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Jacking in to the Virtual Self

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A Context

Recently, I was interviewed for the "feminist perspective" about a group of women called PMS: Psycho Men Slayers, who play as a clan (a team) against any other clans in a networked game called Quake. In Quake, team members stalk virtual representations of other team members on-line through levels of mazes of various degrees of difficulty. The goal, of course, is to kill kill kill. When the other team is wiped out, your team wins.

The Psycho Men Slayers group's Web page proclaims, "Under every floral print dress lies a lady wearing black garters, carrying a big f*cking gun!"1 Members' individual pages list iconography, from male fantasy comic books, of stiletto-heeled women with big guns. I read an interview with one of the PMS members in HotWired, which quotes the PMS founder as saying, "It's always going to be boys versus girls. It's something that's been with us since grammar school." Indeed, both members of PMS and the only other all- female clan, Crack Whore, complain about the sexist treatment of women in that environment: "The fact that we are mostly girls just seems to pile on the sexism. Everyone wants to play us, and wants to either talk sex or give us shit." Playing well, they claim, has a certain mitigating factor on the sexism: "When you get to the top of the scoreboard and they're at minus one, suddenly they show a lot of respect."2 In the interview, I was asked to speak about what was positive for women in what these women were doing and what was not so positive.

There is nothing new in these young women finding solace in the belief that they are beating men at their own game and gaining respect for this. Many of these women go to university, where they learn every day how to do malestream thought, how to write malestream essays, how to compete with men, how to deny they are being harassed while doing so.

There is nothing new in the image these women use to dress up their competition: the femme fatale. The stereotype comes prefabricated with what Freud referred to as "castration anxiety" _ the dangerous fear of, and attraction to, the seductress, who of course only wants to cut off a man's balls.

There's nothing new in a woman's actions regularly being taken to be about a man rather than for herself. This misogynist icon runs the gamut of historical pop culture, from Medusa to Nikita. While it is compelling that these women want to foreground their gender, to challenge assumptions of how women can play or behave, it is problematic that they use male-defined images of women to attempt to make their point. In this game, their representation of their strength is relative only to the men they overpower. These women use the femme-fatale image without irony or contradiction, which begs the question: What are they trying to prove? That they are this stereotype, rather than another? That they are the sexual killer (in a game where there is no overt sexual intrigue, only Rambo-esque blood and guts), rather than the Madonna?

Where the players do break with their chosen stereotype is through their willingness to acknowledge much male attention as "sexual harassment in the form of put-downs or requests for virtual sex." The women acknowledged that they are not treated as equals in this environment until they have "proved" they are the male players' equals or betters. The lesson here seems to be that if they can be seen to be as good as, or better than, men in this game (i.e., can shoot a virtual gun, can pound a keyboard very quickly), they will no longer be treated as women.

They note that many women who do play Quake do not identify themselves as women because of the harassment. When the PMS group put out an invitation for women players to join their clan, it did not receive many replies. The members put this down to the harassment, too. But maybe the lack of response is because not all woman who play Quake identify with this version of what it is to be constructed as a woman who plays Quake. What if one is a woman in Cyberia without a gun or a dress? It is hard to be a woman in Cyberia.

The Discussion Proper: Jacking In

Estimates are that the number of persons jacking in to the 'Net is growing exponentially. This means as that population grows, so (it is hoped) will the number of women on-line. Currently, women represent a third of the on-line population. But these statistics reflect only the most recent period of the Internet's almost 50-year history.

The Internet has been around eight times as long as the Web, and for that entire length of time the dominant group on the network has been white males between the ages of 25 and 50. They have been researchers, academics,

telecommunications experts and members of the military. In fact, the Internet, until 1995, was funded by the U.S. government, with special interest by the U.S. military.3 In 1995, just after the explosion of the World Wide Web onto the scene, the government sold the main backbone, the main line of Internet traffic, to the telecommunications company MCI. Prior to that, however, the 'Net had been the domain of the military and academics. It is important to note, for instance, that in the United States, computer science departments came into being largely through military initiatives and funding. It is only with the coming of the World Wide Web and large-scale Internet Service Providers (ISPs), which made access to the Internet possible in private homes, schools and businesses, that women, along with the rest of the population who can afford to do so, have been going on-line in more significant numbers. Despite this opening up of access to this resource, however, we come not to a brave new world,4 but to a space that has decades-old protocols for exchange and decades-old prejudices about who may exchange what and how.

Our initiation into these protocols is immediate. To access the 'Net and its resources _ like electronic mail, the Web, discussion groups and file transfers _ we must "log on." We must identify ourselves to the system. Our log-on identity determines how we are perceived by the system, that is, what our privileges are within that system: what information we can see and, perhaps more important, what information can we change.

This is only the first wave of self-construction we engage in on-line. Identity for the system is simply authorization. It is not, in most places, a fingerprint. It is like a key that anyone can carry. If you have my log-on name and password, you are me for that system, or at least you are all the system needs to know about me. The construction can be extremely limited: on-screen name; password; real e-mail address. In some spaces, a user will enter the second wave of identification, which is not for the system, but for other users. Users are asked to create a personal profile of likes and dislikes, occupation and so on. It can all be true. It can all be false. That is, once within the system _ once the system has allowed you to access it on its terms _ further identity construction has little to do with the system's authorization for the purposes of entry and tracking for surveillance. Quite the contrary, in fact. Identifying oneself to other real users within the system is about commodification, not authorization. Who we are, as demographic entities, is highly valuable and prized information to the global economy gone digital. This information is bought and sold among collectors at an increasing rate. As we reach the coming millennium, as more and more of our (always already logged) transactions take place on-line, as the source for

informational exchange becomes increasingly limited to the digital domain, the nature of identity (and how or why it is constructed on-line) is of critical moment.

On the 'Net, after log-on, there are two main places in which identity construction is focused: a self-created identity, for use in electronic exchanges such as e-mail or live, real-time textual exchanges; and a form-based identity, for marketing purposes. This discussion is most concerned with issues around the first type of self-construction, but I will make the following point about the latter, since the two intersect.

Companies that use the Web to sell things (especially virtual things such as software or information) have changed the way they do business. In the early days of the Web, a user could go to a company site, look for the most recent version of a software program on the site and download it. Increasingly, however, companies are blocking direct access to both software and information downloads with forms that request information about the downloader. As well as name, postal code, e-mail address and sometimes physical address, sites will ask about occupation, annual income, where you will use the software, how many people are in your organization and whether you are male or female. On some sites, not filling in age or gender is not an option. If you want the software, you have to fill in something. On other sites, like Microsoft's, if you want to access the software support areas, you must allow them to track your computer or you will be denied access to their help files. Similarly, if you wish to get the "free" version of New York Times On- line, you must take out a virtual subscription. Your age, gender, country, name and e-mail address are mandatory before you can access the site. In this case, the news becomes a wrapper for capturing, and likely selling, your stats to other vendors. We will give you some news, but first you must surrender your demographic valuables. As the NYT Web customer-service writer puts it, responding to an e-mail query about their policy for collecting age, gender, e-mail and country information:

> "Different news organizations on the Web do different things in order to earn enough revenue to provide their services. The Wall Street Journal, for example,charges $59 a year for access to its site. Several others request a zip code or a birth date in order to use a particular service, or gather information about readers their viewing habits gradually through `cookies' as they travel a site. Some sites

> do nothing at all; many of those sites are losing not insignificant of money.
>
> "In our case, asking a few questions of our readers is the `price' we charge for access. As stated in our Policy, linked from the bottom of our home http://www.nytimes.com, the information we gather from our individual readers is kept strictly confidential. The major use of this information is to allow advertising banners on our pages to be shown to the readers for whom they are most pertinent. This means that readers see advertising that is most likely to interest them, and advertisers send their messages to people who are most likely to be receptive, improving both the viewer's experience and the effectiveness of the ads.
>
> "The information we gather also allows us to learn how various types of users respond to the features we provide, helping us to improve our services."5

In the corporate Web, the mall of the next millennium, this is identity: a marketing survey that denies anonymous transactions, that insists on categorizing us according to its terms. "Types of users" are defined by age, sex, country and income for both initial survey and future monitoring. This is the price of admission. If you don't provide the information, you cannot get the product.

These details are power and currency. Through these questions, a corporation will represent us to ourselves, market us and, of course, sell us to other corporations. There is little room in such exchanges for identity constructed as other than age/gender/country/e-mail/address/income- optional. On-line, it doesn't matter if you're Black or white, but it does matter if you are male or female, young or old, and, increasingly, what you do and what you get paid for doing it. I am not sure what is worse: a future where all other aspects of cultural affiliation are reduced to income bracket, so that a site can be pitched to that user's price range; or a future where more refined information is required, where whether you are Black or white, blue- or green-eyed, is part of the form, without which, nothing. It won't mean that you will not be served, but it could make a very big difference in what you are served.

Such scenarios as the above do not surrender their rationales to their users. While many sites have so-called Privacy Policies that protest that the information you give them is confidential, you will not be told what "confidential" ends this information will be put to within the organization. And unless the policy explicitly says so, your information can be sold to other companies with whom you may wish never to do business. This type of profile-gathering is not new. Coupons, rebates, subscriptions do much the same thing. But the type of questions have become more intrusive and more restrictive: unless you give us your e-mail address and gender and occupation, we will not give you this product. In the real world, you can still buy a subscription to a newspaper without providing this kind of information. Such is not the case within the hidden workings of the on-line commercial identity trade.

With the above caveat emptor in place, this discussion now turns to the other highly structured zones of virtual transaction, such as e-mail, chat rooms and other forms of "personal" exchange. It's in this well-defined space that the other form of identity construction is situated, the self- identity construction. In each of these spaces, we are asked over and over, before entering the space, to construct an identity for ourselves.

This free-floating nature of the name in cyberspace has been hailed as one of its liberating qualities; outside of the e- commerce forms described above, the Web is "neutral." It does not perceive race, nation, age, physical ability, gender, because there are no bodies, no flesh, in cyberspace. But just because we can't see it, does that mean the body, and all the cultural markers and prejudices that go with it, disappears? More to the point, what happens when there are no fleshly anchors to an identity, or when another claims to speak from that identity? If identity is supposedly so fluid on the 'Net, what is the future of women in Cyberia?

To look at this question, we need to consider first how communication is constructed in cyberspace/cyberia.6 Cyberia is the scene of the new literacy; it is the publishing medium du jour. Despite the emphasis on multimedia content _ the combining of interactive images, sound and video in one Web page or in a single e-mail _ for the foreseeable future, the virtual world of the 'Net will remain largely text- and-icon-based for the exchange of information and the publication of ideas. In this invisible, burgeoning7 zone, identities are communicated through textual descriptions or icons that represent some text. Currently, text-only dominates web-based transactions. In the near future, one will be able to enhance text with icons and avatars _ graphic representations of a

character representing "you" in an exchange. There is no guarantee that the more representational options available, the more "truthful" the representation of self to system or self to other will be. On the contrary, the tools are there for your construction of an identity, not necessarily the representation of an identity. As such, in this world of words and icons, anyone can claim to be anybody.

In Cyberia, claiming to be anybody has, according to many, become simply the way of being on-line. It is taken for granted, for instance, that gender-bending is part of the fabric of many on-line fora. As Amy Bruckman states regarding her research into multi-user domains/dungeons (MUDs):

> "Without makeup, special clothing, or risk of social stigma, gender becomes malleable in MUDs. 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.8 In public forums like rec.games.mud, people reflect the values that our society attaches to gender. In private experiences, people can explore the impact of gender on their lives and their construction of themselves."9

Rather than critiquing the implications of such identity claims, Bruckman sees these on-line fora as an "identity workshop."10 And intense work it is, according to Sherry Turkle in Life on the Screen. Playing at another gender is an energy-intensive exercise that demands attention to a variety of details: speech mannerisms, interpretation of experience, consistency of presentation over time. There is also anxiety about whether or not one is successfully passing as the Other.11 But, despite these anxieties, Turkle and Bruckman maintain that gender-swapping on MUDs can be a safe way (one will not get arrested for cross-dressing on-line) to learn about identity. As Turkle states:

> MUDs are proving grounds for an action-based philosophical practice that can serve as a form of consciousness-raising about gender issues. [For example, when] men playing females on MUDs are plied with unrequested offers of help on MUDs, they often remark that such chivalries communicate belief in female incompetence. When women play males on MUDs and realize that they are no longer being

> offered help, some reflect that those offers of help may well have led them to believe they needed it."12

Indeed, in the literature exploring so-called on-line gender- bending or gender-swapping, the oft-cited markers of gender that men notice are that women get hit on a lot; and that when they get offers of help, it is usually in expectation of some kind of favour (tiny sex,13 usually). And according to this research, women notice that they receive less help when they present as men.

Both Turkle and Bruckman (as well as other researchers in this area) believe that, based on such observations as those noted above, life on the screen does indeed provide the opportunity to "explore" (undefined) gender issues through this on-line "embodying" of personae of the opposite gender. The fake identity becomes a "vehicle of self-reflection."14 But to what end? Does the man who gets hit on on-line become a more caring and sensitive man in real life (RL)?

In one of Turkle's interviews in Life on the Screen, she speaks with a man, Garrett, who says he goes on-line as a woman to "know more about women's experience _ I wanted to see what the difference felt like _ I wanted to be collaborative and helpful, and I thought it would be easier as a female."15 Turkle notes that Garrett as an on-line female "could be collaborative without being stigmatized." While Turkle talks about Garrett's RL history, however, she never mentions if Garrett in RL tried to be collaborative as himself with other men, or even what "being collaborative" means to him.16

How these men presume to construct virtual gender goes unproblematized. In the only other case that Turkle gives much consideration to, she sums up another male's (Case's) take on why he gender-bends: "[F]or Case, if you are a sensitive man, it is coded as `being a bastard.' If you are assertive as a woman, it is coded as `modern and together.'"17 In whose universe? Turkle does not comment on Case's incredibly reversed perception of gender attributes. As has been recited over the past 30 years in arenas from feminist scholarship to pop women's magazines, if women are assertive they are bitches; if men are aggressive they are confident. Furthermore, women aren't praised for being caring and sharing; they are simply punished if they are not. Men, on the other hand, are praised for any turn of seeming sensitivity.18 One wonders if it is simply not easier to play at being a stereotypical woman, to move as such within the company of women, than to attempt to challenge male identity patterns?

Turkle's presentation of this mode of gender-bending as self- reflection also does not consider that the person who has been evolving himself through stereotypical role-play for his own ends in a "safe space" _ safe for him _ has been contributing to the propagation of a gender stereotype, not to the social challenging of it. Neither Turkle nor Bruckman considers what happens to women who present on-line as women in ways that challenge these swapping stereotypes _ who do not behave as men playing women do, for instance. Quite the contrary.

On-line gender-appropriation assumes that playing at stereotypes of gender is actually exploring gender, rather than redrawing again and again the stereotypes so helpful to male domination. Turkle, however, insists that these on-line personae are "serious play" and have RL repercussions. She points to a singularly reiterated occurrence of on-line rape, one man's take on it anyway,19 to raise the "question of accountability for the actions of virtual personae who have only words at their command."20 Julian Dibble tells of how one character in a MUD "took over" another player's character and described raping the character in front of the other participants. The MUD community was in a state over how to treat the offender. One might think that the actions that provoked redress in this on-line community were the rape itself. Not so. Debate ranged around the realness or seriousness of a "verbal only" action. Nothing, in fact, is done until one member's virtual robot dog is also "possessed" by the rapist and returned dismembered to the MUD. The player's character, it is decided, will be terminated. The consequences? The shunned member returns in another identity. There is no concern expressed for the laissez-faire way in which gender and identity are presented as an appropriatable, abusable commodity either within the original story, or within Turkle's retelling of it. Those who view gender as such a transferable commodity, and those who practise this commodification, do not consider the logical conclusion to be drawn from this for race and other specific sites of agency.

A man who wants to present as caring and sharing, Turkle notes, finds it natural to present as a "woman." Would someone wanting to appear evil go on-line as small-bodied and Austrian? Would someone wanting to be seen as musical or athletic go on-line as African American? Turkle's and Bruckman's investigations into the "serious play" of on-line identity construction are limited to their accounts of gender- bending. They are either unaware of, unconscious of, or uninterested in similar appropriations of race and class. Perhaps it is less easy to make claims about the nature of "play" when culture, race and class are at issue,

rather than gender alone. But where these two academic women (both from MIT) may be afraid to tread, Wired magazine boldly goes.

Race in Cyberspace

At the end of 1995, Wired ran an article by Glen Martin entitled "Indian Wars on the Internet." The point of the article seems to be that the actions of a white man claiming to be a Native American shaman spurred a group of Native Americans into developing a telecommunications network. While the argument that the fakery of a white man was the genesis of an all-Native network seems spurious, the article does address the issue of cultural appropriation on-line. The writer of the article asks whether, in a culture (on-line) where all information can be translated as zeros and ones, anything can be sacred. "How do you upload holiness?" In other words, because a technology enables the appropriation of all things that can be digitized, then everything is available for the taking by everybody. To deny this, the article suggests, is to be a narrow-minded fundamentalist.

The author of the article implies that the ability to wear multiple identities on-line is liberating to enlightened Native Americans but threatening to traditionalists. He does not, however, quote or otherwise identify any actual Aboriginal persons who espouse the belief that it is okay for a white man to claim he's an Aboriginal shaman practising authentic Aboriginal rituals. Of course, by labelling as "traditionalists" those Aboriginal persons who find such practices to be cultural appropriation, he discredits their having anything meaningful to say in a supposedly non-traditional, on-line world. The article gives the last word to the white man, too, who says all he wanted was for more Natives to be communicating on-line.

The Native Americans quoted in the piece, however, state that to be spoken for _ for a white man to claim as his the little left to a people from which so much has already been taken _ is too much to bear. They resent the stereotyping and misrepresentation of their practices as well. They also referred to the act as fraud: the man was claiming to practise actual Native spiritual rights when he wasn't. To make matters worse, America On Line (AOL), the company hosting the man, was making money from the exploitation. AOL users had to pay an additional fee beyond AOL membership to enter the chat room where this pseudo-shaman presided. But despite numerous tribal council protests to have the man's platform pulled because of the damage such appropriation does to

their cultures, AOL stalled. One of the Native women involved in the efforts to block the fake, states in the article:

> "But anger [on the part of the Native Americans], says [Susan] Miller, was the dominant emotion _ especially when [Native] protests were repeatedly stonewalled by AOL. `I was e-mailing a Sioux friend about it, and we came to the conclusion that the company didn't want us disturbing the fantasy,' said Miller. `It doesn't want real Indians _ we're not "Indian" enough. It wants the buckskin fringes and the feathers.'"21

Dionne Brand, in her book Bread Out of Stone, refers to the protection and propagation of such stereotypes as part of the cultural-appropriation agenda: "It confirm[s] and reinscribe[s] that colonial representation so essential to racial domination."22

From incidents like that described above, we can see that the multiple but actual identities of all women on-line are also blocked from virtual acceptance in preference of male fantasy and its perpetuation of female stereotypes. Unlike the Native resistance mounted against AOL, women's groups have not petitioned any Internet service providers (ISPs) to stop supporting the appropriation and misrepresentation of women's voices on-line. The terms have been set: it's "gender-bending," after all, not "cultural appropriation." The activity has become far too much a part of 'Net culture to be questioned as anything other than what the 'Net's dominant culture says it is: just fun, just a game, just a joke.

One may suggest that, as a group, women are far more heterogeneous than Native Americans, and therefore have no particular identity to be threatened, misappropriated or lost by such virtual cross-dressing. That assumes that women want to protect some imaginary homogeneous identity. That there are so many voices also marked as "women" is exactly the point. There is a multiplicity of women's voices. For some time, those voices have asserted the basic feminist challenge to stop reading women in terms of stereotypes (from earth mother to nymphomaniac)23 that only subjugate the real differences between them. But the dominant 'Net culture is about as interested in the actual voices and experiences of any women as it is in actual Native Americans. Despite claims that the 'Net is the embodiment of postmodern play, where identity is entirely

subjective,24 the Wild Wild Web, the male-dominated state that produces MUDs and MOOs (MUD oject-oriented), is, as Margie Wylie observes, "male territory." As Wylie states: "Far from offering a millennial New World of democracy and equal opportunity, the coming web of information systems could turn the clock back 50 years for women."25

With popular emphasis like Bruckman's and Turkle's on gender-bending through stereotype, women's presence on- line becomes even more entrenched as either the traditional domestic caretaker or a sex object. Yet Turkle, who has done research specifically on women's reluctance to engage computers in part because of the machine's macho image,26 makes no comment on the propagation of these very stereotypes in the supposedly gender-liberating explorations that her research subjects enact (for their own self-reflection), and that she seemingly extols.

The result of this ready acceptance of stereotyping that passes as meaningful, "self-reflective" gender-bending is the continued silencing of women, a reiteration in this brave new world of the same old, same old. Indeed, the very old. As Karen Coyle points out in "How Hard Can It Be," her article on women's perceived relations to the computer, the majority of computer ads currently on the market equate the machine with power: if women are present at all, they are either on the sidelines, cheerleading male prowess as measured in MIPS or MHz, or they are very obviously replaced by the Tower of Power as the preferred sex object (or, at best, compared with it, such that having the technical object is equivalent to having the organic one).

But ads are not the only place Coyle points to where computers are equated with heroic brawn and brain. Such is the history of computing. Coyle deftly describes how both Wired author Stephen Levy and George Gilder, the influential futurist of the anti-gay, anti- feminist, arch-conservative Discovery Institute, effectively erase women from the annals of computing heroics, both going so far as to suggest that women don't hack and don't "compete" with men in computation because we're not genetically up to it.27 As Coyle points out, Levy's celebration of the early days of MIT male hackerdom misses other possibilities for women's supposed absence:

> "[Levy] never considers relevant that this hacking took place in a campus building between midnight and dawn in a world where women who are mugged

> at 2 a.m. returning from a friend's house are told: `What did you expect, being out at that hour?' Nor does he consider that this hacking began at a time when MIT had few women students. And though he describes his male hackers as socially inept, he doesn't inquire into their attitudes toward women and how those attitudes would shape the composition of the hacking `club.'
>
> "But most of all, he never considers the possibility that among the bright women attending MIT at that time, none were truly interested in hacking. What if the thousands of hours of graveyard shift amateur hacking weren't really the best way to get the job done? That would be unthinkable."28

With this frame of mind _ the belief that the computer and computer jock must be heroic _ it's no surprise that Levy and most other writers of computer history erase the significant and substantial contributions of women (like the notion, design and implementation of the first computer programming language).29 Coyle speaks to the disparate social status of computation as yet another reason for excluding women's voices from computer science. "The assumption in our society is that men's activities are difficult, and that is why women can't or don't engage in them. Women's activities are, of course, inferior, which is why men don't engage in them."30 Not until the computer is reduced to the level of appliance, like a refrigerator, will it be acceptable for women to be visibly involved in computing (again):

> "But it is doubtful we will be able to demote the computer to appliance status in the near future. The inevitable march toward the development of the `information superhighway' means that we are depending on the power and mystique of computers to provide new markets for our economy for the foreseeable future. And a machine with all the fascination of a toaster won't motivate the consumer market."31

We can see that unfounded, stereotypical presumptions about women erase their real achievements in computing. Presumptions about the masculinity of the

computer also erase us from the marketplace of "serious" computer users,32 and these same presumptions operate in on-line fora, where identity is appropriated and the stereotype becomes the only allowable version of women on-line. The scene is grim for female would-be participants in the great information revolution. It gets worse when actual women resist this erasure.

It's All Just a Game

Any criticism of activities practiced on MUDs, MOOs and chat rooms is often dismissed by their participants with the "it's just a game" response. This response acts as a carte blanche excuse for a range of behaviours, from cross-dressing to virtual rape. Indeed, Rapp, the man faking shaman status on AOL, has the typical chauvinist response to criticism from a subordinate group. He is described as somewhat bemused by all the heat and bile generated by his on-line persona. "Basically, what we did was done in fun," he observes. "We certainly didn't intend any disrespect."

It was a joke; I didn't mean it. Of course these very familiar rationalizations do not modify the behaviour critiqued. Instead, they become the rationale for its perpetuation: because it is a game, I can do what I want. Even if one was to accept that rationality for chat room-like on-line environments, there are other places on-line where these same behaviours take place and do not have the excuse of being "just a game." These are on-line newsgroups and mailing lists.

When speaking about off-line conversational exchanges in her book The Writing or the Sex, Dale Spender noted that if women generate more than 30 percent of an exchange, they are considered to be dominating it.33 Retaliation, often aggressive, ensues to reclaim the margin, with arguments that, for example, freedom of speech has been impinged. The same statistics have been reaffirmed in on-line newsgroups and mailing lists _ even those with titles such as alt.feminism and SWIP-L (the Society for Women in Philosophy list).34 In her extensive research in the area of computer-mediated communication (CMC), Susan Herring cites regular use by men of aggressive on-line behaviours such as flaming and personal insult. She notes that this behaviour is validated by "netiquette," as codified by published texts such as Towards an Ethics and Etiquette for Electronic Mail by Norm Shapiro and Robert Anderson, who advise, "Do not insult or criticize third parties without giving them a chance to respond." In other words, flame away, as long as the attackee has a chance to flame back. The flames themselves, when directed at women (something

Shapiro and Anderson do not consider), are more often than not framed as rape threats, and are sometimes mailed not only to the attackee but also to the rest of the list.35 Unfortunately, threats like these, which would otherwise be grounds for legal action, are regularly practised on-line, where arrest is difficult: it is hard to arrest someone from across a provincial or national border, assuming the threat is even taken seriously in the first place.

Stephanie Brail discovered that women in particular are the victims of retaliation that goes beyond the caustic flame. She cites especially e-mail harassment of a graphic and threatening nature, and system administrators unsympathetic to pulling the on-line privileges of the perpetrator. Pornographic writings were posted across various newsgroups and attributed to Brail. Another woman was harassed at work and nearly lost her job as a result of false accusations made about her to her boss by men rubbed the wrong way by her challenging them _ politely _ on-line.36

Netta "grayarea" Gilboa relates similar off-line terrors levelled at her when she inadvertently upset certain hackers on an Internet relay chat (IRC) channel. She found her phone number changed regularly; her phone calls monitored and broken into; various confidential data accessed and published on-line.37 All were acts over which it is very hard to exercise any control.

Ironically, Herring's CMC research found that men dislike flaming and related behaviours as much as women do.38 Despite their stated dislike for these practices, however, they still perpetrate them and dominate on-line exchanges. Women do not; when turned off by a climate of flame or silence, women frequently leave. Be flamed or be ignored _ both are the normal, abusive responses to women's postings. Herring insists that we do not read this scene as simply two different cultural approaches to conversation not getting along. As she states:

> "[T]hese cultures are not `separate but equal' as recent popular writing on gender differences in communication has claimed. Rather the norms and practices of masculine net culture, codified in netiquette rules, conflict with those of the female culture in ways that render cyberspace _ or at least many `neighborhoods' in cyberspace _ inhospitable to women. The result is an imbalance whereby men control a disproportionate share of the

> communication that takes place via computer networks."39

This violent chauvinism of the on-line world is not restricted to on-line exchanges. Coyle raises the question of how off-putting it might have been for an MIT female student to engage with the nerd culture of the early hackers. Spender takes this question further in her description of computer labs where men regularly outnumber women, where activity from networked war games to shared pornography to macho conversation can poison the working atmosphere for women.

The 'Net (and the RL environment that fosters it, from research and undergrad computer labs40 to Wired magazine) is not a gender-neutral space. Communication may be disembodied, but it is not disengendered or politically neutral. In "Gender Issues in On-line Communications," Hoai-An Truong states:

> "Despite the fact that computer networking systems obscure physical characteristics, many women find that gender follows them into the on-line community, and sets a tone for their public and private interactions there _ to such an extent that some women purposefully choose gender neutral identities, or refrain from expressing their opinions."41

In *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, Ann Balsamo cites the above observation and adds:

> "Thus we see an interesting paradox in action. Cyberspace is a place where bodies aren't supposed to matter, but many women discover that they do matter. The false denial of the body (mainly by male users) requires the defensive denial of the body (mainly by female users) so that communication can occur. For some women, this denial of the body is simply not worth the effort. Most men apparently never notice."42

This is why research so involved with images of gender and the (predominantly male) practice of so-called gender-bending, like Turkle's and Bruckman's, is so frustratingly naive. Far from making a space for women's voices, their uncritical acceptance of these stereotypical reenactments of gender only further enables the erasure of women's agency on-line.

What is more distressing in this simultaneous denial of gender and the ready acceptance of the appropriation of gender on-line is the misrepresentation and conflation of political and philosophical positions to support it. Turkle, for example, points to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" and its founding principle of irony to support what she sees as the multiple identities that are the way of being in Life on the Screen. What passes for on-line gender-bending is just one more way of articulating that multiple, postmodern self. What Turkle fails to consider is that Haraway does not contextualize that irony as the playtime exploits of a group of mostly white male individuals who can play at being a stereotype of a woman for "self- reflexive," self-serving ends. On the contrary, Haraway's Cyborg entirely resists just this type of presumption around patriarchally defined categories of gender (woman = nurturing). In fact, her Cyborg specifically exists to resist any attempts to situate a "woman" category, or any identity that does not recognize the layers of political and social construction, the standpoint of that Cyborg identity's articulation.43 Turkle's men, who play at being women, are very much removed from Haraway's demand to take the politics of complex identity structures into consideration (especially those identities that are constructed "negatively," like "woman of colour"). Indeed, from Haraway's Cyborg position, MOO/MUD gender- bending _ the presumption that this naming of oneself as a woman is actually bending gender _ is only the entrenched erasure of difference, of otherness, since it is that actual otherness that threatens the comfortable assumptions of such privileged "serious play."

'Net culture, then, like dominant RL culture, actively resists alterity (otherness, difference) when that alterity seeks to name itself and the terms of its difference in ways that challenge the 'Net's racist, sexist status quo. It is little wonder that many women go on-line with gender-ambiguous or male pseudonyms. These women do so, not to "explore" another gender, but to protect themselves, at least somewhat, from the various forms of on-line harassment they regularly experience when they identify themselves as women. We also do so for the reason Spender points to in historical women's writing. Maryanne Lewes (George Eliot), Charlotte and Emily Bront%, to name a few, all published under

male names, not only in order to be published to begin with, but also simply to be heard. To be taken seriously with less fear of reprisal.44

But such camouflage is only temporarily and situationally feasible, and is clearly no answer to making it possible for women to be safe speaking on-line as our actual, heterogeneous selves for more than 30 percent of the bandwidth.

In Other Words

Many possible solutions have been put forward to facilitate women's communication on-line. One is that we should learn the tools of the 'Net. To that end, a new publishing niche is forming _ on-line guides specifically geared to women by women, with the provocative titles of Surfer Grrls and Net Chick, with the hope that knowing a little UNIX can make a gal feel pretty empowered, and that finding like-minded chicks is even more empowering. Such knowledge is not only empowering, it is essential for the informed critique of these systems by women who bring to bear their expertise from other fields, from psychology to literary theory. All aspects of the 'Net and its deployment are in need of such informed feminist critique from the inside out.

>From the outside moving in, where the user meets the system, Women'space, a paper-based magazine and companion Web site from Nova Scotia, seeks to use the 'Net as both an information resource and a tool for empowerment for women. It states that "Women'space aims to promote accessibility to the Internet, its tools, information and resources; enhance the effectiveness of women's organizing through national and global connections; bring global on-line resources to local community actions; support the exchange of ideas and experiences amongst women."45

Toward these ends, Women'space organized the Women's Internet Conference in Ottawa in 1997 and, in the same year, published the resource volume Virtual Organizing, Real Change: Women's Groups Using the Internet. Predating these publications, other on-line strategies in mailing lists have been to form women-only lists that, though not impervious to impostors, still attempt to construct a safe space for women to network or communicate specific concerns.46 On women-centred lists where men do post, there's a growing strategy to identify and name the behaviours of dominance to the rest of the group, so that the group can and will (usually) pull the plug on them. While these groups can be, and

often are, as ethnocentric as mixed lists, there is a higher likelihood these attitudes will be identified and dealt with in some manner.

Outside these specific net neighbourhoods, however, it is simply a continual risk to be a non-status quo woman on-line (if you're not a woman, please, don't try this at home). The same sexism, homophobia, racism prevails on the Wild Wild Web as in RL, but is often allowed to express itself unchallenged by any 'Net sheriff. While the price of naming one's alterity to male, white, heterosexist discourse on-line is a continual risk, however, even within the rare women-only lists, what is the price of not naming one's alterity on-line? Several years ago, Audre Lorde spoke out to academic women at an MLA conference to say, "Your silence won't protect you." This is a point worth remembering in on-line discourse as well. Do we silence our selves and our sisters if we do not risk speaking as ourselves? As attorney and Arapaho Native American Tamera Crites Shanker states, "If we don't define who we are on the 'Net, other people will do it for us _ And when that happens, part of who we are disappears."47 But in our silence, part of who we are does not simply disappear; it is erased.

It is not in the interests of those in power ever to acknowledge alterity. It will not be in the interests of patriarchy48 to allow women to speak as ourselves on-line. Perhaps part of the radical solution to halting the fixed erasure of alterity from the 'Net is to increase the number of neighbourhoods where the specific agency of a woman's identity is valued and encouraged. We can also intervene in the structures themselves. There could be such a thing as what I've called feminist engineering practice, research and development of the systems themselves from a perspective that listens to alternative voices and perspectives. In other research work,49 for instance, I have proposed how to use this understanding in software systems that generate documents based on user interaction. The design is grounded in these studies of difference, of conversational difference and of valuing these differences.50 As an outgrowth from her work on the Systers Mailing List for Women in Computer Science and the Grace Hooper Celebration of Women in Computer Science conferences, Anita Borg founded in 1998 the Institute for Women and Technology at XeroxPARC (www.parc.xerox.com/iwt.org). The express mission statement of the institute is:

- To increase the impact of women on technology, in education, design, development, deployment and policy;

- To increase the positive impact of technology on the lives of all women; and

- To help communities, industry, education and governments accelerate and benefit from these increases.51

No doubt these virtual neighbourhoods and actual interventions will be small initially. But if there are enough of these spaces, or at least if these precious exchanges are frequent enough, the results on the entire system, like increasing the tiny air bubbles in a brakeline, can be significant.

Endnotes

1. Taken from the Psycho Men Slayers Web page at: www.underramp.com/~pms/. See also the other main women-only Quake Clan page at: www.crackwhore.com/. Much of the same femme-fatale imagery applies.

2. Taken from: www.wired.com/news/story/1885.html.

3. See chapters 2 and 3 of: Douglas. E. Comer, The Internet Book, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997).

4. "Oh brave new world that hath such people in it," says Miranda to her father in Shakespeare's The Tempest. The brave new world to which Miranda, isolated on an island since childhood, refers is of course the very old world from which her father was driven by corrupt politicians. Hence her father's not un-ironic response: "It is new to thee." For most of us, this is the reality of the Internet: seemingly wonderful, but only because new and unknown. Wait until you log on.

5. E-mail from the NYT Web customer service department, April 19, 1998.

6. I prefer the term "Cyberia" to "cyberspace" because of what it implies homonologically: Siberia is a particular place on a map (not unlike Manitoba, weather-wise) with a particular culture. The name seems more grounded than the amorphous ether of "cyberspace."

7. I use the term "burgeoning" with caution. While thousands of Web pages are added to the 'Net each month, recent North American stats (Canadian Librarian Association, 1996) show that only 7 percent of the population use the Internet. Of that 7 percent, approximately a third are women.

8. Seymour Papert, Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas (New York: Basic, 1980).

9. Amy Bruckman, "Gender Swapping on the Internet," from proceedings of INET '93 (The Internet Society, 1993).

10. Ibid., p. 13.

11. Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 212.

12. Ibid., p. 214.

13. "Tiny sex" refers to on-line real-time, text-based sex "acts" by typing.

14. Turkle (1995), p. 219.

15. Ibid., p. 216.

16. In work/play relations with men, collaboration is not the normal practice for women.

17. Turkle (1995), p. 219.

18. The sensitive man has become a media imperative, from films such as Sleepless in Seattle to top-ten sitcoms such as Friends.

19. Julian Dibbell, "Rape in Cyberspace," The Village Voice 38, 51 (December 21, 1993), pp. 36-43.

20. Turkle (1995), p. 254.

21. Glen Martin, "Internet Indian Wars," Wired 3, 12 (December 1995), pp. 108-117.

22. Dionne Brand, Bread Out of Stone: Recollections on Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming and Politics (Vintage Canada, 1998), p. 129.

23. Sheila Ruth, "Talking Back: Feminist Responses to Sexist Stereotypes," in Sheila Ruth (ed.), Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1990), pp. 123-137.

24. Turkle (1995), p. 202.

25. Margie Wylie, "No Place for Women," Digital Media 4, 8 (January 1995), pp. 3-5.

26. Sherry Turkle, "Computational Reticence: Why Women Fear the Intimate Machine," in Cheris Kramarae (ed.), Technology and Women's Voices: Keeping in Touch (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), pp. 41-61.

27. Karen Coyle, "How Hard Can It Be?" in Lynn Cherny & Elizabeth Reba Weise (eds.), Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace (Seattle: Seal, 1996), pp. 42-55. 28. Ibid., p. 44. In a fourth-year software engineering course I teach called "Computers and Society," one of the male students made the observation that there are no known women virus writers or arch- hackers. He and his male colleagues asked why. "Women are busy," I replied.

29. Women put the numeric keypad on the keyboard; a woman came up with the idea of programming memories and textual program representation (i.e., programming languages) over plugs and dials to make programming more manageable (see: Thomas Petzinger, Jr., "History of Software begins with the work of some brainy women," Wall Street Journal 228, 98 (November 15, 1996), p. B1.

30. Coyle (1996), p. 53.

31. Ibid., p. 54.

32. According to a 1997 USA Today survey, women are the majority buyers of the household/family computers.

33. Dale Spender, The Writing or the Sex? Or Why You Don't Have To Read Women's Writing To Know It's No Good (New York: Pergamon, 1989), pp. 9-11.

34. I have been told by computer scientists who were there in the early 1980s ('Net prehistory) and the very early days of Usenet newsgroups that one of the fiercest flame wars to break out was over the establishment of comp.women, a newsgroup meant to discuss women's issues as they pertained to computer science. There are clear rules for establishing new newsgroups, rules based mostly on demonstrating demand. The request to see if there was demand went out and was flamed immediately by those who claimed all the comp.whatever groups had to have something to do with computer science. Comp.women plainly did not. And if you look today, you will not see comp.women. You can find comp.society and five subgroups, though, such as comp.society.folklore.

35. In many sources, such as Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" (1993), this kind abusive language/pornographic narrative supposedly describes "sexual acts" or "unwanted sex." Sex has nothing to do with it. Sex is not a crime. Rape, or the threat of a man using his penis as part of the humiliation or overpowering of a woman, is an assertion of dominance, not sex.

36. Stephanie Brail, "The Price of Admission: Harassment and Free Speech in the Wild, Wild West," in Cherny & Weise (1996), pp. 141- 157.

37. Netta Gilboa, "Elites, Lamers, Narcs and Whores: Exploring the Computer Underground," in ibid., pp. 98-113.

38. Susan Herring, "Bringing Familiar Baggage to the New Frontier: Gender Differences in Computer-Mediated Communication," in Victor J. Vitanza (ed.), Cyber Reader (Toronto: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), p. 149. 39. Ibid., pp. 151-152.

40. I was recently asked to comment on an argument between a faculty member and her grad students regarding the naming of a new networked printer that she had purchased for her lab. She had asked for suggestions from the (predominantly male) research group for the printer's network name. Failing to receive any, she and the only woman grad student in the group called the printer "Daisy." Then the men in the group reacted, saying they wouldn't use a printer named Daisy. One said quite loudly that his colleague had said he would never approve of such a name. What did they think he was? Gay? This is when I was asked for a possible solution. I suggested that since the professor bought it with her research money, she could call it anything she wanted, and if the male students wouldn't use it, that was their loss. "Use your power to name the thing. Quit letting Adam do it." "But I want to be democratic." Some democracy. Sometimes it may be appropriate for a woman to lead. The example may seem small, but I was surprised to see that sexism was alive and well at such a high level of scholarly work and at such a trivial level of exchange. Even the name of a printer could be an affront to a grad student's masculinity.

41. Hoai-An Truong, "Gender Issues in On-line Communications," CFP 93 (Version 4.1), ftp.eff.org.

42. Ann Balsamo, "Feminism for the Incurably Informed," in chapter 6 of her book, Technologies of the Gendered Body (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

43. Donna Harraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in Elizabeth Weed (ed.), Coming to Terms (New York: Routledge, 1989).

44. Dale Spender, Man Made Language (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

45. Taken from the masthead of Women'space (Spring 1998).

46. There are a host of unfortunate examples of men crashing women's lists, claiming that to be excluded is bigoted or violates their rights to freedom of speech (see: Dale Spender, Nattering on the Net {Toronto: Garamond, 1996}; or L. Jean Camp, "We Are Geeks, and We Are Not Guys: The Systers Mailing List," in Cherny & Weise {1996}, pp. 114_125).

47. Martin (1995), p. 117.

48. Read, especially in this case, as white, middle-class, heterosexual, middle-aged males, the dominant group currently in Cyberia.

49. m.c. schraefel, "ConTexts: Intensional Document Creation, Delivery and Retrieval," proceedings of the Pacific Rim Conference on Communications, Computers and Signal Processing (Victoria, BC: IEEE, 1997), pp. 417-419.

50. Dr. Anita Borg, of Parc:Xerox and founder of the Systers mailing list, has recently initiated the Institute for Women and Technology as a space to explore women's needs and interests in the development of technology.

51. Taken from the Institute for Women and Technology Web site at: www.parc.xerox.com/oct/projects/iwt.org/mission.html.