Reality for Sale: Role-playing, Ideology and Multi-user Dungeons[1]

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> The might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds.
> – Adorno and Horkheimer (127)

Proponents claim Multi-User-Dungeons (MUDs) offer participants the ultimate in agency: the chance to inhabit and master virtual worlds where things like race, gender, and age have no effect. They simultaneously praise MUDs as community spaces, calling them interactive novels in which the world of the game is created by the actions of its player base. These twinned propensities are evident in the subtitle of a popular science fiction Multi-User-Shared-Hallucination (MUSH),[2] *OtherSpace: The Interactive Science Fiction Saga*, and in the way its creator, Wes Platt, describes it. In an early edition of his "Survivor's Guide," he writes, "*OtherSpace* is an evolving science fiction epic in an original-theme setting, where participants become central characters, drive the story along. They make news. They make history. Some take turns for the better; others take turns for the worse but everyone has a chance to shape the very universe by their actions [. . .][3]." This statement, which at one point seems to echo a Marxist view of history, is strikingly similar to one that can be found on the title page of the fantasy MUD, *Achaea: Dreams of Devine Realms*:

> Mainly, *Achaea* is about the other players. Its gameplay is heavily oriented on player vs. player whether in combat, politics, or economics. Some barely participate in these larger struggles, while some rise to the top and exert great influence on world affairs [. . .]. Things happen. The world changes. Development and improvement is constant.

These two statements are interesting for what they reveal about the underlying social relationships. Structured identically, both

begin by characterizing their respective MUDs as constructions. While Platt calls *OtherSpace* an "epic" and a "story," the unnamed author of *Achaea's* website refers to it as "gameplay." At the end of each statement, however, it is obvious that both MUDs have undergone a transformation. *Achaea* is suddenly spoken of as a world that changes, in which "developments and improvements are constant," while Platt refers to *OtherSpace* as a universe. The MUDs have thus become real. Through the actions and the participation of their players, whom the grammar of each statement places at the cusp between game and reality, they have been transformed from what Baudrillard calls a second-order simulacra, a game clearly distinct from the material world, to a third-order simulation, a game that is, for all intents and purposes, the material world.

In the process, however, a second, parallel transformation takes place. As Platt's statement reveals, the game's participants, the flesh and blood individuals who play the MUD, are reduced to characters. Second order-copies of themselves, simulacra whose originals are destroyed in the transformation, it does not matter whether they succeed or fail at the game. Whether "some take turns for the better [or] some take turns for the worse" (Platt), or whether "[s]ome barely participate [or] some rise to the top and exert great influence on world affairs" (*Achaea*), what is important is what Althusser calls "the reproduction of the relations of production and of the relations deriving from them" (183). This is the subject of this essay. In describing how role-playing functions as an ideology within the construct of games like *OtherSpace* and *Achaea*, it's goal is to show how MUDs ensure the reproduction of their commodity value, their virtual reality, while simultaneously maintaining the illusion that their players have individual agency[4].

Accordingly, this essay focuses on text-based MUDs like *OtherSpace* and *Achaea*. Its conclusions, however, are also applicable to Massively-Multiplayer-Online-Role-Playing-Games (MMORPGs) such as *EverQuest*, *Starwars Galaxies*, and *Ultima Online*. Corporate ventures, these games host upwards of hundreds of thousands of players, each of whom pays as much as fifteen dollars a month for the privilege of participating in their lush graphical environments. Yet despite their size and the obvious differences in the way they convey information, most MMORPGs are constructed around a model of game play that is similar to that which text-based MUDs feature. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Sony's *EverQuest*. As its chief designer Bill Trost admits, the game was modeled after text-based MUDs. Speaking about the origins of *EverQuest*, he states, "co-operative MUDs most appealed to us, games that were challenging and fostered a strong sense of community by creating interdependence on the players' behalf" (qtd. in Kent). In this context, MUDs like *OtherSpace* and *Achaea* provide an excellent opportunity to look beyond the sweeping three-dimensional vistas of *EverQuest* and *Starwars Galaxies,* the inexhaustible graphic dungeons of *Ultima Online*. While their scrolling text and their telnet-based architecture of might seem primitive in comparison, the strategies that text-

based MUDs employ to manage their players are very much the state of the art in the culture industry. What follows is an attempt to come to terms with these strategies, to show how MUDs ultimately win the consent of their players to act as labor power and are thus able to reproduce what, in another context, Althusser calls "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162) .

In attempting this task, this essay questions many commonly articulated claims about MUDs. The first two claims—assertions often made about individual agency and community in MUDs—are mentioned above. A third claim becomes apparent in the following passage, as MUD programmer and designer Feor[5] attempts to come to terms with the question of whether text-based MUDs are still viable:

> While there are more and more graphical online games coming into the market constantly, muds can still offer things that those games cannot. For the most part, muds are free. They do not require huge downloads or powerful computers to play. They are accessible from anywhere that offers telnet access. You can always play the same game whether you are at home, at work or visiting an internet café in Paris.

While Feor is correct in stating that the majority of MUDs are not run by professionals or for profit, and that most do not require the same investment in technology, it is nevertheless becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between MUDs and commercially produced graphics-based role-playing games. Not only do GUI-based games like Atari's *NeverWinter Nights*[6] and Microsoft's *Dungeon Siege* offer players the ability to host and participate in networked multi-player games, but as mentioned above, MUD-based MMORPGs such as *EverQuest* and *StarWars Galaxies* have become enormously popular, sometimes hosting thousands of players at a time. Moreover, text-based MUDs are becoming more commercialized. *OtherSpace*, for instance, offers e-books based on the game for sale on its Amazon.com website. *Achaea* sells hats and t-shirts, and features a pay-per-credit system with which players can purchase skills and objects for their characters.

It is important, in this respect, to recognize that MUDs are as much commodities as commercially produced computer games. Dependent on much of the same infrastructure, the complex web of technological production Fredric Jameson uses as a metaphor for third stage capitalism[7], MUDs can only transcend their scrolling lines of text and their telnet-based architecture by being exchanged. As Karl Marx writes in Capital, "It is only by being exchanged that the products of labor acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility" (166). In this context, it is more accurate to speak of MUDs as plural entities: OtherSpaces and Achaeas. While MUDs do have a singular material existence, files

stored on a central server, a MUD's exchange value as a virtual reality depends on distributing these files to client computers. Yet even then a MUD is not 'real.' Reproduced in hundreds of different ways on hundreds of different machines, its dungeons, monsters, and treasures cannot have meaning until the MUD's participants have read and responded to them as if they have meaning. As is implied by the acronym MUSH (Multi-User Shared Hallucination), MUDs must win the consent of participants to produce what, to paraphrase Althusser, is a shared imaginary relationship to the material condition of the game (162). It is thus the participants who produce the virtual reality of the game, who stand in as labor-power. It is in their imaginations that signs are transformed into signifiers, that in reading and responding to the game, the text the MUD server sends scrolling down their computer screens begins to look like reality.

In this sense, MUDs are implicated in the culture industry, as Adorno and Horkheimer understand the term in their work *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. Mass culture, they write, "now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio, magazines make up a system that is uniform as a whole and in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system" (120). Mass culture thus fulfills an ideological function with the larger capitalist framework. In "[molding] men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product" (127), it produces subjects, laborers, who in return reproduce the relations of production that the culture industry and the industries that underpin the culture industry depend on; this is what Jameson calls "the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself."

In this context, it does not matter that *Achaea* offers twelve races, "over 15,000 uniquely described rooms" ("features" np), and "40+ Skills, most with 25-50 unique spells or abilities within them" ("features"). Nor does it matter that *OtherSpace* offers twenty-one different races and over 8,000 rooms on twenty-five distinct worlds. As Adorno and Horkheimer say about movies, magazines and automobiles, this charade of choice ultimately functions to mask the fact that there is no choice:

> Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type. Consumers appear as statistics on research organization charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green, and blue areas; the technique is that used for any type of propaganda. (123)

Indeed, with multitudes of rooms, skills, races, guilds, creatures,

quests, and levels, what MUDs like *OtherSpace* and *Achaea* offer participants is a carefully constructed sense of disorientation that serves to mask the fact that MUDs recognize only two categories of subject: the players who consume the game and produce its virtual reality, and the wizards (the managerial class) who quite literally profit from the work of the players.[8]

In this respect, MUDs are also complicit in what Fredric Jameson calls "new spatial logic of the simulacrum." Constructed in such a way that they appear to "transcend the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world"(Jameson), a large part of the challenge of playing a MUD is orientating one's self in relation to the game. This difficulty is most pronounced for new players. Confronted with a dizzying tangle of rooms, objects, players and conversations, all of which are relayed through rapidly scrolling text, many complain of feeling dizzy, disorientated and of not being able to keep up. *Achaea's* website acknowledges this. Advising new players not "to get discouraged," it reads, "If you've never played a game like this before, it will probably seem alien and overwhelming at first. But don't worry, within a short amount of time, you'll be used to it, and you will begin to have no problem keeping up with the pace of things. After awhile, you'll see the world in your mind's eye" ("What is"). What the website does not say, however, is that MUDs are constructed to achieve this effect. With multitudes of rooms, classes, races, guilds and levels, they are built in such a way that it is impossible to see them in their entirety, to map what, in the context of the Bonaventure hotel, Jameson calls the experience of being in "hyperspace up to your eyes and body."

MUDs thus present participants with a pastiche, *par excellent*. Rhizomatic in nature, they are electronic incarnations of what, to Jameson, is the defining characteristic of historicism in architecture: "namely, the random cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the 'neo'." A glance at the public areas of *Achaea* confirms this. Consider this description of the Shallam Gates, for example:

> The gates are constructed of wrought iron and monumental marble [. . .] Graven upon these marble facades are intricate eastern designs, depicting the royal seal and the crescent moon, outlined in semi_precious stones [. . .] A cute little humgii is sitting here placidly, attached to a leash. A large leather tome entitled, "The Constitution and Laws of Shallam", rests on an alabaster podium [. . .] Polished marble gleaming, the Effigy of Victory resides here [. . .] There are 2 Dawnstrider of the Guards here [. . .] a Shallamese djinn watches you with dark, mysterious eyes. There are 2 guardian angels here. A baby rat timidly moves in the shadows here. Esu, Aspirant of Light is here [. . .] Mevrouw Maiya Weltsdown is here[. . .]

Here, participants are confronted with a dizzying mixture of the East and the West, the sacred and the profane. Djinns, guardian angels, rats, humgii, and dawnstrider guards mingle which each other in inscrutable present tense. If there is any organizing principle, aside from the fact that the two player-characters in the room, Esu and Mevrouw Maiya Weltsdown, are listed last, it is simply that these things all happen to be "here."

Players must make sense of all of this in the space of an instant. They must position themselves in relation to the angels, the guards and the two other players in the room even as the server sends more lines of text scrolling up their screens. As such, it is telling that Achaea's website advises new players not to worry about the sense of alienation they experience when connecting for the first time. Indeed, the website's claim that the MUD can only become real–a "world in your mind's eye"–if players consent to the sense of disorientation it engenders ("What is"), underscores what, to Jameson, is one of the chief differences between the modernist and the postmodernist aesthetic. Attempting to account for the flat, rhizomatic quality of postmodern culture, he explains that the modernist hermeneutic has been displaced by a sort of textual schizophrenia. Instead of locating meaning in the dialectical oppositions between concepts such as the interior and the exterior, the essence and the appearance, the authentic and the inauthentic, he states that the postmodern paradigm attacks the temporal framework in which such oppositions are constructed. What happens, he claims, is similar to Lacan's conception of schizophrenia in that when the chain of signification is broken apart at its links, it becomes impossible to construct unified meaning from language or to maintain the illusion of a coherent identity. He writes:

> If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.

Yet rather than causing fear or terror in its subject, Jameson argues the resulting sense of alienation is met with a kind of exhilaration, a euphoria of intensities that is almost "intoxicatory or hallucinogenic" in its effect. This is exactly what *Achaea's* manual promises players, an "emotionally laden" experience in which the disorientation of trying to position one's self in relation to the MUD results in a sense of unparalleled exhilaration: "Beating a computer might feel good and being beaten by one might not feel great, but how more powerful will those emotions be when your opponent is a real person and you're fighting (in whatever form) to defend yourself, your city, or your religion against a hostile one"(6).

At the same time, however, MUDs appear to promise a way out of the postmodern dilemma. In return for their players' labor, they

promise power, prestige, influence, and above all else, a return to the modernist conception of the centered subject. The following passage, excerpted from *Achaea's* manual is typical of these claims:

> you take on the role of a male or female of eighteen years of age [. . .] who has recently left home to pursue his or her fortune. From a myriad of experiences ranging from sojourns into the deepest dungeons, to roles of political leadership, to, if you prove worthy, Ascension to the ranks of the Gods themselves, you will grow as a character in depth, and if you desire, fame. (6)

Here, the game's learning curve is seamlessly integrated into the MUD's *bildungsroman* plot so that there appears to be a direct relationship between the amount of time participants spend playing the game and the power they obtain. Structures within the MUD support this illusion. Not only do the game's levels mark a player's upward progress towards the euphoric heights promised in the manual, but almost everything that can be ranked in the game is. In *Achaea*, for example, participants can see how many hours of gameplay they have logged by typing "status." Typing "score" lists their rank within the MUD's guilds, cities, clans and organizations. Even the number of rooms they have explored is carefully tallied and translated into a rank in the "the Fellowship of Explorers." The work participants do is thus measured at every turn. Carefully recorded, their dedication to the game is literally translated into the honors their characters accumulate.

As this suggests, vertical movement within MUDs like *Achaea* and *OtherSpace* is always circumscribed and always quantified. While it is possible to move between a MUD's rooms, cities, forests, and dungeons with relative freedom, participants can only increase in rank by meeting strict requirements that are often measured in abstract units of currency: experience points, skill points, or quest points. In this respect, what *Achaea* and *OtherSpace* offer participants is not the *bildungsroman* in the modernist sense: a narrative of the individual differentiating himself or herself from society–but a mechanized version of the *bildungsroman* narrative that is very similar in effect to the elevators and escalators in Portman's Bonaventure hotel. Jameson writes "the escalators and elevators here henceforth replace movement [. . .]. Here the narrative stroll has been underscored, symbolized, reified, and replaced by a transportation machine which becomes the allegorical signifier of that older promenade we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own." Indeed, while the hierarchical levels, skills and guild systems incorporated into MUDs ostensibly mark the accomplishments of their players, they simultaneously insure that all players, from the least skilled to the most, follow the same route. As Adorno and Horkheimer write, "Every detail is so firmly stamped with sameness that nothing can appear which is not marked at birth or does not meet with approval at first sight" (128). Thus, if there appears to be a proportionate relationship between the amount of

time a player dedicates to a MUD and the sheer scale of the space of the game, it is not because players gain more freedom, agency, or power as they labor to understand the game, but because the one or two paths (marked by the successive levels in the game) that appear to lead up instead of across are carefully routed to display the game to its best advantage. As Jameson writes,

> the glorious movement of the elevator gondola is also a dialectical compensation for this filled space of the atrium–it gives us the chance at a radically different, but complementary, spatial experience: that of rapidly shooting up through the ceiling and outside, along one of the four symmetrical towers, with the referent, Los Angeles itself, spread out breathtakingly and even alarmingly before us.

In this context, it is no accident that the most grandiose promise *Achaea's* manual makes to players, the possibility of making a capitalized "Ascension to the ranks of the Gods themselves" (the class of programmers, builders and administrators that MUDs variously refer to as gods, immortals and wizards) is proceeded by the parenthetical remark, "if you prove worthy" (6). The master caveat of capitalism, its appearance underscores the fact that what MUDs offer players is not agency, power or prestige, but the perpetually deferred promise of achieving these things. This is, not insignificantly, also what Adorno and Horkheimer say about the culture industry:

> The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. (139)

Thus, while MUDs hail their participants as individuals, they demand that at all times they construct their individuality in the mirror image of the game–that they play the role the MUD demands. In doing so, MUDs invoke what Althusser describes as the double mirror structure of ideology: "the mechanism of the mirror recognition of the Subject and of the individuals interpellated as subjects, and of the guarantee given by the Subject to the subjects if they freely accept their subjection to the Subject's 'commandments'" (182). They recognize and reward their participants only to the extent that their participants recognize and reflect the reality of the game.

Something of how MUDs manage this can be seen upon studying the login screens of MUDs like OtherSpace or Achaea. "Please enter your command now. . .", *OtherSpace* prompts, mixing ellipses with the second person imperative. *Achaea* adopts much

of the same tone, demanding, "Enter an option or enter your character's name." In both cases, it is impossible to respond without simultaneously validating the existence of what Althusser calls, "a Unique and central Other Subject" (178): the constructed reality of the game. Indeed, even typing 'quit' signals a recognition on the part of the participant that "the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed'" (Althusser 174). Participants thus become subject to the game. In sending commands to the server, "entering an option," they are not as much telling the game what to do, but using the format the game stipulates (its language) to do what the game has told them to do (enter a command). Participants can thus only make themselves understood by responding in the syntax the server demands. This is also true of role-playing. "A representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 162), role-playing functions within the construct of the game to shape the actions of the MUD's participants in such a way that they do not do anything without first considering what the game expects. Understood in this sense, role-playing hails participants as individuals, yet simultaneously makes it impossible for them to construct and express their individuality in a manner that is not recognized by the master-construct of the game.

This is how Wes Platt understands role-playing in his introduction to *OtherSpace*, his "Survivor's Guide." After declaring that the players "make history [and] make things happen" (4), he reveals that this freedom is not for everyone. He writes, "participants are treated to a large extent like writers/ actors, both pitching a character concept to add to the cast, and demonstrating their ability to play that role through an application" (4). In other words, to make history in *OtherSpace*, to be a part of the cast, participants must apply for the job. It does not matter that participants will not be reimbursed for the time they spend playing the game. They cannot be hired unless they demonstrate the ability to play the role the game requires, to write themselves in the image of the MUD.

Platt describes exactly what this entails in the next section of his "Survivor's Guide," entitled "Don't Piss in the Pool." Once again, he quickly qualifies an otherwise celebratory remark about players. "While players are the lifeblood of *OtherSpace*," he writes, "they are guests in the house" (9). Speaking of himself in the third person, he says,

> [a]s the owner, it is within his rights [. . .] to ask you to leave the premises. If you refuse, it is within his rights [. . .] to **make** you leave. And he doesn't ever, ever, ever have to let you come back, no matter how many times you threaten to 1) hold your breath, 2) champion a campaign of truth to expose the evils of *OtherSpace*, or 3) bring down the wrath of the network gods to crush *OtherSpace*. (9)

This passage is telling. Framing the issue of how a player is to behave as a struggle for truth between those who own the property and those who do not, he makes it clear that players ultimately have no power over the world of the game: no rights to do anything, not even to speak out about perceived injustices.

In doing so, Platt anticipates a point he makes later in his "Survivor's Guide" when he attempts to explain what is wrong with "powergaming." He writes:

> Don't powergame people in your description or your poses. What exactly does that mean? Well, it means the use of language that forces an action or an emotion on another player. In a description, for example, it would be powergaming to say that anyone looking at you would be chilled to the bone with fear at your ferocity, or that they are aroused by your indisputable good looks [. . .] In poses, avoid foregone conclusions, such as saying: **Bob punches Nero in the face**. You can pose that Bob tries to punch Nero in the face. But it will be up to your combat taskrolls (and Nero's defensive taskrolls) to determine whether you actually hit him or not. (11)

In short, in forcing events to happen, using language in such a way that destroys other players' illusions of agency, players usurp the power of the MUD to determine the proper place for everything, including emotions like fear and arousal. In this context, punching Nero in the face becomes a minor revolution. To do so is to wrest control of the property from the bourgeois of the MUD, the staffers, and thus short circuit what is otherwise a complex, almost religious ritual for determining what types of behavior are appropriate or inappropriate:

> So, when is it possible to steal a ship? First, use the Role-playing Assistance channel to get the attention of a staffer [. . .] Once you enter into a discussion with a staffer about the potential theft, you can determine if the ship's owner is online and in-character. If the owner is not online and in-character, you will not be allowed to attempt the theft. If the owner is online and in-character, you will be allowed to attempt the theft, with certain conditions. (14)

To Platt, then, the ideal player does not act without first submitting to the construct, without first posing and trying. The result is that players only have agency to the extent that their actions work to reproduce and increase the commodity-value of the MUD. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the penultimate section of Platt's "Survivor's guide." Here, Platt offers what he calls "a perfect example of how an individual player can spark a storyline that becomes an integral part of a story arc." What follows are the first two lines of the sequence:

> **ACTION**: When Earth exploded, the formula for Metazine (a metabolic stifler to prolong the lives of Specialists) was lost. Supplies began to run out. The future seemed bleak for existing Specialists with time running out.
> **REACTION**: Janne, a Specialist serving in the Martian Legions, learns that Doctor Haskins on Sivad has a potential substitute. She tries to get him to release the formula.

It immediately becomes obvious, however, that if the individual player controlling Janne sparks the storyline, she does not do so by acting, but by reacting: by constructing her actions in the context of the narrative constraints of how *OtherSpace* hails her. She not only responds to the story arc, but shapes her response around the presence of the fictional substance Metazine and the fact that the Specialist's supplies are running out. In doing so, however, Janne the player becomes indistinguishable from Janne the avatar. Moreover, she becomes indistinguishable from Doctor Haskins, Metazine, the Specialists, or any of the other nouns in the passage. In this sense, her labor is lost. In "making history," working to advance *OtherSpace's* storyline, Janne the player becomes congealed into the commodity, subsumed into the construct so that it is impossible to know anything about the hours of labor she put into to creating and developing her character. Janne thus loses even the illusion of individuality. Reduced to a character, a caricature of herself, her work ultimately serves no other purpose than to make *OtherSpace* look real in the excepts Platt posts on the game's website, or worse yet, to shore up the narrative of one of the *OtherSpace* novels he sells through his *Amazon.com* website.[9]

This is what is problematic about MUDs. It is not that they blur distinctions between fiction and reality, between the virtual and the real, but that they do so in such a way that it becomes impossible to tell the difference between work and play. As Adorno and Horkheimer write,

> Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work [… M]echanization has such power over a man's leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself. The ostensible content is merely a faded foreground; what sinks in is the automatic succession of standardized operations. What happens at work, in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped from by approximation to it in one's leisure time. (137)

MUDs thus ask their participants to consent to more than simply the imaginary relationship that gives the game the illusion of having a life of its own, a commodity-value that transcends its material existence. MUDs ask participants to consent to an imaginary relationship with the material world that simultaneously ensures

the reproduction of the political economy that underpins the MUD: not only the whole network of labor, manufacturing and power production of which the computer is a symbol, but the "blood, torture, death and terror" that Jameson calls the underside of culture. In this sense, MUDs teach the ideology of the post-modern: role-playing. They teach their participants that the only way to overcome the disorientation and alienation that marks third-stage capitalism is to submit to the constructs that are responsible for that disorientation, to play the role that the commodity structure demands. In this respect, it is no surprise that MUDs have been embraced by the culture industry. No longer the province of hobbyists or groups of enthusiasts who meet online to play at vanquishing trolls and dragons, MUDs have been transformed into three-dimensional graphical wonders. They have become the theme parks of the internet–splendid textual and graphical worlds, marvels of technology that at once hail their participants as individuals, but simultaneously ensure that participants are unable to act with any more agency than the non-player characters (bots) that dot the virtual landscapes. As Umberto Eco writes about Disneyland:

> Visitors must agree to act like robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railings which discourages any individual initiative [. . .]the officials of the dream, properly dressed in the uniforms suited to each specific attraction, not only admit the visitor to the threshold of the chosen sector, but is successive phases, regulate his every move. (48)

Notes

[1]I would like to acknowledge Dr. M.J. Braun for help in the early stages of this essay, and Dr. Jim Anderson, who invited me to present this paper at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's faculty symposium.

[2]MUSHes are derivations of MUD technology, as are Multi-User-Chat-Kingdoms (MUCKs) and MUD-Object-Orientateds (MOOs). In general, MUSHes emphasize role-playing and character-to-character interaction over "hacking and slashing:" indiscriminately attacking and killing creatures and other mobiles (non-player-characters) for gold and experience. While there are specific codebases associated with each type of game, the acronyms also carry evolutionary connotations. With their emphasis on building, programming, and experimentation with identity, for example, MOOs are often portrayed as the civilized descendants of their barbaric hack and slash MUD ancestors.

[3]The version of the "Survivor's Guide" from which I quote extensively in this paper is no longer available online. The passage that follows, excerpted from *Achaea's* website, is also not available. While this is not an uncommon occurrence with web-based texts,

the disappearance of documents such as these takes on a heightened importance in the context of ideology. It is not that they have become irrelevant or obsolete, but that the things these documents contain have been so much subsumed into the popular discourse sorrounding the games that they no longer need to be said.

[4]In *Capital*, Karl Marx explains that the exchange-value of a commodity can only be determined when two or more commodities are compared (128-129). Since no two commodities are alike, however, they can only be compared through the use of a third commodity that serves as a universal equivalent. Although this role is often fulfilled by currency, Marx argues out that it is ultimately abstract human labor (which currency symbolizes) that serves as the universal equivalent. In the context of MUDs, which quite literally can only have value by being exchanged by their participants, the veracity of their worlds, their virtual realities becomes the universal equivalent by which the quality of the commodity, the congealed labor of the participants in the MUD is measured. Virtual reality, in this sense, functions as a sort of commodity fetishism, at once standing in for and masking the labor of the MUD's participants.

[5]A well-known MUD-designer and a contributor to *Top MUD Sites*, Feor is the only name this author uses.

[6]The retail box of *NeverWinter Nights* contains a claim that is similar to those presented at the beginning of this essay: "*NeverWinter Nights* revolutionizes PC gaming by giving players the power they've never had before–power to create a universe."

[7]Jameson writes: "technology may well serve as adequate shorthand to designate that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery-an alienated power, what Sartre calls the counterfinality of the practico-inert, which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis."

[8]A concrete example of this can be found in the community section of *Achaea's* website. The "photos" page does not feature photographs of the players, but the game's wizards celebrating their success in Las Vegas and Beaver Creek, Colorado. Similarly, to celebrate the sixth anniversary of *OtherSpace*, Platt added a message to the game's website which, after briefly thanked the "players and staffers from all over the world," lists the wizards who have helped him by name.

[9]It is worth pointing out that Platt's strategies do not go entirely unnoticed. One Amazon.com reviewer, for instance, responsed to his novel *OtherSpace:Revolutions* with indignation: "The absolute GALL to go and put others' work and sell it for yourself. I don't care how much time he's put into it, that is STEALING. What an awful thing to do [. . .] Don't buy this book."

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