A World Exhilarating and Wrong:
Theatrical Improvisation on the Internet

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The image of the god in the machine bequeathed to us by Greek theater is simultaneously reassuring and disturbing. On the one hand the marvelous, the miraculous, the necessary will turn up on cue; on the other, human affairs are out of our control, ultimately shaped by external powers. The god in the machine points inexorably at the machine in god, the desire for and fear of a mechanistic universe.

Ever since the Industrial Age our chief solution has been to displace the god while magnifying the machine. The problem with this solution is that the potency of the machine derives from our sense of a god at its heart—for what is a godless machine but a simple tool? Driving out the god results in a substitution of potencies: either the machine is now its own god (which leads to the fear that we in our turn will be completely displaced), or we are the god in its heart, the reluctant cyborg self-created.

In this narrative of fears and desires, it is striking that the standard form is the duel: machine versus human, them against us. With the advent of the computer, the machine gets equal billing. We argue with it, talk to it, scheme and plot behind its back. It is a magnificent drama, in its way, but one that is every bit as duplicitous as the god in the machine. For the real argument is one we are carrying on with ourselves, using the computer as a stalking horse.

At some point, the drama moved inside the computer, and that simple change of territory has had large consequences. Whatever we are carrying

on through and in the computer, it is no longer a duel, and it is no longer straightforwardly "about" something. Instead of antagonists, we find ourselves agonists: actors, explorers, players, lovers, writers, singers.

Live Fiction, Text Drama

Of all the ways we now inhabit cyberspace, the one that concerns me here constitutes a new type of theater. Through telecommunications software and object-oriented programming, it has become possible for people to participate pseudonymously in environments that they create for themselves. Currently, the most successful locus for this activity is the online programming environment known as a MOO. MOOs are descendants of MUDs, the online version of role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons. However, while both MOOs and MUDs rely on a similar text-based, programmable environment, the differences between them are profound. Role-playing games offer a fairly delimited set of roles, a largely inviolable structure of rules, and a clear goal: to win. Like all games, they are highly controlled and controlling structures embedding a subsidiary narrative. In MOOs, by contrast, the role choice is wide open, the rules are flexible and under constant pressure to transform, the possible goals are manifold, and the fictional element is primary.

MOOs are also akin to online chat rooms or Internet Relay Chat in that one can talk to others in real time by typing a combination of statements and commands. However, MOOs flesh out the cyberspace metaphor by allowing users to build an entire self-contained world for these conversations—a world of rooms, buildings, jungles, subways, deserts and oceans. In this world, you can be anything you choose to be—male or female, human or animal, queen or beggar. All of this is enacted through typed text, but so immediate and detailed is the experience of this

alternative world that the players (as users are called) feel profoundly that they are both in it and of it.

In essence, one creates an entire stage identity for oneself, complete with props (anything from radios to robots, mail to maps) and set (such as a building or a room to serve as one's MOO "home"). Within this extensible fiction, one interacts with other people under an assumed name, carrying out activities of all kinds—conversing both privately and publicly, exploring strange places, voting, having what is endearingly termed 'tiny sex', acquiring property, and so on. From this it is a small step to creating roles around a specific dramatic scenario. There is a built-in tendency for interaction to move away from how-are-you-what's-the-weather chat toward the playing out of one's chosen role or roles.

The following extract incorporates many of the characteristic features of this form of dramatic improvisation. It is from an online performance in a series built around three characters, BigMan, LittleMan, and BloodyZelda. Here, two different players are sharing the role of BigMan (under the stage names Big-Man and Bigman), and there is an additional character named Fate:

> BloodyZelda: "I can offer you your heart's desire."
>
> Fate dances to the smooth soothings of the cordial voice of BloodyZelda. . . .
>
> Her chant carries far over the treetops to the golden city from whence it originated.
>
> A swirling tide of noisy black specks rises from the hot sand.
>
> Off-key echoes ratchet among the rocks, felling two vultures.
>
> Big-Man: "What is my heart's desire?"
>
> LittleMan: "How about a little life insurance?"
>
> BloodyZelda: "I can offer you three delicious, desired, deserving, 'dorable things."
>
> Big-Man: "I can't insure what I don't have."
>
> Jumping . . . jumping . . . jumping . . . specks along the bubbling sand. . .
>
> Bigman: "I want the world in my pocket."

Fate clasps the fallen vultures close to its breast and nurtures them gently back to death.

BloodyZelda: "Bigman, what is your biggest fear?"

Big-Man thinks three things sounds like a lot. . .

Bigman: "I want the joint in the socket."

Big-Man: "Delicious desired deserving what?"

LittleMan: "You can't fit the world in your pocket, Bigman."

Bigman: "I want the key to lock it."

Big-Man: "Why not?"

BloodyZelda: "Let me rephrase that, Bigman: What are you afraid of the most?"

Big-Man: "I am afraid of being alone."

LittleMan: "Lemonade anyone?" [3]

Divorced from the real-time of performance, MOO texts look very much like other verbal forms, a hybrid of hypertext, comedy, and fiction. To grossly simplify matters, one could even define online theater as hypertext plus live interaction. Although this aspect of MOOs is not evident in the above extract, the "stage" of online theater is a classic hypertextual space that one navigates as much as reads. Several authors have, in fact, taken their hypertexts and placed them in MOO-space, where they can be read using the standard MOO navigation commands [4]. However, for anyone accustomed to the liveliness of inhabited MOOs, these MOO hypertexts are eerie places, like vast cities immediately after some holocaust has wiped out the entire population. As fixed texts created by a single voice, they lack the fascination of MOOs under constant creation and destruction by a multitude of inhabitants [5].

There are currently experiments under way to merge MOOs with the World Wide Web to create a graphically richer environment, but this setup, if it gets established, will probably continue to have important drawbacks for quite awhile. For one thing, any use of graphics on the Internet still tends to create significant lag for the users, and online performance suffers greatly when there is too much lag because the sense

of live moment-to-moment action vanishes. Just as importantly, a text-only world speaks to the imagination in a completely different way from a world grounded in explicit imagery, and one is no more a substitute for the other than movies are for novels.

Satire and the Surreal

In the realm of fiction, the long Western tradition of comic, satirical, and surreal fiction feeds online theater. Online interactions tend toward verbal extravagance inherited (directly or indirectly) from such writers as Petronius, François Rabelais, Flann O'Brien, Raymond Roussel, and James Joyce. As the late multimedia artist Jim Pomeroy has pointed out,

> the grotesque caricature in obvious lampoon, coarse impressions in vulgar burlesque, have been classical devices of aesthetic discourse since Aristophanes. We are not seduced by farce, but rather sharpened. Question the emotive, manipulative catharsis of sentiment and beware the sublime beauty of the specially-effected supernatural [6].

Rabelais, for example, would instantly recognize the fascination with elaborate names that is such a feature of MOO life. Instead of Gargantua and Pantagruel, one rubs shoulders with Stigmata, Your.Uncle's.Drinking.Problem, flea.flea, and butteredButtHole. He would also recognize the relentless buffoonery around sex, violence, and scatology, and the tendency to drop into poetic lists:

> "I am the last horseman but one."
> "I am his best and worst friend."
> "I am poised for greatness."
> "I am grateful for poison."
> "I am confused."
> "I am bemused."
> "and I am notorious for a happy libido" [7].

In online theater, the story, the space, and the characters merge in curious ways. The Irish humorist Flann O'Brien (who also wrote as Myles na Gopaleen) had a keen nose for the absurdities inherent in the fact that authors control their characters. In one of his novels, there is a character named Mr. Trellis who is, in turn, writing his own novel:

> He is compelling all his characters to live with him in the Red Swan Hotel so that he can keep an eye on them and see that there is no boozing. . . . Most of them are characters used in other books, chiefly the works of another great writer called Tracy. There is a cowboy in Room 13 and Mr. McCool, a hero of old Ireland, is on the floor above. The cellar is full of leprechauns [8].

Similarly weak boundaries between author and character and between one story and another are a feature of online theater by virtue of the fact that players invent their roles under the spur of the moment. In an improvisation called "Guilty as Lambs, Innocent as Sin," the scene was a courtroom where two characters were disputing custody of a third. By the end, however, the performance had been infiltrated by a number of characters from the O.J. Simpson murder trial (Kato.Kailin, Nicole.Simpson's.Ghost, and others), as well as by a second judge (Cheaper.Justice), a renegade Jury.Member, and such minor characters as God, a Street.Vendor, and The.Gavel [9].

Both O'Brien and his compatriot Joyce rely heavily on oral rhythms, particularly in dialogue, to draw their readers along:

> Can you tell me, Mr Casey, said the Pooka interposing quickly, whether my wife is a kangaroo?
>
> The poet stared at him in surprise.
>
> What in the name of God, he asked, do you mean by throwing a question like that at me? Eh?
>
> I was wondering, said the Pooka.
>
> A kangaroo? She might be a lump of a carrot for all I know. Do you mean a marsupial?
>
> That's the man, said Slug. A marsupial [10].

This punctuated rhythm is equally strongly marked in the quasi-oral arena of online theater:

BloodyZelda: "You must go down with me. . ."

Baron.Samedi: "Blood, shadows, doom. It doesn't take a genius. . ."

Detective_HammettUp!: "Go down on me!"

BloodyZelda: ". . .if you want to see Bigman again."

All assembled realized that they have been sent to the DownUnderworld by the Baron's powers.

Detective_HammettUp! urges LittleMan on: "Do as she says, not as she does."

BloodyZelda: "Hammett, love, not down on me, down with me."

Detective_HammettUp!: "Oh! There's a difference?" [11]

The Ham Beneath the Bones

A hybrid form, online theater draws as heavily on the performative tradition as it does on the written. Among its theatrical antecedents I count such forms as vaudeville and commedia dell'arte—and also Western cartoons, with their lively graphic "sets" and event-driven narratives.

Cartoons: Cartoonists working within the traditions of satire or verbal comedy often come up with dialogue particularly reminiscent of online theater (see Fig. 1). George Herriman's Krazy Kat comes to mind, as do Walt Kelly's early Pogo strips. Indeed, it is striking that despite their salient visual styles, both Herriman's and Kelly's texts retain most of their punch when divorced from the graphics:

Seminole Sam: "You're ready, then, to take weather predictions outen the hands of ignorant groun'chucks. . ."

Albert: "Right! I is takin' over. . ."

Seminole Sam: "Then you're goin' to give me $14 to buy that Cincinnati Post building?"

Albert: "Yessir! Then I'll manufacture weather in it. . ."

Seminole Sam: "And you'll ship it to all parts of the country? Uh, you got that $14 handy?"

Albert: "I had a fourteen dollar bill here . . . savin' it for somethin' like this. . ."

Pogo: "A fourteen dollar bill! What good is that?"

Albert: "It's five dollars better'n a nine dollar bill an' was put out by a select group of southern states. Any objections?" [12]

Vaudeville: Like vaudeville, online theater lends itself to the extravagant, the absurd, and especially the comic. A classic bit of vaudeville business goes:

First.Man: "Would you hit a woman with a child?"

Second.Man: "No, I'd hit her with a brick!"

This form of verbal play and by-play is endemic to MOO interactions [13]. The following example is chosen almost at random from hundreds of possibilities:

First.Man: "Facts will destroy you."

Second.Man: "I destroyed a fact once."

First.Man: "Oh yeah, what happened?"

Second.Man: "I did six months in the grammar."

The comic timing on which this form of comedy partly depends operates differently in online theater than in vaudeville. Timing of online interactions depends on overall network lag, so one cannot time one's repartee in the usual sense. The rhythm of call and response becomes staccato, but this introduces a larger element of suspense as one waits for the next move in the play. Moreover, because of the way multiple players' lines are queued for processing through the MOO's core software, any given thread of call and response is often interrupted by other threads. The result is that the response to one call may accidentally become the response to a different one. In online theater, the two bits of business outlined above would be more likely to get interwoven as follows than to come out cleanly:

First.Man: "Facts will destroy you."

Third.Man: "Would you hit a woman with a child?"

Second.Man: "I destroyed a fact once."

Fourth.Man: "No, I'd hit her with a brick!"

First.Man: "Oh yeah, what happened?"

Second.Man: "I did six months in the grammar."

In this way, "I did six months in the grammar" ends up being the penalty for hitting a woman with a brick. If we consider this phenomenon in light of Freud's analysis of the role of displacement in joke formation, it becomes clear that what is operating here is a kind of double displacement that serves to re-multiply the use of the joke material. Freud argues that jokes manifest a deep-seated "rebellion against the compulsion of logic and reality," one of the purposes of which is to promote thought by guarding it from rational criticism [14]. Thus, what seems patently nonsensical actually serves important psychic ends, a point I shall elaborate below.

Commedia dell'arte: In both online theater and the commedia, the characters rather than the script are the fixed points around which the drama revolves. Similarly, the characters tend toward the larger-than-life outlines of the mythic and satiric. They may be manifestations of abstract principles, such as Fate and Memory; they may be variants on familiar roles from the culture at large, such as Fleaenstein; they may be anything at all. In online theater, any string of words can become a name for a role, and the illusion of a real being behind such fantastic names as Tiny.Hand or the Crooked.Fruit.Vendor.from.Hell is sustained by the fact of live theater.

Samuel Beckett: It is no accident that in modern theater, the playwright whose works most consistently resemble online improvisation is Samuel Beckett, who owes a good deal to vaudeville. "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible," he wrote; "and I accept responsibility for nothing else" [15]. Only the bleakness of Beckett's vision seems not to translate to online theater,

where the psychic energy of exaltation rules out depressive, morbid, bitter, and sorrowful modes.

It will not have escaped notice that there is one glaring absence from the major Western communicative media discussed above: cinema. American cinema, with its commitment to ideals of naturalism and realism, has been particularly inhospitable to the non-rational discourse of verbal playfulness. Thus, its links with online theater are tenuous at best. One must look all the way back to W.C. Fields and the Marx Brothers—who, not incidentally, also came out of the vaudeville tradition—for predecessors who would have appreciated the physical and verbal elaborations of online theater.

From Performance to Script

It should be clear from the foregoing that online improvisation could as easily be referred to as live hypertext, jazz fiction, consensual narrative, or something else of the kind. Why call it theater?

My feeling is that such alternative names (hypertext/fiction/narrative) tend to underline the verbal and textual nature of online theater, with a nod to its real-time, multi-participant aspect (live/jazz/consensual). There is no question that this is a world now dominated by writerly conventions: in order to participate, one uses a keyboard to type descriptions, dialogue, and commands. If I think of it as a form of theater, it is because the real power of this world lies in the ways people inhabit personalities (roles) through words. As with other forms of theater, the point is the enactment of the text, not the text in and of itself.

In all forms of theater, text and enactment converge in ways they do not in fiction, although this convergence differs in striking ways between regular theater and online theater. The norm in regular theater is a prewritten script acted out by players in real time. The script largely

precedes the action, although the convergence of the two during rehearsal often leads to changes in the script. Improvisational elements remain subject to the authoring paradigm, however, and the usual end is the performance of a script.

This process is almost completely reversed in online theater. The improvisational element dominates, and so it is the performance that generates the script. Indeed, because the entire performance is generated through words, the script literally documents the performance, right down to the lighting, stagecraft, and action. In online theater, these elements exist only as words; they do not refer to another realm where these things actually happen, because in fact they are happening already—unfolding as words.

> The curtain begins to rise slowly, revealing wide expanses of sand.
> Like a dream the mist rolls across the desert as the moon shines above.
> CURTAIN IS UP.
> A large cloud moves slowly across the moon and a shadow falls on BigMan's face.
> BigMan seems despondent. . .
> Littleman: "BigMan?"
> . . .and Littleman is itching to tell a tale [16].

In this example, a great deal happens in seven lines: the curtain rises, the stage is set, two characters appear, and one of them (Littleman) speaks. On another level, everything that happens is a form of speaking in the sense that it is a verbal utterance (as well as consequence of a statement in MOO language). And how many characters are really present? Is the curtain a character? After all, the syntax of "CURTAIN IS UP" is identical to "BigMan seems despondent. . ." (In point of fact, the curtain was not a character in this particular piece, but "Like a dream" was.) In regular theater, such elements as speech, action, and scene design

are not interchangeable with language in the same way, and consequently scripts can at most refer to them.

It is interesting, moreover, that if one works within the bounds of prewritten scenarios for online performers, it becomes the case that multiple performances from a single scenario or linked scenarios generate multiple closely related scripts. In other words, online theater takes over from music the form of theme and variations. One result of this is that it can be as interesting to look at a community of related improvisation scripts as to look at each script individually.

There is a sense in which online theater is chaos theater: what happens demonstrates the paradigmatic extreme sensitivity to initial conditions. There is no foretelling even the middle, let alone the end of an improvisation, because every single line influences what comes next. As a small example, in an improvisation called Fleabitten Tunnel of Love, the director's scenario called the Mephistophelian BloodyZelda to offer to bring another character's mother back from the dead. Any potential this might have had to be a poignant moment vanished when BloodyZelda phrased her offer thus:

> "For the third wish I will grant you the resurrection of your dead mother plus two other loved ones from column B" [17].

Double Masks

I would now like to examine in more detail some of the unique characteristics of online theater that contribute to its psychic potency.

Online theater is both pseudonymous and anonymous. Only if the people behind the online mask-names choose to reveal themselves does one know anything about their physical selves. Moreover, there is always some doubt about what is being revealed, since there is no way to know if the mask has been peeled away to reveal yet another mask instead of a

face. This focuses the spotlight on the mask-personae while at the same time plunging the shadow players into the alluring darkness of mystery.

One consequence of this pseudonymity is that, as we have seen, multiple players can share the same role online by giving themselves near-identical names. In the example given above, Big-Man and Bigman were being performed by two different people, but there was no way to know if those performers were male or female, old or young [18]. In a sense, this situation is an inversion of what we know as multiple personality disorder: instead of multiple personalities inhabiting a single body, it is as though multiple bodies (individuals) are inhabiting a single personality (e.g., the BigMan persona).

In addition, on MOOs the syntax of the programming language is set up in such a way that one constantly experiences oneself in both the first and third persons. This is particularly noticeable when using what's called the "emote" verb, with which a player carries out actions. If I, as Big-Man, want to dance with glee, I cannot just type: "I dance with glee." I must think of myself in the third person and type: "emote dances with glee." After this command is processed by the MOO software, which automatically adds one's role name to any standard utterance, I and everyone else see: "Big-Man dances with glee."

Notice further that my verb is really "emote," and "dances," which looks like a verb, is actually part of a statement, as though I were also talking of myself in the third person ("he dances"). Moreover, the command form means that I am talking in two moods (the imperative and the declarative) as well as two voices and two languages (MOO and English).

The enacting of roles online is further complicated by the fact that on a MOO, it is possible to write what are known as "spoof" verbs. A spoof verb simply makes it possible for anyone to pass as anyone or anything else.

Suppose that I, playing Bigman, want to indicate that Bigman is laughing aloud. I type "emote laughs aloud," and the MOO software will show everyone the sentence "Bigman laughs aloud." What spoof verbs do differently is allow one to send something to the screen without one's role name attached. Thus, if I (still as Bigman) type "spoof LittleMan laughs aloud," everyone else would see "LittleMan laughs aloud"—and think the line had come from LittleMan himself. In effect, I would be impersonating LittleMan.

The risk with role-sharing is that there will be incongruities in the way the shared character is presented. Things can become problematic if one player enacts "Big-Man falls asleep" while another simultaneously comes up with "Bigman dances with glee" (although in this example, the effect is to present Big-Man/Bigman as dreaming). To avoid this, any two players trying to share a role must rely on a sort of telepathy to stay in contact with each other and with their role. The lack of traditional distinguishing information about other players (age, sex, physique) reinforces this sense of mind-to-mind contact. One way around this problem is to have two players performing different aspects of what could be construed as a single role. Thus, for example, one might find Big-Man and Big-Man's.Memory together, or Jury and Jury.Member [19].

The possibilities allowed by spoof verbs and role-sharing mean that players in online theater often tend to inhabit the situation more than the roles. In an improvisational situation, one is at all times looking ahead, and in MOOs it is a short step from wishing for certain outcomes to making them happen by seizing control of other fates and forces than one's own. Any action, no matter how unlikely in the ordinary sense, is only a few keystrokes away: "BigMan's-Memory sings in Barbara Streisand's voice" "Stomach controls time" "The clam shells open slowly, delicately, revealing frothy little tufts of polar bear fur" [20].

Since players are simultaneously inside and outside their own roles, they do not experience strong boundaries between themselves and the other roles (Fig. 2). Indeed, as indicated earlier, the "other roles" in online improvisation encompass the entire theatrical experience from staging, lighting, and other technical aspects of theater to walk-ons that may only last a line or two.

The director is also a player in online theater, and this has some useful consequences. For one thing, it means that the director can give real-time instructions to all the players as needed, without being visible to the audience [21]. This allows the director to shape the improvisation in real time, by cueing various sections, ringing the curtain up or down, or giving hints to performers.

To Speak Is to Do

In some ways the most distinctive aspect of online theater is the tension between dialog, action, and description. Every statement and action requires the preliminary use of a command (verb), which is itself a statement in MOO language. As we noticed earlier, something that looks like a description ("Like a dream the mist rolls across the desert. . .") may in fact be an action carried out by a player named "Like a dream" who had typed "emote the mist rolls across the desert. . . ." What makes this syntactic and ontological tangle possible is the MOO language itself, which treats everything (and everyone) in its realm as an object defined by a unique number. All operations involve object numbers, and what one sees on screen (e.g., the lines of a performance) are artifacts of these operations. Fans of "The Prisoner," one of television's few forays into the surreal, will remember Patrick McGoohan's oft-repeated protest: "I am not a number, I am a human being." In the world of online theater, it would

be more accurate to say the opposite: "I am not a human being, I am a number."

The world this statement introduces is neither as dead nor as totalitarian as it sounds. If it is often disturbing, that is not just because it is unfamiliar, but because it requires one to live almost entirely through the potent and unpredictable psyche. To be a number is to be abstracted, disembodied, and dissociated, but only with respect to the landmarks of our usual world. The one thing we cannot simply be is nothing, so the first movement of dissociation requires a second one of reinvestment. It is the form and meaning of this reinvestment that concerns me.

To work with psyche means to work in psyche's realm, which is fundamentally the underworld of dream. As the psychologist James Hillman says in Dream and the Underworld: "The dream has nothing to do with the waking world but is the psyche speaking to itself in its own language" [22]. Hillman makes the further point that dreams are not reducible to upperworld terms: "A dream is less a comment on life and an indication as to where it is growing, than it is a statement from the chthonic depths, the cold, dense, unchanging state" [23]. Our problem is that we try to deal with the dream by interpreting it in the language of the upperworld, the ego's realm. But the ego's primary goal, as ego, is a heroic one: to vanquish the dream world by assimilation. Under these circumstances, as Hillman points out in his discussion of Hercules in the house of Hades, the heroic approach is psychopathic.

Thus, far from being helpful and nourishing, the work we do on our psychic material is, as a rule, grotesque and traumatic. Imagine trying to drag a fat man through a small keyhole: you might succeed at last, but no one would mistake the remnants of mutilated flesh for a man. Thus with the world of dreams and the world of the psyche: to go there is not the

same as to bring them back, but only when we are not looking through the ego's eyes is this radical disparity really clear.

If dream is the psyche's favorite theater, it is not the only one. We are constantly attempting to recreate that theater in the upperworld, through the imagination. If it is true, as Hillman says, "that the thought of the heart is the thought of images, that the heart is the seat of imagination" [24], then it is the engagement of the heart that gives meaning to imaginative activities. Hillman points to Henry Corbin's use of the Arabic word 'himma' to designate this thought of the heart, which Corbin relates to the Greek 'enthymesis', the act of creating as real the figures of the imagination. In his analysis of the poetry of Ibn 'Arabi, Corbin argues that himma is so powerful that it can "make essentially real a being external to the person who is in this condition of enthymesis" [25]. This is precisely the sense online players have of the characters they and their fellows are creating from moment to moment.

Players in online theater consistently report a unique sense of total immersion and exaltation. It is not the things imagined that create this sense, not the act of imagination per se; it is the experience of imagination. What happens in online theater is the immediate embodiment of the imagination; what you think comes immediately to light and life. This embodiment is the online world's transformation of the physical bodies that so dominate our usual life. Online this body is absent, replaced both as subject and object by the activity of imagination.

Online theater demands imagination simply to exist. In a Freudian sense, it works against the censorship we normally impose on our minds by sucking out images and ideas in real time. The rhythm and onward flow of improvisation leave little room for the critical rethinking, neat constructions, and careful editing by which we usually decide how our minds may appear in public. The intuitive leap, the leap of the heart, is

the characteristic movement in cyberspace, not the step-by-step of logic. As Hillman puts it, "we can become intimate with an image or a thing in a sensuous way only when we have abandoned the rational account of it" [26].

Online theater encourages our desire to experience nakedness (in whatever form: of mind, heart, soul, body). As in dreams, it replaces "Oh, if only" with "It is," bringing desire out of possibility into a state of becoming [27]. This desire is made permissible through the fact that MOO space functions also as ritual space. The depths of the desires driving the enactment contribute to an elaborate and formalized display [28]. Ritual space is exactly where desire meets ostentation. The attempt to literalize online space cuts against the ritual demands of the space, the need for the fantasy that allows nakedness.

Ordinarily desire requires the absent body (object); in consummation there is no desire because the body is "consumed." Online, desire and consummation are not mutually exclusive. No body is consumed because the gap between subject and object is never closed. Indeed, online theater does not require the Aristotelian closure we are familiar with in regular theater because it is fiction operating over time—as a player, one leaves knowing one may come back. Moreover, what one is really coming back to is the arena of one's own mind, which knows closure only with death.

Perhaps more importantly, what one is coming back to is the place where mind meets mind in true polyphony. The online world is least interesting as a writing space of the singular ego, the Augustinian confessional "I" to which Western literature has grown accustomed. Confession, as Hillman points out, "confines experience to 'my' experience," and thus is closely entangled with belief in one's own truth. It is the opposite of the *récit,* which is "an account of events experienced rather than of my experiencing. It was then unfolded; the angel then said.

. . ." [29]. A peculiarity of online theater is that it stands between the confession and the récit, proffering both the immediacy of real time experience and the story-teller's expository distance. The online "I" is not a singular, unified "I" but an I-he-she-it-we-they. In this psychic reality, as Hillman says, "grammar breaks its hold: subject and object, personal and impersonal, I and thou, masculine and feminine find new modes of intermingling; plural verbs may disagree with their singular nouns as the imagination in things speaks its language of the heart" [30].

This language is the language of online theater: often fragmentary and elliptical; crude, buffoonish, and frivolous; callous and cajoling; tender and violent by turns. It is a language that shows off the beauty of particular things and celebrates the miracle that they exist at all.

I am all washed up.

I am all the vultures who are tired of waiting.

I am glad to hear that.

Curtain down.

I am the end.

Sun up.

I am over it.

Lights out.

I am in the dark.

I am gone like a will of the lisp [31].

References and Notes

1. MOO is a nested acronym; it stands for MUD, Object-Oriented. MUD has several expansions, among which I prefer Multi-User Dimension.

2. The title-page epigraph is from Flann O'Brien, *The Various Lives of Keats and Chapman and the Brother* (London: Grafton Books, 1976) p. xv.

3. Antoinette LaFarge, ed., "Christmas 11: Fleabitten Tunnel of Love" (transcript of performance on PostModernMOO, Nov. 8, 1994). Note that there are two players sharing the Big-Man/Bigman role in this performance, hence the different spellings of the name.

4. David Blair's "Wax" MOO springs to mind as a prime example.

5. This quality of constant mutability aligns MOOs more closely, in some ways, with simulated environments like SimCity than with classic hypertext. I am indebted to Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994) for prompting this line of thought.

6. Jim Pomeroy, "Stereo Views: Ver Multidimensionales" (Buffalo, NY: Light Work, 1988).

7. Antoinette LaFarge, ed., "Christmas 9: The Cake of the Desert" (transcript of performance on PostModernMOO, Oct. 21, 1994). Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (New York: Penguin Books, 1960) also makes prominent use of similar lists.

8. O'Brien [7] p. 35.

9. Antoinette LaFarge, ed., "Christmas 13: Guilty as Lambs, Innocent as Sin" (transcript of performance on PostModernMOO, Nov. 22, 1994).

10. O'Brien [7] p. 123.

11. Antoinette LaFarge, ed., *Christmas 16: The DownUnderworld* (New York: Haifisch Press, 1995).

12. Walt Kelly, *Incompleat Pogo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953) p. 29.

13. Indeed, an inversion of this same joke turned up in "Christmas 11" (see LaFarge [3]):

Big.Flea: "Would you hit a flea with a brig?"

Little.Flea: "No, I'd hit it with a schooner!"

14. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960) pp. 154 and 162.

15. Samuel Beckett, *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On: A Samuel Beckett Reader* (New York: Grove-Atlantic, 1992) p. 121.

16. LaFarge [7].

17. LaFarge [3].

18. In point of fact, since it is possible for an individual to have multiple simultaneous logins to a MOO, Big-Man and Bigman could have been performed by a single person—a further twist on the doppelganger effect in that the single role of BigMan is divided into two functional roles (Big-Man and Bigman), which are then rejoined in the person of the single anonymous performer.

19. In, respectively, Antoinette LaFarge, ed., *Christmas 12: The Clam-Shaped Iceberg with the Lettuce-Green Hearts of Palm* (New York: Haifisch Press, 1995), and "Christmas 13" (see LaFarge [9]).

20. All from Christmas 12; see LaFarge [20].

21. Technically, this is normally done by whispering or paging commands, which are seen only by the player they are directed at.

22. James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row,1979) p. 12.

23. Hillman [23] p. 43

24. James Hillman, *The Thought of the Heart & the Soul of the World* (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, 1981) p. 4.

25. Hillman [28] p. 5; the quotation here is Hillman, paraphrasing Corbin.

26. Hillman [28] p. 87.

27. Freud [14] p. 201.

28. Much could be said about how programming languages, which are highly formal, work to propitiate desire.

29. Hillman [28] p. 33.

30. Hillman [28] p. 122.

31. LaFarge [7].