.