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COMMUNICATIONS
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**"Democracy in Cyberspace:
Society, Politics and the Virtual Republic"
5 May 1994**

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**MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM**

**"Democracy in Cyberspace:
Society, Politics and the Virtual Republic"
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**Julian Dibbell
The Village Voice**

**Amy Bruckman
The Media Lab
Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

**F. Randall Farmer
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Moderator MARTIN ROBERTS [MR]: Good afternoon everyone. You are sitting in the, a spacious, comfortable auditorium in the basement of Building E-15 on the M.I.T. campus. It is a rainy afternoon, at the beginning of a Communications Forum entitled, "Democracy in Cyberspace: Society, Politics, and the Virtual Republic." There is an atmosphere of expectation in the air as people continue to drift in and take their seats. You look around, recognizing the same old faces and noticing a few new ones. Obvious exits are down then left, or up and out of the auditorium. The forum has already begun. At the front of the auditorium, the proceedings are being opened by Martin. He is a bespectacled, rather assistant professor, in an orange sweatshirt, who teaches in the French Department. He describes himself as a recovering post-modernist, in spite of an evident interest in experimental fiction. He is awake and alert.

In keeping with the common procedure at cyber events of this sort, Martin is reading his notes from a Mac. Although, it is also possible that he is reading aloud the real time output of a parallel forum happening at an unknown location in cyberspace. Martin begins by warmly welcoming you to the forum, explaining that the forum had to be postponed from its original date due to a winter storm. He mentions that when the original forum was canceled, a number of people quipped that it would not have had to be canceled if it had been held in cyberspace, where it does not snow. . . usually. He apologizes, rather, for the rather nature of the present event, and promises to do what he can to compensate for this. He adds that since he will be one of the speakers at the event, he will keep his opening remarks fairly short.

For the benefit of those present who are unfamiliar with MUDs, Martin begins with a brief introduction to the subject. The term "MUD" itself, he explains, is an acronym for "Multi-User Dimension," a text-based virtual reality system that can be accessed by anyone with a personal computer, a modem, and access, in principal, from anywhere in the world. It is called a "dimension," he continues, because when accessed it gives the illusion of entering a three-dimensional space, around which the user can navigate, perform certain actions, manipulate objects, and interact with anyone else who happens to be connected to the system at the same time.

One of the peculiarities of the system, Martin adds, is the use of the second person address. When you log into a MUD, the textual narrative which constructs the illusion of an imaginary space sutures the virtual subject into it by addressing it, or rather, you, directly. You nod as it begins to dawn on you why Martin is opening the forum in such a bizarre way.

Virtual reality systems, such as these, have been popular now for over a decade as combat-based adventure games among the computer science community. More recently, he points out, they have been joined by a new generation of virtual reality environments based, not on fantasy games, but on the real world. Not on combat, but social interaction and exchange. In contrast to MUDs, these new systems are called MOOs, an acronym of an acronym, which stands for MUD Object-Oriented because of the particular software on which they operate.

One such incident of a socially-based virtual reality environment, Martin explains, is Media MOO, founded last year at the M.I.T. Media Lab by one of today's panelists, Amy. Another larger one is Lambda MOO, which on a typical evening, is host to well over two hundred visitors. The past year, Martin adds, has seen the opening of a number of similar MOOs, devoted to social or professional exchanges. They include "PMC MOO," associated with the on-line journal, *Post-Modern Culture*, whose features include a virtual Balinese village, "Diversity-University MOO," intended to be the world's first university campus with its own faculty, students, and curriculum, and "MOO," which includes the world's first virtual zoo, or "MOO Zoo."

Today's forum, Martin explains, had two defining moments. The first was when he had lunch with Amy late last year, and she announced to him that she had just founded a democracy. The democracy in question turned out to be an experimental one, founded on

'Media MOO.' Since the opening of Media MOO, there had been rather frequent, and at times, heated, debate on the subject of the government of the community. Should this be a matter exclusively for the programmers of the MOO? Or should it be a matter for the community itself? Were not the members of the community entitled to certain rights? If so, what were these rights, and how could they be safeguarded?

After growing increasingly impatient with the debates about the relative virtues of different systems of MOO government, Martin explains, Amy had finally decided to establish a rudimentary system of representative democracy. The system, which has been in operation for almost six months, consists of a council of six representatives, elected by a continuous ballot system. Martin notes that one of these representatives is also one of today's panelists, in the form of Randy Farmer, a.k.a. "Oracle," on Media MOO.

The second defining moment for today's forum, Martin continues, occurred when he read an article in the *Village Voice*, entitled, "A Rape in Cyberspace, or How An Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society." The article, written by Julian, was about a recent incident on LambdaMOO, which had been described as "virtual rape." The incident had sparked an intense moral debate among the virtual community of LambdaMOO. The debate centered on more than the incident in question and/or what, if anything, should be done about it. An equally intense debate arose about the status of the virtual community itself and the respective roles which should be played by the community and the system's programmers, in its everyday management.

Martin explains that after reading article, it occurred to him that the basic philosophical issues raised therein were in some respects similar to those raised by the experimental democracy on. He therefore decided to organize an event in which these events could be discussed more systematically, the outcome of which was the present forum.

A familiar model of history, Martin observes, holds that the history of societies consists of a three stage progression, from barbarism to civilization and from civilization to decadence. Simplistic as this model may be, he says, it is tempting to read the histories of MUDs along similar lines. Having had their dark ages, it might seem, with the emergence of virtual democracies MUDs might be seen to have reached the age of enlightenment, and to now be moving from medieval feudalism to modernity. In this light, it is ironic that in an age where media and communications technologies and networks are supposedly rendering the historical nation-state increasingly obsolete, communities should be concerned with organizing themselves along precisely this model.

Sensing his audience's impatience, however, Martin puts an end to these airy speculations and proceeds without further ado to introduce the three panelists, in the order in which they will be speaking. To his immediate right sits Julian, who writes a monthly column on culture and digital technology for the *Village Voice*, and who has also written extensively about digital subcultures, popular music, cultural theory, film, and science fiction for the *Village Voice* and other publications. Julian describes himself as a resident of Manhattan and a citizen in, more or less, good standing in a handful of virtual communities. He is awake and looks alert.

Amy is a doctoral candidate in the Media Lab at M.I.T., and as previously noted, is the founder of. She received her masters degree from the Media Lab's Interactive Cinema Group in 1991. For her dissertation, she is creating a MUD for children called Crossing, which is designed to provide an authentic context for children to learn reading, writing, and programming. Martin adds that Amy was also one of the illustrious participants in the now legendary "Women in Cyberspace" forum at the last week. Amy describes herself as 5'8", with shoulder length brown hair, and a mischievous grin that seems to say, "Can you believe I get paid for doing this?" She is awake and looks alert.

To Amy's right sits Randy Farmer [a.k.a. "Oracle" on MediaMOO]. Randy is a partner in *Electric Communities*, a California-based cyberspace research and development firm. He has 17 years of experience in the design, implementation, and operation of

communications-based multi-participant environments. He was a principal contributor to LucasFilm Habitat project, a networked virtual reality environment with a graphics interface. He has written extensively about virtual communities and other cyberspace development issues. He is awake and looks alert.

With that, Martin introduces the first speaker, Julian Dibbell. As he sits down, all eyes focus on Julian . . .

JULIAN DIBBELL [JD]: I had hoped that, in introducing me, Martin would have said all sorts of nice things about the profound insights I can bring due to my years of reporting on cyberspace and living amongst the natives. But he exposed the true reason I was brought here, which is that, as a journalist, I was lucky enough to stumble across an incredible story. It is an anecdote, really, but an anecdote of almost mythical dimensions, one that really illustrates a lot of the issues that we will be considering here today in such rich nuance that whatever insights I could bring would be superfluous. So, without further ado, I think I will just recount the story once again.

On the face of it, or on one face of it anyway, the story is about a rape, a sexual assault committed by a character named Mr. Bungle, in the living room of a very large communal mansion somewhere in California. It occurred on a Monday night in March of 1993. It began when Mr. Bungle, completely unprovoked, entered the living room. [which was crowded, as it often is in LambdaMOO, with partygoers, chit-chatters, and people gathered in communal bliss] and proceeded to force a number of the characters to engage in sexual acts with himself and with others in the room. He forced them to do this by means of a voodoo doll, which had the ability to make other characters do whatever he wanted them to do. Bungle would not stop, though he was roundly deprecated for his actions.

Ultimately, Bungle was bodily ejected from the living room, but the attacks continued because the voodoo doll had the power to penetrate the rooms of the mansion. The attacks began to escalate. He forced one of his victims to violate herself with a steak knife. He forced another one to eat her own pubic hair. Ultimately, those present called on the aid of a veteran of the community, a man named Zippy. Zippy arrived with a special gun, which had the power to not only capture and cage the characters, but also to silence the voodoo doll. And that was the end of the event which begins this story.

However, since the event took place in LambdaMOO, which as Martin has explained is a MUD, this story is not exactly what it seems. From the knowing chuckles that greeted Martin's introduction, I assume I do not have to do a great deal of explaining about how a MUD works, but I think I should explain something about the nature of the voodoo doll. In a MOO, everything that you see is a sub-program, and all these sub-programs interact with each other. People can make sub-programs that mimic various kinds of objects that one might find in the real world, such as a candy box, a gun, various drugs, etc.

The voodoo doll, on the other hand, mimics something one does not often find in the real world. Or more precisely, real voodoo dolls rarely work with quite the effect of Mr. Bungle's voodoo doll. The way this voodoo doll works is that one issues a command to the voodoo doll, shaping it into the shape of a given character, so that when one issues an action statement, it appears as though the other character is performing that action. This is called "spoofing," and it is not exactly cricket in the MUD community.

However, the voodoo doll that Mr. Bungle was using had a polite feature added to them, which is that it was clear who was doing the spoofing. In other words, he would type in his particular sadistic fantasy about what he wanted to see a character doing, and one would, for instance, see "Star Singer now violates herself with a steak knife. You hear Mr. Bungle laughing evilly in the distance."

In a sense, by the conventions of the virtual reality, he was forcing people to do things they did not want to do. Of course, in reality, all he was doing was sending fraudulent statements to other people in the room. It was a prank by some standards, but

by the standards of LambdaMOO, it was an outrage. People were pissed off, to say the least--principally his victims. His victims began posting messages to some of the in-house mailing lists, expressing their outrage at what had happened.

It is important to emphasize that there was a curious tone to their expressions of outrage. There was a kind of ambivalence, a mixture of outrage and annoyance that really reflects the dual nature of what goes on in a MUD. It is hard to explain to anyone who has not been on a MUD, but what goes on is neither really the fiction that appears on the screen, nor the reality of what is really going on, which is simply that people are sitting in front of their keyboards, scattered across the country and around the world, typing in various messages to each other. But somehow there is a kind of truth to what goes on in these communities, which is a kind of mix of these fictional realities and the physical reality.

The mix of outrage and annoyance with which people greeted Bungle's actions reflected this dual reality. As people began to discuss their feelings about what was going on, there began to develop a sense that Mr. Bungle's rape was one outrage too many. Sexual harassment had been going on in this community for a long time, and this was incident was over the top. Something really needed to be done about this problem; not just the problem of Mr. Bungle, but the problem of what people were calling "virtual rape," in general.

As for the general problem, they decided to hold a colloquium and discuss what could be done about these issues. As for the particular problem of Mr. Bungle, the solution seemed pretty simple to many people. On the second day after the attack, it was finally voiced by one of his victims, legba, a woman in Seattle who masqueraded as a Haitian trickster spirit, that Mr. Bungle should be "toaded." "Toading" is an enigmatic phrase to anyone not familiar to MUDs. It might even be strange to anyone not familiar with LambdaMOO just what legba was asking for. It was a death warrant--she was basically asking for Mr. Bungle's head. In most MUDs, toading is a command that turns a character into a toad, in consonance with the Dungeons and Dragons origins of MUD communities. In LambdaMOO, however, if you are toaded, that's it. Your character no longer exists. You are not even a toad, you are not anything; you're dead.

It appeared that there was a growing consensus behind the request that Mr. Bungle be toaded. But there was a problem with this request. It was perfectly fine for a bunch of people to decide that they wanted to have one of their fellow characters erased from the MOO. However, in order for them to actually do so, they required the services of a much nobler class of character; they required the services of a wizard. According to the rules of the LambdaMOO database, only wizards have the power to wipe out a character. This presented a further complication because, at that moment in time, LambdaMOO was in a state of barbarism--a state of nature into which the wizards had thrown the community, sick of having to mediate people's social disputes.

At the beginning of LambdaMOO, when it was a small community, it was possible to oversee every little dispute, and each wizard would mete out their own brand of justice. But after a certain point, people grew weary of the wizards' role as the power elite, and the wizards themselves got fed up with the thankless job of meddling in people's business. Besides, with the growing size of the MOO [it had reached about 1500 regular participants at the time of the Bungle incident], the need for mediation had grown out of control. So Haakon, the arch wizard of LambdaMOO [who is, in reality, Pavel Curtis, the man who created the LambdaMOO database] and his fellow wizards abdicated, withdrew from the social sphere, and announced that their only responsibilities within LambdaMOO would be as technical servants. They would take care of the technical database and make any necessary changes, but in terms of social interactions, the community was on its own; it was to become, essentially, its own society.

That was all very well and good, but a society requires structures in order to act coherently. In the four months since "this new direction," as Haakon called it, had been declared, people had been living in a state of nature. They had not yet come together as

anything more than a loose, amorphous conglomeration of individuals. This became a problem, because in order to convince the wizards to toad Mr. Bungle, they had to persuade him that the toading represented the will of the community. In order to express the will of the community, they had to define the community. Consequently, the debate about Mr. Bungle became a debate about the political future of LambdaMOO.

It was interesting to watch how this developed because the political map of LambdaMOO was really a crazy quilt of factions, with people falling into various cracks between and within them. There were parliamentarian, legal types who said, "We cannot toad Mr. Bungle because there was no rule prohibiting virtual rape. But it would be a good idea to get some of those rules established. Maybe we can have representative bodies, such as a parliament and a judiciary system, with courts and prisons, and I can go to get to work on building the code for that right now."

Then there was the "royalist" clique who thought, "Well, this Bungle business proves that this New Direction business leads to anarchy. We need to go back to the days when wizards ran things and could mete out swift justice like they were born to, as a class." I am, of course, caricaturing slightly the position, but this was the tenor of this particular vision of LambdaMOO's future. Then there was a somewhat more sophisticated vision advanced by those I call "the techno-libertarians." You find these people all over the on-line world. Their position was, "Well, Mr. Bungle is an jerk, but jerks are an inevitability on the system, and what you do with jerks is engineer around them." That was a good point because there are software goodies in LambdaMOO that enable you to work around this kind of noise in the system. For instance, if someone is sending offensive language to you, the "gag" command will allow you to filter out material you find offensive. This was a beautiful solution in some ways, but in this case, there were complications. Because the Bungle event happened in the living room [a very public place], the only way you could stop other people from seeing what Mr. Bungle was doing was to get all of them to agree to gag him, and then people coming into the living room would have to be advised, "Oh, could you please gag. . . Mr. Bungle is on a rape spree."

Now, granted the techno-libertarians would reply, "How could it hurt someone if they are not seeing what is being done to them?" But one would have to think about how that logic would sound to a woman who had passed out drunk and been fondled all night by strangers, and then woke up to learn what had happened to her, in order to appreciate how that logic would sound to a hard-core MOOer. Also, many of the women on the MOO have a rather ambivalent attitude to the gag thing. Their attitude is that they should not even have to deal with this, and in the case of Bungle, they really wanted to do something to express their communal outrage at this sort of thing. So the techno-libertarians had to tiptoe around this issue, and for the most part, they did.

The most tricky position to maintain was the position of the people who called themselves anarchists, and who basically felt the same way about this community that the techno-libertarians did, which is that, "This is a great new space for us to experiment with, a community that does not need rules and police and all that crap." But they had a slightly less sanguine view about the ability of technology to work around all of this. Further complicating their position was the fact that the leading anarchists were legba and her gang of friends, and they really, really wanted Mr. Bungle toaded. Now, a pro-death penalty position is a really hard one for an anarchist to take, so they were at great pains to sever the conceptual ties between toading and capital punishment. They were successful to a certain extent. They argued that this was, rather, a form of banishment, a communal turning of the back on this guy because he was not a worthy part of the community. But clearly it was going to require a consensus of the community to have Mr. Bungle toaded [or banished], and that was going to require a great deal of jawboning.

When the time came around for this gathering of the tribes [on the third day of this incident] to finally discuss what to do about Mr. Bungle, what took place was a really remarkable conversation, which I happened to stumble in on. This conversation went on for hours: talk about where the mind ends and the body begins, how one can distinguish

between fantasy and reality in a MOO, and also more practical issues, such as how to deal with Mr. Bungle. The conversation went around in circles and basically went nowhere. But people worked out a lot of issues, and at the end of it, one wizard who happened to be there decided what he had seen was a consensus of the community that Mr. Bungle should be toaded. And very quietly, he went off and did it. And that was the end of the story; Bungle was dead.

The really interesting part of the story, though, is the epilogue. On the fourth day, Haakon returned from a business trip he had been on during the entirety of this episode, and found the wreckage of this event strewn across his little universe. He sat down and looked hard and long at what had happened and decided he needed to implement some kind of mechanism to enable LambdaMOO, as a society, to express its will to the wizards. So he came up with a petition system, whereby anybody can put forth a petition, and if they get enough signatures, the petition can be made into a ballot, which if passed, becomes binding on the wizards. They then have to enact the measure. So this was really the birth of the new democracy on LambdaMOO, and the Bungle affair was the defining moment.

There is also an interesting footnote to the Bungle affair, which is that as people were going about their business, a strange character, by the name of Doctor Jest, showed up. He had a kind of forceful, aggressive style, but what was really interesting was how familiar the style seemed. After awhile, Doctor Jest got into the annoying habit of stuffing people into little jars, in which could be found a simulacrum of a certain deceased rapist. At that point, people realized that this was Mr. Bungle, back from the grave. He had gotten himself a new Internet account, which allowed him to circumvent the toading software, and he was back. A little more chastened for the experience, perhaps, although I am told that a little while later he got himself in trouble and got toaded again, which has got to be some kind of achievement.

But what is even more astonishing is the equanimity with which people took his return. Certainly people thought it was kind of brazen of him to march back in, but, in a sense, the point was not to banish him eternally, it was to invoke this sort of ritual toading. In other words, it was a kind of symbolic enactment of punishment, underscoring a point that a lot of people had made throughout the debate about what to do with him--that the punishment should be no more or less symbolic than the crime. So that is the story of Mr. Bungle in a nutshell. I will leave it to the other people to tease out the implications of this for the future of democracy in cyberspace.

AMY BRUCKMAN [AB]: Hello. I am a student here at MIT, in the Epistemology and Learning Group, and the title of my talk today is, "Is it a game?" I will talk a bit about whether all of this is a game and then talk a little bit about direct democracy on LambdaMOO and the MediaMOO republic.

First, I have something to say to you all, and that is, "Get a life!" I mean, come on folks, this is not real. It is text in a database. The virtual world is an outlet for peoples' real world frustrations. It is kind of like sports. If you cannot do it here, then where can you do it? What is the harm done with all of this. I think you all just really need to get a life!

Of course, I could equally respond, "Grow up! You are interacting with real people here. What do you mean, it's just a game? There is another real person with real feelings at the other end of that computer screen." The posts I have quoted here are from a UseNet news group, devoted to the discussion of MUDs. I'll read another short excerpt. Taro writes on RecGamesMUD, "I do think it is funny that there is this misconception that women cannot play MUDs, can't solve puzzles, can't even type 'kill monster' without help." Dennis responds, "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, something that had never happened when I was playing a male character. Then they feel they should be able to tag along forever, and feel hurt when you go off and explore. They 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 is only a game.' Lest you get the wrong impression, there was not anything suggestive 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 I mentioned that I was male in real life? I guess some people are jerks in real life, too."

Well, I think you can make a pretty much equal case for either of these positions. What we are really talking about here is what I like to call "the Murphy Brown problem." Do representations impact our reality? This is a real issue for our culture right now. People really have mixed feelings about it. A lot of people, liberals in particular, sometimes try to have it both ways, making this argument that you can't run around and use "he" as the default pronoun because that changes women's images of themselves. But at the same time, you cannot say, "No, women are not going to run off and become unwed mothers because of Murphy Brown." You can't have your cake and eat it, too.

The question is, whether the words we use, the stories we tell, the representations we use, impact our reality. Now, let's take on an even tougher question. Some teenagers in Oakland, California, who were mostly African-American, were taken on Martin Luther King Day to see Schindler's List. There was a scene in which a female architect gets shot in the head. The kids all burst out laughing, and the theatre owner was so horrified that he turned off the movie, turned on the lights, and kicked them all out.

Who is to blame for these events? I think this is an issue for our culture, one that we have not yet resolved because it keeps cropping up all over the place again and again. So my personal answer is that it is not that simple. Does seeing a representation make you run out and mimic the activity? Of course not, it is not as simple as monkey-see, monkey-do. But our representations do have a significant impact on our culture, on who we are, and on how we see the world. Virtual worlds are evocative in an interesting way. By being between reality and unreality, they help us to reflect on the nature of reality. Thus, I find Julian's story completely fascinating, and the most fascinating aspect of it is the way in which what is happening in the virtual world got people thinking about world issues in new and powerful ways.

This happens all the time. I have, for instance, a UseNet discussion from RecGames MUD about the use of virtual drugs. The discussion is really long--you laugh--but is it really okay to take a virtual toke? That is really a tougher question than it sounds at first. What if children are watching? Will watching an adult take a toke make a child go out and do the same? I don't know, it's the Murphy Brown problem again. I think these issues really come to life in these virtual environments in an interesting way.

So, is it a game? Yes and no. I would say both answers are fine. In some places it is a game, and in some places, it is not. In some places, it is okay to stab someone with a sword [in fact, that is the entire point], and in other places, it is not okay. The real problems occur when people are playing by different rules, with different expectations, and not realizing that they have different expectations about the status of what's going on. So this is really a design problem, in a way. How can the architects of these communities develop tools to facilitate the members of the community developing a shared expectation of what is and what is not appropriate?

How are these expectations going to be established? I think that Randy is going to argue that one should have a terms of service agreement--a clear contract, in which there is someone who owns the machine, and the person who owns the machine gives you a list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, which one must abide by or they are out. There is a certain clarity to that, I guess, which is nice; at least you know where you stand. But I would like to argue that as these systems become an increasing part of peoples' lives, it would be nice if the people, and not the owners of the software, controlled them.

As Julian noted, the whole rape incident was really the beginning of direct democracy on LambdaMOO. I would like to tell you about a very different incident. About a week before this forum was originally scheduled, I was logged on to

LambdaMOO, and someone paged me with an obscene description of exactly what he would like to do with me. It turned out that this page had gone to every self-described female character on LambdaMOO, and it was sent by someone who had a page to females verb. [which other gentlemen were eagerly copying], which just broadcasts to every woman on-line.

Something very different [than with the rape] happened as a result of this incident, which was that a mediation process was immediately started. The offending party was called in, a neutral mediator was chosen, people on both sides had the opportunity to state their case, and the mediator came to a conclusion that this person's programming privileges [i.e., the right to write verbs] should be suspended for three months. This entire process took about three days. The particular mediation system was one of the first things voted in as a result of LambdaMOO's democratic process. I think that is a rather different sort of incident, and a really positive step, showing that the community is moving in some interesting directions.

As Julian mentioned, LambdaMOO is now a direct democracy, with a system of petitions and ballots. It really takes a large number of signatures, right now 177 of the 8,000 person community, to get a petition to become a ballot. It seems to be quite difficult to get a petition passed, but once something becomes a ballot, almost all of them are approved. As of March, there were 21 active petitions and one active ballot on LambdaMOO. Each petition has a mailing list associated with it, and there were hundreds of messages associated with the above initiatives. Now, I do not know about the rest of you, but I do not have time to read all of these messages. And I am not willing to abdicate power to the kinds of people who do have that kind of time on their hands.

So that is why I decided, unilaterally, [after all, all democracies start either by fiat or revolution] to try to move MediaMOO into the direction of a representative democracy. MediaMOO is a different kind of place than LambdaMOO. It is meant to be a professional community for media researchers. We currently have 1,000 members from 24 countries. One has to write an application to become a member, including a description of the kind of research you are doing. A number of people review your application. Everybody is identified with their real name, since they are supposed to be meeting people like themselves, they are supposed to want people to know who they really are.

When MediaMOO opened [on the day of Bill Clinton's inauguration], the first official event held was a forum on democracy. A couple of people showed up, and we had an unfocused discussion, and nothing really came of it. The conversation kind of wandered, and people really did not care. One of the things that really crystallized the grass-roots democracy movement on MediaMoo was the membership issue. There were some people who had friends who were rejected, and got angry about it. They wanted to know who decides who gets in and who does not and wanted representation in this system of government.

The system we adopted was one with elected council members. It is really a much smaller place than LambdaMOO. If fifteen people vote for you, then you are an elected council member, and you accept the nomination by voting for yourself. There have been a number of surprises in this whole process. One of the things that surprised me most was that now that the council members are participating in the registration process, at least two council members must agree before anyone gets rejected. This all got started when questions arose as to why some "nice people" were rejected. And though many "nice people" may be rejected, if one looks at some of the garbage they write on their applications, one begins to understand why they are turned down. Interestingly, the council has turned out to be much tougher than I ever was, which I think is good, because we should be selective. An admissions requirement is part of what gives the place its special character.

They were also tougher on guests. They decided there should be no anonymity on MediaMOO whatsoever, so when a guest connects, one can see where they are connecting from. [I would not have dared to do that.] I thought that the council would vote on things,

casting votes proportional to the number of people they represent, or some system like that. I did not set up a whole system, but rather a partial system, and I wanted the council to figure out the rest. In the end, the council decided to work on a consensus basis.

I think through the process of participating in these virtual governments, a lot of people have developed a richer understanding of how government works in the real world. It is empowering for people to have more control over their communications systems, and this is part of a larger trend--users are becoming creators of content. People are not sitting down and watching television, they are instead participating and creating a community together.

Thank you.

MARTIN ROBERTS [MR]: I would like to say a few abstract things about my sense of virtual communities, and then say a bit about why I think what I have to say is important, and how it relates to political and social questions. I would like to start out by asking you to consider this series of words: dungeon, garden, water cooler, salon, neighborhood, university, city, nation, world, universe, wizard, janitor, parent, robot, sheriff, counselor, voodoo doll.

As you know, these are all terms that are used commonly in MUDs. Now I am going to read out a passage, which will be familiar to those of you who use MUDs. "This book arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered as I read the passage, all of the familiar landmarks of my thought, our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography, breaking up all of the ordered surfaces and all planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age of distinction between the same and the other.

This passage quotes a certain Chinese encyclopedia, in which it is written that, 'animals are divided into a) belonging to the emperor; b) embalmed; c) tame; d) sucking pigs; e) sirens; f) fabulous; g) stray dogs; h) included in the present classification: i) frenzied; j) innumerable; k) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush; l) etceteras; m) having just broken the water pitcher; n) that from a long way off look like flies.' In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that by means of this fable that is demonstrated is the exotic charm of another way of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that."

That is a quote from the opening page of Michel Foucault's book, *The Order of Things*. Foucault goes on to define the world that is described in this encyclopedia as "a heterotopia: the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension without law or geometry of the heteroclete." It should be explained that the spaces, objects, and people that constitute a heterotopia are not just incongruous elements from the same world like an umbrella and a sewing machine meeting on an operating table, but that they themselves belong to heterogeneous worlds, which are discontinuous or incompatible with one another, and cannot be reconciled into a stable, unified world of their own.

I would like to suggest that the worlds of MUDs are heterotopias, and for that reason, to describe them as virtual worlds, as is usually done, is misleading because it implies a sort of unity to the space, which is not always there. They are better seen as composite worlds, which are, in many ways, collages overlapping in heterogeneous worlds. Now this fact does make a difference because it is one of the things that makes a MUD different from the real world, and it therefore raises problems when we try to configure MUDs according to models drawn from the real world.

Let me try to give you some sense of what I mean by describing a MUD as a heterotopia. As anyone who has visited MediaMOO or LambdaMOO recently can tell you, the present topography of MediaMOO was originally based on that of the real life Media Lab. But if you check into MediaMOO now, you'll find that it only bears a passing resemblance to the Media Lab. This is one of the particular features of MediaMOO, that

you can actually build new spaces onto the existing space. The fact is these new spaces that can be programmed onto the MOO do not need to conform to either models or to real world physics, which is why they are so fun. And if you look at many of these places, [many of which do not conform to real spaces], you get some sense of what I mean by a "heterotopia," in that the worlds that are being indexed from particular spaces within the MOO are heterogeneous worlds, ranging from offices to the surface of the moon.

Thus, it appears that the users of MOOs bring to them different frames of reference, which go from imaginary fantasy worlds to the real world. You also see this kind of heterogeneity in the naming of characters [though less so on MediaMOO, since most have their own names]. It is into this kind of world that there has been introduced discussion of democracy. And as we have heard, particularly with respect to LambdaMOO, the programmers have withdrawn from the stage of representation that they created, and want to concern themselves almost exclusively with the technicalities of what they've created. Virtual communities are to become autonomous and decide their own destinies.

It seems to me that there are a certain number of problematic assumptions underlying what is going on here. One of the presuppositions is that there is some degree of continuity between the virtual world and the real world, and hence, certain real world institutions are valid models for the real world. There is also the supposition that the MUD is a world at all, which is something that we cannot necessarily assume. The second assumption is that the virtual world can be construed on the model of a city or a state, for which democracy might be an appropriate form of government. A third assumption is that there is at least some degree of consensus among the virtual community about the first two points--about the kind of world that we are in and what it is for.

Now, the problem for me is that it is just not clear that this kind of consensus exists. Discussing systems of government on a MUD and setting up a proto-type democracy on it seems to involve a political decision at the outset, in that it imposes a particular understanding of the kind of place the virtual world should be. It seems to me that there is, at best, only a partial consensus on this point. And coming back to LambdaMOO, this was essentially the problem during the Mr. Bungle incident that Julian told us about. By any standards, Mr. Bungle was clearly not playing by the rules of civilized society. But who said LambdaMOO had to be organized by these same rules, anyway? What was debatably at least as shocking to people, about what Mr. Bungle did to his victims, was the way in which what he did violated the world frame of the virtual community itself.

If it was an act of sexual terrorism, it could also be seen as an act of ontological terrorism. The problem with the aftermath of the Mr. Bungle incident was that, in trying to impose justice in this situation, debating about what would be the fairest way of dealing with this, the community was trying to absorb into its own world frame something heterogeneous to it, and as we saw, something that resolutely refused to play by its rules. Mr. Bungle continued not to play by the rules, and it seems, quite easily circumvented his banishment by just logging in under another name.

What is the solution? Should we simply deport people who won't play by the rules of society? Maybe that is the solution. I think that from the social-political viewpoint, that is where the future of MUDs may lie. Already it appears that the privatization of MUDs is quite advanced. Already it seems MUDs are beginning to look less like open cities, where people can just go and do whatever they like, and more like exclusive, members-only clubs. As with bulletin board systems, my guess is that it won't be long until you have to pay for the privilege of accessing the community and the special services that are offered there. I also think MUDs will be run along more hierarchical lines, more akin to the structure of large corporations, rather than democratic nation-states. It is quite interesting that among the many metaphors, which I listed at the beginning of the talk, one that is conspicuously absent is "corporation." It is an intriguing omission in light of the fact that MUDs, like MediaMOO and LambdaMOO, would not exist were it not for corporations.

I am going to wind-up here, with just few points. My first thought is that in setting up a democracy, it requires the establishment of the equivalent of some kind of social contract, whereby the members of the community agree on some set of basic principles about what kind of place the MUD is and what their rights and responsibilities within it will be. The second point is that, in its unregulated form, a MUD is basically an anarchic space, and so as long as it remains unregulated, attempts to establish social or political institutions modeled on those of the real world state will always be subject to acts of terrorism by marauding net-surfers like Mr. Bungle, who are not interested in playing the same game, or who actively oppose it. If you continue to allow gate crashers into your house, you have to take the consequences.

There is a related question here that perhaps we should address, and that is, what to do about guests because many times the problems come from guests. This is not meant to sound like an apology for the privatization of cyberspace; I am actually in favor of MUDs remaining the virtual equivalent of an open city, festival sites, if you like, which can be temporary hangouts for virtual communities not necessarily confined to one place. This is another interesting aspect of MUDs, which is easy to overlook. Virtual communities are not necessarily anchored in one particular MUD, but often hop around between different MUDs. This further problematizes the concept of the virtual community as a community.

Thank you.

RANDY FARMER [RF]: I am here to talk about why I think conversations like this one need to happen. Almost everything that has been said hints at some important things, and for the last year, I have been trying to make sense out of all of this. As mentioned earlier, I was one of the earliest developers of LucasFilm's Habitat, which in the 1980s was one of the first attempts at what we now call a "graphical virtual community." When I first worked on it, in fact, no one knew what to call these things. We also had problems with our partner, since they did not know how to market it in 25 words or less. We were talking about this bizarre concept of a world where people go and interact with each other for the sole purpose of interacting with each other, not in order to accomplish any particular goal.

What I want to talk about is some of the features in our graphic space that give hints about what things might be like tomorrow. For example, there is a "turf," what we call a personal home. People are only allowed in if they are invited. [In the MOOs, you think of these as private rooms.] This is a place in which people can store their stuff. There are also internal economies in these communities. There is a unit of exchange known as a "token," which is toy money. You get some for logging in every day. These are run, by the way, as commercial networks. This money is how one buys things from vending machines. One thing we learned from both the Japanese and the American implementations is that the economy decays to that which the people find most valuable. Although the token has a value, it is inflationary because you can always get more just by logging in. Eventually you buy all of the interesting objects there are to buy, and the economy degrades into whatever objects community members find more valuable. [So far, these have been different characters heads. Thus, in the most affluent turfs, one will find whole rows of different heads on display.]

Another interesting thing that happens when things get graphical is that there is a whole new level of communication, gesturing, which is not present in textual environments. One can wave, jump, move around the screen, etc. In both the original and the Fujitsu Habitat systems, performing groups spontaneously formed. For instance, the Red Shirt Troupe develops new dances. They perform coordinated gestures and put word balloons above their heads to draw kind of figures into the text space. It looks like cheerleading on Valium. But it is spontaneous. In the original system, these groups were called "wave teams." When we designed the original system, we believed this kind of thing was impossible, due to latency and other constraints. In fact, it is not impossible and has become an enormously popular sport.

What I am trying to point out here is that there are some things that have not been addressed in MOOs and MUDs discussions, things having to do with spontaneous social order of different kinds and also the effects of economies on these systems. First, I am going to talk about what I call, the Global Cyberspace Infrastructure. In our research, we have spent a great deal of time analyzing Habitat and the American Information Exchange, where we built a system in which people could trade information with each other for money. It is an on-line service, where one could sell expertise for money. As the middleman, we took a cut, and at the end of the month, those who sold more than they bought actually received checks.

One of the things we have looked at is that what is coming in the future is a new kind of medium. Cyberspace is very special--it is a many to many medium. We see point to point and broadcast [one to many] as proper subsets, but our real emphasis is on architectures that are many to many. We think that all of this leads to a new mass media, a new way for everyone in the world to communicate.

Our specific project is the Global Cyberspace Infrastructure: A Set of Interlocking Standards, Procedures, Protocols, and Institutions. The issues we need to cover in this project are as follows: place, point of view, privacy, government, commerce, fraud, politics, resources, religion, crime, punishment, inclusion, ostracism, identity, participation, addiction, abuse, and spontaneous social organization. In our research, we were actually able to distill every thing down to three guiding principles: decentralization, security, and community. Decentralization actually attacks the core of what we are talking about today. When we talk about the future being decentralized, we mean that it will be decentralized in every way--technologically, developmentally, entrepreneurial, and creatively. We envision a world in which anyone with their cyberspace terminal should be able to provide as well as consume services.

We believe that, in order for that to happen, the development needs to be decentralized. We are talking about something as big, perhaps, as the global telephone system. This needs to be an open systems effort; one cannot own the key piece. That is what scares us most as we watch certain attempted mergers between cable companies and telephone companies, who are looking to become the next monopoly. We do not think the system can be a monopoly; otherwise you get hierarchical control systems.

Security, in all discussions, is the thing that is left out. In order for any of these systems to really mean anything, money will be involved. People will trade it with each other for goods and services; they want to work. So transactions need to take place, and they need to take place securely. At the same time, you need to address the concerns of responsibility for actions. You need to address the issues of traceability. You need to address the issues of responsibility and reputation.

Finally, and most importantly, whenever one hears about the data highway, the first thing one hears is "data." You do not hear about people, nor do you hear about communication. We believe the central tenet of all of this is that it is people interacting with other people. We are in a world now where geeks rule, and we get this binding between technical knowledge and responsibility for running the system. I have written a bit on that separation, that, in fact, there needs to be a separation, and in every single one of these systems I have ever seen, eventually the power is abdicated. In my paper "Lessons from Habitat," I talk about how I had to abdicate power to a sheriff body. But over and over, I am struck by these emerging spaces, and how they go from the status of a patriarchal Jerusalem, where G-d dealt directly with the people. Eventually the people get ticked off and demand a king. Consistently they go through these transformations. This separation requires people other than those standing before you.

I am not a politician, even though I serve on the MediaMOO Council. I do so because I recognize that there needs to be a separation between the technical creator god of these spaces and the customers. But in fact, we need politicians, sociologists, anthropologists, people who understand cultures and have studied the spontaneous creation

of cultures. The good news is that there are some people out there studying this because this does matter.

We, the technicians, are not really qualified to establish what form these governments should be; we are just the first ones in the line of fire. All we know is that we like this, and we are excited by the capabilities we have for connecting people. We believe that we are doing something that is important and a force for good. But none of us are creator gods when it comes to dealing with human beings. So my appeal is for those who care about something new that is emerging, they should contribute and find ways to help us figure out what these problems are. I am not talking about participating in a debate on a MOO, but rather pointing the way and acting when you see people say stupid things.

That is all I am going to say for now. Thanks.

QUESTION 1: Though I have not participated in a MUD, I have participated in the UseNet, which is experiencing some of the same problems as the MUDs. There are, for example, huge petition drives going on to get rid of unwanted people. I wonder if any of you have participated in UseNet and can comment on that. It seems that UseNet is somewhere between the unreality of a MUD and the reality of real life.

AB: I think you are right. Many of the same issues come up. One question is, when a community passes a certain size, does it cease to be a community? I think we have a wonderful opportunity here to create a number of communities, each with distinct rules of appropriate conduct for that particular space. That pluralism is really something we should take advantage of. The question then becomes how to develop tools to help people develop shared expectations of what kind of space you happen to be in. I do not think that problem has been tackled.

JD: Also, Martin mentioned a kind of "heterotopia," the heterogeneous nature of these communities. The case of LambdaMOO illustrates that you have varying degrees of participation in this community. For instance, the whole debate about Mr. Bungle bracketed this important fact: it was restricted to a hundred people at the most. So how can this discussion be considered a consensus when one has perhaps 1,500 people in the community. And yet, perhaps these hundred people were the most dedicated people.

RF: One of the things I did not mention in my talk, but which I want to talk a bit about is this heterogeneity. I think the statements about who knows what the rules are in each space are very true, and I think this needs to be embodied in designs for cyberspace, and it is not now. We need to be able to express capabilities and requirements in a way that can be mutually shared. For instance, imagine in the future walking from your cyberspace unit to another with your objects. You want to know what those in the new space are going to do with your objects.

Perhaps the solution lies in standard terms of service contracts, in which everyone agrees to certain rules. This formalizes heterogeneity in a way that is similar to real life. You know, for example, when you go to Disneyland that the rules are different. Here in this room the protocol for talking is different. There are ways to express these rules, and not all of them have to be in code.

COMMENT 2: As an employee of ARPA, I have gotten the White House to start talking about virtual places because most of the images people have of the superhighways are as access to data sources, or they think about processing at a distance. I have got them to start thinking about virtual places, using MOOs and MUDs, etc., within which people will do a number of different activities, including access, process, meet and play, etc.

I also wanted to tell you about my own experience with a MUD, which is resonant with your own experiences, and I think it is worth mentioning. Two years ago, as a

newbee on DragonMUD. I was invited to a town council meeting, which turned out to be 50 characters meeting to discuss a rape.

What had happened was that a character named Targis had asserted rape actions on a number of female characters. It was an action that had played too fast for anyone to gag it or to turn it off. We had discussions similar to those that were discussed today. The types of solutions proposed were, on the other hand, a little different. Some proposed that Targis be branded with a scarlet A, so that every time he logged on, it would say, "I'm an a--hole." Another solution was that wherever this character showed up, he would be put into an electronic jail. This discussion went on for hours, until the wizard of this particular database said, "You know, we are overreacting. In the end, we will end up killing some of the things we like so much about DragonMUD, like its openness. We don't want to destroy that which we like so much. So, I decide to do nothing."

As a result of his decision, about 80% of the MUD [circa 500 players] decided to do the DragonMUD version of gagging, so that when Targis entered the room, he could not be seen, none of his actions could be seen, and he could not be heard. An interesting thing happened. For the first couple of days and weeks, he reacted very negatively and bitterly. Then about a month and a half after the incident, he said, "You know, I never realized anything I could do could negatively impact anyone else in a significant way." Finally, about four months after this spontaneous banishment, people started to let him back in, and gradually he reemerged with the group.

AB: I want to respond to something that you said. You can set up two continuums for solutions to problematic behavior, between social solutions and technological solutions, and between centralized solutions and decentralized solutions. In my opinion, it is always better to try a social solution rather than a technical solution because you are getting at the cause, not a symptom. And it is better to try a decentralized solution, which is what you described--a social, decentralized solution.

RF: I want to point out something important. The technology of MUDs permit virtual harassment and rape. Habitat, on the other hand, does not; it is not possible to spoof the system. Everyone knows which communications are associated with which body, and each body is mapped to a name, and the name is attached to a terms of service agreement. Some people do not like these agreements, but they give us the tools to do the work necessary. The software, itself, chooses to [or not to] impose a contract. I am not opposed to any system that says, "Come in and do whatever you want here." But I need to be told that is what will happen.

You will see, however, that even MOOs are changing. Implicit contracts, with terms of acceptable behavior, are popping up everywhere. We need more of this.

QUESTION 3: You mentioned that some anthropologists are studying LambdaMOO. Who exactly is studying it?

RF: You can contact Pavel Curtis for more information.

AB: There is a bit of a problem with all of this study. Not everyone is as careful as they should be about getting informed consent. They claim that what they are doing is participant observation, so they do not need to get consent and can just run around and observe people. I really think that is not okay. In fact, there are so many people doing it that sometimes it feels like the anthropologists outnumber the natives.

MR: To anyone who is interested in anthropology and MUDs, I would suggest having a look at the Balinese village I mentioned earlier. I also had a quick additional point. I think it is important to take into account that the anthropology of virtual communities does not begin and end with representation, but also needs to address the real question of the people

at the end of the computer terminals. I know quite a few people who are working on studies that involve participant observation in a MUD, but I know of few who are looking at the kinds of questions raised by Amy about the global distribution of MediaMOO and the kinds of questions this raises.

RF: Some time ago, I was speaking to an anthropologist who was very interested in Habitat. At the time, I did not know she was an anthropologist. She asked about the race question in Habitat, and I asked her if she meant Afro, Asian, Caucasian, etc., or if she meant dragons, spider, human, craphead, etc. And she said that she had been thinking of the former, but the latter sounded interesting. Then she asked if there were African-American heads in the Japanese system. And I said that I didn't understand the question, which seemed to offend her. I had to apologize because I guess I did not phrase it well, but I said I didn't understand what the issue of race could mean if one could be "craphead." She decided that perhaps the issue was a bit more subtle than she had expected. I guess I just did not understand the question.

AB: One place where race gets more represented is on various Star Trek MUDs. For instance, on a Star Trek MUD, you have characters that are Klingon, human, etc. I play a character that is Bujoran. It turns out that many real-life African-Americans play Klingons. I find that kind of curious, since they are kind of marginalized; I don't even want to begin to analyze this. But there is a lot of interesting stuff happening in the way people choose to represent themselves. This is a reflection of something very deep and personal about how they are seeing themselves and how they see the world.

JD: If you look at the real people logging on, the central question that comes up is not race, but gender. Gender is a huge issue on these networks. On one hand, it is not a coincidence that the victims in the Bungle case were real-life women, and that the perpetrator was really a man. But there is a tension there between this kind of fluidity of identity, but when the chips come down, the victims are women and the aggressors, men.

QUESTION 4: I think you have all brought up interesting points and then run away from them. Randy, for example, claims to be against unrestricted creation. But at the same time, he has people working 24 hours a day to build things just before people need them. Amy says she does not want to and does not have time to read all these petitions, so she has a council, who are exactly the kinds of people who have the time to read AND write these petitions. Plus you have Mr. Bungle who got toaded by 100 people, who, you say, are not representative of the community. Well, I would argue that they are the community. Which brings me to Martin's error when talking about heterogeneous spaces. Inside every black box, there are two white boxes trying to get out. Identifying a space as hetero- or homogeneous is just a function of how finely you tune your microscope. I think it is not a particularly useful characterization. There, have I said enough controversial things?

RF: I have no problem [and, in fact, agree] with the things you have said about what I am doing. It was only as a matter of brevity that I did not discuss the details of my project. Extendability is important. If there is anything that I have learned from the news groups, it is that. It also has the same problem as unmoderated UseNet news groups; there is a noise problem. All of these systems require some kind of moderation, even if the moderation is that there is no moderation.

I have always built commercial systems, so I am lucky. I always get terms of service from my partners. So, unchecked, unrestricted growth? No, not until we have a fully distributed system. Habitat is not that; it is a stepping stone. But in the long run, yes, that is why you need contracts--to protect people.

AB: I disagree with Randy about the issue of the importance of extendibility. As you know, I am involved in a program here that focuses on constructionism--learning by doing. I think that the idea of allowing people to create a mess is important because it is their mess. Someone once called MediaMOO "a multi-cultural mess," and I was never so flattered. I was designed in the first place as an experiment in letting people compose a world for themselves. I understand the kinds of practical constraints that someone running a much larger commercial service has to contend with, and I think there are some real practical problems to solve. So I agree with Randy when he said that distributing the database will be the key to letting people create their own personal mess. Cyberspace should be built by people and not by administrators.

I also want to answer Alan's second point about the council. We had another discussion of this same topic last weekend. Someone said that they felt we were losing all of the good people since the rewards to take part in government were not there. And someone from the back piped up, "Gee, it is just like the real world. You lose all of the good people because the job is not worth it." I think it is really interesting that you see so many of the same issues arise in the virtual world. I think we try and make being a council member an honor, so that some thoughtful people might actually take the time to participate. I would also like to compensate them financially, though that is not possible at this time. But there is a real question there, no doubt.

JD: Now, me. Well, I agree with you. But it becomes problematic at the point where Pavel came in and tried to institute this petition system. You know I have presented this with an implicit assumption that the creation of these democracies is a good idea, but in a sense one could also see it as a tragic fall. Before communities could simply define themselves, but no longer. By trying to draw a circle around the community and instituting a petition system, one loses self-identity; there is instead an imposed view of what the community is. Thus when you have only a hundred people showing up, trying to oust Mr. Bungle, one cannot say this represents the entire community. That is a bit bogus, which is sort of the point that the anarchists were making about this imposition of democracy. And yes, it will always, as Martin says, happen by fiat, but does it have to happen?

MR: I accept Alan's criticism. If you do not think talking about a MUD in terms of heterogeneity is interesting, then that is really up to you. I think what might have been a more interesting critique of what I was bringing up, however, would have been, if you accept my theory of heterogeneity, one of the things that is most interesting about the people who use MUDs are that they continue to operate as if that heterogeneity does not exist. William Gibson describes cyberspace as "a consensual hallucination," and I think there is a degree of consensual hallucination going on. People tend to treat LambdaMOO as if it is somehow a coherent whole, even though there are some spaces people get to by, etc. But people just adapt to these, and do not seem to find them particularly unusual or unrealistic.

QUESTION 5: Actually, I believe that real democracies arise neither from fiat nor from revolution. That is why I am so excited by the work that Randy Farmer is doing. I agree that only through widespread distribution of the system can we have real democracy. And one more point, I think that is an interesting example to look it with respect to this issue. It is a radically decentralized democracy, there are voting procedures in place that are more or less adhered to, and most interestingly, despite all of this, there seems to be all sorts of anti-social behavior going on, although there is no central organization making people stop. For example, though people seem to be going into wide gyrations about how to get people to stop sending advertisements to groups where they do not belong, there has been no centralized response.

RF: I think the error there is the centralized response is what people think is required, and that is not necessarily the case. I think that is a good example of a portion of the distributed sense, both the developmental and open systems aspect. What is most missing from the, which is most demonstrable in the signal to noise ratio, is an economic and reputation system that makes it reasonable to do various kinds of filtering. So many places, like the Media Lab here, are working on things to sift through that problem.

AB: I just want to respond that as long as MIT still owns this box, there are a certain number of barriers that we cannot overcome. There was a question on this week about whether we could become a non-profit organization, and there was extensive discussion of the hurdles that would have to be overcome to make that happen.

JD: I want to add that I agree that it is democracy in a box, with G-d outside using puppet fingers. But whether that is a real problem depends on how you define these things, and I think Amy defined them as "learning environments," simulations of real political environments. Whether they are good simulations of environments is another question.

QUESTION 6: One thing that concerns me is a certain elitism that seems to define this whole community. For example, in terms of access, how would one get these systems into private homes in, say, the Third World? I am curious how you address the issue of elitism, both locally and globally.

AB: I think there are some real issues about access. Actually there was a small conference a few weeks ago sponsored by the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility entitled, "Towards an Equitable and Open Information Infrastructure," where people from the movement and other kinds of communities got together to discuss these kinds of issues. It is important to remember that access is not just a link, it is the knowledge of what you can do with it.

RF: One of the few benefits of the government getting on the information infrastructure bandwagon is that universal access is one of the things they are really concerned about. I am an engineer, not savvy to discuss these issues, but I can assure you that this truly is part of the national public debate already.

MR: It is interesting that we have spent the afternoon talking about issues of democracy without spending much time discussing the democratization of access to these systems. I think one thing that also needs to be taken into account is that there are some ways of circumventing the extensive inequities currently in the system. One example that comes to mind comes from an article I read recently in the *Voice's* "Wired" column. The article was about a married couple from Cuba that was separated, the wife was in Cuba and the husband was in the U.S.

Now, the question of connections between Cuba and the USA is a delicate one. But by traveling to the university campus a few miles from her house, the wife was able to send messages in real time to another university campus in Canada, which then bounced the messages to her spouse in New York. This is not to imply that there is some sort of utopia out there, just that ways can be found to obtain access, other than through the official economic channels.

I would like to thank you for your attention and questions, and that's it. Log out.

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



Is it a game?

Amy Bruckman
MIT Media Lab

The Communications Forum
May 1994

- Is it a game?
- Direct democracy on LambdaMOO
- The MediaMOO Republic

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



What I'm Not Going to Talk About

- MUDs as constructionist learning environments
- MOOSE Crossing
— The MOOSE Language
- MediaMOO as a professional community

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



Get a life!

- It's a game!
- Outlet for aggressions
 - Like sports
 - If not here, then where?
 - What real harm is done?

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?

Grow up!

- You're interacting with real people with real feelings!

Carol 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.

Dennis responds:

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.

The Murphy Brown problem

- Do representations impact reality?
 - Does violence on television cause real life violence?
 - Does use of “he” as the default pronoun disempower women?
 - Did the television show “Murphy Brown” encourage more women to become unwed mothers?
 - Who is to blame for Oakland teenagers laughing at *Schindler’s List*?
- It’s not that simple
 - “Cause”? No.
 - “Monkey see, monkey do”? No.
 - Confuse the real and the unreal? No.
 - Have a significant impact? Yes.

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?

An Evocative Medium

- Difficult issue for our culture
- Issue comes to life in virtual communities
 - Debate about virtual drugs

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?

So is it a game?

- Both answers are fine
- The problem is when people don't realize they have different understandings of its status
- Multiple communities with multiple styles
- How are expectations established?
 - By administrators?
 - Emerge from the community

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



Democracy in Cyberspace

- Growing part of people's lives
 - Who is to control them? The people or the owners of the hardware?
- Democracy on LambdaMOO
- The MediaMOO Republic

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



A Very Different Incident

- Obscene pages on LambdaMOO
- Mediation started
 - Mediation procedure set up by democratic vote
- A complex system
 - Petitions
 - Ballots
 - Architecture Review Board

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



Direct Democracy on LambdaMOO

As of March 2nd, 1994:

- 21 active petitions
— 353 Messages
- 1 active ballot
— 134 Messages

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?


LambdaMOO Petitions

>@petitions

Author	ObjNum	Title	Msgs	Sigs	Expires
Q	#52606	? (untitled; please	8	15	--
Moriah	#51338	Archiving Petition	12	0	--
Fortinb	#60739	Too many log ons?	4	16	--
Karl	#55681	LambdaMOO Cultural	16	0	--
Blackbr	#62261	Eliminate the Petiti	52	0	--
Dr.Benw	#63526	Stop the Excess Peti	11	11	--
Ramblin	#61267	Amendment To New	6	17	40 days
The_Out	#38358	Account Responsibili	16	42	42 days
Calvin	#16175	Initial Quota to 100	26	31	55 days
Lambda	#22581	Closing Loopholes in	8	0	--
Spaz	#48442	Publicize Guest Site	28	0	--
Linnea	#50599	Appealing ARB Decisi	31	0	--
Rog	#54577	Judicial Review Boar	15	25	85 days
edd	#66434	Post count against q	5	0	--
Mickey	#67209	Petition Restriction	24	23	79 days
Stace	#61729	A system of sponsori	27	0	--
evangel	#69299	mediator selection m	4	0	--
Klaatu	#69369	Mediator and Disputa	13	0	--
jaime	#69338	Make all new players	20	33	80 days
Ian	#71895	Have a Heart, Free a	0	5	12 days
SamIAm	#57395	Zero Population Grow	27	32	89 days

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



The MediaMOO Republic

- MediaMOO
 - A professional community for media researchers
 - 1000 members from 24 countries
 - Application required
 - Identified participants
 - Research interests
- Representative Democracy
 - History
 - Gradual transition
- Thoughtful people don't have time to make decisions on every issue facing the community

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?

The MediaMOO Population

DOMAIN	NAME	NUMBER OF USERS
edu	Educational (USA)	653
com	Commercial (USA)	167
ca	Canada	77
uk	United Kingdom	40
au	Australia	27
us	Misc (USA)	16
net	Network provider (USA)	15
no	Norway	14
org	Nonprofit organization (USA)	12
gov	Government (USA)	10
at	Austria	10
za	South Africa	9
de	Germany	8
jp	Japan	8
il	Israel	8
se	Sweden	7
mil	Military (USA)	7
bitnet	Bitnet (USA)	6
nl	The Netherlands	4
br	Brazil	3
it	Italy	3
fi	Finland	3
ie	Ireland	2
sg	Singapore	2
pt	Portugal	2
tw	Taiwan	1
nz	New Zealand	1
pl	Poland	1
ch	Switzerland	1
gr	Greece	1
be	Belgium	1

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?

The MediaMOO Council

Council members as of Wed Mar 2 11:29:51 1994 EST
Constituency needed for council membership: 15

REPRESENTATIVE	CONSTITUENCY	QUALIFIED?	ACCEPTED?
mday (#1849)	23	yes	yes
Allday (#3411)	22	yes	yes
bookish (#4844)	20	yes	yes
Oracle (#553)	19	yes	yes
Nancy (#2180)	18	yes	yes
BethK (#4841)	17	yes	yes
Mickey (#6989)	16	yes	yes
NO COUNCIL (#7032)	12	no	no
Wilson (#1358)	6	no	yes
der_wanderer (#1338)	6	no	yes
Gustavo (#5953)	4	no	yes
Ninja_Librarian (#1751)	3	no	yes
Val (#7673)	2	no	yes
Mucho_Maas (#6676)	2	no	no
DavidSan (#1379)	2	no	no
Ryan (#4856)	1	no	yes
Cabaal (#2951)	1	no	no
petit_objet_a (#8776)	1	no	no
sleepy (#8633)	1	no	yes
Pan (#5038)	1	no	no
TOTAL	177		

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?

Surprises

- Tougher on registration
- Tougher on guests
- Consensus based
- Advisory status: the backwards argument

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



Community Size

- The MediaMOO system wouldn't work on LambdaMOO
- The benefit of small communities

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?

Is all this a big waste of time?

- Participatory simulation
 - Combat people's naive idea of "democracy"
 - Come to understand real government world better
- Empowerment
- Part of a larger trend
 - Users becoming creators of content, not just recipients

Amy Bruckman

Is it a game?



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Kent Pitman

The people of MediaMOO