WORLDS OF WORDS

Little had changed since my last visit. The parrot in the corner still spouted sentence fragments it had heard earlier, characters of all genders and species lounged in over- stuffed armchairs, shooting the breeze, and occasionally a cleaner would arrive to drag a sleeping player away to be recycled. Excuse me," I said, aware that, as a guest, I was clearly marked out as a second- class citizen. Anyone know how I can find the object number of a room?"

The geeky talk about Linuxbased servers and Windows emulation ceased abruptly. Pixie dust from a freshly cast spell settled in the silence. Which room?" Any room - a hypothetical room." There was some mumbling until those present concluded that there was a way to find out, but damned if any of them knew.

I felt like Burt Lancaster's character in the The Swimmer. I didn't even know my own house number - and without it there was no way to get home. What's more, a quick flick through the database revealed that someone else was using my name... At that point a minotaur trotted toward me and asked if I fancied joining in with a threesome? This wasn't some existentialist nightmare, however much it was beginning to feel like it - this was my first time in a MUD (Multi- User Dungeon) in months and my first time on this particular MUD for four years.

MUDs have lost out in the glamour stakes to the Web in recent years, which makes it all the more ironic that they're also the closest thing we have to the 'cyberspace' of Net mythology. Enabling multiple users to chat and interact in complex artificial environments, MUDs are tomorrow's virtual realities today. Although other forms are beginning to appear, the most prevalent of these environments are entirely text- based. Yep, you heard right. No 3D-surroundsound-emitting, Voodoo-2-requiring, bilinear fog wotsit stuff for mudders, matey. Linked areas, described purely in prose, make up a world of words that you navigate around by entering compass directions, just as in the textbased adventure games of old. The major difference is that the characters you come across are real people, connected to the same server as you, rather than figments of a programmer's imagination.

Here in black and white, it may be difficult to understand just how absorbing an experience that can be. Although Internet Relay Chat shares some of the same characteristics, it's the sense of place that makes mudding uniquely compulsive. In IRC you can only chat; in MUDs you can role play, explore vast landscapes, program cool gadgets, take part in political decisions, play games, build your own room, heck, even build your own planet. Just about anything you can do in the real world, you can do in a MUD, and then some. In an era where the Net is becoming more and more reliant on gee- whiz technology and multimedia bells and whistles, MUDs stand as a testament to imagination and the power of words.

The term MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) betrays its origin as an attempt to produce a Dungeons and Dragons- style game that can be played over a network. Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw are the Tim Berners- Lee of MUDs, producing the first one back in 1978 on a DEC - 10 mainframe at Essex University. Trubshaw's aim was to create a multi- user role- playing adventure within a user-extensible database; two elements that became the core of the

MUD engine and continue to define MUDs today. Bartle's contribution came later, writing interface routines, cleaning up the engine code and significantly enhancing MUD's communication system.

Although there are still many worlds devoted to role- playing games, some of the most popular MUDs are purely social environments, while others are used as virtual universities or library systems. The most sprawling examples, such as the social world LambdaMOO, reflect the diversity of interests and cultures in the real world. Others cater for narrower tastes, from the mundane to the bizarre. The infamous FurryMUCK won't let you in unless you adopt a suitably mammalian character; no humans allowed.

The term MUD is generically applied to all these shared virtual environments, but the commands you use to move about and talk to others differ subtly depending on the server base the world is using. You may come across MUSHES, Talkers, MUSEs, MOOs and an assortment of others on your travels.

A MOO, for example, may be a more complex environment. MOO stands for MUD - Object Oriented, and participants can build programmable objects of their own, rooms and even small applications using a powerful scripting language. Talker- based MUDs are easy to navigate around and contain a small set of commands that let you chat with groups or converse privately. The users' ability to build within the world is limited when compared to the open architecture of MOOs. Despite these differences, they're all MUDs, regardless of the code they run on and the communities they play host to.

The real beauty of mudding is that you don't need anything extra to try it. You can connect to most MUDs using the Telnet protocol, and if you're using Windows (even the steam- powered Windows 3.1), you already have a Telnet client. You don't need a powerful computer either, so if you're still clinging to a 486 with 4Mb RAM, this is one on-line gaming experience you won't be left out of.

There are a growing number of graphical MUDs emerging that require a dedicated client - the most infamous of which, Ultima Online (http://www.owo.com/), has been beset by problems from the outset. In some ways, these upstarts miss the whole point of mudding. The experience should be like being in a cartoon - a world where anything is possible. An event in a graphical MUD that would take hours of work to design and program can be scripted in the time it takes to write a single paragraph.

This freedom is illustrated by some of the stories Richard Bartle, whom we interview on the next page, relates on his Web pages. The story of 'Sue', a prominent figure on the original MUD, strikes a chord. Because she was an agoraphobic, MUD was one of Sue's few points of contact with the outside world. She played every night for six hours solid, day in, day out, and her phone bill came to over £1,000 per month," says Richard. She also loved writing and sent letters to all her fellow wizards." Then Sue announced that she would be leaving the MUD because she was moving to Norway to work as an au pair. Realising what an astounding turnaround this was for an agoraphobic, a group of mudders took a trip in a mini- bus to her home in South Wales. It transpired that Sue was a man who had just been jailed for defrauding the Department of Transport of £60,000."

Welcome to the world of MUDs, where nothing is quite as it seems.

RICHARD BARTLE, THE GOD OF MUDS

As far as MUDs are concerned, Richard Bartle is God. He not only co- authored the first ever MUD, but also invented women. That is to say, players could only appear as male characters in the original MUD, until Bartle made the change. The first female character on the MUD was played by Bartle himself - a woman in his own image, 'Polly'.

I'd like to emphasise that crossing gender was not done as an end in itself - I was attempting to show what role playing was, and that it was okay. Gender was just the mechanism I used to do it," Bartle tells **.net**. The fact that researchers always write about crossing gender as if it were something amazingly special, whereas playing a 90-year-old ninja elf is something people have no trouble with, continues to bemuse me."

MUD1 has now been superseded by MUD2, available through Wireplay, where it has proved every bit as popular as the flashier games the network plays host to, outgunning Quake in some cases. But how easy is it for newcomers to get into role- playing games?

There are good MUDs and bad MUDs out there," says Bartle, discussing how newbies can be put off by a lack of help from existing players and poor on-line directions. "MUD2 is very good in this regard. When it says it's newbie-friendly, it means it. It has several automated tours that help players get the right idea of what to do. The interface is easy to use, and the players are helpful, too. Mind you, I have been doing this for 20 years, so there ought to be some advantages of experience."

Unlike other on-line gaming experiences, role playing is uniquely social. This is reflected in the community spirit that extends beyond the gameplaying landscape. We've had terminally ill people who drew strength from the support of their on-line friends until they were too ill to log in any more, Bartle relates. Players help other players get jobs and we've even had marriages - although, to be honest, we've caused far more divorces than marriages."

But Bartle admits that the appeal of mudding has now passed him by. Once you know how something works to the degree that I do, it loses its wonder." Still, if you decide to give MUD2 a go, don't be too surprised if you bump into a helpful wizard on the system, perhaps masquerading as a female character or even a 90-year-old ninja elf...

Richard Bartle's Web site at http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/ is a great resource for wannabe mudders.

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES...
Julian Dibbell, author of *My Tiny Life*

Author Julian Dibbell's article for the Village Voice, 'A Rape in Cyberspace', first brought MUDs and mudding to the attention of a mainstream audience. In the article, Dibbell relates the true story of how a LambdaMOO rogue character, Mr Bungle, terrorised other players in a public area of the MOO using a Voodoo doll (a program that projects commands on to other players, so it looks as if they have issued the commands themselves). Under Bungle's control, the other players present on the MOO appeared to perform a series of increasingly sick and violent sexual acts with one another.

Although Dibbell wasn't present at the time, the furore that ensued prompted him to investigate the appeal of mudding on Lambda and ask why some took the experience so seriously - becoming enchanted with the world in the process. His book *My Tiny Life* is an account of his adventures, including his own experimentation with a MUD persona. related to Dibbell the story of someone who had had an account on Lambda around the same time as the 'rape' incident and had returned recently to find his character - the name and description he'd used - being used by someone else.

That's exactly what went on in Mr Bungle's attack," says Dibbell. "It wasn't just that he was transmitting naughtiness to the computer screens of his victims -- he was doing it in the name of their characters. He was momentarily usurping their identities. That, to me, was what added an extra level of creepiness to it. What tends to make life in a virtual community worth caring about is the relationships you form in it and they depend, to a large degree, on the sense of presence that people are able to convey."

That suggests that your MUD identity is almost as real as your real identity? Dibbell continues: "So much of what we do with our bodies in the real world, whether it's having sex or making gestures or simply signalling our presence, can be done in the MOO with words and computer code. And when you see that, it makes you think that the larger world we live in, the one we think of as so solid and material, is really constructed of language and thought and convention and other such airy figments of the social."

While investigating the virtual rape, Dibbell took to hanging around in Mr Bungle's room - the area of the MOO the character owned - hoping to be able to interview him. We wondered if that might have been a little unsettling. Yeah", admits Dibbell, the events surrounding his toading [the erasing of his character from the MUD] had made

him a little larger than life for me, as for a lot of people on the MOO, so I couldn't help feeling the slightest frisson of fear as I hung out in his chambers." **.net** had hoped to conduct this interview on LambdaMOO itself, but had to make other arrangements when Dibbell explained there are difficulties for him logging in there now.

Given that Dibbell's book is a factual document about other people's lives, albeit their fictional lives, the reaction to its publication has been mixed. Their responses seem to be all over the map, as far as I can tell," remarks Dibbell. Some are amused, some pleased, some disgruntled. Some are all of these things. I haven't yet worked up the nerve to log on to LambdaMOO and have a good look at what they're saying on the mailing lists and in the living room."

So if LambdaMOO is currently out of bounds for Dibbell, does he have a 'tiny life' elsewhere? e-mail," he says. It feels a lot bigger, somehow, but much thinner, more dispersed." Meanwhile, Dibbell's character sleeps on LambdaMOO, oblivious to the changes that the world continues to undergo in his absence.

Selections from *My Tiny Life*, including the full account of the 'rape' on LambdaMOO, can be found at http://www.levity.com/julian/mytinylife/

MUD JARGON

MUD Multi- User Dungeon, Dimension or Database, depending whom you ask.

MOO MUD - Object Oriented. A MUD that enables players to create objects, environments and rooms for addition to the world database.

MUD server Software running on a remote computer containing the virtual world in a database.

Telnet Internet protocol that enables you to connect directly to a remote computer.

Lag The delay between typing and the words appearing on screen on a slow connection.

Lurking Listening in on other people's conversations without contributing anything yourself.

Wizard A player (or more usually a contributor to the programming of the MUD) who has unlimited control over the MUD's commands.

Toading Erasing a player from the MUD.

Emote Command used when you want to describe your character's actions. If you're called Soap and you type 'emote lathers itself up', other characters will see 'Soap lathers itself up'.

Voodoo doll A program that projects emote commands on to other players, making it appear as though they have issued them themselves.

CONNECTING TO MUDS VIA TELNET

To connect to a standard MUD, you shouldn't need any extra software - you just use Telnet to log in to the remote site. All flavours of Windows and the Mac operating system have Telnet software (a Telnet client) installed by default. Here's how to connect to a MUD using the Telnet software that comes with Windows 95.

1 Dial up your ISP in the normal way, then click the Start button on the Windows 95 taskbar and select Run. Type 'telnet' in the text box and click OK to start up the client.

2 In the Telnet client, select Connect /Remote System from the menu bar. In the Host Name box, type the address

of the MUD you want to connect to. For example, if you are connecting to Surfers, a UK- based Talker, you type 'surfers.org'

3 In the second box, marked Port, type in the port number of the MUD, if there is one. This is a sequence of four numbers that usually appears after the address. In Surfers' case, the number is 4242.

4 Finally, select VT100 in the box marked Term Type and click OK. Most MUDs allow you to connect as a guest the first time. Each has a different procedure for giving out full accounts, so follow the instructions on the screen.

CONNECTING TO MUDS USING ZMUD

Although Telnet is perfectly good for most MUDs, you can make things easier by using a dedicated client. Zmud (from http://www.zuggsoft.com/) offers standard Telnet functionality along with ANSI colour, a connection wizard that gets you to thousands of MUDs, profile editing, macro generation, hot keys for frequent actions and more.

1 At launch, select New from the menu bar, then choose a MUD from the list in the left-hand pane. A description of the world appears in the right-hand pane to help you decide where to go.

2 To set up a new or existing character on an unlisted MUD, type the address of the MUD you want to connect to in the Host box, making sure you also enter the correct port number.

3 Click on Connect and follow the instructions on the screen to log in. Once you've created a character, a dialog box will pop up asking whether you want to save the character name and password you've entered. Click Save. The next time you want to connect to the same MUD, the process will be automated for you.

4 Macros and hot keys will make navigation quicker. By default, the keypad is configured so that you can select the arrow keys to move north, south, east and west. Pressing '5' has the same effect as typing 'look'.

FIVE TOP MUDS

There are literally thousands of MUDs out there, so picking five of the best is like picking the five best pages on the entire Web. Your choice comes down to what you want out of a MUD. Do you want to just chat, or role play? Do you want to build in the world, or are you content to explore? Do you want a surreal fantasy environment, or a slab of urban reality? Your best bet is to check out the the Mud Connector at http://www.mudconnect.com/ In the meantime, here are five MUDs that caught our eye.

LambdaMOO
telnet://lambda.moo.mud.org:8888
(where 8888 is the port number)
This MUD is placed first for a reason. Built as a grand social experiment, it has expanded over the years to include all human life. Players can build their own areas, which has resulted in an environment as diverse as its population. Everyone from die-hard role players to chat-room freaks will find something in Lambda to tempt them.

Avalon
http://www.avalon-rpg.com/
Avalon is one of the best worlds around for hard-core role players, from beginner to expert level. You can connect using Java directly from the Web site and comprehensive tutorials soon have you hacking, slashing and puzzle-solving to your heart's content.

Babylon 5 MUSH
telnet://bab5.godlike.com:2260
Not all MUDs have sword and sorcery backgrounds - coming in a close second are the sci- fi themed worlds, with more MUDs inspired by Star Trek, Star Wars and Babylon 5 than you can shake a light sabre at. Babylon 5 MUSH is atypical of many of these worlds in that it's well built, well documented and the quests are open ended.

You'll need to have seen a fair number of episodes of the TV series to know what's going on, but the world itself is impressive.

Surfers
telnet://surfers.org:4242

Talkers are the least MUD- like of all MUD types. Although they retain many of the same characteristics, they're purely social worlds. With rudimentary building commands, it's possible to create your own private rooms. Surfers is one of the longest running and friendliest of the bunch, and because it's located in the UK, you'll always find folk to chat with at sensible times of the day.

MUD2
http://www.mud2.com/

MUD2 is an improved version of the original MUD built by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle back in 1978. With an impeccable pedigree and massive popularity, it's difficult not to recommend. There are two versions currently available, a Net version accessible from the MUD2 site listed above or the Wireplay version at http://www.wireplay.com/

TerraFirmA
http://terrafirma.terra.mud.org

Billed with the slogan "It's A Brave New World In There!" TerraFirmA offers a handy overview of what MUDding is all about over the Web and explains exactly how to get into the game and get on once you're there.