Meaning and Identity in "Cyberspace": The Performance of Gender, Class, and Race Online

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This article explores issues of gendered, classed and raced identities using examples drawn from my research on a type of online forum known as a mud. I critique previous accounts of research regarding identity online which have suggested that online interactions encourage greater identity fluidity and multiplicity. Drawing on examples from face-to-face interviews and online interaction, I discuss several aspects of identity. I first examine participants' efforts to meet face-to-face and discuss their privileging of offline information regarding identity. Using two examples of "gender-switchers," I then show how some participants distance themselves from experiences of gendered identities which might otherwise disrupt previously held beliefs about gender. Next I discuss classed and raced identities, which participants express in conversations about income and ethnicity. These discussions point to the interconnections between online and offline interpretations of class and race. Thus, in discussing these examples, I emphasize the need to examine not just online performances, but also the participants' interpretations of such performances. Despite the potentially disruptive effects of online ambiguity, many participants continue to believe in essence and continuity of identity.

Carets says: This, right here, and places like it are the real laboratories for the future—the place where we find out what interaction will be like when it's all through a computer and you're judged on what you say and how you say it, and not on who or what you are. In RL, if I'm black, or handicapped, or don't have a college degree (or even a highschool degree), that will affect how I'm treated. That matters for nothing here, really.[1]

In the quotation above, Carets, a long-time participant in online social forums, expresses aspirations shared by many online. In his vision of the future, an increasing amount of social interaction will occur via computers. In his view, the benefits of this transition will include the fact that aspects of identity which currently form the basis for discrimination

and hierarchical relationships will cease to matter. Computers will facilitate the dream of a just and egalitarian world which somehow continues to elude us in "real life."

An increasing number of accounts in both the academic and popular press echo the sentiments of Carets and other online participants. Such accounts frequently emphasize the potential for portraying identities online that differ from offline identities. Some authors have viewed such identity play as deception, and they describe it as a potentially negative aspect of online life (Rheingold 1993). More positive accounts suggest that it can disrupt existing hierarchies based on aspects of identity like gender. In the latter, more utopian, view of online identity, the ability to portray different selves online fosters views of the self as multiple (Turkle 1995) and gender as constructed (Bruckman 1992, 1993; Dickel 1996; Poster 1995; Turkle 1995). Or, it allows participants to see "how the other half lives," fostering greater compassion and understanding between members of different genders (Bruckman 1992, 1993; Deuel 1995; Turkle 1995). Both the negative and positive views of fluidity in online identity assume that online experiences of identity differ from those offline. The utopian view further assumes that such differences change people's understanding of their identity, both online and offline.

Yet people use assumptions about identity—including understandings of race, gender, age, and so forth—to organize their social world and inform their interactions. They do not necessarily join online forums expecting or desiring these understandings of identity to change. In order to evaluate the potential effects of online interactions on identity, researchers need to consider not just how the interactions differ from (or are similar to) offline interactions, but also the understandings participants have of these differences and similarities. Rather than merely looking at whether or not participants are engaging in identity play, such as gender switching, we need to be cognizant of the meaning and salience of such behavior for participants. We should also contextualize these meanings in light of social and political realities both online and off.

Goffman (1974) suggests that despite the ability to adapt our presentation of self to accommodate different social situations, people resist viewing the self as a performed character. To some extent, our performances acquire their meanings precisely from the belief that they are not performances. We organize social life to allow us to tell meaningful stories about ourselves, while accomplishing a "sleight-of-hand"-like concealment of the distance between the "I" that tells the story and the "me" about whom the story is told.[2] Even online—where the performance of identity seems almost unavoidably obvious, where tales abound of multiplicity and fluidity, of deceptions and revelations (McRae 1997; Reid 1994; Rheingold 1993; Stone 1995; Turkle 1995)—people persist in seeking essentialized groundings for the selves they encounter.

In this article, I analyze some interactions and accounts of online participants that demonstrate strategies people use to resist viewing identity as fluid or performed. The experienced group of online participants on the mud BlueSky, where I did my research, privilege offline identity information over information received online.[3] In doing so, they dismiss the potential fluidity of online identity as illusory. This allows them to continue to understand identity in the essentialized terms of a persistent and consistent self, grounded in a particular physical body.

To further explore the effect of ideas concerning identity on participant understandings of online interactions, I discuss examples from BlueSky regarding three aspects of identity: gender, class and race. My interviews with two gender-switchers show that some participants distance themselves from their online experiences of differently gendered identities. They resist disruption of previously held beliefs about their own identities or about gender in general. The fact that participants can compartmentalize their online experiences of identity performance highlights the need to examine not just participants' identity performances, but their *ideas* about such performances as well.

Although participants rarely refer directly to class and race online, they bring ideas and assumptions about these aspects of identity into their online interactions. Issues concerning class and race emerge in online discussions of income and ethnicity. Online participants reproduce the persistent individualism of U.S. culture in depicting class as a quality of individuals rather than as an aggregate relationship to the means of production. Similarly, by discussing their identity in terms of ethnicity, rather than race, they resist characterizing people as members of racial groups, preferring to emphasize the unique heritage of each individual. However, the way they talk about race, and in particular, white participants' ability to avoid thinking about their own racial identities, demonstrate the continuing effects of racial hierarchies online, despite participant hopes to the contrary.

Before discussing examples of these identity strategies, I first briefly explain what muds are and describe my research project. Next, I discuss and critique previous accounts of research regarding identity online, which have suggested that online interactions encourage greater identity fluidity and multiplicity.

INTRODUCTION TO MUDS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Muds are a form of interactive, online, text-only forum. MUD originally stood for Multi-User Dungeon, based on the original multi-person networked dungeons and dragons-type game called MUD. Muds are also sometimes referred to as Multi-User Domains or Dimensions.[4] As in other online chat programs, people use Internet accounts to connect to mud programs running on various remote computers. They can then communicate through typed text with other people currently connected to that mud. Muds also allow participants to create programmed "objects," which facilitate the feel of being in a place, thereby adding richness to the social environment. There are hundreds of muds available on the Internet and through private online services. Many still operate as gaming spaces. Others are used for meetings, pedagogical purposes, and as social spaces. My research has been based primarily on social or chat-oriented muds, particularly a mud I call BlueSky.

For the past two years, I have been a participant-observer on BlueSky. Many of the people who connect to BlueSky have been mudding for over six years and have formed relationships with each other which sometimes extend offline. Most are sophisticated computer users, many of whom work with computers as programmers or system administrators. Almost all come from middle-class backgrounds, and the majority are white, young, male, and heterosexual. (Approximately 27 percent of the regulars on BlueSky are

female, and approximately 6 percent are Asian American. Most participants are in their middle to late 20s.)[5]

I entered BlueSky as a newcomer to mudding and as an overt researcher. My participation has included both online and offline interactions with other BlueSky participants. I also conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with 30 BlueSky participants in several U.S. cities. I have supplemented my research on BlueSky with visits to other muds and by reading various Usenet newsgroup and email list postings relating to muds.

PREVIOUS DISCUSSIONS OF ONLINE IDENTITY

Discussions of online interaction often emphasize the differences between online and offline interaction and construct "cyberspace" as a distinctively different arena for social interaction, one in which offline rules concerning identity do not apply. For instance, in her book about online life, Sherry Turkle (1995) has proposed that "technology is bringing a set of ideas associated with postmodernism...into everyday life" (p. 18). Her interpretation of postmodernism specifically highlights multiplicity and fractured identity, and she suggests that a primary appeal of online interaction is the ability for people to enact identities unavailable to them offline: "The Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves" (p. 178). Muds in particular allow people "the chance to discover...that for both sexes, gender is constructed" (p. 223).

Similarly, Mark Poster (1995) states that "the resistance of the new media to modernity lie in their complication of subjecthood, their denaturalizing the process of subject formation, their putting into question the interiority of the subject and its coherence" (p. 41). Like Turkle, Poster also suggests this has particular relevance for gender identity, stating that the ability of mudders to adopt a "fictional role that may be different from their actual gender...drastically call[s] into question the gender system of the dominant culture as a fixed binary" (p. 31). In these and other philosophical reflections on cyberspace, researchers suggest that hierarchical relationships are disrupted by the new media.[6]

A large and growing list of articles, mostly looking at newsgroup and email communications, suggest that norms of gendered behavior continue to shape online interactions. (Cherny 1994; Herring 1992, 1996; Kramarae and Taylor 1993; Sutton 1994; We 1994.) However, researchers examining more "synchronous" online forums, such as chat rooms and muds, have suggested that online "gender-switching" can change people's expectations and understandings of gender. For instance, several recent works have proposed that gender-switching can lead to a greater understanding of gender as constructed and the self as mutable (Bruckman 1993; Burris and Hoplight 1996; Deuel 1995; Dickel 1995; Poster 1995; Turkle 1995). These accounts have relied predominantly on participants' own assertions regarding the liberating potential of their online interactions. For the most part, researchers have not contextualized these assertions through consideration of the social norms and expectations within the online groups or by using examples of online gender enactments. Consequently, these reports fail to take into account potential discrepancies between what people say about their online experiences and what they actually do online.

These reports also tend to blur distinctions between identity performances and participant understandings of those performances.

Insufficient attention to the power differences inherent in gender, class, and racial identities leads researchers to overestimate the ability of online interactions to displace power hierarchies. Bruckman (1993), Dickel (1995), and Turkle (1995), for instance, confuse limited gender *exchangeability* (the ability to *represent* oneself, with variable success, as a different gender identity from one's offline identity) with gender *malleability* (an understanding of gender as constructed, fluid, and changeable). As Bornstein (1994) and others have pointed out, changing one's gender identity, even offline, can still perpetuate a rigidly binary understanding of the gender system. Bornstein observes that "most transsexuals opt for the theory that there are men and women and no in-between ground: the agreed-upon gender system. ...[I]n my world view, I saw myself as...something that needed to be...placed neatly into one of the categories" (p. 64). Although Bornstein later came to a more fluid understanding of gender identities, the experience of changing identities, through behavioral change and/or through surgical body modifications, remains insufficient in and of itself for many to reach this understanding.

Gender identities may be more readily changed at will online than off. However, as Thorne (1993) notes in her discussion of the concept of "borderwork," crossing gender boundaries can strengthen those boundaries, rather than dissolve them. Several features of online interaction can result in gender identity enactments which rely to an even greater degree on stereotypical notions of identity than do offline enactments. These include the difficulty of introducing nuance absent physical cues, such as tone of voice, as well as the necessity in chat environments of communicating in short bursts of text. Under these circumstances, as in Thorne's (1993) study of children's play, gender enactments online become "stylized moments [which] evoke recurring themes that are deeply rooted in our cultural conceptions of gender, and they suppress awareness of patterns that contradict and qualify them." Thus, online gendered interactions are unlikely to displace fundamentalist and essentialist ideas about gender offline and, in fact, may further perpetuate rigid gender expectations both online and offline. Before presenting two examples of gender-switching behavior which illustrate this analysis, I need to contextualize such enactments within the social norms of BlueSky.

BLUESKY PARTICIPANTS' SOCIAL NORMS AND OFFLINE CONNECTIONS

BlueSky differs somewhat from other muds. For instance, on some muds, role-playing of imaginary characters comprises much of the social interaction, and participants do not necessarily expect congruence between online and offline identities. On role-playing muds, many participants define the entire online realm as unreal or as a dramaturgical arena in which people always portray fictional characters. (A perennial theme on several Usenet newsgroups concerns whether or not muds are "real" or "just a game.") In contrast, on BlueSky, as on many chat-oriented online forums, participants expect that others should communicate honestly about their offline identities, and behave online in congruence with

those identities. Since BlueSky participants view online representations of self as extensions of offline identities, they do not define the whole online realm as completely illusory. Instead, they regard information received online as incomplete, and give greater weight to information about identity received offline. They also seek out face-to-face meetings in order to acquire such offline information.

Online groups that foster close relationships, particularly those that recognize themselves as distinct subcultural groups, frequently go to great lengths to extend their online relationships into the offline world (Bruckman 1992; Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995). Several of the older social muds have groups which regularly meet offline. For instance, Earlymud, one of the longest-running muds, has biannual parties, usually in the same Southern California town. These parties are well-attended by participants from all over the United States, and sometimes from other countries. GammaMOO, a very large social mud, has several geographically local groups which occasionally socialize offline together.

BlueSky's meetings tend to be less formally organized, but small meetings usually occur a couple of times a year. In earlier years, when most participants were students, there were large gatherings, usually connected with conventions of science fiction fans. Now that most work full-time, face-to-face get-togethers tend to take the form of one person travelling around the country, making contact with several other participants, many of whom will drive from several hours away to meet with the cross-country traveler.

Almost every BlueSky participant has met several others, including people at some geographic remove. Mu, a long-time BlueSky participant, made the following statement in a face-to-face interview:

> I know everybody by this time. There may be a few exceptions [but I] have either met them or someone who I've met who I trust has met them.

In discussions online, people will sometimes list the currently connected people whom they have met face-to-face, comparing the numbers of people each has met. Most of my BlueSky interviewees stated that there were people they had never met face-to-face whom they considered friends nevertheless. However, meeting face-to-face did make a difference in their relationships. Many interviewees consider offline meetings important to the establishment of trust in relationships with others:

> Atticus: People I've met, I feel that I'm more willing to put my trust in them.
> Lori: When you meet people, you've got more of a solid base?
> Atticus: Right. You know something's actually there. It's more solid.

Several people brought up this issue of trust when I asked about the difference face-to-face meetings make in their relationships. Notice, also, that Mu associates "knowing" somebody with meeting him or her face-to-face, suggesting that he believes that important information about people's identities does not get communicated online.

Similarly, in her mud research, Allen (1996) found that people she interviewed were interested in gathering information about people's offline identities. Based on some of her own meetings with people, she concluded that meeting face-to-face could change the way

people felt about each other. My meetings with interviewees often fit this pattern. Sometimes I found myself uncomfortable with people in a face-to-face meeting—people with whom I had been quite comfortable online. After the face-to-face meeting, I found that I could return to our previous level of comfort online. However, I now noticed things I had not previously, and reinterpreted some aspects of the other's communication style.

BlueSky participants rely on face-to-face meetings to inspire trust and to provide a feeling of really knowing someone. In this way, not only do they bring offline information into the online world, but they privilege that information over what they have been able to discern about a person online. Long-term mudders set aside expectations about the people with whom they interact online until they are able to meet face to face. Many talked about the difficult learning process they went through before realizing the necessity of doing this.

Beryl began participating on muds when the first social mud went online in 1989. In a face-to-face interview, she talked about offline meetings with online acquaintances:

> Beryl: At first I was really bad at meeting people. I guess I had real expectations or something. But I learned.
>
> Lori: So what kind of things would happen? Were there people that you liked online and you'd meet them and you wouldn't like them?
>
> Beryl: Yes. Like Cap turned out. ...He's not bad online. ...But he's never mastered being social. So he was a totally different person in real life. In general, though, I've gotten pretty good about it now, in the past few years. You can tell if somebody's rude online they're going to be rude off. If you genuinely like someone online you're probably going to genuinely like them when you meet them. You just have to be careful not to mistake having hung out with someone for years for liking them.

In Beryl's description, sociability online does not carry the same status as the ability to socialize offline. Beryl had an enjoyable relationship with Cap online, but, after meeting him face-to-face, she says that he "never mastered being social." Other participants mentioned discrepancies between online and offline socializing skills, and, in similar fashion, many discounted online socializing.

In our interaction with others, we rely on the expectation that they have limited control over "given off" or expressive information in the face-to-face context. We read such information for clues as to the other person's "true" feelings or personality (Goffman 1959). But on text-based forums like muds, all information is transmitted through text; thus, all information is intentional information. Participants understand that others choose what information they present in this way and could be lying or misleading them. While emotions, and the facial expressions and tones of voices associated with them, can certainly be controlled or manipulated, we expect that there remains some residue of uncontrollable information given off which can be read by others. To the extent that we rely on "gut feelings" about people based on our evaluations of information given off, we are unlikely to put full trust in someone we have not met face to face.

Most of the interaction among BlueSky participants occurs online. But by seeking to meet one another, and to gain face-to-face information about their online contacts, they reconnect identity to the body. In so doing, they reinforce tendencies to view identity as fixed and essential. By interpreting offline self-presentations as more authentic, they can dismiss online behaviors which appear to contradict the offline persona, or relegate them to mere effects of the electronic mediation.

Face-to-face meetings also provide the very information which some claim to be irrelevant to online interactions. When meeting face to face, mudders gain information concerning each others' race, gender, and class identities. They also learn about age, physical ability, attractiveness, and certain types of social skills not evident online. The importance of face-to-face meetings and the subsequent privileging of offline information and socializing may point to participants' reluctance to disregard these categories of identity. In the following sections, I present examples of the continuing importance of these categories online.

GENDER-SWITCHING ON BLUESKY

For the rare gender-switchers on BlueSky, portraying an online gender identity different from their offline identity need not disrupt previous understandings of identity. As in other forms of gender masquerade—whether on the stage, in carnivals, or on city streets—motivations for such masquerade vary. So, too, does the potential for masquerade to disrupt existing gender norms. Below, I have reproduced excerpts from discussions with two BlueSky participants, Fred and Toni, who, for significant lengths of time, enacted gender identities on BlueSky that differed from their offline gender identities. Their experiences provide evidence that the online enactment of gender identities that differ from participants' offline gender identities need not call into question existing beliefs and assumptions about gender. Thus, Fred and Toni's gender strategies highlight both the potential for and the limitations on fluidity in online gender enactments.

Fred/Amnesia: "Her Femininity Shows Through Easier Via Text"

Fred is a long-term male participant on BlueSky who, for a year, portrayed himself as female, with the character name Amnesia. Although Fred revealed his offline male identity to other BlueSky participants several years ago, ending his masquerade, he retains the online name Amnesia and continues to engage in self-reference using female pronouns.[7] I asked Amnesia about this behavior in a "whispered" conversation online (i.e., other participants could not see the text Amnesia and I exchanged). In our conversation, my character is Copperhead:

Copperhead whispers: so I'm curious—if everyone knows you're not
                        female, why still the female pronouns? Continuity?
Amnesia whispers: "Amnesia" is a woman, and always has been. Amne-
                        sia was (is) my "ideal woman," and so is more carica-

	turial than any real woman can be. I think that means her femininity shows through easier via text.
Copperhead whispers:	your "ideal woman" is caricaturially female?"
Amnesia whispers:	no, I mean that I have no real experience in being a woman, so can only draw a crude image with a broad brush when I'm acting. Also, my "ideal woman" has qualities not available in humanity, so there's another thing that doesn't translate into reality well.

Fred considers himself to be acting and does not expect characteristics of his "ideal woman" to translate into reality. This points to his reliance on stereotypical notions of femininity in order to accomplish his masquerade. In addition, Fred separates the "crude image" he portrays online from his offline identity, suppressing any gender blurring effect his online masquerade might have for his own sense of identity.

This type of gender enactment, while clearly a performance, does not necessarily lead to an understanding of gender as performed in *all* instances, offline as well as online. Moreover, Fred's understanding of gender-switching emphasizes differences between males and females, as seen in this exchange:

Copperhead whispers:	okay, but why do you need experience as a woman to play a woman on-line. I mean, look at me. What experience would you need to come across like I do?
Amnesia whispers:	in the short run, not a lot. For a year, quite a lot.
Copperhead whispers:	I've been here six months. I haven't needed any special experience yet! ;) [8]
Amnesia whispers:	now try pretending to be a 50 year old man for 6 months.
Copperhead whispers:	ah, but what if I just talked like I've been talking and *told* people I was a 50-yr-old man?
Amnesia whispers:	if one isn't exceedingly careful, one slips just slightly and the entire game is up.

While the slips to which Amnesia refers could result from any inconsistency in online self-presentation, he specifically emphasizes gender. In particular, pronouns are easy to forget. Other BlueSky participants consider Amnesia to be obsessive about using female pronouns, perhaps because everyone relates to Amnesia as male (since they have met or know about Fred), and the constant use of female pronouns strikes them as somewhat incongruous. In treating Amnesia as male, BlueSky participants give greater weight to offline identity than online identity, and they continue to treat gender as immutable and rooted in the physical body. Despite having previously believed that Amnesia was "really" female, they treat that earlier understanding as a mistake, now corrected by their greater knowledge of Fred's offline identity.

As Amnesia and I continued to discuss gender portrayals online, it became clear that, given Fred's orientation towards role-playing online and gender portrayal, ideas about gen-

der and appropriately gendered behavior might become even *more* rigidly defined through such online enactments:

Amnesia whispers:	"Oblivious" was my male persona briefly, but it was less fun
Copperhead whispers:	less fun? how so?
Amnesia whispers:	hard to say. Perhaps less attention is paid male characters.
Copperhead whispers:	hmmm. I've heard that from other people as well.
Amnesia whispers:	when I was full-out a woman, the differential was unbelievable and measurable.
Copperhead whispers:	but you know, I haven't really noticed it. 'Course, I haven't been on here as a male, but comparing myself to other people, it doesn't really seem to me that I get more attention. Heh. Maybe if I was male, I'd get *no* attention.
Amnesia whispers:	you don't "act female" in the traditional sense, as far as I've seen.
Copperhead whispers:	ah. I suppose that's true. So maybe it's not females that get more attention, per se. Am I less a woman than Amnesia? ;)

Fred interprets my presentation of self online, in which I make no particular effort to emphasize a gendered identity, as not "acting female." With the limitations inherent in text-based online interactions, and the absence of cues we typically use to interpret the gender identity of others, Amnesia's caricature of femininity becomes potentially more real— more female—than my less stereotypical enactment as Copperhead. However, other participants' understandings of both Amnesia and Copperhead's online gender presentations remain subject to correction and reinterpretation upon acquisition of further information about our offline identities. Several BlueSky participants acknowledged that Fred had "passed" as female for a year. But rather than interpret Fred's ability to "fool" them as evidence of gender malleability (and rather than credit Fred with great skill at deception), they generally attribute their mistakes to their earlier naivete and unfamiliarity with the medium.

Toni/Phillipe: "Me With Different Pronouns"

Toni has been mudding for several years, but she joined the group on BlueSky fairly recently. She portrays herself on BlueSky using the male character name of Phillipe. Unlike Fred, Toni deemphasizes differences between male and female character portrayal. But she, too, distances herself from her character, attaching little significance to her online gender-switching. In a face-to-face interview, she described for me the process of choosing a name for her character:

When I was sitting there thinking what am I going to name this character, I had heard so much about what a weird place GammaMOO was that I just didn't

want to go there as myself. It wasn't like I decided, "Oh I'll make a male character because it's safer to be male online" or something like that. I didn't really ever feel that. I just liked the notion of not being myself. I wasn't really sure of the environment or anything. ...And so I just, I had a cat named Phillipe, and so I just borrowed his name. So then I got in the habit of naming characters Phillipe or Phill, some variation of that whenever I went somewhere that I wasn't sure I was going to be comfortable.

At the time of this interview, very few BlueSky participants knew that Phillipe was female offline. Since then, Toni has "come out" as female. However, just as Fred continues to go by the name Amnesia and to use female pronouns, Toni retains the name Phillipe online and continues to engage in self-reference using male pronouns. This leads to occasional confusion among other participants:

cropduster says: mckenzie won't even dance
Phillipe won't dance either; why is this bad?
cropduster says: women like dancing dudes
Phillipe says: i don't
cropduster says: are you a woman?
Peg says: yes, she is
cropduster says: phillipe is a woman?
cropduster says: niiice name choice
Phillipe says: cropduster, we've had this discussion before; every few
                   months you find out i'm female and boggle like that
cropduster forgot it
cropduster has a profound aversion to cross-sexing, that's why
cropduster says: i'm sure i block it out
henri says: your illusion is JUST THAT GOOD
cropduster says: or i care JUST THAT LITTLE

Cropduster indicates by his sarcastic statement, "niiice name choice," that he expects online names to reflect offline gender identities (perhaps because those names can be chosen, rather than merely received from one's parents). His expression of a "profound aversion to cross-sexing" reiterates this sentiment. The ability of Toni to convincingly portray the male character Phillipe potentially establishes gender as fluid and socially constructed. For those seeking to resist such a perspective, being fooled by gender masquerade is disturbing. Hence, when henri suggests that cropduster was fooled because of the effectiveness of Phillipe's illusion, cropduster counters that he does not care enough to pay attention.

Fred emphasized the difficulty of portraying a character with a gender different from one's offline identity, but Toni claims to have little problem maintaining Phillipe's male persona consistently. She indicates that she makes little distinction between her own personality and that of Phillipe. Toni describes the mistakes others make in portraying gendered identities, and she outlines her own enactment strategy:

You know a lot of people, if they make an alternate gendered character, they'll make it really exaggerated. I think Phil's kind of this wimpy guy, kind of a pretty boy. I think Phillipe is just more me with different pronouns. I suppose it's a lazy kind of a disguise. He has a guy's name and he has male pronouns. I guess the wimpy part is, it's a stupid name. I have this notion that probably lots of people think that Phillipe is gay.

Toni's masquerade both reinforces and calls into question stereotypical assumptions about masculinity and femininity. Like others I spoke with, she suggests that the attempt to be different when "switching" genders leads many to perform exaggerated and easily unmasked caricatures. She, on the other hand, successfully passes as male, theoretically without making any effort to behave in a "masculine" fashion. (Participants less frequently question male character enactments, given assumptions that more online participants are male than female, and owing to cultural tendencies to view "neutral" enactments as male.) Unlike Fred's contention that lack of experience being female hampers his ability to portray a female character, Toni's low-key masquerade suggests greater similarities between male and female gender enactments.

Toni's portrayal of Phillipe does resemble her offline presentation of self. Moreover, few other BlueSky participants would agree with her characterization of Phillipe as "wimpy." Given the social norms on BlueSky, gender enactments of all participants, regardless of online or offline gender designations, tend to conform to standard cultural expectations of masculine behavior. BlueSky participants have a high tolerance for obnoxious behavior, and they frequently tease and heckle each other. In the following discussion, Phillipe and two other participants (both of whom present themselves as male, online and off) engage in flirtatious horseplay. Both Mender and Locutus know that "Phillipe" is female offline. (The paged comments between Phillipe and Locutus at the end of this example were private communications, not visible to the third participant, Mender.)

> Mender mewmewmewmewmewmew
> Phillipe doesn't really think that's how you attract pussy, Mender
> Phillipe says: AHAHAHAHA
> Locutus laughs
> Mender says: So how DO you do it
> Phillipe says: i think it's abundantly clear at least to some of us in this room that I don't
> Locutus says: you say "come to madison" over and over until someone gives in
> Mender says: Locutus, come to madison
> Locutus says: no
> Mender says: Locutus, come to madison
> Locutus says: STILL no
> Locutus says: mender, hint, I'm not female
> Mender says: oh yeah
> Phillipe says: what locutus said, only first we need to have a little talk about genders; and clearly i'm the best person to talk about genders

> Phillipe HOWLS at himself
> Mender says: we've had that talk
> Phillipe pages Locutus with 'mender knows i'm a girl, btw. he started telling
>   me a lot of personal stuff and i outted myself cuz it seemed
>   unfair.'
> Locutus pages Phillipe aw you're so sweet

In the transcript above, male and female alike flirt with each other and joke about sexuality and gender identities. Phillipe highlights the connections between "proper" gender identity and heterosexuality when she states that it should be "abundantly clear" to the people in the room (who know she is female) that she does not attempt to "attract pussy." She also jokingly alludes to her dual gender status by stating that she is "the best person to talk about genders," which is followed by Mender indicating that he is aware of her gender masquerade. Phillipe then updates Locutus concerning Mender's knowledge. Significantly, Phillipe indicates that she felt bound to reveal her "true" gender identity when Mender began revealing "personal stuff" (i.e., information about his offline life). In this way, she reciprocates his revelation of offline information with her own "confession" concerning her offline identity.

As with my own character, Copperhead, Toni's online and offline presentations of self fit neither feminine nor masculine stereotypes. Yet because she is female offline, Toni characterizes her less "exaggerated" male character as "wimpy" and believes others may perceive him as gay. Toni's evaluation of Phillipe's wimpiness relies on cultural standards of masculine behavior. Her view of Phillipe as not very masculine and possibly gay also depends on expectations that connect heterosexuality with standards of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). As evidenced by these examples of her interactions as Phillipe, her personality fits into the general bantering common on BlueSky, and she passes for male unless she makes a point of "outing" herself. Thus, her characterization of Phillipe as wimpy represents an interpretive strategy which reinstates gender as an essential category of identity. Her passing becomes irrelevant to her own gender identity as long as she only passes as an imperfect or wimpy male. In short, for Toni, as for Fred, caricatured or exaggerated gender enactments are potentially more "real" online than less stereotypical portrayals.

ONLINE TALK ABOUT CLASS

With the focus on gender, scholarly attention to online identity tends to ignore considerations of race and class. However, Turkle (1995) does discuss the possibility that muds can provide participants with "the sense of a middle-class peer group" (p. 240). She connects the appeal of muds to the economic difficulties experienced by many young people from middle-class families whose job prospects have not met their expectations. The fact that these mud participants can feel more like "themselves" online than in their downwardly mobile "day jobs" suggests the extent to which middle-class cultural understandings shape muds and online culture in general. Online social spaces would not function as an escape from perceived or feared working-class existence offline unless they somehow convey a sense of middle-class culture to participants.

Nonetheless, while most people acknowledge the relevance of gender in their online social interactions, many argue that race and class identities simply "drop away" from online personas. For instance, in the quote at the beginning of this article, Carets, an active participant on several muds, states, "In RL, if I'm black, or handicapped, or don't have a college degree (or even a highschool degree), that will affect how I'm treated. That matters for nothing here, really." This color-blind, class-blind stance reflects cultural norms carried over from offline discourse. (The use of the abbreviation "RL" demonstrates another way of cognitively partitioning online interactions from the offline world.) If, on the Internet, "nobody knows you're a dog," then theoretically all participants enter online interactional spaces on an equal footing.[9] Again, however, this perspective assumes that online spaces exist entirely separate from the offline contexts within which they are created. It ignores the different experiences and understandings that participants bring to their online interactions, as well as the historical and cultural development of the Internet itself.

Most BlueSky participants live in the United States, where a discourse of "color-blindness" predominates, making direct references to race in interactions more or less taboo (Frankenberg 1993, p. 14). Similarly, U.S. cultural preferences for individualistic explanations of economic attainment preclude recognition or discussion of the social structures or effects of class. The historical predominance of libertarian viewpoints online, especially on the Internet, strengthens this anti-class-conscious bias in online discourse. Further, the color-blind stance dovetails with "color-less" text-based online social spaces to produce a discourse which represents the online world as a haven from offline prejudice.

Not surprisingly, then, group discussions on BlueSky rarely refer specifically to class. However, participants bring their class backgrounds and attitudes concerning class identity into their online interactions. The meaning of class identities emerges obliquely on BlueSky in discussions of welfare, politics, and education. As Sherry Ortner (1993) points out, we in the United States have an "impoverished language for thinking and speaking about" class (pp. 259-260). In her research, she found that people tend to change the subject from class, often to "related but subtly different categories" (p. 265) such as success and money. As in Ortner's interviews, class-related discussions on BlueSky frequently concern income rather than referring directly to class.

The following excerpts from an online conversation on BlueSky demonstrate that income has meaning beyond the expectation that people, "of course," prefer to have more money. Participants discuss each others' salaries and rents, revealing in the process class identities and anxieties about class. In the first excerpt, participants answer a salary roll call. Roll calls are a cultural practice on BlueSky in which a participant announces an implicit question, usually regarding opinions or personal statistics. People answer in short phrases analogous to offline attendance or voting roll calls. The roll calls function as a way to display and exchange personal information among participants:

Corwin ANNUAL SALARY BEFORE THE PAYCHECK LEECHES GET
TO IT
ROLL CALL
Corwin roughly $27k

McKenzie $42k
Faust $32k currently, $35k soon
Bidle $20k before he quit.
Bendable Barbie 29K
Corwin believes Bridget's is $30k or so
Starfish $36K
bodkin $n/a
Mender $40k
elflock $40k
Ulysses $53k

As the discussion continued, participants responded to further roll calls on monthly rent and "what you get for your monthly rent" (i.e., what kind of apartment or house). Corwin then came up with the formula of annual rent divided by salary to provide a rough index of buying power, and led a roll call for that figure:

Corwin's is 1/9, for the record
elflock .198
Corwin says: aka .111111"
Jet is .15
Mender's is .245
Starfish .19
Half Life's is 2.4. sigh. go go gadget parent's money
Faust hms. potentiall .17?
McKenzie is .214
Mender says: Half Life has the still-in-school exemption from the roll call
Half Life phew
fnord 0.18, for the record
Captain .33 but General makes lots
Bendable Barbie says: .161
Obtuse is .13 in the rent/salaray

Given U.S. cultural attitudes toward work and success, income has meaning for people beyond what it purchases. It also provides an index of social standing (i.e., class). By factoring in considerations such as cost of living, BlueSky participants illustrate their understanding of the inadequacy of looking solely at income levels to determine class position. Although language concerning class does not appear in the discussion, class position clearly underlies the import of what is said. For instance, Mender's comment "exempting" Half Life from the roll call because of her student status suggests the view that student status affects income but should not be understood to disrupt continuing middle-class status.

Similarly, both Corwin (in the previous excerpt) and Captain (in the excerpt above) refer to their wives' salaries. (Both use online names for their wives, Bridget and General, respectively.) In so doing, they move from an emphasis on personal income toward a recognition of the effect of total household income on class standing. This also reflects changing economic realities in the U.S. middle class, where more and more households require two incomes to maintain their middle-class status and lifestyle.

Overt recognition of class differences in the United States would bring participants to the uncomfortable recognition of power imbalances in society. Concern with power and autonomy fuel anxiety about income, but the cultural predominance of individualistic explanations for class differences channels that anxiety into worry about personal attainment. The following discussion concerning henri's salary demonstrates these connections between personal attainment (of high salaries) and class, and an implicit understanding of the power implications involved in different class positions:

> McKenzie says: henri answered out of order
> Mender says: henri was sparing us the horror of his salary"
> henri didn't see the salary roll call
> Corwin says: henri doesn't answer salary roll calls
> elflock says: We all know the answer :)
> McKenzie says: if henri doesn't answer then I end up with the highest salary
> henri says: my salary is public knowledge on here anyhow"
> Corwin says: smash McKenzie utterly, henri
> henri $90k
> Corwin says: henri crushes everyone anyway
> henri says: Shub makes more than I do

The participants hold salary to be a measure of success and, therefore, a source of pride. However, Corwin's violent metaphor, suggesting that henri's salary information will "smash McKenzie utterly," along with henri's apparent discomfort with being on the top of the salary hierarchy, demonstrate that pride is mixed with ambivalence concerning the power over others which being at the top of a hierarchy entails.

The competitive, "mine is bigger" tone of much of this conversation also points to interconnections between gender and class identities. People view class issues through gendered lenses (and gender issues through class-based understandings). As Anne McClintock (1995) points out, "race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience ....Rather they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other" (p. 5; see also Connell 1995, pp. 74–76). Here, the BlueSky participants express a middle-class identity tied to the traditionally male public space of competitive economic enterprise. Successful performance of masculinity involves successful economic performance and the achievement of a middle-class lifestyle. Similarly, performing a middle-class identity entails adopting particular gendered behaviors recognizable as middle-class—in this case, the behaviors and demeanor associated with the competent, competitive male breadwinner.

As a consequence of the focus on individual attainment rather than social class structure, even people with relatively privileged class positions worry about their personal success and may perceive themselves as disadvantaged compared to others. Despite his explicit emphasis on differences in cost of living across regions of the United States and the effect this has on salary versus class distinctions, Corwin leaves the discussion still concerned that others regard him disfavorably because of his comparatively low salary:

```
Corwin says:      keep watching these fractions, MadMonk, and consider cost
                  of living differences
MadMonk says:     True, Oklahoma, like NM, has a pretty low cost of living.
Corwin has the smallest resulting ratio so far. See? He makes plenty of money.
Drog makes less than McKenzie, ulysses, mender, etc but more than some others
Corwin says:      TIME TO GO
henri says:       bye Cor
Corwin says:      you may all make fun of my salary behind my back now
Faust HAHAHAHAH oh he hasn't left
Mender is too busy wallowing in self-pity over no recent raises
Corwin has disconnected.
```

These discussions demonstrate both the importance of class position and the difficulties Americans have in discussing class. Salaries provide a source of pride, reflecting a belief in individual merit and effort. But they are also a source of ambivalent feelings, reflecting an underlying perception of class conflict. Corwin in particular exhibits anxiety about income engendered in part by the individualistic language that is common in the United States. As in the previous examples concerning gender, this individualistic perspective portrays class in essentialized terms. But Corwin's anxiety suggests that despite seeing class attainment as a personal quality, or as a matter of will and effort, BlueSky participants may still be vulnerable to a lingering "fear of falling" (Ehrenreich 1989).

VIRTUAL WHITE SPACE: RACIAL IDENTITIES ONLINE

BlueSky participants' views concerning race online resemble their views of class. Although discussions directly touch on race more often than on class, most of the participants feel that race has no effect on their online interactions. However, BlueSky participants' responses to my questions about their own racial identity reflect the different experiences they bring to their online interactions and the perspectives their different racial identities give them. For instance, many white mudders say they do not think about race much:

```
fnord whispers:   um, just sort of generic caucasian mix, I suppose, never
                  really think about it much
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                                      ***

```
HalfLife whispers:   hmm...It's not something I think about. When asked I
                     usually say Jewish; though I don't know if that's a race
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                                      ***

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Bridget pages:    I rarely give race thought at all—this may be mainly due to
                  my upbringing more than a conscious effort on my part
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Whiteness as an unmarked, empty category allows white people the luxury of not thinking about the effects of race. Thus, as Feagin and Vera (1995) have noted, "most white respondents in research conducted by Robert Terry in the 1970s said that they had rarely or never

thought about being white" (p. 139). White people often fail to see how race and racialized understandings shape their view of the world and their actions within it.

Like the white mudders quoted above, Asian American participants on BlueSky also seek to distance themselves from identities based on race. However, in contrast to white respondents, they have thought more about racial identity and its effect on their lives. Their distancing strategies display evidence of complex relationships with their racial and ethnic heritages and communities as well as the predominantly white spaces in which they work and socialize:

> Tempest whispers: filipino. i'm not your typical flip, tho', i've been too americanized; the vast majority [of filipinos] are much calmer than i am :)

Tempest identifies himself as Filipino, yet distances himself from other Filipinos. Later in my online conversation with him, he connected his difference from other Filipinos to specific aspects of his BlueSky character (cartoonish violence and an agitated personality), implicitly recognizing that BlueSky exists as a white space, in which white identities are performed.

Resistance to racial categorization on the part of two other Asian American respondents highlighted the inaccuracy or insufficiency of categories imposed upon them by others:

> Spontaneity whispers: I'm in that "Asian and Pacific Islander" bin the Federal Government uses, yup.

***

> RaveMage says: hmmm, well, as you probably know i call myself the "asian punkboy" :)
> Copperhead grins
> RaveMage says: which is funny 'cos i'm actually filipino, which is actually a pacific islander; but bodkin and i have fun with the look :)

RaveMage's reference to "the look" of an "asian punkboy," as opposed to the "actual" identity of Filipino illustrates his perception of the artificiality of racial categories. His ability to "pass" as Asian relies on U.S. racial categorizations which take little notice of cultural differences.

ONLINE TALK ABOUT RACE

BlueSky participants rarely discuss race directly, but they discuss race more often than they discuss class. References to race in offline media coverage of political or social events influence online discussions concerning these events. For instance, discussions concerning the O.J. Simpson trials on BlueSky sometimes alluded to race or racial tensions. Similarly, election coverage focussing on issues of immigration sparked several political discussions

which touched on issues of race and ethnicity. The following conversation began as a discussion concerning immigration policies, which were in the news at the time, and evolved into a discussion of participants' ancestry:

> elflock has one parent whose ancestors have been on this continent for nigh on 400 years, and another who is an immigrant. Provides an interesting perspective.
> Farron nods @ elflock. "Same here."
> Farron's grandfather immigrated, but he had relatives on both sides of the Civil War, back into the 1600s.
> Ulysses' grandparents were all born here, and he has pre-revolutionary ancestors
> Bilerific-Sid's father is an immigrant and his mother's folks are immigrants.
> Pyramid is like unto Ulysses ancestorally
> Bilerific-Sid is surrounded by honkies.
> Ulysses says: and since I'm a tiny part Seneca, I have ancestors who were here long before all you WHITE PEOPLE
> elflock has aunts, uncles, and first cousins scattered through Europe and southern Africa.
> elflock is 0 percent Native American, but Diana has some Injun blood
> Corwin is a bit Cherokee
> Farron has no native american blood.
> Farron is so white that he disappears against snowbanks.
> Corwin says: or so I'm told
> Pyramid is a bit Jewish, that's the only thing keeping her from utter WASP-hood
> Corwin says: Farron looks exactly like he should be in an Irish pub getting plastered
> Farron says: Pyramid: all my traceable ancestors are Irish, Scots, or English.
> Farron nods @ Corwin.
> elflock's ancestors are German, Scots, English, and Norvegian
> Bilerific-Sid's ancestors are greek and Rom.
> Ulysses' ancestors are English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, French, Dutch, German and Seneca

The discussion above slides in and around the entangled issues of immigration, race, and ethnicity. Several aspects of dominant U.S. discourses on race emerge in participants' expressions of their own heritage. The focus on ethnicity itself, rather than race, reflects dominant U.S. discourse regarding issues of difference (Omi and Winant 1994, pp. 14-23). Lists of mixed ancestry evoke a "melting-pot" assimilationist model of U.S. culture. These lists also serve as what Frankenberg (1993) has termed "belonging names" (p. 205). Most of the participants quoted above do not strongly identify with the cultures they name, nor do they engage in particular practices that reflect those cultures. But due to widespread perceptions of whiteness as bland, empty, and normative, white people frequently evoke more specific or "bounded" heritages.

As Frankenberg has pointed out, this strategy risks "romanticizing the experience of being oppressed" (p. 230). This romanticization combines with guilt-avoidance in the preceding discussion of Native American ancestry. Many white American families point to a

single "Native American ancestor" in near mythical fashion. Often, the exact history of these ancestors is vague or unknown, as demonstrated by Corwin's assertion that he is "a bit Cherokee ... or so I'm told." Whites who can point to this ancestry lay claim to being "good whites" who presumably married rather than killed the Native Americans they encountered upon immigration. (This fails to consider, among other things, how social constructions of gender and race intertwine, such that both racial and gender oppression can occur in and through sex and marriage.)

Conjuring the mythical non-white ancestor also serves to disavow white status, further reinforcing a "melting pot" theory of U.S. ethnic experience, and continuing to reproduce whiteness as empty or null. Pyramid's statement that she is saved "from utter WASP-hood" by virtue of being "a bit Jewish" enacts a similar strategy, and presents whiteness as a negative identity from which to be "saved." Similarly, Bilerific-Sid's use of the pejorative term "honkies" and Ulysses' attempt to jokingly distance himself from "all you WHITE PEOPLE" demonstrate continuing uneasiness toward white identity.

Such discussions occur on BlueSky only rarely. Perhaps in part for this reason, most BlueSky participants believe that race has no effect on their online interactions with others. However, a common reply by white participants to my questions concerning the effects of race on online interaction highlights how racial assumptions nevertheless form a backdrop for those interactions. When I questioned people as to whether race matters online or not, they would often mention one of the few African American mudders they know:

> Corwin is a white boy, and hasn't seen as how people have any clue what race anyone is; he's pretty sure nobody realized for ages that a few black [mudders] were black, for instance

<div align="center">***</div>

> elflock whispers: I rarely see race playing a major factor in BlueSky discussion—like many other forms of online interaction, one's race isn't glaringly obvious. It was years before I even knew Sand was black, for instance.

<div align="center">***</div>

> Peg whispers: well, i don't know unless someone mentions it, obviously, but people don't seem to act any differently. there was one girl (katrina?) who was black but it never came up in conversation

These white participants associate race and racial relations specifically with the question of blackness. In these statements, the ultimate test of whether race matters online is the ability of black people to pass as white. This emphasizes both the presumed desirability of hiding blackness and the assumption that people online are white. While the latter assumption is not unreasonable, given the current demographics of online participants, it demonstrates the extent to which anonymity online cannot be classified as an absence of identity characteristics. When black participants must state that they are black in order to be recognized as

such (so that it will "come up in conversation"), anonymity carries with it a presumptive identity of whiteness.

But because of the online potential for anonymity, race operates somewhat differently online than off. For instance, non-white participants can find the presumption of whiteness advantageous:

> Spontaneity whispers: I've noticed a lack of harassment on line in general.
> Copperhead whispers: that's interesting; less harassment online than off?"
> Spontaneity whispers: Yah. Now, it may just be that people are able to be more subtle on-line, but I don't think so. For example, it's fairly common for me to get shouted at on the streets.

Spontaneity is a Chinese American, and, as he indicates, the lack of physical markers can result in freedom from harassment. Since the space this opens up for speech from non-whites remains in some sense white, this advantage constitutes a form of "passing" for white rather than a true dissolution of racial difference and hierarchy. However, the lack of visual cues in text-based online spaces makes passing more feasible online than off. This does constitute some degree of "leveling the playing field" (although the type of game and its rules remain unquestioned).

The examples above demonstrate some mudders' enactments of racial identities online as well as their perceptions of the racial identities of others. Some participants, like Spontaneity and Tempest, arguably enact racial identities online that differ from those they enact offline, while others, like RaveMage, engage in play with racial identity both on and offline. However, none of these participants consider themselves to be masquerading, as were Fred and Toni. Nor do mudders compare such enactments to gender-switching. No mudder has ever told me stories about "betrayal" or "surprise" involving the unmasking of a "race-switcher," while almost every mudder has at least one such story concerning "gender- switchers." (However, Nakamura [1995] did find examples of play with racial identity on LambdaMOO, another social mud.)

The interconnection between sexual identities and gender identities, and the awareness of participants that social interactions online might include sexual connections, makes gender identity an appropriate topic for conversation and questioning. Online participants frequently ask, "Are you male or female?" In addition, they sometimes push to determine the "real life" gender identities behind the facades of online personae. But since race is not supposed to matter online, participants cannot explicitly notice racial identities in the same way. Few if any ever ask, "Are you really Asian, or is that just your online persona?" It follows that online interactions potentially intensify the offline cultural situation in which race continues to matter, but cannot be acknowledged, in interactions. Thus, online interactions merely sidestep, rather than call into question, essentialized views of race.

CONCLUSION

Online forums provide a social environment in which participants have a greater degree of choice regarding their presentation of self than is usually possible offline. This provides opportunities for identity play and experimentation that potentially affect hierarchical relations and other power issues relevant to aspects of identity. However, as the examples above demonstrate, the relative freedom in online forums does not necessarily change participants' views of their own identity or the significance of those aspects of identity implicated in power relations and hierarchies. Participants' offline identities underlie their online identities and conversations. Moreover, their offline identities affect their views of others' identity performances. Gendered, classed and raced identities continue to have salience in online interactions, with power relations often operating in much the same ways as they do offline, even when participants understand that people's online identities might differ from their offline identities.

Participants actively interpret, evaluate, and react to others' online presentations. They do not recognize all such performances as equally valid or real. They often resist the potential disruption online performances (both their own and others') might have on their sense of identity by defining all such performances as less real than offline identities. The efforts BlueSky and other online participants make to meet each other, as well as the evaluations they make of offline versus online identities, point to their desire to reconnect online identities to physical bodies. Their view that offline identity is more "real" and necessary for building trust may also indicate a reluctance to change ways of evaluating others which include attention to aspects of identity such as race and gender.

Assertions by scholars such as Turkle and Poster that online experiences foster postmodern views of identities as multiple or fluid should be reconsidered within both offline and online social contexts. Clearly, students of online interaction have reason to question the claims (often made by young white males) that the online world provides a haven from prejudicial treatment. Such claims reinforce the idea that prejudice stems from reaction to difference (skin color, gender cues, etc.) and can only be solved by hiding such differences. This position also neatly sidesteps any need for change in the offline world.

In face-to-face interaction, people resist views of identity as fluid, and they seek to resolve ambiguities in others' presentations of self. Likewise, online participants are able to continue to believe in essence and continuity of identity, despite the potentially disruptive effects of online ambiguity. Therefore, we cannot expect that online experiences will significantly change people's views of identity, nor can we rely on the fluidity of "cyberspace" to eliminate the need for offline social change.

NOTES

1. RL is a common abbreviation on the Internet. It stands for Real Life, as opposed to VL, Virtual Life, or VR, Virtual Reality. Some also use the abbreviation IRL for In Real Life.
2. Chapter 13, "The Frame Analysis of Talk," is particularly relevant to my discussion here.
3. All names, including mud names, character names, and people's "real life" names, have been changed throughout.
4. Although originally an acronym, participants now use "mud" as both a noun and a verb. A "mud" may be a type of mud program or a particular social space using such a program. Mudding refers to participation on muds, and a mudder is a mud participant.
5. Demographic data regarding online participants are usually difficult to verify. I have an advantage in the case of BlueSky since I have met a large proportion of the regulars face-to-face. Also, because of the length of association of most participants on BlueSky, many of them have met each other. There are over 300 characters on BlueSky, but some of these are rarely or never used. My demographic percentages are based on 138 people I have determined to be "regulars." I derived my cutoff point for "regular" status based on levels of activity (determined through a computer program written by one of the participants) and on understandings gained from group members concerning who were considered to be part of the group.
6. Usually, such discussions only address gender hierarchies in any detail. (See, for instance, Burris and Hoplight 1996; Stone 1995.) In part, this reflects mudders' own tendency to play and experiment more with gender than with other aspects of identity. It also reflects the general reluctance in U.S. culture to discuss class and race. Mudders themselves avoid such discussions, and most research concerning online interaction has not considered how people enact classed and raced identities online. An exception is Burkhalter (1996), who explores the ways participants in a Usenet discussion of African American culture analyze language usage for clues to racial identity. See also Nakamura (1995), who looks at the "identity tourism" of white males attempting to perform Asian female identities online.
7. Mud participants vary their speech by interspersing "say" commands with "emote" commands. "Emote" commands are used to portray actions by a character in the virtual environment. The "say" command displays text preceded by the character name and the word "says," while the "emote" command displays text preceded only by the character name, allowing the participant to insert a verb of choice. For instance, my command of "say hi" displays for others on the mud the text "Copperhead says, 'hi,'" while I see the text "You say, 'hi.'" The command "emote waves to all" displays to both myself and other participants the text "Copperhead waves to all." Emote commands are generally written in third person, so participants have far more occasion to use third-person pronouns about themselves than would be true in face-to-face encounters.
8. In this excerpt, the semicolon followed by a right parenthesis represents a type of "smiley" or "emoticon," in this case denoting a winking, smiling face (sometimes termed a "winkie"). Emoticons introduce emotional nuance into online text. (If you are not familiar with these symbols, it helps to tilt your head to the left.)
9. A famous *New Yorker* cartoon by Peter Steiner (1993) shows a dog at a computer, saying to another dog, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

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