

INTERNET IDENTITY:

IDEM? or ID?

Joanna Dacko  
0158675  
CMST 3A03  
Dr. Catherine Frost  
November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003

And on the eighth day, “virtual spaces were created that many computer users could share and collaborate within, [and] they were deemed Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs, [and through them] a new kind of social virtuality was born” (Turkle, 241). The 21<sup>st</sup> century is experiencing rapid shifts into a more highly mediated reality than ever before - virtual reality. Psychologist Sherry Turkle has avidly studied the postmodern environment of the MUD since its inception. This new environment has vast effects on society, so many of which cannot be understood in foresight; however, trying to understand such environments while they are still relatively new will be beneficial to the understanding of where the notions of humanity are leading. It already seems, that the behavior of the identities in MUDs are very egocentric, prompted by both conscious and unconscious emerging needs. Using Turkle’s theories as a foundation, this essay will examine the phenomenon of virtual environments on the Internet, and how traditional notions of interpersonal relationships and self-concept are being challenged. Their unfolding is moving towards a type of self-serving exploratory behavior, revealing much about the self.

The simulated worlds of MUDs are challenging traditional notions of how individuals relate with others, and are also nurturing egocentric agendas within interpersonal relationships. In 1987, Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor published what they called the “Social Penetration Theory”, which attempted to explain the way in which individuals create interpersonal bonds. They use the model of an onion to convey the sense of a person’s multi-layered personality. As Altman and Taylor describe, the outer layer of the onion constitutes superficial characteristics, such as appearance, career, marital status and so on, which are easily accessible for people to see. Deeper beneath

the surface are semi-private attitudes that are revealed to a more selective audience. The inner core of the onion constitutes private concepts, deep emotions, beliefs and so forth, which are rarely, if ever, shared with others. The key, say Altman and Taylor, to the formation of a deep, valuable relationship is to self-disclose “in a gradual and orderly fashion from superficial to intimate levels of exchange” (Griffin, 133). The closer one gets to another’s core, through a gradual process of removing the layers in an orderly fashion, the more intimate (not necessarily in a romantic sense) the relationship will be.

Some aspects of this tradition model of experiencing relationships seem to hold true within simulated environments. The notion of a multi-layered onion parallels the postmodern notion of a fragmented identity, which Turkle describes. There are certain layers people feel comfortable disclosing only to certain people, and only within certain environments. This seems to strengthen Altman and Taylor’s model. However, MUD relationships challenge this theory in important ways. First, postmodern identities refute the notion of a central core to one’s being. Rather, individuals are composed of a myriad of qualities and personalities, none of which can be deemed as the singular, central foundation that constitutes a person’s core identity, around which all other fragments of self revolve. In this sense, valuable postmodern relationships are created when an individual gets to know many facets of another person’s collage of personalities.

A second way online relationships challenge the “Social Penetration Theory” is by the order and rate at which social penetration occurs. The exposure of the first layer of superficial characteristics does also occur first in MUDs. The instant a person enters a MUD, he or she is asked to create a description of him or herself. “Identity is the first thing you create in a MUD. You have to decide the name of your alternate

identity...And you have to describe who this character is..." (Nakamura, 228). However, as soon as this initial stage is complete, self-disclosure within the virtual environment seems to happen at an extremely fast pace. As Turkle describes, "MUD players feel the excitement of a rapidly deepening relationship and the sense that time itself is speeding up" (Turkle, 245). Within minutes, on-line characters are disclosing personal information and are engaging in intimate conversation. Altman and Taylor state that "instant intimacy is a myth. Not only is there internal resistance to quick forays into the soul, there are societal norms against telling too much too fast" (Griffin, 135). Therefore one has to question the authenticity of an on-line relationship. If instant intimacy is "a myth", it only seems plausible to consider that most relationships created in virtual spheres are either momentary experiences of some form of psychological satisfaction, or even illusions.

If on-line relationships are some form of psychological need gratification, one can less wonder why so many people invest such dedication and time into creating and maintaining them. For, there is a self-serving perspective to this question. On-line relationships are nothing more than vehicles to understanding the self. As Charles Taylor describes in his work *The Ethics of Authenticity*: the Internet encourages a "purely personal understanding of self-fulfillment, thus making the various associations and communities in which the person enters purely instrumental in their significance...this is antithetical to any strong commitment to a community." (Taylor, 43). On-line communities are instruments in the sense that they act as mirrors. Within on-line communities, people play with various identities in order to see these identities reflected back at them. By creating textual descriptions of their identities, and then receiving

feedback from the on-line community, people attempt to paste together a notion of 'self'. Turkle states that one of the essential qualities of MUD communities is that they are a "new kind of virtual parlor game and a new form of community...[within which] as players participate they become authors...of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction." (Turkle, 241). Therefore, on-line communities are measured as useful to the point in which they aid self-discovery. This engenders a psychologically egocentric aura towards being involved in a community on the Internet. As long as the community is functioning to meet personal desires, one will be a part of it; as soon as it fails at this task, the individual will most likely abandon it.

Just as the Internet changes traditional expectations of community, it is also engendering a more self-centered, need fulfilling, egotistical notion of 'the self'. One of the critical qualities of the postmodern self, as introduced above, is that of fragmentation. More traditional notions consider identity as a single entity. This is expressed within the word itself, since the Latin root for "identity", *idem*, means "the same" (Turkle, 242); implying that what we express through our personas should reflect the same qualities that are inherent in our core identities. However, with the age of the Internet, this concept is being shattered, and what now being proposed is a fragmented notion of identity. Identity is no longer "IDEM" based, but may I suggest, "ID" based. Within the sphere of the virtual, "each player can create many characters in many games, [and] the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit" (Turkle, 242). Multiplied as many times as the individual chooses, and often driven by the "ID" present in every individual. As defined by Merriam Webster, "ID" is "the one of the three divisions of the psyche in psychoanalytic theory that is completely unconscious and is the source of psychic energy

derived from instinctual needs and drives. The other two divisions are the 'Ego' and the 'Superego'. This ability to transform and reveal the complexity of the self is due to the disembodied presence of individuals in virtual spaces like MUDs.

People's physical bodies, within the physical bounds of the real world, place many restrictions on what they are capable of being and doing. However, in the world of the MUD, people exist through text. As Lisa Nakamura states in her work entitled *Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet*: "Users of the Internet represent themselves within it solely through the medium of keystrokes and mouse-clicks, and through this medium they can describe themselves and their physical bodies any way they like; they perform their bodies as text" (Nakamura, 226). Therefore, the only things binding people's identities are the limits of their imaginations and desires, as well as the limits of whatever language they are using to create their textual presence.

This opens up vast possibilities for playing with notions of identity, which are not possible in face to face interactions. People use this power to their advantage, and fulfill their real-life desires through textual MUDs. Through this virtue, MUDs become egocentric playgrounds. People become anything they desire: "On the Internet, nobody knows that you're a dog; it is possible to "computer crossdress" and represent yourself as a different gender, age, race, etc." (Nakamura, 226). Children have uninhibited dreams and ambitions. They aspire to become doctors, pilots, famous movie stars. They dream of growing wings and flying, of sliding to the end of a rainbow and falling into a pot of gold. Once those children grow to become adults, many realize that they failed at becoming what they had once aspired to be, or simply, that what they imagined is not

possible in this physical world. So, as a form of self-fulfillment, as a chance to become what they have always desired, adults “perform” their identities within MUDs.

This experimentation of identity is often done through an Internet phenomenon labeled “identity tourism”. People take on the role of another racial group, “to indulge in a dream of crossing over racial boundaries temporarily and recreationally” (Nakamura, 229). “Tourism” within MUDs evokes the freedom of unlimited travel to wonderfully exotic destinations. Many white males in MUDs appropriate an Asian identity to elicit Asian stereotypes of the skilled warrior, of the virtues of antiquity, and the appeals of the exotic (Nakamura, 229). Through such role-playing and identity fragmentation, The MUD becomes a narcissistic haven. A place of “self-preoccupation, lack of empathy, and unconscious deficits in self-esteem” (Merriam-Webster). A place of “pleasure derived from admiration of one's own body or self, especially as a fixation on or a regression to an infantile stage of development” (Merriam-Webster).

It is easy to see how the self-centered, self-gratifying, uninhibited nature of the MUD could foster immoral behaviors; and it has. Morality is a controversial area to discuss, but there is no doubt that moral experimentation and subjective morality of individuals surface on the Net. First, MUDs often cause people to live more meaningful lives on their computers than in real life. Turkle describes an individual who spends about forty hours a week on MUDs. “It seems misleading to call what he does there playing. He spends his time constructing a life more expansive than the one he lives in physical reality” (Turkle, 243). Many would question the morality of such a mediated lifestyle. How is this individual attempting to better society by sitting at his computer? On another level, MUDs can elicit a type of voyeuristic tendency which some may find

unsettling. Individuals are reaping pleasure from watching the movements and interactions of others. Third, for many, simply the concept of the ability to virtually cross-dress evokes ill feeling. Men enter MUDs as women, and most “are generally seeking sexual interaction, or “netsex” from other players of both genders” (Nakamura, 231). Even virtual rape is a reality on MUDs: a 21-old college senior defends his violent characters as “something in me; but quite frankly I’d rather rape on MUDs where no harm is done” (Turkle, 242). Should the concept of rape be justifiable simply because it is occurring in the virtual sphere?

The notion that on-line virtual environments are changing traditional notions of interpersonal relationships and self-concept towards a type of self-gratifying, but never fully comprehending of self, egocentrism is a phenomenon on-line society needs to be aware of. This unconscious or sometimes conscious shift towards narcissistic ideologies on the Internet, so often motivated by deeper forces and needs, could have severe implications off the computer screen. MUDs are people in action. People both affect and are affected by what they do with their actions.

Sherry Turkle states that: “As the boundaries erode between real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self, the question becomes: Are we living life on the screen or in the screen?” (Katz, 270). If the boundaries between virtual reality and real life are becoming less distinguishable, then this implies that people’s distinct identities between these two worlds are becoming less discernable also. Therefore, people’s actions on and off the screen will become more consistent with one another, and people will continue to bear their egocentric self-satisfying on-line attitudes beyond their computer screens. As a result of such a blurring of the two worlds, MUD

users, and the like, could be on route to becoming a collage of wandering, self-serving, superficially connected entities, formed as they play and live within virtual environments. People must try to understand the multi-faceted personalities they create in the virtual world and consider how they can be used to enrich their life in the real world. “If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our screen personae, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation” (Turkle, 269). Identity by “IDEM”, rather than by “ID”.

## Works Cited

Griffin, Em. *A First Look at Communication Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

Katz, James. *Social Consequences of Internet Use*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002.

“Merriam-Webster Online.” <<http://www.Merriam-Webster.com>> Springfield: Merriam Webster Inc., 2002 (6 Nov. 2003).

Nakamura, Lisa. “Race In/For Cyperspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet”. *Reading Digital Culture*. ed. David Trend. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. pp. 226-235.

Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Toronto: Massey Lectures, 1991.

Turkle, Sherry. “Who Am We?”. *Reading Digital Culture*. ed. David Trend. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. pp. 236-250.