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Concepts of Space and Place in a Virtual Community

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Bedouin ummms, trying to decide how to ask this so that it  
makes sense. She settles for "Where are we?"  
wapini says "On the Balcony Overlooking The Unknown?"  
You say "I mean, beyond in Malacar's balcony on DragonMud...  
we're having a conversation - where's the conversation  
happening?"  
Celeste says "in virtual space"  
Malacar says "Right here."  
wapini nods...on the balcony.  
Celeste says "not in reality. and yet, still real"  
You say "But where's the balcony? Where's DragonMud?"  
Zeke says "in San Diego electrons"  
wapini says "In TinyLondon."  
Celeste says "I don't know, Bedo. It has confused me for over  
a year"  
Celeste does not understand the nature of this medium.  
wapini believes wapini is there.. here..  
Malacar says "Bedouin -- I think that our souls are gathered  
in another level of reality from that when we 'normally'  
frequent."  
Celeste says "We are in our own minds"  
Malacar says "And each other's."  
Celeste nods to Mal  
wapini agrees with Mal also.  
Celeste says "It's essential to understand this to deal with  
what we do here.."  
Malacar says "We are all living in a mass consensual  
hallucination."  
Malacar has his suspicions about the 'reality' of RL, but you  
didn't ask about that.  
Celeste says "Yeah, a place which doesn't exist, where you  
can socialize at almost any hour, with almost anyone."  
Malacar says "But it does exist."  
Celeste says "Yes, and no. it isn't physical" [1] (4/22/94)

The conversation excerpted above took place in DragonMud, on a balcony in a virtual community that is created and described completely in text. If one were to "look" while located on the balcony for example, one would see the following:

Balcony Overlooking the Unknown

Round, the balcony, projecting a half circle out into the huge pit. The wall behind you is smooth crystal that arches up, becoming ceiling high above. Below you and to either side, it drops away to chaos. The balcony is wide and comfortable, with cushions to sit on and a sturdy balustrade around the edge. A pleasantly cool breeze blows over you, ruffling your hair.

The bouncer, a towering green and grey polymorphous Chaos Creature, ambles over to you and points out the Reality Check. "Check your reality before you try going over the rail. Malacar's orders."

[ Exits: out to the menagerie, jump ]

A list of the room's contents the follows, including a T-shirt that proclaims "I swam in Chaos - \*Twice!\*" , a Reality Check, and a black feather, and the players in the room - in this case, Zeke, LadyHawke, Celeste, Malacar, wapini, and Bedouin. However, some background on what exactly a MUD is, and what in particular DragonMud is, is necessary before continuing.

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## Overview

MUD (short for Multi-User Dungeon, originally) was the name of a game written by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle when they were students at Essex University in the UK. Initially written in MACRO-10, the machine code for the university's DEC-10, Bartle describes it as being "little more than a series of inter-connected locations where you could move and chat" (1990:7). Rewriting the entire code twice, it eventually developed into a multi-user adventure game available to subscribers to commercial networks in England.

MUDs (which came to stand, generically, for Multi-User Domain) took on a different aspect in the US, much to Bartle's dismay. He stated (using the term MUA (Multi-User Adventure), lest readers confuse the generic code with his particular game) that "at present, the best games are the top-notch UK professional MUAs, but with the huge number of US academics presently engaged in MUA activity, it is only a matter of time before players over there start writing their own versions and marketing them commercially. Unless the UK can maintain the lead that history has given it, these American MUAs will doubtless come to dominate the scene over the coming years" (1990:7).

The first, and still one of the most commonly-used American versions,

was TinyMUD, written by James Aspnes of Carnegie-Mellon University in 1989. Bartle especially objects to the TinyMUD code, stating "TinyMUD is not so much a MUA as a forum for conversation where participants have pinned short pieces of prose on the wall for the benefit of anyone with the inclination to read them. If this kind of MUA gets a strong hold in the USA, it could set the industry back several years" (1990:80).

It is, however, the flexibility of TinyMUD code, and the ease of real-time communications it affords, that attracts most of its users. Text is an information-dense medium; the ability to use the same language forms we use in everyday speech with minimal interference from the underlying code makes this medium a powerful narrative tool. As Howard Rheingold, one of the few people who have actually written about virtual communities, writes, "narrative is the stuff of which MUDworlds are made. Everyone and everything and every place has a story. Every object in a MUD, from your character's identity to the chair your character is sitting in, has a written description that is revealed when you choose to look at the object" (1993:155).

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## DragonMud

When John Crane (whose tangled initials JO.hn P. C.rane are the basis of the name by which he is known on DragonMud, "Jopsy") was a student at Northern Arizona University (NAU), Crane wrote an interactive, user-alterable game called "The Playground" in the late 1980s. Written in Fortran77, PL6, and SPITBOL!, it ran on NAU's Honeywell DPS-6. He chose that particular machine because it was the most popular mainframe on the campus, giving him the widest possible cross-section of players. Crane wrote this implementation, he states, because he was frustrated with the lack of elegance with the University bulletin board he was responsible for maintaining. Originally designed as a 10x10 grid through which players could move, it grew a then-monstrous 800 objects. (Crane 1989:1, personal interview 1/5/94)

When the Honeywell mainframe was scheduled to be retired, he started to rewrite the code in C, intending to transfer it to NAU's UNIX system. When James Aspnes released his TinyMUD code at Carnegie Mellon, Crane realized that most of what he was trying to do was included. Since then, that code has been heavily modified by Crane to increase the ease with which players use it, to increase player privacy, and to add features to make it more enjoyable. (personal interview 1/5/94)

DragonMud is the oldest continuously-running implementation of the TinyMUD family [2]. Originally put up in December 1989, it became accessible to non-local players when NAU went on the InterNet in March of 1990 [3].

DragonMud is one of more than 300 MUDs being operated on the InterNet. MUDs are, simply, text-based real-time multi-person interactions occurring within nodes of computers. (Howard Rheingold describes MUDs

as "a communication soup in real time, with a flavor of improvisatory theater" (1993:149).) Generally, MUDs have some sort of over-arching "theme", ranging from fantasy to futuristic. Some are rather large, with more than 50 people logged in at any time from anywhere in the world; others are restricted to participants at a specific campus. Some are combat-oriented, others are known as being "intellectual" MUDs.

Anyone with access to the InterNet can log onto a MUD merely by telnetting to the correct address. Once logged on, a player "creates" themselves. The "character" presented is entirely the product of the imagination of a person sitting at a computer keyboard somewhere [4]. Once logged in, the player's character ventures out into the world. Because interaction occurs in "real time", conversation scrolls up the player's screen, looking rather like a play script.

In the same way that there is a recognized difference between "VR" (virtual reality) and "RL" (real life), mudders distinguish between the "character" or "avatar" they role-play and themselves; the human being is the "player" or "operator". This nomenclature is not firmly established, though the concept is universally accepted. The "style", attitudes, physical description, quirks and idiosyncrasies of the character are all generated by the player. While some people play roles, generally "characters" who have been around for a while pretty closely represent their "players" - that is, "players" "play" themselves.

With a current population base of well over 2500 players, there are generally about 1500 characters in use on DragonMud during any month, depending somewhat on the season. (Players who log in through a university account may lose access to their accounts over the summer months, so the active population drops.) Some players run several different characters. Typically, there are between 35 and 50 players logged on at any time. Some are "regulars"; some people log in once and never return.

According to people with experience in a greater variety of MUDs than I, DragonMud is unusual in several respects [5]. It is considered to be an "intellectual" MUD - it is noteworthy, but not unusual, to walk into Town Square and find the conversation occurring in a language other than English, for example. Where most MUDs are populated predominantly by college students, DragonMud seems to have a larger contingent of post-doctoral players than is usual. Further, there is no combat system on DragonMud, and there is reportedly less "role-playing" compared to other MUDs. Players log on primarily to solve quests and puzzles, and to socialize. DragonMud has an extremely low tolerance for player harassment (unlike combat MUDs) and absolutely no tolerance for gender harassment. Players who are abusive are warned once, then ejected.

DragonMud's social system is hierarchical, comprising of "mortals", who control themselves and the objects that they have created, "wizards", who can see, but not affect, most things regardless of ownership, and "gods" who can see and control anything. Of the approximately 2500 characters, 13 are active wizards and 4 are active gods [6].

In what has become almost an anthropological cliché, my entrance into the DragonMud community was guided by the "village headman", Jopsy, who is the system administrator, and created and maintains the DragonMud database. In the more than three years that I've been involved with DragonMud, he has gradually given me greater responsibility within the community so that my most commonly run character, Bedouin, is now his second-in-command with "god" status. While this rank necessarily affects how some players react to me, for the most part, hierarchical rankings are down-played on DragonMud, so much so that many players are surprised when they discover that Bedouin is a Goddess. Moreover, I've noticed little difference between how players react to "Bedouin" and two other non-god characters I run in secret for comparison.

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### Concepts of Space and Place

One of the most interesting aspects of studying the DragonMud community is how concepts of space and place are perceived in a community that has no physical geography. The question is multi-faceted, including where the player is located physically, how they visualize space on DragonMud, and how they visualize DragonMud's location within the InterNet itself. Additionally, questions of "public" and "private" space get warped in a location where everyone is there by choice.

Of all of these, the easiest to answer is where players are located physically. People log in from all over the world, though the heaviest user population is located in the US. Players log in by whatever means they can, using home computer systems and a modem, university computer labs, or sophisticated equipment at their places of employment. Where people actually live is rarely the subject of conversation, unless someone makes a comment about their local weather or there are plans being made for a Gathering. People are considerably less interested in physical geography, than in being involved in a community of interest - DragonMud.

It should be noted that "public" necessarily has a special meaning in an electronic community like DragonMud. Participation is not a random event; a player has to choose to log in there, unlike being required, for example, to spend time in a doctor's waiting room. Encounters between specific individuals may be happenstance, but everyone who logs in does so expecting to encounter other players on some level. At any time, any player can see who else is logged on, though levels of hierarchy determine how much information a player can access.

Public spaces are "owned" by the MUD, and generally are controlled by Jopsy and a few others whom he trusts to understand and implement his ideas. Private "space" is controlled by individual players, building and describing to suit their whims. While a great deal of latitude is allowed in private space, Jopsy will ask for modifications if objects or descriptions become too overwhelmingly divergent from DragonMud's theme. New players are watched fairly closely; as they gain experience

and trust from the senior users, more latitude is allowed.

Permission to build (an earned right, on DragonMud) is actually permission to modify the database. Players can create objects, rooms, exits, and groups. Players and objects may be assigned memberships to groups, and exits can be locked to members of groups or individuals. All of these objects, rooms, exits, and groups are recorded in the database and become more or less permanent parts of the textual environment. The database is fluid, however; objects and rooms that have been created can be recycled or redescrbed.

Newer players generally work hard to qualify for building privileges. Having the right to build a private space is a sign of having been around long enough to have acquired some knowledge of the database and to have formed friendships with others in the population. As their skills increase, players often go back and revise or enhance their previous constructions.

Because of the modifications made to the DragonMud code by Jopsy, the database is fairly easy to modify, even for beginners. A number of concepts familiar to computer programmers, concepts which are usually difficult for the novice computer user to grasp, are made easy and challenging. These concepts include linked exits, loops, if-then-else clauses, Boolean logic, pattern matching, set theory, variables, labels, attribute tracing, and parsing, and are all used every day by players. Rather than being a source of confusion, in DragonMud they have immediately visible and applicable uses. Once someone has explained to a user that moving a room is as easy as opening new doors to it from someplace and removing the old doors, (which a programmer would see as moving a node in a linked list) they understand and are able to do it quite easily.

The transparency of manipulating the database and the ease with which non-programmers can contribute to the "space" of the community is, I think, one of the reasons for DragonMud's longevity. Rather than a terse barren space, (or the "short pieces of prose [pinned] on the wall" that Bartle feared (1990:80)), DragonMud has developed the feeling of being "someplace".

The sense of "being" somewhere is reinforced by the illusion of moving through spaces - one types "north", the description of the room changes, the objects in the room are different, and different options exist. People treat textual objects as though they are real - people will sit on the railing of the balcony described above, for example.

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## Public Space

DragonMud itself is laid out on a series of streets that each have their own characteristics. The main streets, Austral (going south), Narthat (going north), Wester (going west), and Easter (going east), meet in the center of TinyLondon in Town Square. These streets are carefully watched for topographical accuracy and, in fact, players can

"get" a map of the streets in Town Square. The map, drawn in ASCII characters (that is, drawn in the characters available on a standard keyboard without using a graphics package), looks like this:

```

          ~~~~~
          ~~~~  ||
(O) #####=====###|#####(O)  TS - Town Square
#          ~~~~  ||  #          ST - The Carriage Station
#  SH===NW  ~~~~  N2    WA===EA===NEC #  BZ - Bazaar
#          || ~~~~  ||  #          DO - Docks
#  NF    SW  ~~~~  N1          NR #  SH - Soho
#  ||    || ~~~~  ||          || #  TF - Trafalgar Sqr
(M) =W3===W2===W1===TS===E1===E2===E3=====
#  ||    || ~~~~  ST||BZ          || #
#  SF    BS  ~~~~  S1  `--+.  -.  SR #
#  ||    || ~~~~  ||  -|  `--+'  || #          nw  n  ne
#  CS===TF=~~DO===S2-----+-  `-'  SEC #          \  |  /
#          ~~~~  ||  alleys          #          w  -  *  -  e
(O) #####=====###|#####(O)          /  |  \
          ~~~~          #          sw  s  se
          ~~~~~

```

If one was to "look" while in Town Square, the following description would appear on the screen:

```

The Town Square, London
Once a quiet intersection, the Town Square has now become a
rowdy haven for gossipers fond of hanging around the wishing
well and the various prestigious establishments found here.
The meager flowers that pushed their way up through the
cobblestones have been trampled nearly flat. A small tree
near the well is all that survives.
[ Exits: East to Easter Street, North along Narthat Street,
Northeast into Quester's Rest, SouthWest into the stables,
NorthWest into the Knight's Inn, Southeast to the Bazaar,
Cab, Wishing Well, Wall, West over the Bridge, South
along Austral Avenue ]
Contents:
A Map of London
The Knight's Inn
The Stocks

```

The "Exits" line tells the players in which directions they can go, the "Contents" shows what is in that room. Jopsy has gone further than drawing a map to help players locate themselves in TinyLondon, however. At certain critical locations, he has generated ASCII pictures to graphically remind players what buildings are on which streets. For example, while standing in Town Square, if one were to type "look north", one would see the following:

```

\\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ . _____ _____ ----^^^
\\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ /^^\ ####### = | -^-^-^-|^-^/\ | 
The    |/^v^v^v^ \ _____ | _ | / ^  ^\ | Quester's
Knights | The | | | | | | | | /=====| Rest
Inn    | Builders| | | | | | | T H |
_      | Guild | | | | | | | O A | .
\\     | /\ | | | | | | | W L | // \
| |    | | | | | | | ^-^-| _ | N L | | | |
_| |   | | | | | | |   ^'^-+-_#_ | | | |
_ \ \  --^^^      ^^^ /-- / | _

```

TinyLondon extends beyond the walls of the map, however. If you were to walk along Narthat Street far enough, you'd eventually leave TinyLondon altogether, and step outside of the gates and see:

```

Farmland north of TinyLondon
You are on the remains of an old roman road. Large broken
flagstones stretch on northwards for a ways before dipping
below the horizon. In the park to the left is an oak tree
towering above the surrounding trees. When the wind dies
down, you can almost hear chanting coming from the northeast.
[ Exits: North to Crossroads, West into the Park, NorthEast
to Stonehenge, South into TinyLondon ]
Contents:
A small black scroll with a Mithril band.

```

Again, the "Exits" tell the player the obvious directions that can be taken, though occasionally there are hints in the room's description that other, "dark" exits exist. The small black scroll indicated in the "Contents" list is a permanent fixture at this location; it contains a clue to solving a quest.

Not only the streets are considered "public", however. Any place that is quest-related must be available to the entire population, for example, and various other privately- built public locations exist. Malacar's "Balcony Overlooking Chaos" is one example; even though it is part of his private residence, he allows and even encourages people to use his space. Another example is The Treadmill, a tavern southwest of the far end of Narthat Street. If one steps southwest from Narthat Northend, one sees:

```

A flagstone-paved walkway leading to The Treadmill
You're standing on an evenly paved path leading to an old
stone public house. A wooden sign hanging over the entrance
reads "The Treadmill" in carefully painted script. To the
left of the path is a signpost proclaiming the "House Rules"
[ Exits: Around the pub to the Garden, West into the
Treadmill, Northeast to the street ]
Contents:

```



A rustic wooden sign by the side of the path.

Actually stepping into The Treadmill gives the following description:

Main floor of The Treadmill

The room is long; at the far end it bends to the left, making an L-shape, and in the back you see armchairs clustered around low tables, a wreath of pipe smoke drifting aromatically up. Just in front of you is a scattering of worn wooden tables and pub chairs. Doris presides over the bar, which runs along the length of the left wall. She grins cheerfully up at you as she polishes a glass.

[ Commands: Sit, Order ]

[ Exits: Through the swinging doors to a hallway leading south, East to the front walk ]

Contents:

Menu

a flask of freshly squeezed tangerine juice

Private space that is accessible to the public is expected to conform to the general "feel" of DragonMud. Anachronistic (loosely defined as being "Industrial Revolution or later") descriptions and objects are discouraged. In fact, as part of the lecture that my character delivers before granting building privileges to players, Bedouin specifically warns that "We tend to @nuke stuff that's anachronistic, duplicative, or just plain poorly built" and obtains verbal agreement from the player that they will abide by DragonMud's building conventions before allowing them to build.

In public spaces like Town Square or The Treadmill, people wander in and out, joining conversations or just passing through on their way someplace else. Players are careful to acknowledge the arrival of a new player in a variety of formats. Characters bow, wave, smile in greeting, or make a verbal statement. Those characters already in the room usually direct their greeting specifically to the new arrival, using their name. The new arrival may greet individuals specifically or may greet the group as a whole.

Dryad has arrived.

Dryad curtseys to all.

wapini says "hi Dryad!"

nightshade says "Hi dryad"

Gustavef says "Hi Dryad."

Czhorat says "hi dryad!"

wapini hugs Dryad!

Dryad says "hi pini! hi NS, hi , gustavef, hey CZ"

Bedouin hugs Dryad hiya! (LAAAAAG...) (6/12/94)

Players generally announce their departure, then pause a moment before

actually leaving, giving the others in the room the time to say good-bye.

Loki smells raw little fishies and runs off quickly to investigate before the raw little fishie shop closes! [7]  
Loki leaps from Bedo's arms  
wapini says "Night Loki!"  
Celeste says "bye Loki!"  
You say "G'night, kitten!"  
nightshade waves to kitty  
Loki toddles quickly off the side of the balcony  
Loki goes home.  
Loki has left. (4/22/94)

In fact, while in a public place, not allowing other players the opportunity to say good-bye generates comment:

Jopsy waves hi and runs away before getting sucked into glorious chitchat with all of you which he could easily do... but doesn't want to right now...  
Jopsy disappears into the shadows...  
Jopsy has left.  
Modesty oops.  
You say "How DARE he??"  
Shar says "Well hrmph!!"  
Katharyn says "ah, deserting our company in order to make a few computer moves on Conquer...sigh..."  
Shar feels snubbed. (11/4/92)

While the comments that followed Jopsy's disappearance were teasing in nature (and, in fact, he couldn't even hear them), Jopsy still elaborated immediately after his departure:

You sense that Jopsy Idles..."Back in a while... maybe... if not, back tomorrow. :-)"  
Jopsy senses that Bedouin grins. "Later, darlin'!" (11/4/92)

Private construction used by the public is, of course, still subject to the whims of the owner. Shar's Tavern, for instance, had long been a favorite "hang out" of the "regular" population, primarily because it was tricky to find and new players usually got frustrated and quit looking before they located it. When, for personal reasons, Shar decided that he no longer wanted to have anything to do with DragonMud, he destroyed his Tavern by recycling it [8], and as a result, the Tavern is no longer part of DragonMud's scenery.

A third type of "public" space exists in DragonMud in the Griffin and Gargoyle Conference Center. Originally built in August 1993 as a demonstration of how meeting rooms can work on a MUD as part of an ARPA project, the Center has become the site of monthly Town Meetings [9], and is only open to the general population for those meetings. Rather than the barely organized mayhem that general conversation in

public places can have, Town Meetings are conducted by a formal set of rules that are handed to each player as they enter the Auditorium. The Auditorium's description was written to remind players of the social hierarchy and was intentionally written to convey the "feel" of a more formal occasion and, as a rule, players comply.

#### The Auditorium

Tiers of comfortable seats slope downward toward the center of this circular room. Your attention focuses on a large velvet-covered table cluttered with books and unidentifiable instruments. A massive globe adorned with gas lights hangs centered above the table.

Contents:

tomes

The speakers table

The meetings are conducted by Jopsy, who presents a topic, and players "stand" to express their desire to speak and "sit" when they're done. Jopsy takes comments in order. Players generally recognize that not everything they might have to say is relevant to everyone; once the portions that might concern other players is concluded, details are deferred until after the meeting.

Jopsy says "Does anyone want any quests removed from  
    Quester's Rest?"

Kadiya stands up, letting it be known that she has something  
    to say.

Jopsy nods to Kadiya

Kadiya says "Um, I hate to say this, but I think mine should  
    probably be removed... It really needs some work, and I  
    haven't done it yet."

Jopsy says "Is it un-doable?"

Jopsy snorts.

Jopsy says "Is it impossible to do..."

Kadiya shakes her head, "No, it's do-able. Sort of..."

You say "Or merely extremely difficult?"

Kadiya nods to Bedouin.

Jopsy says "I'll only remove it if you want all the people  
    who've already done it to do it again once you complete  
    it..."

You say "Do you think you'll get time to work on it any time  
    soon?"

Kadiya wavers, "No, okay then. Leave it, and I'll try to fix  
    it asap..."

Jopsy nods. "Gotcha. :-)"

Kadiya sits down, allowing the next person a chance to speak.

Jopsy says "I've heard some talk about it and I have an idea  
    that may fix it quickly..."

Jopsy says "we can get together and talk about it later..  
    :-)"

Kadiya says "Okay, maybe I can talk with you about it later,  
    then?"

Kadiya grins and nods.

Comments made in Town Meetings conform in style to the surroundings. They tend to be articulate, occasionally technical, and (generally) to the point. There is some jargon, sometimes as a method of describing a technique, sometimes twisted slightly to become a form of shorthand (Minstrel says "Is there a way for an @effect to change the @lock on an object?" (3/10/94) ). Nonetheless, words tend to be typed in full, rather than using less-formal phonetic spellings. Jopsy's "Gotcha" above is an exception, however he tends to take a fairly informal tone to encourage interaction with "mortal "players. He also uses more "smilies" to the same purpose.

There are some other Town Meeting conventions that contrast with the informality of conversations in other public spaces. Players confine personal conversations to whispers within the room and pages to players logged in but not present. These only appear on the screens of the whisperer/pager and the recipient of the remarks. Players move (or "pose") only rarely, and enter and leave the meeting without public comment. The notation:

Fizzgig goes East to the main room.  
Fizzgig has left.

is generated by the database, not by any typing from the character Fizzgig.

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### Private Space

Private space on DragonMud is much less restricted in construction. Players create private spaces that reflect their RL personalities, their VR personalities, or fantastical imaginations. Conventions are more flexible, expectations of conformity are looser. In a conversation with other dinosaurs [10] Jopsy typed (speaking in his more formal role as the Dragon) "Dragon is and isn't a topology buff. 'Make it make sense is my cardinal rule. For those that don't know what they're doing, keep it topologically correct. Those that have a clue can do whatever they like'" (11/6/93).

Hence, there is great diversity in personal rooms among experienced builders. Mortis's home, for example, isn't actually a "room" at all. It is described as:

### Mortis's Hammock

The fabric of hammock gives as you climb in. You notice it has an unusual quality of stretchiness and tightness enabling

it to make room for several bodies comfortably. You grab one of several down pillows and crawl under a black comforter imprinted with tiny grey skulls.

[ Exits: down ]

Contents:

Pink Triangle

Mortis

Aiken-Lugonn, however, tends to be a bit more lavish in:

Aiken-Lugonn's Sumptuous Apartment

Tastefully decorated in white with black, purple, and gold trim, Aiken's apartment is lavish without being...too ostentatious. Overstuffed pillows in the Royal colors lie scattered randomly on the cool marble floor. A Maxfield Parrish winterscape glows blue from the east wall in the golden light of the bioluminescent lamps hanging from the ceiling. A crystal decanter of brandy sits amidst a sea of papers on a high table in a corner, its matching glasses resting on high chairs.

[ Exits: Comment Unfavorably on the Music, Comment Favorably on the Music, Sit down, Pour Some Brandy ]

Contents:

Gustavef

Aiken-Lugonn

The Comfy Sword

If, however, Aiken permits it, players can crawl under the table and find evidence of his more whimsical side. Going through that "dark" exit yields the following:

You feel the cold clammy touch of tentacles frisking you, making certain that you carry nothing that could harm Aiken-Lugonn (if he dies, nobody pays their dental benefits), and then you slip into the warm blackness that is the interdimensional pocket where Aiken keeps his secrets.

The Bisected Void

Warm and dark, this is a small pocket of interdimensional space that Aiken uses as a sort of rest stop between the world we know and the "place" where he hires his domestic help. Unimaginably long tentacles snake past the place where you float, glowing faintly green in the darkness. Sound echoes hollowly here, and eerie, tinkling music jangles in the distance.

[ Commands: float, Tentacle ]

[ Exits: out ]

"Look"ing at the tentacle tells you that:

Green and lithe, these writhe slowly from the unending blackness into the distant light. They glow faintly, in a phosphorescent shade of verdure that seems slightly unhealthy, and muscles bunch and crawl beneath their slick

hides.

while actually typing "tentacle" yields:

You clamber onto a tentacle, seating yourself to avoid the awful free-floating of this place that unsettles you so. The tentacle, warmer than you thought it would be, molds itself softly to your frame and rocks you gently to and fro through the dark.

Because of the short life-span of most MUDs (Islandia, fondly remembered by dinosaurs as a "classic", was only on-line from January 1990 until November 1990 (Bartle 1990:102), some dinosaurs no longer bother building at all. In an on-line interview with several dinos, I asked about building and got the following responses:

Randomness grins at dirque. "People have no loyalties to a server, and don't build massively anymore, because they know that servers are ephemeral.

Randomness never builds \*anything\* anymore. "Only what I can carry. It's like being a refugee." He grins.

Garrett builds.

Randomness hasn't the time.

Randomness used to build his home and stuff. "I was unemployed, then."

Randomness says "Then, I started working part time, and I built just my home."

Randomness says "Finally, I added hours and noticed that no matter what I built, it went a way. I gave up."

uwiz is a doctor and only builds a Razorblade Kiss with a one-line desc :)

Randomness grins at uwiz. "yeah, exactly."

uwiz says "dragon, read them the desc of razorblade kiss here, if you would - my home :)"

Randomness says "Now I just build myself, and sleep in the rooms of friends."

Randomness says "I wanted to show off stuff at the beginning."

Dragon types --> @find razorblade=r

Dragon quotes "Same as it ever was."

(11/6/93)

And that's it. The entire description of uwiz's home, Razorblade's Kiss, is "Same as it ever was." It is worth noting, however, that several other dinosaurs who participated in that particular interview (dirque, Garrett, and the Dragon) still build extensively when they have the time, in spite of the loss of what OliverJones called the "gee whiz" factor.

People generally treat private spaces as being exactly that: private. Conversations are informal, interactive, and tend to be personal. More informal language is used, and more words are typed phonetically

("prolly" or "proibly" for "probably", "whatcha" for "what are you", "sez" for "says") or are jargon ("huggles" is a contraction of "hugs" and "snuggles"). Nicknames are used ("Kat" for "Katharyn", "Bedo" or "Bedi" for "Bedouin", "Aik", "AL", or "Aiken" for "Aiken-Lugonn", "FB" for "Foolsbane") but with very rare exceptions, the human player's name is not used even when the players know each other outside of DragonMud.

Unlike Town Meeting, where anyone can enter or leave at any time, one requests the owner's permission before entering a private room:

You page "May I drop by? Or are you busy?" to Katharyn

Katharyn pages: please do.

tele \*katharyn

You feel a wrenching sensation...

Katharyn's room

Teleported.

Katharyn smiles. "Hi there!"

You say "Hi!"

(11/5/92)

or before inviting another player into the room:

Modesty pages: Hi! Whatcha two up to?

You page "Gossiping :-)" to Modesty

You sense that Modesty laughs, "Darn, that's what Shar said.

Any good gossip I'm missing?"

You say "Modesty just asked what we were upto - I said

'gossiping'... ;-)"

You say "And now she wants to know if there's any good gossip

that she's missing... ;-)"

Katharyn says "she's welcome, as far as I'm concerned. :-)"

Bedouin types --> page modesty=Kat sez c'mon over - we'll

catch you up ;-)

Katharyn grins.

Modesty has arrived.

Modesty says "Boo!"

You say "Hi, Modesty!"

(11/5/92)

and, if 'immortal', one asks permission of 'mortals' before teleporting them:

You whisper "Okay if I ask Aiken over?" to Katharyn.

Katharyn whispers "sure, why not? :-)"

You page "d'ja like to join the rest of us drunks?" to Aiken-

Lugonn

Aiken-Lugonn pages: Would love to. Where art thou being

drunketh?

Aiken-Lugonn senses that Bedouin chuckles. "Hang on, I'll

drag you ;-)

Bedouin types --> @tele \*aiken-lugonn=here

Aiken-Lugonn has arrived.

Teleported.

Shar says "y0"  
Katharyn says "Hello there!"  
Aiken-Lugonn bows deeply to all those assembled  
You say "Hi, Aiken! Welcome to the slow partly-drunk typists  
meeting ;-)"  
Shar laughs!  
Aiken-Lugonn feels right at home, Bedouin :-) Thank you  
(11/5/92)

Interestingly, this convention of asking permission of those present before inviting others into a conversation can also extend from the room's owner to the guests. Katharyn owned the room in which this conversation was occurring. Nonetheless, at one point, she typed:

Katharyn says "dirque wants to stop by? Okay with one and  
all?"  
Bedouin nods  
Aiken-Lugonn says "Dirque dirque dirque!"  
Katharyn says "Wait till he's here dear."  
Aiken-Lugonn is practicing.  
dirque has arrived.  
Bedouin removes the \*reserved\* sign from her lap... "Hi,  
dirque-darlin'!"  
Aiken-Lugonn says "Dirque dirque dirque!"  
Katharyn smiles. "Hi dirque!"  
dirque smiles and hops into Bedouin's lap  
dirque says "Hi Katharyn!" (11/5/92)

Further, 'immortals' usually warn others in the room when they're bringing another player into the conversation:

You sense that san'do is back...  
You page "YAYY!!" to san'do  
You sense that san'do blushes with happiness...  
You page "May I \*bamf\* you over? We're just yakking..." to  
san'do  
san'do pages: bamf away...  
Bedouin drags an ex-student that she hasn't seen in eons  
over...  
Bedouin types --> @tele \*san'do=here  
san'do has arrived.  
Teleported.  
Foolsbane says "Hi San'do!"  
Aiken-Lugonn says "You ex-student is in drag?"  
You say "Hi, san'do!"  
dirque\_shadowsword says "Hi sando"  
san'do looks around, checking out the old scenery...  
san'do bows to all... " hi! " (11/5/92)



Again, Malacar's Balcony is something of an anomaly, at least for me. Though it is in his private space, he's declared it open to the public. To a large degree, Malacar's Balcony serves the purpose that had formerly been filled by Shar's Tavern, in that it is a place where people who are "regulars" can chat without being distracted by questing players walking through. As a "god" I technically have the right to go anywhere at any time - a power I'm very careful not to abuse. The idea of just wandering into his home without his explicit permission, in spite of his open invitation, bothered me so much that, for several months, I'd wait for an invitation or page him and ask permission before dropping in to join whatever conversation was going on. He eventually got mock-annoyed:

Malacar senses that Bedouin knock-knocks?  
You sense that Malacar thought he already \*gave\* you a  
standing invitation...  
You sense that Malacar gives you another.  
You page "You did... but, well, um..." to Malacar  
Teleported.  
Bedouin rudely falls through the roof and hugs folks hiya!  
Malacar whispers "But what? " (3/2/94)

and eventually led to the following exchange:

Malacar senses that Bedouin knock-knocks? (Yeah, yeah, I know  
- but I still feel better asking first :-)  
You sense that Malacar threatens to @tel you in next time you  
knock. :-)  
Malacar senses that Bedouin jumps in (thanks :-)  
Teleported.  
Bedouin falls through the ether and hugs folks hiya!  
Malacar says "Hi, Bedouin! :-) And welcome." (4/22/94)

And from then on, I've just dropped in when there's been a  
conversation going on and I've had the time.

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## InterNet Spaces

Of particular interest to me is how people conceptualize where DragonMud "is", which led to the conversation held on 4/22/94, a portion of which is excerpted at the beginning of this paper. People seem to have a real sense of "place" about DragonMud - in fact, wapini states that she knows it's a place since it has an address; she types "tinylondon.ucsd.edu 4201", and she's there. Rather than trying to repeat what the participants said, however, I'm going to let them speak for themselves, with some minimal explanation. This conversation, which took place over approximately two hours, involved (at various levels of participation) Malacar (a wizard), nightshade,

Celeste, wapini (a wizard), Zeke, Czhorat, LadyHawke, nymph, k, Loki, Tourmaline, Melkir, and myself (as Bedouin). It was occasionally interrupted by players going idle to make dinner, greeting and departure rituals, or in Malacar's case, the security patrol at his place of employment asking why he was in the building so late. Again, this extract has been lightly edited for clarity, and extraneous material has been removed. (The original log is, of course, intact.)

Bedouin tries a different tack. "We're on a node of the InterNet - so what does the net look like? Where 'are' we?"

Malacar says "Bedouin -- I think that our souls are gathered in another level of reality from that when we 'normally' frequent."

Celeste says "We are in our own minds"

Malacar says "And each other's."

Celeste nods to Mal

wapini agrees with Mal also.

Celeste says "It's essential to understand this to deal with what we do here.."

Malacar says "We are all living in a mass consensual hallucination."

Bedouin has disconnected. [11]

Celeste says "And it's a rather shaky hallucination, at that" [a comment on my having gotten disconnected ]

wapini laughs..

wapini thinks Gurjeffian..(sp)..and believes she is asleep in rl. and only wide awake here.

Celeste says "Yeah, a place which doesn't exist, where you can socialize at almost any hour, with almost anyone."

Bedouin has connected.

Malacar says "But it does exist."

Celeste says "Yes, and no. it isn't physical"

Bedouin sighs. She shoulda expected that...

Bedouin grins. "Getting thrown out of where ever 'here' is, in the middle of asking where we 'are'? How ironic!"

Malacar says "If you ask Milo, he'll tell you it doesn't exist as intensely..."

Celeste says "I agree with Milo."

Celeste says "Real Life is more important"

Malacar says "...perhaps you're right, perhaps not. That question isn't relevant to this one."

Celeste says "And 'living' here is to not succeed at living in the real world."

Celeste says "a lot of the time"

wapini hmms.. I'm not so sure about rl.

Malacar says "Celeste, we're not having that argument at the moment, we're discussing a different question."

wapini has had enough of the real world.

Celeste thinks they're intertwined

Malacar says "My point was that both worlds exist, so far as we can tell, as realms of more-or-less consistent sensory input."

Celeste says "When we talk about the nature of this place, we are perforce comparing it to rl"

Malacar says "Or to meditation when you tune out all input."

Celeste nods, ok  
You say "I have a hard time making a separation - ya'll are certainly 'real' to me..."  
Malacar says "So, granted, the sensory input is different..."  
wapini agrees. "With bedo, that is."  
Celeste says "yeah...that's what's so blurry and confusing"  
wapini guesses it doesn't help when we play ourselves either.  
Malacar says "...both are 'real.' In different ways. That's why I said we're in a different reality at the moment."  
Celeste says "ok, I can see that, Mal"  
Celeste says "why do we put our efforts into this 'place', whatever it is, when we could be having friendships in rl?"  
wapini says "Because we are fairly like minded.. but can't all be in the same geographic location?"  
Celeste says "I now have some of the deepest friendships I've known, with people I've barely met, or haven't met"  
Malacar says "And I put effort into this place because it is a beautiful place, worth the effort I put into it."  
Celeste says "Yes...hrm"  
wapini agrees with CC too.  
You say "Does that 'different reality' have a 'space'? Is it even important whether or not it has a 'place'?"  
Malacar considers Bedouin's question.  
Celeste wonders why she hasn't found that in the other reality  
Bedouin grins. "We weed out the weirdos quicker here :-)"  
Malacar says "What do you mean by 'space' and 'place,' Bedouin?"  
Celeste hehs. :)  
Malacar is a weirdo. You missed him. :-)  
wapini grins.. not that kind of weird-o Mal.  
Malacar says "Heh. Okay."  
Bedouin grins. "Yeah, but you're cute. That makes up for a lot :-)" [12]  
Malacar laughs!  
wapini grins..  
Celeste says "this place has no real physical sensation. You cannot feel when someone hugs you, in a physical sense. there's a great buffer which prevents physical sensation"  
Malacar says "Okay, I'll take that one too. :-) But about 'space' and 'place' Bedouin?"  
Celeste says "and yet our minds touch"  
Malacar says "Depends. You can feel it if you're here deeply enough."  
Celeste can feel it, emotionally, intellectually...not with her hands. maybe the faint glimmerings of physicality. it's not the same, the physical presence of the other person is not here. it's akin to autoeroticism  
You say "Place. I guess I would contend that this is a 'gathering place' - we log on to meet with and encounter people we like (for whatever reason)."  
Malacar says "So this \*is\* a place. I'll agree with that."  
Malacar says "What about 'space?'"  
You say "For humans, historically, there's been a specific 'space' in which these meetings occurred - the

barbershop, the agora, the coffeeshop, the neighborhood bar..." [13]

wapini humms.. she feels everyone..

Celeste shrugs. physicality represents a 'place' to her.

Celeste says "the Town Square"

Celeste says "The Auditorium"

Celeste says "the Balcony Overlooking the Unknown"

Malacar says "These are spaces, Bedouin."

Malacar says "They're in a different plane, if you will, but they are spaces."

wapini thinks she understands what Bedo means.. we no longer have those places in rl.. just the Mall.

wapini thinks we've replaced those places with Dragonmud.

Celeste says "yeah. it's just not like any other space in the other reality. well, similar, but not of the same nature"

You say "So, where is this 'space'? Out 'there' somewhere?"

wapini is very literal... to her it's inside the monitor.

Celeste says "here. in your mind, in mine, in our ...hmm...what's it called...consensual mind?"

Celeste can't find the right phrase

Malacar says "It is separated from the RL world by all distance and none. Just like in the SF and fantasy books we read. It's a different plane. Or dimension, if you prefer."

Malacar says "Communal hallucination?"

Celeste grins

Bedouin grins. She knew she'd get three different answers from ya'll :-)

Malacar considers RL to be another communal hallucination.

Celeste does not think it's quite the same in rl....hrm

Malacar's answer actually coincides with Celeste's. It's just phrased differently.

You say "Is the space more 'real' if you know the person to whom you're talking?"

Malacar grins. "Except for the bit about RL being the same, I guess."

Celeste sighs, can't pick out the differences, but there are some for her.

Bedouin apologizes for the weirdness of these questions - she seems to be lacking the language in which to ask them.

Malacar says "You believe in the objective reality of RL, Celeste. I don't. I think that's where our difference spring forth."

Celeste says "well, no more than if I was talking to someone I didn't know in rl, or was in a room full of strangers, except that i can see the strangers, watch them, interact without speaking."

Malacar says "You can do that here too."

Celeste says "That's it. there's the difference!"

Celeste says "I can use body language in rl."

Malacar nods at Celeste.

Celeste says "I can dance in rl."

wapini can do all that here.

Celeste says "I exist in a very physical way in rl."

Malacar waves his hand and dust motes dance at your feet for you pleasure.

You say "But not VR, Celeste?"  
Celeste says "It's different for me. I cannot \_describe\_ how i dance here, or \_describe\_ my facial expressions past a certain point"  
Bedouin ahhs - thanks!  
Celeste says "in rl, i do not have to describe them"  
Celeste says "i DO them"  
Malacar says "It is different here, yes. But still real."  
Malacar says "In RL you send nerve impulses to your muscles, which then produce reflections of your will for others to perceive."  
Malacar says "Here you send impulses to your fingers, which then do the same."  
Celeste says "yes, but it requires some intelligence, some ability with words..."  
You say "I guess that's why I asked if it was more 'real' if you knew the person to whom you're talking - for instance, if I see: Celeste laughs, I can visualize a memory of what that looks like."  
Celeste says "yeah, that helps. i have grown much closer to both Bedo and wapini since I met them, because i can imagine them"  
Malacar is very comfortable with written (well, typed) words. Maybe that's part of why it's easy for him to consider this place real.  
Celeste is not very verbal. she's getting better. partly due to the mud  
Czhorat too...and he can get to know peopel here too..  
Czhorat says "if you blank out the names, you can still tell who's who..."  
Czhorat says "we have mannerisms here just as in rl."  
Malacar agrees.  
Celeste says "yes, and personalities.."  
wapini grins.. and agrees.  
incidentally, Czhorat dislikes the phrase 'RL',..implies this in NOT real.  
Celeste says "that's why 'vr' means virtual REALity"  
Bedouin uses VR because it expresses the non-physicality of the InterNet - not because it's not-real.  
Mr.X floats up in the air and sits cross-legged three feet of the ground. Can you i dentify this man?  
wapini says "That's malacar."  
Malacar chuckles.  
Malacar says "Typo's and all."  
Czhorat calls things outside of the insurance agency 'rl' these days.. peopel at the office look at him strange.  
nightshade grins at Cz, but appreciates the perspective  
Malacar assumes that in that case, you \*do\* mean RL as a positive term.  
Tourmaline knows what Cz means...  
wapini thinks of here being rl.. and out there being asleep.  
Czhorat says "funny...they always look at me strange."  
Czhorat's parents used to give him strange looks when he'd sit here sometimes laughing insanely at his computer.  
Malacar says "Oh, dear."  
Malacar says "Speaking of RL, I was just accosted."  
Celeste says "hrm?"

Malacar was just accosted by a police officer.  
Czhorat says "a POLICE officer?"  
wapini says "Whatever for?"  
nightshade says "as is... PO-leece?"  
Malacar says "I'm not supposed to be here. :-)"  
Celeste says "why not???"  
Malacar says "Place closed half an hour ago."  
nightshade notes that 'here' is ambiguous  
Bedouin grins at nightshade. "You missed the beginning of  
this convo"  
Malacar is going to stay connected so he can log the rest of  
this conversation.  
Malacar says "I'm at work."  
Malacar says "Only we closed some time ago."  
Czhorat says "dragonmud is a good thing -- it keeps peopel so  
conscientious that they wokr hours past closing time."  
Czhorat says "or a bad thing for the same reason, as the case  
may be."  
Malacar goes idle.  
Bedouin notes that, since nightshade is present, she's gonna  
re-ask the initial question. "Where 'are' we? Where is  
'here'?"  
nightshade is obligated to quote Bruce Sterling 'cyberspace  
is where you are when you are 'on the telephone'  
Celeste says "good point, ns"  
nightshade says "these issues are 100 years old"  
Celeste thinks it's even further into the phone-space, tho  
nightshade thinks the many of the issues concerning telephony  
apply to being 'in the mud'  
Czhorat says "re : your question, Bedo..."  
Czhorat says "I think of 'here' as 'Malacar's balcony'....  
This is a place to me.."  
Czhorat says "we are 'together'...at least to my way of  
thinking."  
wapini nods.. to her.. I see us all.. in a semicircle..  
talking..  
Tourmaline says "Since I'm relatively new to this, it feels a  
little like RELAY Chat. We're in a kind of null-  
space."  
wapini sees us all.. kinda on the floor..  
You say "But where IS Malacar's balcony?"  
wapini says "Upstairs at QR."  
Czhorat says "it's off of the QR building in Tynylondon..."  
Celeste says "off of his room, off of the quester's rest..."  
Celeste says "upstairs above Town Square..."  
Czhorat says "all of which are real places....at least to me."  
nightshade says "like in some non-topographical muds?"  
You say "Okay, okay - then where's DragonMud?"  
Celeste says "It's a familiar island of time"  
Tourmaline says "Bedo, maybe that's what I meant by a null-  
space - the cyberspace of the MUD..."  
Celeste says "and space"  
wapini thinks it's at tynylondon.ucsd.edu 4201  
wapini just thinks she goes to that address.. and she's  
here..  
Celeste shrugs. shuts up.  
Czhorat says "it's kind of...across from where I live...not

up/down, north/south, or east/west...but another direction, orthagonal to those."

Just because it isn't a direction doesn't mean that it isn't a place.. Czhorat

Bedouin nods... okay...

wapini says "It's real to me."

Celeste says "and it doesn't really matter here what time of day it is"

Celeste says "we're from all different times"

wapini hmmmms.. not quite.. cause I'm getting sleepy.

nightshade says "i think it all boiled down to 'cyberspace' or Tourmalines 'null space'"

nightshade says "the rest is socially constructed"

Bedouin guesses that she just has a problem with 'cyberspace' - it doesn't define anything.

Tourmaline says "Night - what do you mean by 'the rest'?"

Czhorat says "well...what we call 'rl' is just empty space.. the rest is all structure.."

Celeste says "well, it does define something, just not what we would think of as something, from an rl viewpoint. it's kind of recursive"

nightshade says "the sense of being in a particular kind of space (a private balcony) which is different from a public space (TS) or a private room (bedroom), is socially constructed"

Czhorat says "same as the differences in 'rl', though..."

Czhorat sees this balcony as a place.. at least as real as his office.

Celeste says "that's why people who haven't been to vr don't understand it...it's something you have to be in to comprehend..."

nightshade says "there's a physical diff. between an enclosed room and an empty field... here, text and use define space"

Celeste says "sort of like visiting europe, or africa...you can't understand how it is just through pictures."

Celeste says "although pictures might be better than words, and tv programs better than pictures..."

Tourmaline says "The lack of a 'real physicality' makes MUDs really different. In rl, if you want to do a thing, you just DO it. Here, you hafta search a bunch of methods before something is recognized as a real command."

Celeste sighs and is getting too involved in figuring it out, maybe

Tourmaline tells Celeste not to worry too much about it.. who knows if the answer to the question (if there is one) really makes a difference? POV probably more important than anything else.

Bedouin was about to agree with your 'recursion' comment (though she'd have said 'reification' \*shrug\*) - so perhaps a better question would be 'what IS cyberspace?'

nightshade thinks the aspects of making something you do 'convincing'.. learning the commands, etc.. correspond to subjective limitations on RL activity

Czhorat says "may as well ask what is SPACE then, Bedo...."

nymph likes the fact that this is all words. it requires a bit of talent to make successful quests and such with

only words.

Czhorat's point to you, CC, is that the medium is NOT what ultimately matters.. it is the message and the mastery of the medium.

Bedouin dunnos - she hasn't yet figured out how to fly through the ether RL yet...

Tourmaline disagrees with Nightshade. "If an object can be manipulated in RL, it's obvious. Here, the descs don't make it obvious what you can look at more closely, pick up, etc.

Celeste says "that was my point. you have to master the medium to comprehend it. even then it's hard to see the big picture of it."

Czhorat thinks here is just a place...because he can't "find" tinyLondon with respect to where he is, that doesn't make it any less real.

Bedouin grins at CZ. That was the original question. Where 'are' we? Where's the 'space' where this convo is taking place?

nightshade says "okay.. our 'null space' (phone, etc) is not isomorphic to 'space' at all.."

nightshade says "it's a sort of surface..."

Bedouin is still following, nightshade...

nightshade says "a phenomenal field, across which experience plays.."

Tourmaline groans - Nightshades' comments are starting to sound like philosophy..

Czhorat says "well.. that's what he does.."

Tourmaline says "I mean.. 'a phenomenal field, across which experience plays..' It struck me as a little cheesy. I apologize, if it was not meant in that light."

Bedouin will take philosophy - she's trying to wrap her brain about something rather intangible.

nightshade says "we all are experiencing parallel things,. so our subjective experiences are parallel.. like moads :)"

nightshade says "MONADS"

Celeste says "monads? whassat?"

Czhorat says "yeah.. monads."

nightshade says "only THIS monadology works. holds together well"

Celeste says "oh, oh, nomads. :)"

Celeste says "nomads? monads?"

Celeste gets out her dictionary

Celeste can't find her dictionary. grrr.

Czhorat thinks NS can field this one better than he.

nightshade says "since our experiences are coordinated .. we have, subjectively, a shared phenomenal field.. which amounts to a shared 'space', since experience defines the universe-as-experienced"

Celeste wishes she had a degree in psychology so she could write a paper on muds. Her Zoology degree doesn't do much good here.

nightshade asides [monad... from the metaphysics of Liebniz, which is pretty awful :)]

Czhorat coulda said THAT much.

Tourmaline says "Night, does that imply that, since each of us perceives the universe differently, that there are



somehow multiple universes, each of which is defined by  
          one person's experience?"  
nightshade says "i'm limiting myself to cyberspace right now,  
          tourmaline.. don't tempt me. :)"  
nightshade pokes Bedo.. "whaddaya think?"  
Tourmaline says "Night, you could conceivably try to argue it  
          in the case of muds as well. :)"  
Bedouin is stunned - not that she has a better grasp on  
          where DragonMud 'is', mind you - but that you're capable  
          of defining your concept of where it is so well!  
nightshade is a pro  
wapini hmmmms.. maybe.. but ...  
nightshade ;)  
Bedouin is impressed  
nightshade says "actually.. i didn't have a concept of where  
          dragonmud was until i tried to say where it was... "  
Bedouin grins at nightshade "thanks!"

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## Conclusions

People invest time and imagination in their constructions on DragonMud, working to create the proper mood and "feel" of a place wholly in text. To a large extent, players create places where other people will be comfortable; there's not much personal benefit in creating something that no one else ever sees or uses. I would contend that the sense of "space" and "place" created, and the conventions of usage surrounding those spaces and places, contribute to the sense of "community" felt by those players, in spite of the non-geographical location of that community.

I am mindful of the fact that I am, to no small end, speaking as a "native anthropologist". Nonetheless, (citing Rheingold again)

MUDs are living laboratories for studying the first-level impacts of virtual communities - the impacts on our psyches, on our thoughts and feelings as individuals. And our attempts to analyze the second-level impacts of phenomena like MUDs on our real-life relationships and communities lead to fundamental questions about social values in an age when so many of our human relationships are mediated by communications technology. (1993:146)

There is much yet to be done.

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End Notes:

[1] Comments prefaced by "You say" are mine, speaking as Bedouin. Several nicknames are used in this excerpt: "Mal" is short for Malacar, and "Bedo" is short for Bedouin. All excerpts have been lightly edited for spelling (some spelling errors are intentional, others are distinct characteristics of the person typing) and clarity, though the original logs remain intact. Additionally, a glossary follows these end notes.

[2] Of the seven TinyMUDs that Bartle ranked "first rate" in 1990, DragonMud is the only one still up and running (1990:102).

[3] Crane's version of the TinyMUD code is now being used by more than a dozen other sites, including TinyMUDlin at Bond University on the Gold Coast of Australia, Athens located at Merrimack University in Maine, Prohibition in Santa Cruz, California, ToadMUD in San Diego, and MetropolisMUD in Raleigh, North Carolina. One of the most innovative uses of Crane's code is SolSys, an educational MUD based at NAU and used by several universities to team-teach an interactive anthropology course.

[4] There are many issues that I'm exploring in working in DragonMud, most of which are far beyond the scope of this paper. However, it's worth noting that the ability to be anonymous is definitely a factor in DragonMud, along with gender issues, friendships and interpersonal relationships, systems of exchange, the political hierarchy, groups as sites of memory as well as rank, fictive kinships, time compression and expansion, and how VR and RL overlap and how each informs the other, and especially, how DragonMud acts as a Goffmanesque "backstage" where players practice RL skills.

[5] See, for example, Rheingold and O'Brien, in addition to numerous comments made on DragonMud.

[6] About 35 players actually hold "wizard" powers and 10 have "god" powers, however many are inactive for any of a variety of reasons - loss of net access, RL job responsibilities, new infants, and so on.

[7] Loki is one of the few avatars on DragonMud who stays within character on a consistent basis. Loki is a grey kitten who, beyond an occasional "Mew", does not speak in public, though he will whisper or page private conversations. When he needs to say something he holds up a sign with his comment on it, or "gives you a look that seems to imply" whatever it is he wants to say. Before typing his "raw little fishies" comments, he'd whispered to me that he was going to a local restaurant to get sushi.

[8] The command is called "recycling" because it frees those database reference numbers up for other players to use. Additionally, it's worth noting that the DragonMud database is backed up; in the case of systems failures and other disasters, constructions are not lost. In this case, however, Jopsy agreed to honor Shar's wish to leave, and did not restore Shar's Tavern from the backup database.

[9] Town Meetings, occurring on the first Thursday of each month, were instituted on DragonMud in May 1992. Any player who chooses to may participate.

[10] A "dinosaur" or "dino" is someone who's been mudding since the original TinyMUD at CMU or other very early (and now defunct) MUDs.

[11] University of Wisconsin's dial-up is notoriously unstable, and I get disconnected from the InterNet with great regularity. Players have become so accustomed to my sudden departures and rapid reappearances that they will hold comments to wait for my return. In this instance, Malacar had started a log shortly after the conversation began, so I've used his log to fill in the pieces that occurred when I was disconnected. (I sent him the beginning of my log, in trade). Further disconnections and reconnections have been omitted from this extract.

[12] This is an on-going joke. Malacar is one of the few "regulars" that I've never met RL, nor have I seen a picture of him, nor has he ever told me what he looks like.

[13] I'm cribbing from Oldenburg's The Great Good Place, in which he contends that people have usually had home, work, and a "third place" where they meet with their friends.

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Glossary:

ASCII characters: the alpha-numeric characters on a standard keyboard  
Bedo: Bedouin's nickname  
Bedouin: my most commonly run character on DragonMud, holding the rank of Goddess and co-administrator of DragonMud.  
bot: a player being run entirely by a computer program.  
A robot.  
CC: Celeste's nickname  
code: a computer program  
convo: conversation  
CZ: Czhorat's nickname  
dark exit: a non-explicit exit, one that must be discovered or inferred by reading the room's description rather than the "Exit" line  
dbref: data-base reference number; the identifying number of an object, player, room, or exit  
desc: description (of a room, player, object, or exit)  
dinosaur: players who've been mudding since the original TinyMUD at CMU, generally, and other very early (and now defunct) MUDs.  
Dragon: John "Jopsy" Crane, the creator, architect, system administrator, and ultimate authority of DragonMud.  
DragonMud: a multi-user real-time community, residing in a computer at University of California at San Diego  
ether: the air, a holdover from amateur radio  
FDL: falls down, laughing

FOTCL: falls off the chair, laughing  
fwiw: for what it's worth  
FYA: for your amusement  
FYI: for your information  
Gathering: more than a mere "party" which is usually a one-day event, Gatherings are generally three day parties over Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends. Formerly held in Flagstaff AZ, now in San Diego CA  
gmata: great minds always think alike (it's worth noting that this acronym started as "gmta", but no one could figure out how to pronounce it, so the "always" was added) Frequently used when two players type the same thing.  
huggles: a contraction of "hugs" and "snuggles"  
idle: logged on, but inactive  
iima: if I may ask  
imho: in my humble opinion  
immortal: players with wizard or god powers; also, on DragonMud, a group of characters who predate timestamps  
imnsho: in my not-so-humble opinion  
InterNet: the "information highway", the world-wide interlinking of computer networks  
IRC: InterNet Relay Chat - a multi-user interface without wholly being a MUD. There are no "spaces" described.  
IRL: In Real Life - the definition of which is still a matter of considerable debate  
j/k: just kidding  
Jopsy: the Dragon of DragonMud  
LaDaPa: Labor Day party, an annual DragonMud Gathering  
lag: the occasional pauses caused by heavy traffic on the InterNet - those close to DragonMud's host machine=20 generally experience less lag than those farther away  
local: someone or something nearby in RL, as in: He's local to me.  
LOL: laughs out loud  
macro: a meta-command written by a player using a client  
Mal: Malacar's nickname  
Malcony: contraction of "Malacar's Balcony"  
MemDay: Memorial Day weekend, usually the largest Gathering of DragonMudders  
MOO: another form of a Multi-User Domain  
mortal: players without wizard or god powers - in fact, most of the player population  
MUSH: another form of Multi-User Domain  
ns: nightshade's nickname (also, less commonly, "nigh")  
page: a method of sending messages to a player not in the same room. Only the recipient will see the page.  
'pini: wapini's nickname  
pose: an action, rather than a statement, made by a player  
POV: point of view  
proably: probably  
proolly: probably  
QE: Quester Emeritus - the highest earned rank on DragonMud  
QR: Quester's' Rest - a series of rooms in DragonMud. Residence in Quester's' Rest is reserved to those of Quester Emeritus rank.  
rember: remember  
RL: Real Life - the definition of which is still a matter of

considerable debate

robot: a player being run entirely by a computer program.

ROTFL: rolls on the floor, laughing

RSN: Real Soon Now - sometimes meant  
sarcastically, sometimes hopefully, always undefined

SC: SantaCruz (CA) usually, but occasionally South Carolina

SD: San Diego (CA) usually, but occasionally South Dakota

server: any of the variety of codes used to run Multi-User  
Domains, including TinyMUD, MUSH, MOO, and so on.

smilies: ASCII characters used to make sideways faces: :-)  
for humor, ;- ) for winking or sarcasm, :-/ for chagrin,  
:-( for sadness, and so on

SO: Significant Other

spam: in proper useage, useless text on one's screen.  
used incorrectly, more text appearing on a screen than  
the reader can assimilate

spoof: either "posing" an action, or the posing of an action  
without a player's name being included in the action

teleport: moving from one location to another without walking  
through the connecting rooms

telnet: a network command that can be used to connect to  
DragonMud. Since input and output are mingled on the  
screen making it difficult to follow conversations,  
players frequently call this form of communication "raw  
telnet"

TF: TinyFugue, a client program that most players use to  
connect to DragonMud that separates what the player is  
typing from other comments appearing on their screen

TS: Town Square

whisper: a method of sending messages to a player in the same  
room. Only the recipient will see the whisper.

wrt: with regard to

  

@concorde: a joke command, the idea being that someday RL  
people and things will be able to be teleported to other  
places

@desc: the command that allows the player to describe  
something

@effect: a method of causing something to happen when a  
player  
enters a room or uses an object

@find: when used by most players @find locates items that  
they own, when used by wizards and gods @find searches  
the entire database

@force: a command reserved to wizards and gods, it allows  
force another player's actions. Usually spoofed rather  
than used, as all @forces are logged because of a high  
potential for abuse.

@lock: a method of controlling access to areas or objects

@mail: a message program internal to DragonMud

@nag: a running joke, not an actual command - only Bedouin  
has the power to @nag the Dragon about things that need  
to be done

@nuke: @recycle, but another running joke in that the command  
"@nuke" doesn't actually exist

@recycle: the removal of an item or items from the database

@teleport: or @tel a power restricted to wizards and gods,

allowing them to move players or objects around  
DragonMud

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