Virtuality and Its Discontents
Searching for Community in Cyberspace

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Adapted from Life on the Screen by Sherry Turkle.
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The anthropologist Ray Oldenberg has written about the "great good place"--the local bar, the bistro, the coffee shop--where members of a community can gather for easy company, conversation, and a sense of belonging. Oldenberg considers these places to be the heart of individual social integration and community vitality. Today we see a resurgence of coffee bars and bistros, but most of them do not serve, much less recreate, coherent communities and, as a result, the odor of nostalgia often seems as strong as the espresso.

Some people are trying to fill the gap with neighborhoods in cyberspace. Take Dred's Bar, for example, a watering hole on the MUD LambdaMOO. MUDs, which originally stood for "multi-user dungeons," are destinations on the Internet where players who have logged in from computers around the world join an on-line virtual community. Through typed commands, they can converse privately or in large groups, creating and playing characters and even earning and spending imaginary funds in the MUD's virtual economy.

In many MUDs, players help build the virtual world itself. Using a relatively simple programming language, they can make "rooms" in the MUD, where they can set the stage and define the rules. Dred's Bar is one such place. It is described as having a "castle decor" and a polished oak dance floor. Recently I (here represented by my character or persona "ST") visited Dred's Bar with Tony, a persona I had met on another MUD. After passing the bouncer, Tony and I encountered a man asking for a $5 cover charge, and once we paid it our hands were stamped.

The crowd opens up momentarily to reveal one corner of the club. A couple is there, making out madly. Friendly place . . .

You sit down at the table. The waitress sees you and indicates that she will be there in a minute.

[The waitress here is a bot--short for robot--that is, a computer program that presents itself as a personality.]

The waitress comes up to the table, "Can I get anyone anything from the bar?" she says as she puts down a few cocktail napkins.

Tony says, "When the waitress comes up, type order name of drink."
Abigail [a character at the bar] dries off a spot where some drink spilled on her dress.

The waitress nods to Tony and writes on her notepad.

[I type “order margarita,” following Tony’s directions.]

You order a margarita.

The waitress nods to ST and writes on her notepad.

Tony sprinkles some salt on the back of his hand.

Tony remembers he ordered a margarita, not tequila, and brushes the salt off.

You say, “I like salt on my margarita too.”

The DJ makes a smooth transition from The Cure into a song by 10,000 Maniacs.

The drinks arrive. You say, “L’chaim.”

Tony says, “Excuse me?”

After some explanations, Tony says, “Ah, . . .” smiles, and introduces me to several of his friends.

Tony and I take briefly to the dance floor to try out some MUD features that allow us to waltz and tango, then we go to a private booth to continue our conversation.

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**MAIN STREET, MALL, AND VIRTUAL CAFÉ**

What changes when we move from Oldenberg’s great good places to something like Dred’s Bar on LambdaMOO? To answer this question, it helps to consider an intermediate step—moving from a sidewalk café to a food court in a suburban shopping mall. Shopping malls try to recreate the Main Streets of yesteryear, but critical elements change in the process. Main Street, though commercial, is also a public place; the shopping mall is entirely planned to maximize purchasing. On Main Street you are a citizen; in the shopping mall, you are customer as citizen. Main Street had a certain disarray: the town drunk, the traveling snake-oil salesman. The mall is a more controlled space; there may be street theater, but it is planned—the appearance of serendipity is part of the simulation. If Dred’s Bar seems plausible, it is because the mall and so much else in our culture, especially television, have made simulations so real.

On any given evening, nearly eighty million people in the United States are watching television. The average American household has a television turned on more than six hours a day, reducing eye contact and conversation. Computers and the virtual worlds they provide are adding another dimension of mediated experience. Perhaps computers feel so natural because of their similarity to watching TV, our dominant social experience for the past forty years.
The bar featured for a decade in the television series *Cheers* no doubt figures so prominently in the American imagination at least partly because most of us don't have a neighborhood place where "everybody knows your name." Instead, we identify with the place on the screen. Bars designed to look like the one on *Cheers* have sprung up all over the country, most poignantly in airports, our most anonymous of locales. Here, no one will know your name, but you can always buy a drink or a souvenir sweatshirt.

In the postwar atomization of American social life, the rise of middle-class suburbs created communities of neighbors who often remained strangers. Meanwhile, as the industrial and economic base of urban life declined, downtown social spaces such as the neighborhood theater or diner were replaced by malls and cinema complexes in the outlying suburbs. In the recent past, we left our communities to commute to these distant entertainments; increasingly, we want entertainment that commutes right into our homes. In both cases, the neighborhood is bypassed. We seem to be in the process of retreating further into our homes, shopping for merchandise in catalogues or on television channels or for companionship in personals ads.

Technological optimists think that computers will reverse some of this social atomization; they tout virtual experience and virtual community as ways for people to widen their horizons. But is it really sensible to suggest that the way to revitalize community is to sit alone in our rooms, typing at our networked computers and filling our lives with virtual friends?

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**THE LOSS OF THE REAL**

Which would you rather see—a Disney crocodile robot or a real crocodile? The Disney version rolls its eyes, moves from side to side, and disappears beneath the surface and rises again. It is designed to command our attention at all times. None of these qualities is necessarily visible at a zoo where real crocodiles seem to spend most of their time sleeping. And you may have neither the means nor the inclination to observe a real crocodile in the Nile or the River Gambia.

Compare a rafting trip down the Colorado River to an adolescent girl's use of an interactive CD-ROM to explore the same territory. A real rafting trip raises the prospect of physical danger. One may need to strain one's resources to survive, and there may be a rite of passage. This is unlikely to be the experience of an adolescent girl who picks up an interactive CD-ROM called "Adventures on the Colorado." A touch-sensitive screen allows her to explore the virtual Colorado and its shoreline. Clicking a mouse brings up pictures and descriptions of local flora and fauna. She can have all the maps and literary references she wants. All this might be fun, perhaps useful. But in its uniformity and lack of risk, it is hard to imagine its marking a transition to adulthood.

But why not have both—the virtual Colorado and the real one? Not every exploration need be a rite of passage. The virtual and the real may provide different things. Why make them compete? The difficulty is that virtuality tends to skew our experience of the real in several ways. First, it makes denatured and artificial experiences seem
real--let’s call it the Disneyland effect. After a brunch on Disneyland’s Royal Street, a cappuccino at a restaurant chain called Bonjour Café at an Anaheim shopping mall may seem real by comparison. After playing a video game in which your opponent is a computer program, the social world of MUDs may seem real as well. At least real people play most of the parts and the play space is relatively open. One player compares the roles he was able to play on video games and on MUDs. “Nintendo has a good [game] where you can play four characters. But even though they are very cool,” he says, “they are written up for you.” They seem artificial. In contrast, on the MUDs, he says, “There is nothing written up.” He says he feels free. MUDs are “for real” because you make them up yourself.

Another effect of simulation, which might be thought of as the artificial crocodile effect, is that the fake seems more compelling than the real. In The Future Does Not Compute: Warnings from the Internet, Stephen L. Talbott quotes educators who say that years of exciting nature programming have compromised wildlife experiences for children. The animals in the woods are unlikely to perform as dramatically as those captured on the camera. I have a clear memory of a Brownie Scout field trip to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens where I asked an attendant if she could make the flowers open fast. For a long while, no one understood what I was talking about. Then they figured it out: I was hoping that the attendant could make the flowers behave as they did in the time-lapse photography I had seen in Disney films.

Third, virtual experience may be so compelling that we believe that within it we’ve achieved more than we have. Many of the people I have interviewed claim that virtual gender-swapping (pretending to be the opposite sex on the Internet) enables them to understand what it’s like to be a person of the other gender, and I have no doubt that this is true, at least in part. But as I have listened to this boast, my mind has often travelled to my own experiences of living in a woman’s body. These include worry about physical vulnerability, fears of unwanted pregnancy and infertility, fine-tuned decisions about how much make-up to wear to a job interview, and the difficulty of giving a professional seminar while doubled over with monthly cramps. Some knowledge is inherently experiential, dependent on physical sensations.

Pavel Curtis, the founder of LambdaMOO, begins his paper on its social dimensions with a quote from E. M. Forster: “The Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people--an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes.” But what are practical purposes? And what about impractical purposes? To the question, “Why must virtuality and real life compete--why can’t we have both?” the answer is of course that we will have both. The more important question is “How can we get the best of both?”

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**THE POLITICS OF VIRTUALITY**

When I began exploring the world of MUDs in 1992, the Internet was open to a limited group, chiefly academics and researchers in affiliated commercial enterprises. The MUDders were mostly middle-class college students. They chiefly
spoke of using MUDs as places to play and escape, though some used MUDs to address personal difficulties. By late 1993, network access could easily be purchased commercially, and the number and diversity of people on the Internet had expanded dramatically. Conversations with MUDders began to touch on new themes. To some young people, "RL" (real life) was a place of economic insecurity where they had trouble finding meaningful work and holding on to middle-class status. Socially speaking, there was nowhere to go but down in RL, whereas MUDs offered a kind of virtual social mobility.

Josh is a 23-year-old college graduate who lives in a small studio apartment in Chicago. After six months of looking for a job in marketing, the field in which he recently received his college degree, Josh has had to settle for a job working on the computer system that maintains inventory records at a large discount store. He considers this a dead end. When a friend told him about MUDs, he gave them a try and within a week stepped into a new life.

Now, eight months later, Josh spends as much time on MUDs as he can. He belongs to a class of players who sometimes call themselves Internet Hobos. They solicit time on computer accounts the way panhandlers go after spare change. In contrast to his life in RL, Josh's life inside MUDs seems rich and filled with promise. It has friends, safety, and space. "I live in a terrible part of town. I see a rat hole of an apartment, I see a dead-end job, I see AIDS. Down here [in the MUD] I see friends, I have something to offer, I see safe sex." His programming on MUDs is far more intellectually challenging than his day job. Josh has worked on three MUDs, building large, elaborate living quarters in each, and has become a specialist at building virtual cafés in which "bots" serve as waiters and bartenders. Within MUDs, Josh serves as a programming consultant to many less experienced players and has even become something of an entrepreneur. He "rents" ready-built rooms to people who are not as skilled in programming as he is. He has been granted wizard privileges on various MUDs in exchange for building food service software. He dreams that such virtual commerce will someday lead to more—that someday, if MUDs become commercial enterprises, he could build them for a living. MUDs offer Josh a sense of participating in the American Dream.

MUDs play a similar role for Thomas, 24, whom I met after giving a public lecture in Washington, D.C. After graduating from college, Thomas entered a training program at a large department store. When he discovered that he didn't like retailing, he quit the program, thinking that he would look for better opportunities. But things did not go well for him; he couldn't find a job that would give him the middle-class life he knew as a child. Finally, he took a job as a bellhop in the hotel where I had just spoken. "MUDs got me back into the middle class," Thomas tells me. He has a group of MUD friends who write well, program, and read science fiction. "I'm interested in MUD politics. Can there be democracy in cyberspace? Should MUDs be ruled by wizards or should they be democracies? I majored in political science in college. These are important questions for the future. I talk about these things with my friends. On MUDs."

Thomas moves on to what has become an obvious conclusion. He says, "MUDs make me more what I really am. Off the MUD, I am not as much me." Tanya, also 24, a college graduate working as a nanny in rural Connecticut, expresses similar aspirations. She says of the MUD on which she has built Japanese-style rooms and a
bot to offer her guests a kimono, slippers, and tea, "I feel like I have more stuff on the MUD than I have off it."

Josh, Thomas, and Tanya belong to a generation whose college years were marked by economic recession and a deadly sexually transmitted disease. They scramble for work; finances force them to live in neighborhoods they don't consider safe; they may end up back home living with parents. These young people are looking for a way back into the middle class. MUDs provide them with the sense of a middle-class peer group. So it is really not that surprising that it is in this virtual social life that they feel most like themselves.

Is the real self always the naturally occurring one? If a patient on the antidepressant medication Prozac tells his therapist he feels more like himself with the drug than without it, what does this do to our standard notions of a real self? Where does a medication end and a person begin? Where does real life end and a game begin? Is the real self always the one in the physical world? As more and more real business gets done in cyberspace, could the real self be the one who functions in that realm? Is the real Tanya the frustrated nanny or the energetic programmer on the MUD? The stories of these MUDders point to a whole set of issues about the political and social dimension of virtual community. These young people feel they have no political voice, and they look to cyberspace to help them find one.

SEX AND VIOLENCE IN CYBERSPACE

If real business increasingly gets done in cyberspace, what kinds of rules will govern it? And how will those rules be made, democratically or by fiat? The issue arises starkly in connection with sex and violence.

Consider the first moments of a consensual sexual encounter between the characters Backslash and Targa. The player behind Backslash, Ronald, a mathematics graduate student in Memphis, types "emote fondles Targa's breast" and "say You are beautiful Targa" and Elizabeth, Targa's player, sees on her screen:

Backslash fondles Targa's breast. Backslash says, "You are beautiful Targa."

Elizabeth responds with "say Touch me again, and harder. Please. Now. That's how I like it." Ronald's screen shows:

Targa says, "Touch me again, and harder. Please. Now. That's how I like it."