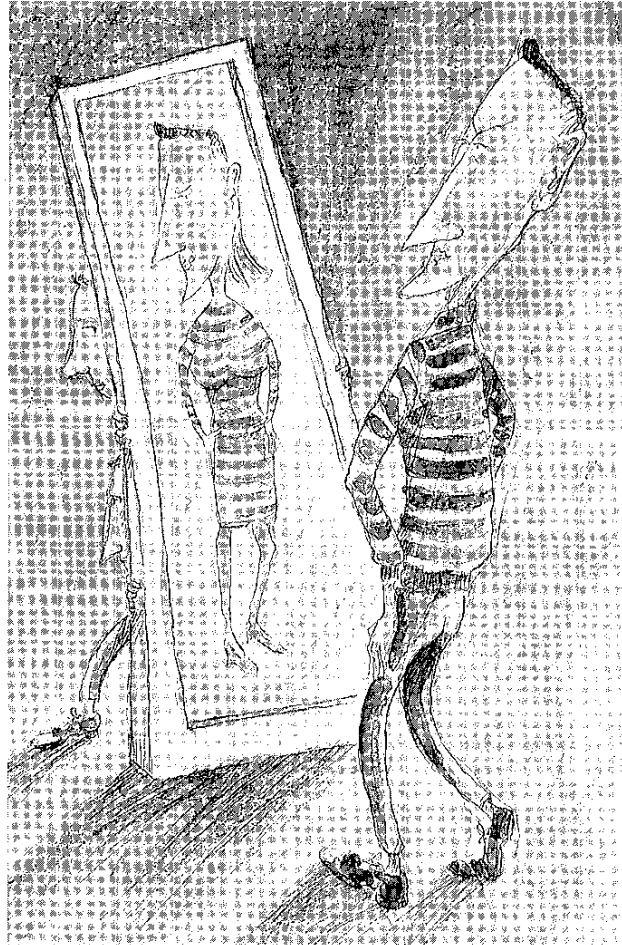


Tinysex and Gender Trouble



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Sherry Turkle

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Guest Editors' Note: Most of us, most of the time, neatly fit ourselves and others into one of two mutually exclusive social categories. We are either men or women; we cannot be both at once. This is something we take for granted. Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* is an ethnography of the Internet world. In this excerpt from the book, she examines how

that world has created forms of human interaction that cannot rely on such taken-for-granted knowledge. When a person is online, one's gender identity must be actively constructed and presented within an interaction. Her accounts of gender-swapping and virtual cross-dressing suggest ways in which computer technologies can provide unique opportunities for exploring how we enact our gender

identities and what we require of others as they enact theirs.

A word on acronyms. Multi-User Domains (MUDs) are Internet locations, virtual spaces in which participants interact anonymously. Most are text-based but some use graphical icons. They are computer programs organized around different themes, games, and interests but they share the characteristic that MUD players participate through the process of creating themselves within the community activity. LambdaMOO is a specific MUD (MOO is "MUD Object Oriented".)

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

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

When Jiffy's question appeared on my screen, I was standing in a room of LambdaMOO filled with characters engaged in sexual banter in the style of the movie *Animal House*. The innuendos, double entendres, and leering invitations were scrolling by at a fast clip; I felt awkward, as though at a party to which I had been invited by mistake. I was reminded of junior high school dances when I wanted to go home or hide behind the punch bowl. I was reminded of kissing games in which it was awful to be chosen and awful not to be chosen. Now, on the MUD, I had a new

option. I wondered if playing a male might allow me to feel less out of place. I could stand on the sidelines and people would expect me to make the first move. And I could choose not to. I could choose simply to "lurk," to stand by and observe the action. Boys, after all, were not called prudes if they were too cool to play kissing games. They were not categorized as wallflowers if they held back and didn't ask girls to dance. They could simply be shy in a manly way-alooof, above it all.

Two days later I was back in the MUD. After I typed the command that joined me, in Boston, to the computer in California where the MUD resided, I discovered that I had lost the paper on which I had written my MUD password. This meant that I could not play my own character but had to log on as a guest. As such, I was assigned a color: Magenta. As "Magenta_guest" I was again without gender. While I was struggling with basic MUD commands, other players were typing messages for all to see - such as "Magenta_guest gazes hot and enraptured at the approach of Fire_Eater." Again I was tempted to hide from the frat party atmosphere by trying to pass as a man.¹ When much later I did try playing a male character, I finally experienced that permission to move freely I had always imagined to be the birthright of men. Not only was I approached less frequently, but I found it easier to respond to an unwanted overture with aplomb, saying something like, "That's flattering, Ribald-Temptress, but I'm otherwise engaged." My sense of freedom didn't just

¹At the time, I noted that I felt panicky when female or female-presenting characters approached the gender-neutral "me" on the MUD and "waved seductively." And I noted this with considerable irritation. Surely, I thought, my many years of psychoanalysis should see me through this experience with greater equanimity. They did not.

involved a different attitude about sexual advances, which now seemed less threatening. As a woman I have a hard time deflecting a request for conversation by asserting my own agenda. As a MUD male, doing so (nicely) seemed more natural; it never struck me as dismissive or rude. Of course, my reaction said as much about the construction of gender in my own mind as it did about the social construction of gender in the MUD.

Playing in MUDs, whether as a man, a woman, or a neuter character, I quickly fell into the habit of orienting myself to new cyberspace acquaintances by checking out their gender. This was a strange exercise, especially because a significant proportion of the female-presenting characters were RL men, and a good number of the male-presenting characters were RL women. I was not alone in this curiously irrational preoccupation. For many players, guessing the true gender of players behind MUD characters has become something of an art form. Pavel Curtis, the founder of LambdaMOO, has observed that when a female-presenting character is called something like FabulousHotBabe, one can be almost sure there is a man behind the mask.² . . .

GENDER TROUBLE³

What is virtual gender-swapping all about? Some of those who do it claim that it is not particularly significant. "When I play a woman I don't really take it too seriously," said twenty-year-old Andrei. "I do it to improve the ratio of women to

² Pavel Curtis, "Mudding: Social Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Realities," available via anonymous ftp://parcftp.xerox.com/pub/MOO/papers/DIAC92.*. Cited in Amy Bruckman, "Gender Swapping on the Internet," available via anonymous ftp://media.mit.edu/pub/ash/paper/gender-swapping.*.

³A.R Stone, presentation at *Doing Gender on the 'Net Conf.*, M.I.T., Cambridge, MA, Apr. 7, 1995.

men. It's just a game." On one level, virtual gender-swapping is easier than doing it in real life. For a man to present himself as female in a chat room, on an IRC channel, or in a MUD, only requires writing a description. For a man to play a woman on the streets of an American city, he would have to shave various parts of his body; wear makeup, perhaps a wig, a dress, and high heels; perhaps change his voice, walk, and mannerisms. He would have some anxiety about passing, and there might be even more anxiety about not passing,

spicuously. [When online] I don't actually have [virtual] sex with anyone. I get out of that by telling the men there that I'm shy and still unsure. But I like hanging out; it makes gays seem less strange to me. But it is not so easy. You have to think about it, to make up a life, a job, a set of reactions.

Virtual cross-dressing is not as simple as Andrei suggests. Not only can it be technically challenging, it can be psychologically complicated. Taking a virtual role may involve you in ongoing relationships. In this process, you may discover things about yourself that you never knew before. You may discover things about other people's response to you., You are not in danger of being arrested, but you are embarked on

MUDDing as a female character. In response to my question, "Has MUDDing ever caused you any emotional pain?" he says, "Yes, but also the kind of learning that comes from hard times."

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

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

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

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which would pose a risk of violence and possibly arrest. So more men are willing to give virtual cross-dressing a try. But once they are online as female, they soon find that maintaining this fiction is difficult. To pass as a woman for any length of time requires understanding how gender inflects speech, manner, the interpretation of experience. Women attempting to pass as men face the same kind of challenge. One woman said that she "worked hard" to pass in a room on a commercial network service that was advertised as a meeting place for gay men.

I have always been so curious about what men do with each other. I could never even imagine how they talk to each other. I can't exactly go to a gay bar and eavesdrop incon-

an enterprise that is not without some gravity and emotional risk.

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

Case, a thirty-four-year-old industrial designer who is happily married to a coworker, is currently

continues:

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

Case has played Mairead for nearly a year, but even a brief experience playing a character of another gender can be evocative. William James said, "Philosophy is the art of imagining alternatives." MUDs are proving grounds for an action-based philosophical practice that can serve as a form of consciousness-raising about gender issues. For example, on many MUDs, offering technical assistance has become a common way in which male characters "purchase" female attention, analogous to picking up the check at an RL dinner. In real life, our expectations about sex roles (who offers help, who buys dinner, who brews the coffee) can become so ingrained that we no longer notice them. On MUDs, however, expectations are expressed in visible textual actions, widely witnessed and openly discussed. When men playing females are plied with unrequested offers of help on MUDs, they often remark that such chivalries communicate a belief in female incompetence. When women play males on MUDs and realize that they are no longer

being offered help, some reflect that those offers of help may well have led them to believe they needed it. As a woman, "First you ask for help because you think it will be expedient," says a college sophomore, "then you realize that you aren't developing the skills to figure things out for yourself." . . .

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

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

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

And indeed, Garrett says that as a female frog, he did feel freer to express the helpful side of his nature than he ever had as a man. "My competitive side takes a back seat when I am Ribbit." Garrett's motivations for his experiment in gender-swapping run deep.

As a male, I could stand on the sidelines and people would expect me to make the first move.

Growing up, competition was thrust upon him and he didn't much like it. Garrett, whose parents divorced when he was an infant, rarely saw his father. His mother offered little protection from his brother's bullying. An older cousin regularly beat him up until Garrett turned fourteen and could inflict some damage of his own. Garrett got the clear idea that male aggression could only be controlled by male force. . . . From Garrett's point of view, most computer bulletin boards and discussion groups are not collaborative but hostile environments, characterized by "flaming." This is the practice of trading angry and often ad hominem remarks on any given topic.

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

Garrett found MUDs different and a lot more comfortable. "On

More men are willing to give virtual cross-dressing a try.

MUDs," he says, "people were making a world together. You got no prestige from being abusive."

Garrett's gender-swapping on MUDs gave him an experience-to-think-with for thinking about gender. From his point of view, all he had to do was to replace male with female in a character's description to change how people saw him and what he felt comfortable expressing. Garrett's MUD experience, where as a female he could be collaborative without being stigmatized, left him committed to bringing the helpful frog persona into his life as a male, both on and off the MUD. . . .

When Garrett stopped playing the female Ribbit and started playing a helpful male frog named Ron, many of Garrett's MUDding companions interpreted his actions as those of a woman who now wanted to try playing a man. Indeed, a year after his switch, Garrett says that at least one of his MUD friends, Dredlock, remains unconvinced that the same person has actually played both Ribbit and Ron. Dredlock insists that while Ribbit was erratic (he says, "She would sometimes walk out in the middle of a conversation"), Ron is more dependable. Has Garrett's behavior changed? Is Garrett's behavior the same but viewed differently through the filter of gender? Garrett believes that both are probably true. "People on the MUD have ... seen the change and it hasn't necessarily convinced them that I'm male, but they're also not sure that I'm female. And so, I've sort of gotten into this state where my gender is unknown and people are pretty much resigned to not know-

ing it." Garrett says that when he helped others as a female frog, it was taken as welcome, natural, and kind. When he now helps as a male frog, people find it

unexpected and suspect that it is a seduction ploy. The analogy with his real life is striking. There, too, he found that playing the helping role as a man led to trouble because it was easily misinterpreted as an attempt to create an expectation of intimacy. . . .

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

BEING DIGITAL

[My research about the internet shows] people doing what they have always done: trying to understand themselves and improve their lives by using the materials they have at hand. Although this practice is familiar, the fact that these materials now include the ability to live through virtual personae means two fundamental changes have occurred in our situation. We can easily move through multiple identities, and we can embrace-or be trapped by-cyber-

space as a way of life.

As more and more people have logged on to this new way of life and have experienced the effects of virtuality, a genre of cultural criticism is emerging to interpret these phenomena. An article in *The New York Times* described new books on the subject by dividing them into three categories- utopian, utilitarian, and apocalyptic.⁴ Utilitarian writers emphasize the practical side of the new way of life. Apocalyptic writers warn us of increasing social and personal fragmentation, more widespread surveillance, and loss of direct knowledge of the world. To date, however, the utopian approaches have dominated the field. They share the technological optimism that has dominated post-war culture, an optimism captured in the advertising slogans of my youth: "Better living through chemistry," "Progress is our most important product." In our current situation, technological optimism tends to represent urban decay, social alienation, and, economic polarization as out-of-date formulations of a problem that could be solved if appropriate technology were applied in sufficient doses; for example, technology that would link everyone to the "information superhighway." We all want to believe in some quick and relatively inexpensive solution to our difficulties. We are tempted to believe with the utopians that the Internet is a field for the flowering of participatory democracy and a medium for the transformation of education. We are tempted to share in the utopians' excitement at the prospect of virtual pleasures: sex with a distant partner, travel minus the risks and inconvenience of actually having to go anywhere. . . . The new practice of entering virtual worlds raises fundamental questions about our communities and ourselves.

(Continued on p. 38)

⁴ S. Lohr, "The meaning of digital life," *The New York Times*, Apr. 24, 1995.

technology resources across all segments of society.

Elucidation of these issues is crucial, given the unprecedented pace of recent innovations in information- and bio-technology and their potential for beneficial, harmful, and even unintended effects. A valuable intellectual contribution to establishing a context for exploring such important issues is offered by Freeman Dyson [2]. In his brief, but excellent, treatment of issues of technology and society, Dyson helps those who are not scientists and engineers understand how scientific progress and social policy can combine to utilize recent and future innovations in solar energy, biotechnology and information technology to improve the economic and human vitality of all individuals, despite their educational or economic status.

In his introduction, Rhodes acknowledges the unavoidable problem in any anthology of excluding some topics that others may think are important. Even with his omissions, this anthology is a well-organized, insightful and provocative exploration of 20th century technological innovation. Issues raised in this anthology provide us with a critical perspec-

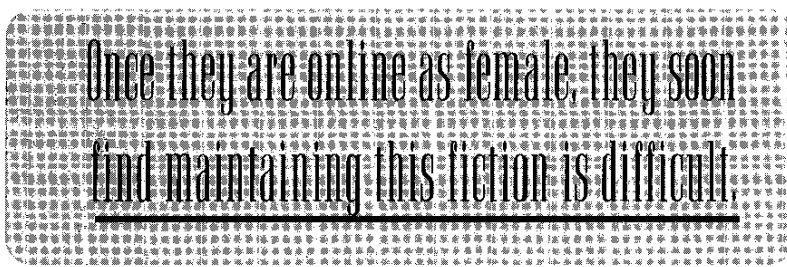
tive for understanding the complex etiology and consequences of technological innovations and, it is to be hoped, with a keen sense of vigilance for the unintended consequences of technology as we enter the 21st century.

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Gender Trouble

(Continued from p. 12)



My account challenges any simple utilitarian story. For every step forward in the instrumental use of a technology (what the technology can do for us), there are subjective effects. The technology changes us as people, changes our relation-

ships and sense of ourselves. My account also calls into question the apocalyptic and utopian views. The issues raised by the new way of life are difficult and painful, because they strike at the heart of our most complex and intransigent

social problems.. problems of community, identity, governance, equity, and values. There is no simple good news or bad news.

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