



# Character and Caricature, Virtual and Real

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Resumen Carácter y caricatura, virtual y real	Abstract Character and Caricature, Virtual and Real
<p>El carácter, como la personalidad, se forma a través de la biología y la cultura. No obstante, aún no se conoce con detalle la influencia de estas instancias y los procesos a que dan lugar. Como parte de la cultura en permanente transformación, la tecnología nos ofrece una ventana a través de la cual observar la construcción del carácter en un entorno extraño: el ciberespacio. El mundo virtual nos permite jugar con nuestra identidad de formas desconocidas en la vida "real". Este juego pone en evidencia lo que es biológicamente inmutable y lo que no, por ejemplo, el género y la raza. La construcción de personajes/caricatura en MUDS, MOOS y otros ciber-lugares arroja luz sobre dispositivos de formación del carácter tales como el rol de las tecnologías del recuerdo, la potencialidad de las fantasías hechas realidad etc. Por otra parte, la participación política en internet revela los límites en los que el carácter puede manifestarse en entornos simulados. Parece, en suma, que la personalidad-cyborg es más plástica de lo que se creía. Pero el carácter como integridad aún sigue determinando hasta dónde puede llegar la suplantación de éste por el personaje.</p>	<p>Character, as personality, is formed through biology and culture. But the influence these forces have and the actual processes involved are not really known. Technology, as an important and always changing part of culture, offers us a window on the construction of character especially in that strange new place: cyberspace. The virtual world allows people to play with their character in ways that are very difficult "in real life." This play reveals a great deal about what is biologically immutable and what isn't after all. In particular gender, race, and embodiment in general are treated quite differently on-line then in the flesh. And character/caricature formation in the MUDS and MOOS and other cyber-places throws light on the processes of character, such as the roles of evocative technologies, the feedback loops of will and non-will (addiction), and the potentiality of fantasies actualized. In particular political participation on the internet reveals the limits of what real character can be manifested in a simulated environment. It seems cyborgian character is more plastic in some ways than most observers would have predicted; but character, as integrity, will still determine how far the role of caricature will go in supplanting character.</p>
<p><b>Palabras clave</b>          cyborgs, tecnología, mundos virtuales</p>	<p><b>Key words</b>          cyborgs, technology, virtual worlds</p>

## Summary

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## 1 MULTIPLE CHARACTERS

A person whose desires are his own —are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture— is said to have character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has character. John Stuart Mill, 1859, *Liberty*, p. 108.

Character has many meanings. This essay will play with all of them. *The Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>1</sup> (OED) tell us that the first meaning of character is a “distinctive mark...a graphic sign or symbol.” Today, in political and personal discourse, the term character itself is a “character” in this sense, symbolizing morality, trust, and virtue. In our fictions and our dreams character goes even further, becoming a “magical sign” of destiny, whether it is personal (as with our cinematic heroes) or national (as with “manifest destiny” for example, a gift from God for our American “character”).

Of course, even those individuals or nations with good “character” might not be perfect, for character is “the aggregate of the distinctive features of any thing, essential peculiarity, natural, style, kind.” And therefore, unique as well. Still, the essence is clear, often in the “face or features as betokening moral qualities” and therefore representing “the sum of the moral and mental qualities which distinguish an individual or race.” As definition 12 of the OED proclaims, character is “moral qualities... character worth speaking of.”

Here is our political moral vision of character, in the heart of the OED’s list of meanings. But toward the end of the catalogue of character meanings grow erratic. For character also means a created character in fiction or even in real life to some extent, since we all can drift “in, or out, of character” on the street as on the stage. Finally, a character can be an “odd, extraordinary or eccentric person” even a caricature.

Which brings us to technology and character. For now, with virtual reality as it is manifested in the textual computer-mediated simulation of reality known as cy-

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<sup>1</sup> All *Oxford English Dictionary* quotations are from pages 380/280 to 381/281 of the compact version of the 1971 edition.



berspace, we have character as symbol, character as magic, character as behaviour and moral action, character as essence, character as role, character as caricature. We have a great laboratory for asking ourselves fundamental questions about this powerful matrix of meanings where you want to have character but not be one; where we demand our leaders have character when we suspect it is characteristic for them not to have it; where we define character as a fundamental inner essence yet judge it by outward behaviour; where we strive to cultivate character yet profess not to understand its origins or workings; where often those who speak most of its value manifest its qualities the least; and finally, where the line between pretending and having disappears completely. For if you pretend well enough to have good character (or not), doesn't it magically become so? As Kurt Vonnegut says in *Cats Cradle*, "Be careful who you pretend to be for you are who you pretend to be."

We now have a land of make-believe and pretend called cyberspace and it is an ongoing experiment in the qualities, and definitions, of character. But everyone doesn't believe in character. Many postmodern and other contemporary theorists have taken to proclaiming the "death of the subject." They claim that individuality is a mere social construction and that instead of having any fundamental character at all we are mere amalgamations of impulses and fragmented personalities. This point of view is, in many ways, in contradiction with the recent revalorization of embodiment championed by feminist and other philosophers. And it is all complicated by the figure of the cyborg.

A cyborg is an organism that combines artificial and natural parts into one single system. It need not be a human-machine synthesis but for this essay that is what interests us, for when you log onto the net and enter cyberspace you become a cyborg in a very real sense. Through machines your consciousness is projected into an environment that is only sustained by machines. The implications of our increasing cyborgization and the resulting cyborg society are far reaching (see Gray 1995 and 1999) but two seem particularly relevant here. First, under some circumstances humans who are cyborged seem to change their "character." This can be subtle, as with the psychological dislocations associated with losing a limb and getting a prosthesis (Gray 1996) or it can be drastic, for example when a person dies legally (brain death) but their body is kept alive with machines until the organs are harvested. The second relevant point is that cyborg technosciences, especially genetic engineering, seem to promise that eventually humans can be transformed into post-humans. Many writers and scientists have already speculated that such a posthuman will not



be bound by human morality, and certainly couldn't be judged by human standards of character. Even now on the internet you find those who attack certain points of view, often humanistic, with the remark that it is "meat thinking." There seems to be an assumption among those who would use such a label that there is a better, higher even, virtual or even "silicon" point-of-view.

The cyborgs that inhabit cyberspace are only intermittent, and we are certainly not yet posthumans. But none-the-less cyberspace does offers us a remarkable window for looking at today's tension in high postmodern theory between fragmented subjectivities and embodiment that is directly related to the popular question of character and also into the future, where these issues will certainly grow more acute. Which, in sum, might be put in terms the average Montanan would be comfortable with: Character, what the hell is it, who the hell has it, how's it it going to change, and is it a blankedy-blank good thing?

## 2 WE ARE ALL "DOGS IN CYBERSPACE"

If the information age is an extension of the industrial age, with the passage of time the split between the body and the subject should grow more pronounced still. But in the fourth epoch the split is simultaneously growing and disappearing. Allucquere Stone, 1991, p. 108.

"No one knows you're a dog in cyberspace" the dog at the computer terminal tells his puppy companion sitting on the ground. This justifiably famous *New Yorker* cartoon captures several important truths about character in cyberspace. First, of course, race, gender, age, looks, and able-bodiness are all washed away by the limited textual interfaces that mark most communication in cyberspace. By merely tapping the keyboard you can change your gender, or refuse to reveal it along with race and any other bodily markings you feel are irrelevant or that might prevent others from judging you honestly. So for many citizens of cyberspace (netizens in *Wired* magazine's ugly phrase), the "true" character of someone is what is being evaluated, even judged, by fellow conversationalists. The growing participation of women in cyberspace (fast approaching 50%) seems to support this contention. It is dangerous to make even the most politically correct assumptions in cyberspace about who you are talking to. During an academic discussion in a virtual seminar room in a virtual space (called a MOO, explained below) modeled after, and hosted by, MIT's Media Lab, a bright anthropology student from Duke, who was studying cyberculture, went off on a



textual tirade against the overwhelming “whiteness” of cyberspace. Unfortunately for her, the other participants in the room, besides myself (pretty white all in all despite having 20 different nationalities in my background) were a Chicana from California, a Black woman from the Midwest, and a Puertorriqueña. They quickly pointed out that even if most participants in cyberspace are white (and male for that matter, which was certainly the case then with roughly 15% of the users of the internet being women at that point) it was racist to assume that there were no “people of colour” (in the clumsy terminology of the time) there. So you should just throw away your guesses and presumptions about who you are communicating with and evaluate the “true” character of their contribution.

But, ironically enough, the second point of the “Dogs in Cyberspace” cartoon is just the opposite of this nice liberal conclusion. In cyberspace no one really knows your character. Charming on the surface, you might really be a “dog” in a different sense, a bitch or a bastard, or worst of all, one of the conscienceless beast-predators that haunt the popular imagination and dominate the concerns of our lawmakers and law enforcers who delight in feeding on these fears. Fortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court has struck down the worst of the legislation that argues that cyberspace isn’t a real place and therefore the Bill of Rights and other protections don’t apply there. It is a real place at least politically, the Court affirmed in the face of arguments from the FBI and others, and therefore the rights of free speech and free press extend there. In some ways, of course, this just confuses things more. In cyberspace you can exercise real rights and commit real crimes such as fraud (often prosecuted now) and even libel (no cases yet in the U.S. but already some in Europe where libel is easier to prove) but still, you can’t do anything physical and you might be just playing a part in cyberspace.

The issue of character as role leads to a third major implication of the cartoon. In cyberspace you may pretend to be this or that, playing with various ideas, but for many, no one will know your real character until you do something in “meat” space that demonstrates it. Still, as some great writers have warned us, even in “real life” true character might be hidden, for after all, “all the world’s a stage and we are but players.”

Well, clearly there will be no easy answers. But I do think we can make some progress in understanding this idea of character, thanks to the new perspective cyberspace offers. So to that end, this essay explores the issue of character in terms



of its virtual manifestations with special attention to that form of human interaction where character is particularly important: sex. In particular I will try to keep the strange twins, character and caricature, in dialogue. To begin, a bit of geography is in order. Just what is cyberspace?

### 3 CYBERSPACE

Cyberspace... A name to a new stage, a new and irresistible development in the elaboration of human culture and business under the sign of technology... A new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers and communication lines...The tablet becomes a page becomes a screen becomes a world, a virtual world. Everywhere and nowhere, a place where nothing is forgotten and yet everything changes. Michael Benedikt, 1991, p. 1.

Although I'd been around computers for years working on Unix and MSDOS systems my first real experience with cyberspace was organizing an academic meeting there, on cyborgs ironically enough. It was a strange disembodied experience. Of course, here are those who would say describing an academic meeting as disembodied is a tautology in any case. But rhetoric is one thing, actually meeting in real time without your bodies is reality now and it is certainly different from being there in person, maybe even better. At your typical academic meeting the body grows lethargic as it drifts from one panel discussion to another until finally even massive transfusions of espresso drinks are incapable of raising its heart rate. The only sure-fire stimulant in such meetings, and probably for academics in general, is talking. Take a comatose, nearly dead, Professor and give him or her the floor and a Lazarus-like resurrection takes place.

Maybe this explains the exhilaration of virtual meetings. First, you can "talk" a great deal, although the "talk" is actually typing messages onto a computer screen. In what truly must seem a miracle (the immaculate conversation?) everyone can talk at once because your text eventually comes up with everyone else's on the screen. So, as you sit there with your mind racing and your fingers dancing the most your body can do is squirm. After several hours of this you want to stand up, wave your arms, and scream.

This is certainly not advisable if you are in a monster computer lab surrounded by a hundred undergrads who are already looking at you askance because of your forty-something appearance and the fact that you are chuckling maniacally at



the clever things you are writing while exclaiming “hello” outloud when a friend logs on from Puerto Rico, and then gasping when someone you just met licks your face!!! Virtually licks your face, I should clarify.... but it is very upsetting just the same.

Five or six hours of being cyborged on-line had incredible effects on my body. When I'd walk outside into the Oregon rain I felt lighter, not all there. And it wasn't because my consciousness was still back in that virtual elsewhere in cyberspace where it had just been bumping clumsily (textually) into the other attendees' projections. Talking at once to the simulations beamed from Australia, England, Germany, Puerto Rico, New York, Boston, Seattle, and SF it became impossible to think of the world as anything other than hanging in space showing one face after another to the Sun. After all, morning in Australia was afternoon in Oregon and late evening in London. It reminded me of the reaction all astronauts get once they soar above the atmosphere. “Hey!” they always exclaim, even if they've promised themselves they wouldn't go gooey about it as all the other space travelling cyborgs do, “It's one world. It's just... hanging there in space.” Strangely enough cyberspace and outerspace impose the same perception, although in other respects they are so different. Disembodiment in cyberspace is hyperembodiment in outer space, but both places are dependent on machines, and therefore both places are only inhabited by machines, and cyborgs of course.

Few make it into space, but millions now visit cyberspace so it is not surprising that there is a great deal of fascinating research on the cyber personality. Sherry Turkle has shown in her book *The Second Self* how computers, and particularly the internet, are what she calls evocative technologies, bringing out latent habits of mind and body. According to Turkle the two major patterns people use in relating to computers are mastery and cooperation, with males tending toward the mastery approach and females using cooperation more, but by no means do these approaches map over perfectly onto gender. So for Turkle, cyberspace evokes, and even strengthens, aspects of character that are already present. She also explores how computers mediate communication between people in surprising way, such as the tendency of some humans to prefer confiding in a nonjudgemental machine; implying that they can be more honest, more themselves, without other humans present.

In her latest book, *Life on the Screen* Turkle notes three major effects of virtual experience (pp. 235-8). The first, the tendency of virtual experiences to make



“denatured and artificial experiences seem real” she calls “the Disneyland effect” for obvious reasons. An even more disturbing impact of simulations she labels “the artificial crocodile effect.” Here, “the fake seems more compelling than the real.” Finally, there is an exaggeration effect of seductive simulations. She points out that “a virtual experience may be so compelling that we believe that within it we’ve achieved more than we have.” I think this explains many of the wild claims virtual reality researchers are prone to make. Turkle points out it also might make us feel that by pretending to be of another gender for a few hours on the net gives us a profound and real experience of, for example, a man “living in a woman’s body.” But as she argues, pretending to be a woman in disembodied cyberspace is not being a woman because “knowledge is inherently experiential, based on a physicality that we each experience differently. Yet, despite her misgivings, she does see “life on the screen” as a very important phenomena.

Turkle makes an extended argument that the internet is the precursor of a postmodern personality that will supplant the modernist persona that has dominated technological culture for the last few centuries. While the modernist personality is unitary the postmodern personality is more flexible, hopefully in a playful, not an insane, way. In terms of character this means less of a unitary self, and more interest in tolerance as rigidity declines. Turkle comes to these conclusions from her field work and not the other way around, so it is startling to find postmodernity influencing even the ways we define ourselves.

Some of the research mentioned below certainly backs this up, especially the open-mindedness about gender roles and sexual exchanges that seems to mark cyberspace. Still, it is crucial to remember that cyberspace *habitus* have not actually left their real bodies and the real world behind, so much of this tolerance and flexibility could be seen as just “play”. Allucquere Stone, cybertheorist and transsexual activist has warned against any illusions in this regard:

*Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. No refigured virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with Aids. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies. (1991, p. 113)*





Even holding this caveat in mind, it is clear that cyberspace opens up ways of relating and being that are entirely new. Race and gender distinctions are hard to enforce if you can't tell what labels to put on the people you are interacting with.

Another major area for looking at character in cyberspace is in the governance of cyberspace, discussed below. The actual control of virtual "space" is now a matter of political struggle in many respects between "netizens" and meatspace politicians, but also within cyberspace between cyber-anarchists, cybercapitalists, and cyber-cops. Since the internet grew out of the U.S. military's working experiments on distributed networking and electronic fostering of research the U.S. government has had a great deal of influence over the net, but never control.

Somehow, this profoundly militarized project became "the biggest anarchist institution in history." The reasons for this are, unsurprisingly, complicated. In part the culture of computing, profoundly shaped by the rhetoric and the practices of the counterculture in the 1960s and 70s is responsible for this. Since the system was designed to be "distributed" (non-hierarchical) without any central authority neither the military nor the universities were in a position to control the (inter)net. But what isn't entirely clear is why control devolved to self-selected voluntary committees of technical experts who set the standards that fostered the incredible growth of the internet and related cyberspace domains. For a variety of reasons (explored below) skilled computerists donated a tremendous amount of time and valuable expertise to make the internet the place it is. Some of this donated labor (in the form of computer codes such as the hypertext mark-up language —html, that makes the web possible) was/is literally worth millions if not billions of dollars.

As the military lost control over the internet, and the world wide web (www) in particular, it turned them over to the National Science Foundation and established their own tightly controlled milnet. Despite a number of initiatives to cede control to private for-profit businesses (such as giving the right to the licensing of domain names to a corporation) or to exert national control (as with efforts by the U.S. government to censor the world wide web, turned back by the Supreme Court) the internet has remained a very unregulated space, governed in most technical areas by the same autonomous committees that nurtured its spectacular growth.

The Department of Defense passed "ownership" to the National Science Foundation and the NSF has passed on the power of setting up "domains," distribut-



ing names, and other chores to various groups, some of which make big profits out of their monopoly.

Meanwhile, the voluntary associations that set net standards and interested groups like the Internet Society and Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility have joined with many European countries and others in calling for more democracy in governing the net. Ironically, since in many ways it seems to govern itself. But their fears that either the U.S. government or for-profit proxies will find a way to assert control over “the greatest working anarchy ever” are legitimate.

In a sense, the web is more of a frontier than a highway, but what it really is can only be described as...a net. It is its own best metaphor. And as it is unique, and becoming ever more so, that's how it will stay for quite a while. Unlike the physical frontier the net really is infinite. It cannot be used up. And the more it is inhabited the wilder it becomes, not the more “civilized.” This has real implications for character in cyberspace, since there is little in the way of enforceable “law and order” although there isn't any real violence either, although there is always the danger that someone is going to waste your time.

On the web attention replaces media, wasting time replaces violence, and mobility replaces space as the primary values and organizing metaphors. What this means is that it isn't so important how often you say stuff or how wildly you broadcast it, but how many people listen which is only indirectly related to your output. It isn't significant if you have lots of space; space can be bought at the local computer store by the megabyte. It's how easy it is to get to you and from your space to other places. And most of all it is whether or not people find you interesting and therefore tell their friends about your work.

Desire is the primary force behind the growth of the net. Not just the desire for sex, although that is obviously very important. As it was with videos, sex was the first “product” to make a profit with the new technology. And sex continues to lead the way in many areas of technology such as delivering real-time video, e-commerce transactions, and new types of interactivity. But desire for connection, for stimulation, for attention are just as important in the long run. Still, that sounds sort of like sex doesn't it? Well, it isn't all sex, but sex is important, I'm the last person to deny that, so we might as well look at sex in cyberspace. “Tiny Sex” some call it, but not tiny in its implications.



#### 4 TINY SEX

[W]e feel [resentment] for our own bodies' cloddishness, limitations, and final treachery: their mortality. Reality is death. If only we could, we would wander the earth and never leave home; we would enjoy triumphs without risks, eat of the Tree and not be punished, consort daily with angels, enter heaven now and not die. Michael Benedikt, 1991, p. 14

And, the reader seems compelled to say after reading this nerdish fantasy, finally get laid! Are there real triumphs without risk? Is their knowledge without costs and obligation? Can we live forever? Only in cyberspace, and maybe not even there. Maybe you can have sex on the net, but it isn't real sex by many people's standards. It is a simulation and, perhaps, a tiny one at that.

Still, for good reason, sex on the net is a popular subject. Perhaps you are interested in it as well...academically only, of course. Aficionados are at pains to point out that it is very real sex., not simulated at all they claim, although it is impossible to tell which manipulations or orgasms ("OHHHHHHH!!!") are real. At its best it is like two people watching each other masturbate while reading Annis Nin. But few computerists, if any, write as well as Annis Nin, nor are you watching a person, or even an image of a person unless you're just beating off looking at sex sites. But for real interactive sex, for now, basically you're looking at words, except for a few expensive web domains staffed by professionals, most of which run out of Amsterdam it seems. So, it's about writing. Which brings up another common complaint: few people can type fast enough, especially one-handed, for really good netsex. But, like phone sex, there are real people, real bodies, and if you're good and lucky and really horny, real orgasms, so I guess it is real enough sex for these cybertimes. One thing though, your partner may not be a real man, or a real woman.

David Jacobson, a professor of anthropology at Brandeis University, has been researching the plasticity of gender in cyberspace and has discovered some surprising things. Working with a female graduate student, Prof. Jacobson visited various political and sexual chat rooms to see what the users think of gender deceptions. First, one of them openly visits the site pretending to be of the opposite gender. After participating for a while the deceiving researcher leaves and the other, who has been lurking there silently, questions the people in the chat room about any doubts or conclusions they may have had about the first researcher. Then the true gender of the first researcher is revealed and the scientists record the reactions. Jacobson and



his confederate predicted that there would be a fair amount of anxiety, even anger, at being tricked, particularly in the sex sites. Instead, they found that their virtual sex partners were almost indifferent to the actual sex of the investigators. A fantasy is a fantasy, after all. It was the political discussion groups that freaked out at the experiment.

People feel very betrayed when they discover that the man or woman they have been discussing politics with is really a woman or man. Deception seems almost expected in sexual encounters. But if the sex is part of a real relationship, the anger can be very intense indeed, as the case of the male psychiatrist who pretended to be a disabled bisexual woman makes clear.

According to Dr. Sanford Lewin it happened quite by accident. In the early 1980s he joined CompuServe using the handle "Shrink, Inc." During one of his early visits to a chat room he ended up in a private conversation with a woman who clearly thought he also was a woman. Dr. Lewin noticed that the conversation was unlike any he had ever had and decided that the gender confusion had allowed him to experience how women talk together. One thought led to another and he soon opened a second account under the name of Joan Greene.

While the good doctor was a shy, conservative, heterosexual Jewish male, Ms. Greene was an outgoing, liberal, severely disabled, bisexual atheist. Soon she was a major player in CompuServe's niche of cyberspace. She helped start the first woman's discussion group there, she counselled and advised many different women friends, she seduced some of them into having tiny sex with her, and she even started a vigilante group to ferret out and expose gender-pretenders. Now what does this say of Dr. Lewin's character?

At one point Dr. Lewin tried to (virtually) kill off Joan Greene but the pain this evoked from her many friends forced him to abandon this plan. Still, he did have her introduce him to her contacts and while most of them found him uninteresting, if not annoying, several struck up friendships and one woman began a love affair in real life.

Eventually the deception collapsed and Dr. Lewin not only lost most of his, and Joan Greene's, friends and lovers but also, he laments, a large part of himself. The victims of this masquerade do not usually complain about the sexual posturing however, which was targeted at heterosexual women who often joined in on-line masturbation sessions with Joan because of sympathy for her disability, they are out-



raged by the emotional transgression. Even though they admit that Joan's advice and support helped many of the women change their lives for the better, returning to college for example, they can't forgive his successful trespass into women's (head) space. The sex, after all, was simulated or at least one remove from reality; the friendships were as real as could be (See Van Gelder, 1991).

So, while virtual encounters can be casual, if they are part of real relationships they are still serious. Other aspects of sexual culture, like harassment and even assault, can be both virtual and significant as well, as a famous incident of "cyber-rape" in 1993 made clear.

The case has been well chronicled. Basically, what happened was that a member of the Lambda Moo virtual community, named Mr. Bungle, used a computer trick called "Voodoo Dolls" to make it seem like two other players, Legba and Starsinger, were committing assorted kinky and unpleasant virtual sexual acts together in public, such as sodomy with kitchen knives, eating their own pubic hair, and intercourse with other players.

Now cyber-rape is pretty common, especially of characters identified as female. Say you are in a MOO (which stands for MUD Object-Oriented —MUD stands for multi-user dungeon). The original MUDs were developed from text-based dragon and dungeon games. A MUD or a MOO allows for much more interesting interactions but it is still basically the same thing<sup>2</sup>. So you're in the MOO and someone (named "scumbag" for example) comes up to you and says (types) "I rip off your clothes and..." you can quickly type "@gag scumbag" and scumbag's verbal attack becomes invisible to the erstwhile target. Other players in the room, unless they type an @gag command as well, will read the attack however. But the Voodoo Doll approach makes this technofix impossible. And besides, the hijacking of one's character seems worse to many cyberspace regulars than the verbal assaults that are so common because they feel it represents their character. In reality, it represents their fantasy of their character, not a bad definition of caricature. Still, it is something of their self.

A wizard (one of the programmers who run the virtual space) named Zippy finally came and captured Mr. Bungles and his dolls with a special silencing/capturing

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<sup>2</sup> This is a bit quick and dirty. Pavel Curtis, who developed the MOO code and has opened it to use and modification by anyone who is interested, also stresses that MUDs and MOOs are not goal-oriented, are extensible from within, and have multiple users. See Curtis 1997 for a full discussion.



gun to bring the attack to an end. Then Lambda Moo, the oldest, and perhaps biggest of the MOOs, had a great debate about what this assault meant for their society. The details of this debate, and of the different sides from wizardists ("All power to the wizards!"), through liberals, technolibertarians (invent a new technology to fix the problem) to anarchists, are discussed at length in an excellent article (now a book) by Julian Dibbel of the *Village Voice*.

In the end, new technologies (a new command to control Voodoo Dolls) were created and the reigning wizard of Lambda Moo, Pavel Curtis the inventor of MOOs, imposed direct democracy on the virtual community. But before this happened a lesser wizard unilaterally eliminated the Mr. Bungles character. Some people called this murder, others execution, and still others exile. The technical term is "toading," going back to the Dungeons and Dragons games where wizards were apt to make some character they didn't like into a (virtually) slimy toad. But toading now includes the virtual death penalty that was enacted on Mr. Bungles.

Mr. Bungles real life persona wasn't hurt physically, of course, nor were Legba's or Starsinger's for that matter. But for serious participants in virtual communities the possession/rape or execution of one's avatar is a serious matter none the less. Later, Mr. Bungles creator returned to Lambda MOO as another character, much less annoying and sadistic, but apparently he was bored with the new persona and eventually drifted away. Lambda MOO, meanwhile was off into an experiment in democracy while Curtis and some of his more loyal wizards created their own, totally hierarchical invitation-only, virtual world where they could experiment with MOO technology without the distracting brouhahas of the virtual masses.

The character questions this affair raises are striking. Where is the line between free speech and physical assault in a textual world? What is the difference between mind and body in virtual space? Can one be a good citizen IRL (in real life) and a sociopath in VR (virtual reality) at the same time? For Julian Dribble (1993, p. 45) the affair made manifest some of the more startling claims of Michel Foucault and his spoil-sport friends about the end of the Enlightenment and its replacement by postmodern/premodern magical thinking.

After all, anyone the least bit familiar with the workings of the new era's definitive technology, the computer, knows that it operates on a principle impracticably difficult to distinguish from the pre-Enlightenment principle of the magic word: the commands you type into a computer are a kind of speech that doesn't so much



communicate as make things happen, directly and ineluctably, the same way pulling a trigger does. They are incantations, in other words, and anyone at all attuned to the technosocial megatrends of the moment —from the growing dependence of economies on the global flow of intensely fetishized words and numbers to the burgeoning ability of bioengineers to speak the spells written in the four-letter text of DNA— knows that the logic of the incantation is rapidly permeating the fabric of our lives.

Well and good, perhaps. But what is going to replace Enlightenment values, such as the good and tolerant character advocated by Voltaire and the other Enlightenment philosophers? Will it be swamped in uncritical technoeuphoria? Consider the hubris of the computerists: “Reality is 80 million polygons per second” Alvy Ray Smith declared (Rheingold 1991, p. 168). And Michael Benedikt of the University of Texas is even more outspoken. Resentment of our bodies is the fundamental impetus for cyberspace, he has argued. He singles out their “cloddishness, limitations and final treachery, their mortality.” For Benedikt, reality “is death.” He is counting on cyberspace to end the reality of death, and give us Smith's reality predicated on high-speed computing, as I quoted him above. It is worth hearing his voice again.

*If only we could, we would wander the Earth and never leave home;  
we would enjoy triumphs without risks, eat of the Tree and not be  
punished, consort daily with angels, enter heaven now and not die.*  
(1991, p. 14).

But the triumphs will only be pretend without real risks, the knowledge simulated without a price to pay, and the virtual angels will inhabit a virtual heaven, with no real grace or redemption. If one is interested in real knowledge, true grace, and authentic character you have to look at real life. Nothing else will do. Strangely enough, the politics of cyberspace governance are as real as the space is virtual.

## 5 REAL POLITICS IN VIRTUAL SPACE

The main players in the social struggle over the political and technical future of the internet can be broken down into four categories: governments, corporations, alliances, and individuals.

Among governments the U.S. government is the key player. If anyone can be said to “own” the internet it is the U.S. government. Ironically enough, however, its ability to act is severely constrained by the desire of other rational governments to



free the internet from administration by the U.S. government or its proxies. So the U.S. government has been forced to give up its power.

It has tried to pass on administrative control to a number of for-profit corporations. However, here again, the competition between corporations for guaranteed profits (notice the alliance against Microsoft), and the opposition by governments, alliances, and individuals to granting such monopolies, have precluded any permanent for-profit administration. Instead, because of the competition among those who would probably in the long run prefer a more structured and policed internet, the governments and the corporations, power seems to be devolving to the voluntary alliances made up mainly of computer professionals, who have played the major role in making the internet, and cyberspace in general, what it is today.

While there are many interlocking and overlapping groups that play significant roles, I will confine most of my remarks to two somewhat different organizations that contain many of the activists who make the internet actually work. They are the Internet Society and Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR). I am a member of both groups. CPSR for over ten years and the Internet Society for one.

The Internet Society is more international than CPSR, although still dominated by U.S. citizens, and it also has close ties to many computer businesses with an interest in the internet and cyberspace. While it is hardly uniform politically the individuals and corporations involved generally favor less governmental interference instead of more, giving it a pragmatic Libertarian (in the procapitalist/ limited government form of U.S. politics) cast. CPSR grew out of organized opposition to the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) among computer scientists so it is generally more "leftist" in its outlook.

CPSR's internet principles can be seen in their "One planet, one net" initiative:

1. There is only one Net.
2. The Net must be open and available to all.
3. People have the right to communicate.
4. People have the right to privacy.
5. People are the Net's stewards, not its owners.
6. No individuals, organizations, or governments should dominate the Net.





## 7. The Net should reflect human diversity, not homogenize it.

What is it that motivates these computer professionals of these groups to become so involved in the politics of this “virtual” place? Well first, especially for those of you who have not been seduced by cyberspace, it is important to understand that for many people it *feels* like a real place. It seems like a neighbourhood they live in. For the professionals who have helped shape it, and who spend tremendous amounts of time “in” it, there is a powerful sense that it is a real place where they live, at least part of the time.

For a variety of reasons, a powerful articulated ethic of “responsibility” and an unarticulated assumption of “service” have developed that define good citizenship for what I shall call, for want of a better term, netizens. These values can be directly traced both to the hacker subculture and the 60s counterculture that many of the key technical players adhere to. Even when they aren’t “counter-cultural” they often share general computer culture assumptions about the incompetence if not perfidy of large institutions, such as the government and corporations.

However, on the other hand, the central institutional players are committed to quite different values: profits and militarization. And they have the resources to buy a great deal of technical expertise. Recent skirmishes around “virtual CD” and the growth of “hactivism” have illustrated this well. Attempts to protest Mexican policies in Chiapas, for example, by mass “denial of services” attacks on Mexican and U.S. web sites has led to Pentagon organized counterattacks that crashed, and at times even destroyed, the computers of some of the individual activists taking part. Divisions among netizens about the efficacy and wisdom of making cyberspace an arena for disruptive political struggle reveal real confusion about the nature of “virtual” citizenship.

## 6 ISSUES

### ***Governance (technical and political)***

The conflict between the values of the anti-authoritarian techno-elite (supported by many interested netizens) and the cyber-institutions can be seen in a number of issues. Once one understands that all technical and political struggles are about who will govern (or self-govern) the internet it becomes possible to see the stakes of the controversies around cyberporn, computer crime, privacy, encryption,



domain names, communication standards, hacking, and infowar. (I'll discuss two or three of these in reference to the "players" listed above and to their impact on militarization and the resistance to it.)

### ***Infowar***

Initially the U.S. government saw the issues of cyberporn and computer crime as ways of exerting direct control over the internet. Because of constitutional issues, business resistance, and netizen outrage they have had to step back from such claims as "email is not real mail and so the FBI can read it whenever they want" (overthrown by the Supreme Court) and such projects as the clipper chip (rejected because of its effects on the export of U.S. computer hardware and software). However, the new military mania for Infowar offers a much stronger, and much more sweeping justification for not only the domestication of cyberspace, but its remilitarization.

The military's claim that cyberspace is a crucial battleground for future wars and contemporary terrorism (Stocker and Schopf 1998) has already justified the creation of a number of military and police institutions for monitoring the internet. Plans for extensive future investments and the creation of technological ways of forcibly occupying parts or all of cyberspace are a way of superseding the democratic infrastructure that is now in place. One has to suspect that, in military terms, the real world is the high ground in relationship to cyberspace. For all its potential to exist among the cracks of the postindustrial infrastructure and create, in Hakim Bey's terms Temporary Autonomous Zones, when push comes to shove it is hard to see how the internet can resist occupation if the real world political situation is manipulated to produce the resources needed. On the bright side, the divisions among governments and corporations, and the growing sophistication and numbers of netizens, indicate that the future of cyberspace is still not determined.

## **7 FUTURE OF CYBERSPACE**

### ***The technical is political***

Every technical innovation produces unintended consequences for the political future of the net. In just one example, a relentless wave of improvements has made the www much more friendly to not only the computer illiterate but to programmers with a more open cooperative style as opposed to those with a "microworld"



approach (which incidentally is the military's frame set —See Edwards 1996). This has led to the increasing feminization of the www, where the participation of women has gone from 5% to almost 50% in ten years. It would be naive to think that women are “naturally” against war and incapable of contributing to militarization (see Enloe 1983) but it does represent a drastic shift from traditional military forms and traditional militarization, perhaps mirrored in how computerization has shifted gender identity in the U.S. military itself (Gray 1993).

### ***Paranoia and profits vs. responsibility and service***

It may go further. The implicit feminist values of the “cybergirrrrrl” aesthetic mesh well with the emerging hactivist and other dissident currents in cyberspace. While hardly the same, they share an antiauthoritarianism with the Libertarian assumptions of many in the computer industry and the older hacker ethic and the responsibility and service values of the computer professionals who dominate the technical aspects of cyberspace. How they will interact with the paranoia implicit in infowar and cybercrime scares, and the profit drive of most corporations, remains to be determined.

## **8 CHARACTER AND CARICATURE**

Once most people believed that your character depended on your breeding and your gender. More recently, some have claimed that your wealth or other accomplishments represented a true measure of your worth. Cyberspace, in one sense, can directly attack these archaic assumptions. But the dominant discourse on character in the West, traceable in part to military values but really supported in many ways in most areas of the culture, evaluates character by what you do, especially in situations of extremis, when life and limb are on the line. Here, cyberspace has little to offer because life and limb are never on the line. So what does it say about the character of many of the most vocal partisans of cyberspace that they think they can escape death altogether? This is what opens the door to caricature. Now, in the interface between cyberspace and Real Life, as it is called, character can come into play. The stories of cyberspace may be proven true or false in the real world. But you could even argue that there is no chance for showing true character in cyberspace, even though through lies and plagiarism you can demonstrate a lack of it. This is because cyberspace is a prosthesis, not a world of itself. It is not inhabited by its own citizens but rather it is constructed and visited by cyborg citizens, who always exist in



large part as living embodied creatures, even if some of their parts are artificial. And it is a space with its own special history, much of it in military research and development projects, which imposes its own special structures and values (see Gray and Driscoll 1992) as much as does the anarchic culture and capitalist profit hunting of today.

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