Gender Swapping on the Internet

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Abstract

In text-based virtual reality environments on the Internet called MUDs, it is possible to pretend to be the opposite gender. In these virtual worlds, the way gender structures basic human interaction is often noticed and reflected upon. This paper introduces MUDs, and then presents a community discussion about gender issues that MUDs inspired. Next, a case study of one gender swapper examines why he chose to gender swap and what he and others around him learned from that experience. Gender swapping is one example of ways in which network technology can impact not just work practice but also culture and values.

I. Gender Swapping on the Internet

On the television show *Saturday Night Live*, a series of skits concerned a character named Pat, who has no apparent gender. The audience is tempted with the promise of clues. In one episode, Pat gets his or her hair cut. A sign in the salon says that men's haircuts are $7, and women's haircuts are $9. The audience waits in suspense: when Pat goes to pay, his or her true gender will be revealed. The humor of the series lies in the fact that those hopes are constantly foiled; in this instance, Pat leaves $10 and says to keep the change.

Gender is so fundamental to human interactions, that the idea of a person without gender is absurd. The audience thinks that surely some clue must reveal Pat's gender, but none ever does. Many who have never seen *Saturday Night Live* know about Pat.[2] The character has become a kind of cultural icon. Pat's popularity is revealing.

On many MUDs, it is possible to create gender neutral characters. It is possible not only to meet Pat, but also to be Pat. When I[3] first met an ungendered character, I felt a profound sense of unease. How should I relate to this person? Most unsettling was my unease about my unease: why should this matter? I am having a casual conversation with a random stranger; why should I feel a need to know his or her gender?

The experience highlights two things: the ways in which gender structures human interactions, and, more importantly, the ways in which MUDs help people to understand these phenomena by experiencing them. This paper briefly introduces the technology called MUDs, analyzes a community discussion about the role of gender in human social interaction which was inspired by the participants' experiences in MUDs, and then presents a case study of a man named Peter who chooses to gender swap on MUDs. Peter's motivations and what he learned from the experience are analyzed. Gender swapping is one example of how the Internet has the potential to change not just work practice but also culture and values.

II. What are MUDs?

A MUD is a text-based multi-user virtual-reality environment. As of April 16th, 1993, there were 276 publicly announced MUDs based on twenty different kinds of software on the Internet. I will use the term "MUD," which stands for "Multi-User Dungeon," to refer to all the various kinds.[4] The original MUDs were adventure games; however, the technology has been adapted to a variety of purposes.

When a person first logs onto a MUD, he or she creates a character. The person selects the character's name and gender, and writes a description of what the character looks like. It is possible for a character to be male or female, regardless of the gender of the player. In many MUDs, a character can also be neuter or even plural. A plural character could, for example, be called swarm_of_bees or Laurel&Hardy.

MUDs are organized around the metaphor of physical space. You can "talk" to anyone in the same virtual room. When you connect to a MUD

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[2]In fact, I retell this story second hand; the details may not exactly reflect the television show.

[3]I have chosen to write in the first person, because many of the ideas in this paper are based on my experiences as a participant-observer, and because notions of identity are part of my topic.

[4]On March 6th, 1992 there were 143 MUDs based on 13 kinds of software. This is an increase of 93% in number of MUDs and 54% in number of types of software over slightly more than a year. MUDs are constantly being created and destroyed. A current list is regularly posted to the USENET news group rec.games.mud.announce.

at the Media Lab called MediaMOO,[5] you see the description:

>connect guest
Okay,... guest is in use. Logging you in as `Green_Guest'
*** Connected ***
The LEGO Closet
It's dark in here, and there are little crunchy plastic things under your feet! Groping around, you discover what feels like a doorknob on one wall.
Obvious exits: out to The E&L Garden

MediaMOO is a virtual representation of the MIT Media Lab. Typing "out" gets you to the "E&L Garden," a central work area for the lab's Epistemology and Learning research group:

>out
The E&L Garden
The E&L Garden is a happy jumble of little and big computers, papers, coffee cups, and stray pieces of LEGO.
Obvious exits: hallway to E&L Hallway, closet to The LEGO Closet, and sts to STS Centre Lounge
You see a newspaper, a Warhol print, a Sun SPARCstation IPC, Projects Chalkboard, and Research Directory here.
Amy is here.

>say hi
You say, "hi"
Amy says, "Hi Green_Guest! Welcome!"

The earliest MUDs such as "MUD1" and "Scepter of Goth" were based on the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons, and were written in late 1978 to 1979.[6] They were also based on early single-user text adventure games, such as the original ADVENT by Crowther and Woods [7]. In adventure-based MUDs, the object is to kill monsters and obtain treasure in order to gain "experience points." As a character gains experience, he/she/it becomes more powerful.

In 1989, a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University named James Aspnes decided to see what would happen if the monsters and magic swords were removed. He created a new type of MUD, called "TinyMUD," which was not an adventure game. Instead of spending time killing virtual monsters, participants work together to help extend the virtual world using a simple programming language. Langdon Winner remarks that "social activity is an ongoing process of world-making" [9]. In MUDs, this is true in a literal sense.

In most MUDs, characters are anonymous. People who become friends can exchange real names and email addresses, but many choose not to. Conventions about when it is acceptable to talk about "real life" vary between communities. In most MUDs, people begin to talk more about real life when they get to know someone better. However, in some communities such as those based on the Dragonriders of Pern series of books by Anne McCaffrey, talking about real life is taboo.

MUDs are increasingly being used for more "serious" purposes. Pavel Curtis of Xerox PARC has developed a MUD to enhance professional community amongst astrophysicists called AstroVR [4]. The MediaMOO project, which I began in fall of 1992, is designed to enhance professional community amongst media researchers [2]. MediaMOO currently has over 500 participants from fourteen countries and is growing rapidly.

MUDs also have an intriguing potential as an educational environment. Since 1990, Barry Kort has been running a MUD for children called MicroMUSE.[7] I am currently in the process of designing a MUD language and interface to make the technology more usable by children as part of my dissertation research. I hope to use this technology to encourage ten to twelve year-old girls to be more interested in computers.

III. A Public Debate About Gender

Gender pervades human interactions in such basic ways that its impact is often difficult to observe. Phenomena that are subtle in real life become obvious in MUDs, and are a frequent topic of discussion on USENET newsgroups about MUDs. For example, men are often surprised at how they are treated when they log on as a female character. Andrew writes on the newsgroup rec.games.mud:[8]

[5] To connect to MediaMOO, type "telnet purple-crayon.media.mit.edu 8888" from a UNIX system on the Internet. Send electronic mail to mediamoo-registration@media.mit.edu for more information.

[6] The earliest multi-player games existed on stand-alone time-sharing systems. In 1977, Jim Guyton adapted a game called "mazewar" to run on the ARPAnet. Participants in mazewar could duck around corners of a maze and shoot at one another, but could not communicate in any other fashion [email conversation with Jim Guyton, March 1992]. Numerous multi-user games based on the Dungeons and Dragons role playing game appeared in 1978-1979 including Scepter of Goth by Alan Klietz and MUD1 by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle [email conversation with Alan Klietz, March 1992].

[7] MicroMUSE is at chezmoto.ai.mit.edu 4201.

[8] This is an excerpt from a USENET discussion on about MUDs. Communications technologies have complex interactions. Since most MUDders have read

> Back when I had time for MUD, I, too, played female characters. I found it extraordinarily interesting. It gave me a slightly more concrete understanding of why some women say, "Men suck." It was both amusing and disturbing.

Female characters are often besieged with attention. By typing using the *who* command, it is possible to get a list of all characters logged on. The *page* command allows one to talk to people not in the same room. Many male players will get a list of all present, and then page characters with female names. Unwanted attention and sexual advances create an uncomfortable atmosphere for women in MUDs, just as they do in real life.

Many people, both male and female, enjoy the attention paid to female characters. Male players will often log on as female characters and behave suggestively, further encouraging sexual advances. Pavel Curtis has noted that the most promiscuous and sexually aggressive women are usually played by men. If you meet a character named "FabulousHotBabe," she is almost certainly a he in real life [3].

Perhaps more damaging than unwanted sexual advances are unrequested offers of assistance. Carol, an experienced programmer who runs a MUD in Britain, writes on rec.games.mud:

> What I *do* think is funny is this misconception that women can't play muds, can't work out puzzles, can't even type "kill monster" without help. (Okay, I admit we have it on this side of the Atlantic too...) Thanks, guys.... I log on, they work out I am female, and then the fun begins. Oh joy! After all, I don't log on to see whether people have found bugs with my little area, or to dispense arbitrary justice ("Please, Miss, he stole my sword!") or to find a friend. I call Aber-o-rama[9] (for this is the place) expressly to meet little spods who think (I assume) that because I am female I need help. People offering me help to solve puzzles *I* wrote are not going to get very far.
>
> Do you think all women in real life too are the same? We don't squeak and look helpless *all* the time (in my case, only when I am tired and can't be bothered to wire the plug, change a fuse or remove the centipede from the bath (I really should move house...)).

The constant assumption that women need help can be damaging to a woman's sense of self esteem and competence. If people treat you like an incompetent, you may begin to believe it. Carol here is honest and astute enough to admit that women as well as men help create this problem— sometimes she acts helpless when she's simply "tired and can't be bothered" to complete an uninteresting or unpleasant task.

In the same netnews discussion, Dennis concurs with Carol:

> I played a couple of muds as a female, one making up to wizard level. And the first thing I noticed was that the above was true. Other players start showering you with money to help you get started, and I had never once gotten a handout when playing a male player. And then they feel they should be allowed to tag along forever, and feel hurt when you leave them to go off and explore by yourself. Then when you give them the knee after they grope you, they wonder what your problem is, reciting that famous saying "What's your problem? It's only a game". Lest you get the wrong idea, there was nothing suggesting about my character, merely a female name and the appropriate pronouns in the bland description. Did I mention the friendly wizard who turned cold when he discovered I was male in real life? I guess some people are jerks in real life too.

Male characters often expect sexual favors in return for technical assistance. A male character once requested a kiss from me after answering a question. A gift always incurs an obligation. Offering technical help, like picking up the check at dinner, can be used to try to purchase rather than win a woman's favor. While this can be subtle and sometimes overlooked in real life, in MUDs it is blatant, directly experienced by most, and openly discussed in public forums such as this USENET discussion.

Ellen provides an interesting counter point:

> This is very odd. I played LPmud[10] once, just to find out what it was like. Since most LP's do something hideous with my preferred capitalization of my preferred name, I chose a different name, and thought, what the heck, I'd try genderbending and find out if it was true that people would be nasty and kill me on sight and other stuff I'd heard about on r.g.m[11]. But, no, everyone was helpful (I was truly clueless and needed the assistance); someone

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USENET groups about MUDding for at least some period of time, the culture of USENET and of MUDs are in some ways linked. Social conventions evolve in the context of the complete set of technologies in use, including email, netnews, surface mail, telephones, answering machines, voice mail, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, and the like. Email, netnews, and MUDs have especially complex interactions.

[9] The name of the MUD has been changed.

[10] LPMUDs are a type of adventure-game-style MUD.

[11] The abbreviation "r.g.m" stands for "rec.games.mud," the USENET newsgroup on which this discussion is taking place.

> gave me enough money to buy a weapon and armor and someone else showed me where the easy-to-kill newbie[12] monsters were. They definitely went out of their way to be nice to a male-presenting newbie... (These were all male-presenting players, btw.[13])
>
> One theory is that my male character (Argyle, description "A short squat fellow who is looking for his socks") was pretty innocuous. Maybe people are only nasty if you are "A broad-shouldered perfect specimen of a man" or something of that nature, which can be taken as vaguely attacking. People are nice if they don't view you as a threat.

Ellen's point is intriguing, and takes the discussion to a new level of sophistication. In *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego*, Sigmund Freud suggests that "love relationships... constitute the essence of the group mind" [5]. Issues of sexual power structure interpersonal interactions, and are more complex than "boy chases girl." Argyle's description invites a phallic interpretation— he is short and squat, and the reference to socks carries a connotation of limpness. Since Argyle is clearly not a sexual threat, he receives kinder treatment.

One cannot fail to be impressed by the quality of the netnews discussion. For the participants, MUDding throws issues of the impact of gender on human relations into high relief. Fundamental to its impact is the fact that it allows people to experience rather than merely observe what it feels like to be the opposite gender or have no gender at all.

IV. Case Study: a Network Gender Swapper

The preceding netnews discussion showed ways in which MUDs evoke gender issues which are of concern at a broad, societal level. For many, the exploration of gender issues is also deeply personal and psychological. One example is Peter.[14]

When Peter was young, he lived with his mother and older brother. His parents divorced when he was an infant, and Peter's father played little role in his sons' lives afterwards. Peter has always been very close to his mother. After school while his older brother was out playing, he would work for his mother, doing odd jobs and acting as a courier for her small business. He is proud that his mother could depend on him, and that he contributed to the family's financial well being.

Peter was always young for his class in school, and even younger after he was skipped ahead a grade in elementary school. Unchallenged by the public school system, he applied and won a scholarship to a prestigious boarding high school. He was one of two scholarship students admitted. He was the low man on the totem pole in every respect: the youngest, the poorest, and the newest boy in an established group who had been attending school together for many years. The school itself he describes as "Dickensian," with strict discipline and levels of hierarchy within the ranks of the students. Some boys were selected as monitors, and given better living quarters and power over their peers. In this hierarchical world, Peter was, in his words "at the bottom of the food chain."

All of these factors combined to make masculinity an issue of concern for Peter. He has explored many avenues. He experimented with homosexuality in college, but concluded that he prefers women. He reads books on gender differences in his spare time. Peter is a software engineer, and has used various electronic communications media for years. When he discovered MUDs, he decided to make his character female.

When asked how his character, SusieQ, was different from him he says that she's "a little bit better behaved than I generally am. As far as not being competitive and obnoxious and territorial." SusieQ wears a badge which says "SusieQ's Official Helpful Person Badge." If someone seems to need assistance, she "polishes the badge conspicuously." That's Peter's way of offering help without forcing it on someone who might not want it. Just as he took pride in helping his mother after school, being a helpful person has always been an important part of Peter's identity. At work he says he is a "team player." He says that he finds it easier to express the helpful side of his character in a female context— his competitive side takes a back seat when he is SusieQ. Peter says that playing a female character has helped him to get in touch with the female side of himself.

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[12] A newbie is a new player with little experience. According to Raymond [7], the term comes from British slang for "new boy," and first became popular on the net in the group talk.bizarre. A newbie monster is a monster that a low-level player could defeat.

[13] This is an abbreviation for "by the way."

[14] Sherry Turkle and I interviewed Peter in person individually and as part of a group of MUDders, and also followed his progress online. Peter is one of ten subjects I have followed in detail. Eight of the ten were interviewed by Sherry Turkle and me jointly. Professor Turkle's work has been a central inspiration for this project.

Peter played a female character for seven months. Sherry Turkle and I met with Peter on four separate occasions. After the first interview, he immediately "blew his cover" and let everyone on the MUD know he was really male.[15] Asked why, he said:

> More than there having been any particular thing that made me do it is that I've been already planning to do it. And in talking to you, I sort of, it just gave me the occasion to think more about the fact that I was playing this opposite gender role. So it was something I sort of... I'd gotten used to it, to the extent that I was sort of ignoring it. It didn't really.... OK, so I log in and now I'm a woman. And I'd log off and I'm a man again. And it didn't really seem odd anymore.

Discussing his gender swapping experience made Peter realize that the experiment had outlived its usefulness. He had played a woman so long, that it no longer seemed strange. However, returning to a male character brought on a new set of realizations. He was apprehensive that people would be angry, but for the most part he found those fears to be unfounded. Some male characters who were fond of SusieQ were disappointed to have her suddenly become Scotty, but those were the most serious repercussions. The experience of being a man again felt odd to Peter:

> And I'd gotten so used, it'd be like— that might be a good analogy for how it feels— it would be like going to an interview for a job and acting like I do at a party or a volleyball game. Which is not the way you behave at an interview. And so it's sort of the same thing. I'm behaving in a way that doesn't feel appropriate for the context, although it's still just as much me as it ever was.

The experience of gender swapping in MUDs *defamiliarized* Peter's real life gender role. He was able to reflect on his gender role in new ways: what does it mean to be a man? He has new tools and new data with which to think about a question which has been an issue of concern for him.

There is a final twist to the story which was the biggest surprise for Peter: not everyone believed that he was really male.[16] To others on Peter's MUD, it seemed almost as likely that SusieQ was a woman who had suddenly decided to see what it would feel like to be a man:

> I think other, more people, probably most people on the MUD, have... they've seen the change and it hasn't necessarily convinced them that I'm male, but they're also not sure that I'm female. And, so I've sort of gotten into this state where my gender is unknown and people are pretty much resigned to not knowing it. Which doesn't seem to cause any particular difficulties for most people. I certainly don't seem to get the attention from the young men of the MUD like I used to. On the other hand, it's kind of hard to be sure, but it almost seems like I'm spending more time talking to the women. Assuming they are, in fact, women.

Without makeup, special clothing, or risk of social stigma, gender becomes malleable in MUDs. Malleable to the point where for Peter it became indeterminate. When gender becomes a property that can be reset with a line of code, one bit in a data structure, it becomes an "object to think with," to use Seymour Papert's terminology [6]. In public forums like rec.games.mud, people reflect the values that our society attaches to gender. In private experiences like Peter's, people can explore the impact of gender on their lives and their constructions of themselves.

V. Conclusion

Gender is just one example of an aspect of personal identity that people explore on MUDs. Examples abound. Jack is a British student studying in America. He logs onto MUDs in the morning when it is afternoon in Britain and many British players are on. He enjoys confusing them— he tells them he is in America, but displays a detailed knowledge of Britain. On further questioning, Jack tells me he is trying to decide whether to return to Britain or continue his studies in America. What does it mean to be British or American? Jack is exploring his sense of national identity in virtual reality. MUDs are an identity workshop.

Gender swapping is an extreme example of a fundamental fact: the network is in the process of changing not just how we work, but how we think of ourselves— and ultimately, who we are.

VI. References

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[15] Asking Peter to reflect on his experiences caused a change in his behavior. The impact of the study on the subject should not be ignored.

[16] In fact, a year later Peter's online friend Houdini still refuses to believe that SusieQ and Scotty are played by the same person, since their behavior seems so different. He found SusieQ to be "erratic"— she would often walk out in the middle of a conversation. "Scotty is more dependable," says Houdini. This is quite different from Peter's own perception of the difference between his two characters, discussed above.

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