The Geography of a Non-place

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Abstract

In role-playing MUDs, the arena is defined by the program and the builders, and mapping it is complicated and occasionally made even more so by those who create the arena. Still the metaphor of space is powerful and enduring, and players speak of the different little bits of text describing different settings in the MUD as rooms. They talk of movement and speed, of roads and paths, when what is really happening when the character moves from Haven or Azur is that the program lets you sort through its stored information in a certain manner. Only the administrators have power to access the information directly, all others need to follow some path, which creates an illusion of space and particularly of place. This illusion of place is not restricted to MUDs though: the metaphors of physical movement are powerful and enduring, to the point that Sherry Turkle's interviewee suggests that online is its own place (Turkle 1995:231). But is the "place" I am accessing when I log on to the net comparable to physical places? I will discuss this on the background of Mark Auge's concept of a non-place (1995).

My home is my airport

The computer offers the user a means of communication, and from the seat before the screen I prove my identity on request through a password, before entering into the lobby of opportunities, which is the opening screen of the web browser. This first page the browser opens is defined as my 'home' page, as if it is a house of many doors… or an airport, a place of endless potential, a non-place in the language of Augé: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (1995:77-78).

The browser 'home' is different from my physical home in more than the fact that one is a page on a screen; the other is an actual three-dimensional building. I live in a house, the space is shared with three humans and a cat, and our physical lives

intertwine. No space is totally private, even the bed has more or less fluctuating limits, being intruded upon by all the others in the house, not least of those the cat, with her ingenious schemes to be allowed to spend the night in the warmth and company of the bed rather than in her basket. In the physical home, everything is negotiation of boundaries and acts, visitors being invited, permitted or denied, and the home is defined by how it is presented to guests, friends or inhabitants.

The online home is defined not by how it is intruded upon, or what it can receive, but where I can go from it. A good web start page is one where I find the links and the functions I like. I can choose to build my own web page and use that for a start page, or I can use one ready made - but either way it's not a page for dwelling, although I can open it up and let it be permeated by the activities of others through introducing comments, guest books and various feedback tools. This page, this 'home', mirrors my own need for communication, it is based on my choice and convenience, but it doesn't permit intrusion or hospitality. I can share a start page with hundreds or thousands of others - but we do not encroach upon each other's private space or time. None of them pour me a cup of tea or insist that I make dinner.

This online home is 'home' in the manner arriving at an airport is coming 'home'. I can choose a 'home' that is more intimate than others. My start page for the World Wide Web is the site of the college I work on, a web site which is mainly concerned with the super-local news of the college and tiny college town of Volda, and contains links to suit a scholar in a University/College network in Norway. This is still less intimate than the airport I fly from when I take off into the world. That is a tiny airport, the largest plane taking off is a Dash-8, and the attendants at the airport greet everybody by name as they take the boarding cards, wishing each and every traveller a nice trip in a personal manner. But when I ask somebody to come home with me, I do not take him or her to this airport, nor to the homepage, I take them into my house. 'Home' is contextual.

The space in front of the screen, the computer itself, the mechanical object and everything around it has a role in my flesh-world, even in my flesh-home. But when I turn on the computer I become focused on a space of departure rather than a space to dwell. In front of the computer the potential of absorption of attention becomes evident. Cats and small children are famous - or infamous - for discovering this. Cats love to walk on keyboards, sleep with their tails draped down computer screens, sit on the laptop, or they insist painfully on being petted by the hands which are engaged at the keyboard. While the cat settles very quietly in my bed when she has tricked her way into the forbidden spot, there is no trickery about her blatant demand for attention when I attempt to disappear into the other space, the sphere of isolation and dis-attention: I am focused elsewhere.

Janice Radway, in her study of women reading romances and other popular literature, found that one of the reasons women gave for reading was that they could enter into a sphere of privacy, or even a sphere which was 'elsewhere': "For a while Dan was not thrilled that I was reading a lot. Because I think men do feel threatened. They want their wife to be in the room with them. And I think my body is in the room but the rest of me is not (when I am reading). (Radway 1984:87)"[1]

While Radway's interviewees reported how their families resented this space of absence or elsewhere, it was accepted that they didn't respond to the demands of their family while absorbed by reading. 'Mommy reads' to the women in Radway's study was as good a reason for not paying constant attention to others as was the physical absence of the men when they attend to sports or other activities described by the women in the study. They also put emphasis on the sensation of departure, when prompted by the question "Why do you read":

> Ann: To be entertained; escapism, armchair traveling. One of the things I enjoy about Harlequins is that they are so geographically correct - in their facts. I had a friend who traveled to Ireland every year. She's the one who got me to read them. She had hers classified - her collection [of Harlequins] - she'd rip the front cover off and classify them by place.

> She'd travel to one of these places, and she'd say, "I was there this time. It was just like so and so wrote. You turn that one corner and there's that well, and that tree, and there's that..." (1984:110)

This inner absence or inner exile is a state of absorption and detachment, easily recognised in the computer game player. The acts and attention are turned elsewhere, and by aid of the metaphor of geographical space, the computer games create a different location: A home away from home, similar to the experience quoted in chapter 9, where one of Turkle's interviewees says: "I feel like I have more stuff in my room on the MUD than I have off it (Turkle 1995:240)." In a culture where home can be said to be less where the heart is and more where we store our favourite possessions, the non-space of the entrance to the internet leads to the home away from home - a space with no physical definition where her favourite possessions in the shape of tiny bits of programming are stored.

Computer games offer this same sensation of having a "home away from home". Most of them offer a feature that makes the statistics of the character viewable, "you" can see "your" possessions and abilities. In a mimicry of the manner in which I will keep the proof of my education, civil status, credit cards and favourite possessions in every genre in a spot where I can keep it safe but still have access to it, the stats page of a character lets you see what you have "got".

To play a game is to let yourself take off into this space, obeying Huizinga's rules of the nature of a game: "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and

duration. This is the third main characteristic of play: its secludedness, it limitedness. It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning (1950:9)." Single-user computer games display this characteristic flawlessly. The computer itself functions as a limitation and a manner to seclude - to penetrate into the space of the game becomes impossible unless invited or permitted, achievement being the key to invitation through advancement. Even in top-level football matches there is a potential for intrusion, for supporters storming the arena, or dogs to escape their owners to join in the happy chase of the ball on the turf. In a single-user computer game the intrusion can not be into the game itself, only into the entrance-point, the non-space which allows for play: the interface where fingers touches keys.

The importance of being identified

Multiple-User Dungeons are secluded, exclusive arenas of play, which represent themselves as places rather than non-places. They demand the same manner of identification as crossing the borders of countries - they ask for a name and a password - identification unique to the player. In the games included in this study there is a penalty for assuming the identity of another upon entering. The reaction is very similar to the punishment for entering a country under false pretensions: the player will be rejected and banned. Cyberspace is an arena where proving your identity is the proof to innocence whether you are shopping for books at Amazon.com: "Hello Torill Mortensen, we have recommendations for you in Books, Music and DVD & Video (if you're not Torill Mortensen, click here)" or hiding behind a handle in a sex-chat, as these posters do in the basement at bianca.com (all nick-names altered, typos retained):

> Date: Sun Apr 1 14:01:55 2001
> From: kariana
> Subject: Roaming Tiger's beloved ghost

> how dare you! if you really are the one who posted that filth to LT….

> how dare you post that kind of crap and still call yourself human! dont you have a heart or a soul or even a conscience?

> yeah sure, lovely thinker might not be perfect but she's still human and has feelings and emotions just like everyone else (besides you, apparently)

> you flame her for being filthy and on welfare and fat and all that other paltry crap, but look at you! you aren't any better than she is...quite possibly worse and INFINITELY more "common".

you're obviously less than human and i guess it makes you feel better to attempt to make people miserable. but what you said was uncalled for. COMPLETELY uncalled for. You're no better than the most common piece of wasted flesh trailer park prostitutes that you condemn.

grow up a little bit.

And the reply…

In Response To: Roaming Tiger's beloved ghost
  Date: Mon Apr 2 02:12:51 2001
  From: *Ghost Tiger*
  Subject: Re: Roaming Tiger's beloved ghost

I decided to log in and post this time

I would never ever hurt lovely thinker and i am appalled you would think so.

..get a reality check….

Roaming Tiger's Beloved Ghost

Here's hoping the silly tag works here to

In the original html text, kariana did not wear a "tag" which would identify her as a paying member of the chat site, while *Ghost Tiger* did. In the message kariana refers to, which was posted by someone using a name similar to "Roaming Tiger's Beloved Ghost" but without the original name and the identifying tag, a third person was attacked. Such is quite common on this site, as it invites for discussion about topics which are at the edge of what is acceptable in society, and despite attempts at internal discipline and limitations to the topics posted, it seems to be impossible to maintain the limits of what the group visiting Bianca's basement consider acceptable perversions.

This thievery of another person's personae is a type of power play reminiscent of Mr. Bungle in Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" (1998), where he made the avatars of others speak his words. Here it's however done much less sophisticated, as the code permits the use of handles, which have been registered by others when you post, no hacking required. Any accidental passer-by can take a shot at both being nasty to the one they attack and the one they impersonate. What this site, Bianca's Smut Shack, makes money on is mainly the proof that the same flesh-world person controls a given avatar every time it is being used. They give this proof through the colours on the handle as well as the tag next to the handle, and use passwords in much the same way as banks keep our money safe, or NASA protects their information. (Unlike my bank though, as long as you pay you can have any identity you like.)

While playing with identity is accepted in the gaming sites, playing with identification is not, as this is the only way for others to know whom they relate to – or rather, which aspect of a certain flesh-and-blood player they relate to. As Mariah says:

> *Mariah*: I think everybody play shadows of themselves. I don't think you can ever get away from yourself. As hard as you are trying, you are still playing yourself playing something. You are still you. And so, all of it is going to be at least a shade of yourself, because at the very least you are portraying something you believe thing is like. So it's always you, it might be just a shade of you which might not be what you are used to be every day. (Mariah, interview 16.9.99)

What the different passwords do, is to confirm to others that while they might not be talking, chatting, playing or in other manners interacting with a faithful representation of the person behind a personae, they interact with the same controller of the 'shade of yourself' in every session.

This need for identification is also necessary to be able to maintain the secrecy of the play-arena. As Huizinga (1950:12) states, this is an important factor of maintaining the nature of play: "The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy. Even in early childhood play is enhanced by making a "secret" out of it." To keep a secret restricted access to the play is necessary. In online games like *Dragon Realms*, *Aarinfel* and *Lu'Tamohr*, the restrictions went beyond demanding a password when entering. A new player had to go through a process of screening. In *Dragon Realms* you had to be approached by an administrator – an immortal – to be permitted to play at all. The main purpose of this check was to make certain no player had two characters in the game at the same time. Once you were approved, you were permitted to enter into the game, but with certain limitations. On the 'who-list' (the list of characters in the game displayed when typing *who* and hitting enter while playing the game) a new player would be shown as belonging to the clan 'Haven':

[Hum Mal] Xeziar Borealis Silverdew, Bardic High Mage of [ARCANA]

[Mer Mal] Zalgi Hirdar. [ARCANA]

[Elf Fem] Zindwyn Borealis Silverdew, Magister of [ARCANA]

[Pix Fem] Ylara, Justice of [ARCANA]

[Dwa Mal] (Busy) Wotrac [HAVEN]

[Mer Mal] Souman, Lord Marshall of the [RED GAUNTLET]

[Elf Fem] Erinn [HAVEN]

[Elf Fem] Essiadora [HAVEN]

[Dwa Mal] (BATTLE) Cromath Wigdi. The last Balserazian

[Orc Mal] CorthCorth, Seeking Scars, Cook of the Skinshields [ORCS]

[Hum Mal] (Outlaw) Beobey [DRAGONLORD]

[Elf Mal] Handion [HAVEN]

[Elf Mal] (BATTLE) Hynomynon Barru

The *[HAVEN]* flag was yellow and very visible on the black background, to warn all other players of the privileges granted new players, as well as to remind the player that this character was not yet approved to be fully integrated into the intrigues and play among the different clans. *Aarinfel* had no initial screening, but it limited the abilities of the new players, and gives them another flag, also in very visible yellow (visible against the black screen of most MUD-clients): *(New Player)*. Both *Dragon Realms* and *Aarinfel* had certain rules for when to remove the different flags, on *DR* the character had to write a public and private background, rise 10 levels and be rewarded a favour point (FP). The favour points were rewards for good role-playing. On *Aa* the players had to write a private background and be sponsored by an established player, which means receiving a favour point or a recommendation for one.

This ensures the secrecy and the sensation of being apart from the real world, even if it is taking place in a space where everybody with a computer has access. The sensation of being different and secret is also enhanced by wearing and addressing each other with something other than the real names, using the names and relating to the appearance of the personae. Or, as Huizinga says:

> The "differentness" and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in "dressing up". Here the "extra-ordinary" nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual "plays" another part, another being. He *is* another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises (1950:13).

MUD-characters are perfect for playing 'dressing up'. Erinn, the character I played, even as a newbie with little custom-fitted equipment, looked very different from myself:

> A tall, slim elven woman with golden hair like a river flowing down her back, and two golden eyes that watches everything about her calmly. Her hands are slim, but look strong and useful. Graceful movements and her shape bear witness of a well-trained body.
>
> Erinn is in perfect health.
>
> Erinn is using:

<worn on head>   a leather headband

<worn on ear>   a silvered earring

<worn around neck> a warm-looking cloak

<worn on body>   a cloth vest

<worn about body>   a woollen cape

<worn about waist>   a leather belt

<worn on legs>   a pair of cloth leggings

<worn on feet>   a pair of worn leather boots

<worn on arms>   a pair of cloth sleeves

<worn around wrist>   a cloth bracer

<worn around wrist>   a cloth bracer

<worn on hands>   a pair of cloth gloves

<worn as shield>   a small shield [Worn]

<wielded>   a dagger

<held>   a needle [Flawed]

<floating nearby>   (Glowing) a bright ball of light

Almost a year later her personality had changed and filled out, and my skill at playing had grown. I had received a lot of favour points, and these could be used to enhance the look of the character through asking for renames from the administrators. This is what Erinn looked like after a rename-spree in the late days of the game, when she was one of the most influential persons in the court of Arcana, no longer acting as their undercover agent, and married to Eristeth, a powerful healer and second in command in the clan:

> A tall, slim elven woman, with golden hair falling like a river down her back to her waist. In her fey face, two calm golden eyes watch the world from over accentuated cheek-bones. She moves with the grace of a dancer, her shape hinting at a well-trained body. Slim, long hands look strong and efficient, and she keeps them calm and visible. Dressed in dark colours, she does not stand out in any environment, her sombre dress muting the sense of watching a very young elf, a lost child of some ancient dawn.

> Erinn is in perfect health.

> Erinn is using:

<worn on head>	a long tan velvet ribbon twined through her hair
<worn on ear>	a tiger's eye set against an enamel stud
<worn on ear>	a tiger's eye set against an enamel stud
<worn on eyes>	a pair of spectacles rimmed with darkened bone
<worn around neck>	a pendant of onyx, with a stylized falcon etched in gold
<worn on body>	a vest of charcoal black leather, lined with tan fur
<worn about body>	a cloak of soft, oiled silk
<worn about waist>	a broad, grey leather belt
<worn on legs>	a grey skirt lined with black silk
<worn on feet>	a pair of soft soled, black leather boots
<worn on arms>	a grey silk shirt with pale threads
<worn around wrist>	a gold bracelet
<worn around wrist>	a gold bracelet
<worn on hands>	dark grey fingerless gloves
<worn on finger>	(Glowing) A circle of moonstone with a silver fox
<worn on finger>	a ring set with a watery aquamarine
<worn as shield>	a shield studded with rusty nails
<wielded>	a crystal epee
<held>	a smooth, brown stone
<floating nearby>	(Glowing) a golden mageball, wrapped in dark iron

When playing Erinn I imagined that I was her, and even as I write these lines, looking at the description brings back the sensation of being Erinn, remembering the different items… the Tiger's eyes worn as earrings replaced the onyxes she wore while she was on a lower level – two onyxes each wrapped in a golden mesh - the moonstone was the wedding ring, Eristeth wore an onyx one with a gold fox leaping about the circle. The shield was later exchanged with a larger and heavier one, and renamed to a parrying dagger, as an assassin might carry two daggers, but would rarely be carrying about a shield. Almost everything was renamed according to Erinn's nature and looks – an elven woman with naturally bright colours, who tried to fade into the background and sneak around soundlessly.

Dragon Realms absorbed the players, to the point that the immortals would ask some of them to archive for a week or a month, and play a different character. Huizinga points out this as one of the characteristics of games: "Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players (1950:8)." One of the immortals, William, the player of Azhanith, touches on this in an interview:

> TM: Well, actually, he – it's a little bit fun, because he played on Strive, and he played a totally different character from Magrath. He turned it – he was this very low-key, shy, powerless servant. He was just deferring to everybody, he was incredibly polite, and he was terribly careful, and he was walking with tiny mincing steps…

> *William*: So some of it might have been that he was just caught in the character, there was nowhere to go from Magrath but down.

> TM: Yes, I think he was just caught up in Magrath and how he was, and how he would naturally react, and played that out too far and too much. Because the characters I have seen him with on strive are very very different.

> *William*: I think a lot of it is also that people get into fights much on these muds, and competition gets really intense, again because there's not much to lose except the pride-issues, and so you can just build your character up and get revenge in a way, and you can plot forever the revenge in some way, and devote yourself to that – to this unhealthy insane passion, where a lot of the breakers would kick in in real life, like say the police, or restraining orders, they don't come up in a MUD. (Interview 18.09.1999)

When in a game, there is no reason for outside breakers to "kick in", because a game is a world of its own with rules of its own:

> These rules in their turn are a very important factor in the play-concept. All play has its rules. They determine what "holds" in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. (…) Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed, the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire's whistle breaks the spell and sets "real" life going again (Huizinga 1950:11).

Living in a non-place – 11 years at Charles De Gaulle

A man called Alfred lived on Charles De Gaulle Airport since 1988, making it 11 years in September 1999, when the Belgian Government granted him refuge status

(Patton 1999). In clippings from September 1999 he claims to have decided to stay at the airport, despite having been given French residency as well. According to the writings about him[2] and his own words in a Finnish documentary (Kouros 1999), he originally wanted to go to Great Britain, claiming he was British. During the documentary he changed his mind several times, wanting to go to Germany, Belgium and the United States of America. At one point in the film he also claimed that he had so many options - he was unable to choose.

I have tried to find more recent news of him on the net, but a search on "Charles de Gaulle airport Alfred" gave me only the news that Steven Spielberg wants to make a movie of his story: *Terminal*. The movie is at best loosely based on this story though. Did Nasseri meet the millennium in an airport, endlessly waiting? A search on his real name, Merhan Karimi Nasseri, yielded little more. He seems to have disappeared from the news when he was no longer forced to stay at the airport, but chose to. It's a fascinating situation. Marc Augé (1995) writes of non-places and identity:

> Checks on the contract and the user's identity, a priori or a posteriori, stamp the space of contemporary consumption with the sign of non-place: it can be entered only by the innocent. Here words hardly count any longer. There will be no individualization (no right to anonymity) without identity checks (1995:102).

This is what trapped "Sir Alfred", or Nasseri, on the airport. Robbed of all his papers, he could no longer prove his innocence - but with the same papers gone, the police could not prove his guilt. He could not "retrieve his identity ... at Customs, at the tollbooth, at the check-out counter" (1995:103). And after 11 years of this, he refused to leave this life where he had become no longer a stranger, but a celebrity. In the documentaries, those were the words with which he refused having his picture taken by tourists passing by: "I am a celebrity".

The land in which he was familiar was the non-place of transit, with the large brand shops of Charles De Gaulle, and what should have been familiar after 11 years in France was foreign. He was locked in the paradox of the traveller:

> A paradox of non-place: a foreigner lost in a country he does not know (a 'passing stranger') can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motor-ways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains. For him, an oil company logo is a reassuring landmark; among the supermarket shelves he falls with relief on sanitary, household or food products validated by multinational brand names. (Augé 1995:106)

In many ways the non-places of airports are similar to play spaces. A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or

driver. Perhaps he's still weighed down by the previous day's worries, the next day's concerns; but he is distanced from them temporarily by the environment of the moment. (Augé 1995:103)

After having identified himself – or logged on with his password – the player has entered a different space, within which different rules apply: "All play has its rules. They determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt." (Huizinga 1950:11). In an airport, the rules are fairly simple and clear, even if they sometimes catch people in impossible dilemmas, like the one of Nasseri – to leave the airport he had to prove that he had residency in Belgium, to prove that he had to leave the airport and go to Belgium for copies of his papers. Logging on and off the net doesn't require the same rigorous checks of identity as entering a country (particularly not logging off), but the public space of the net is a place of conflicting rules and dilemmas, which makes the airport more similar to a play-space than the public spheres of the net are. Perhaps can the image of the information-highway be taken seriously, and we can compare the highway on the net to the highways Augé describes:

> But the real non-places of super-modernity – the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge waiting for the next flight to London or Marseille – have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their 'instructions for use', which may be prescriptive ('Take right-hand line'), prohibitive ('No smoking') or informative ('You are now entering the Beaujolais region'). (1995:96)

This place of transit is defined partly by words, as is the super highway of information. While the World Wide Web today is defined also by graphics, by the speed of connections (like the speed of the motorway – smooth and fast is a quality), words are the keys to navigating. And when you turn off, you pass tollbooths or you reach borders where you need to identify yourself, or perhaps you end up in a little corner of the digital landscape, where no links lead you out, and the only way to get on is to go back until you reach the motorway again.

But online, reaching a space defined by history and culture rather than by signs and words is a matter of definition. The historical landmarks online – what are they?

Creating history and culture along the information highway

Can there be places at all, on the net, and not just non-places, marked by signs and texts? Surfing the net for chat rooms, the traveller often encounters territorial behaviour. This should, according to Augé be a sign of having found a place rather than a non-place: "The place held in common by the ethnologist and those he talks about is simply a place: the one occupied by the indigenous inhabitants who live in it, cultivate it, defend it, mark its strong points and keep its frontiers under surveillance." (1995:42).

Chatters tend to become protective of the room and what they understand as the benefits of their regular meeting 'place', the URL or online connection point where they find the software to let everybody connect. Strangers are questioned and tested before they are accepted, and offensive behaviour is punished by flaming or shunning. The games with their space of mystery and drama are even more protective. Not only are people asked to identify themselves at entering, they also have to learn the history of the place – both the fictional history, which is the frame of the stories created, experienced and told, but also the history of the different characters.

Here I would like to point out the different layers of fictionality and creation in a MUD (Mortensen 2003:71). When dealing with role-playing MUDs like *Dragon Realms* and *Aarinfel*, you have first the fiction that is the frame of the world. An example of this is the description of how in Dragon Realms the Dragon Lords were plotting to take over the known world, to create a realm in their image. Each of the clans as well as the religion, had a history of conflict, conquest, rise and fall, a history which none of the players had experienced. The original immortals, Topaz, Scarabae and Elwyn, the neutral, the evil and the good, had created a setting with a plan for a certain conflict. This was their history that they protected from the interference of the players through different mechanisms to control the play and punish those who did not pay attention to the history they had created, at the same time as they invited people in to play in and with it.

The other layer of history is the history of the game as it develops. New immortals are incorporated in this history. An example of the creation of a new immortal and the creation of a historical "marker" in the game was the advent of Azhanith. Azhanith in the flesh-world is my interviewee William, but I had no idea of that when I learned the history of Azhanith. This was the kind of history that travelled through hearsay, not written anywhere. The help-files says this about him:

Azhanith: As the patron of Mystery and Illusion, it is fitting that Azhanith should be largely an enigma to the Realms. It (even gender is not evident) is apparently a recent phenomenon, appearing only well after the escape of Balpherus. However,

there are references to Azhanith in ancient, arcane texts, and it claims to remember the Great War clearly. There are rumors that Azhanith is not a God at all, but is of the Fey, or is even one of the Princes of Hell. In any case, wherever the moon shines, Azhanith might be found, granting double-edged wisdom and pursuing inscrutable ends.

The "true story" of Azhanith was that he was a mage of Arcana, who happened to stumble upon the moon palace and its innermost secret:

> The Court Of Mystery
>
> [Exits: down]
>
> Standing here, you can no longer be sure of anything. This is an elegant theatre of a chamber, in which the walls hold windows to the night sky, but themselves contain all the bright stars as well. Above you, the ceiling reveals a moon, looming imposingly in a way which should be impossible. You are not sure if there is a floor beneath you at all, or just a descent through heatless silver flame into endless mystery.
>
> (Glowing) An eddy of moonlight drifts through the air.
>
> (Glowing) (Humming) An immense sphere of silver hangs motionless in the air.

The silver heart – the humming sphere of silver - was a repository of power, which he could use in the fight to keep Opal and Arcana safe in the struggle against the Dragon Lords. This gave him such immense power that he was taken to be a god, and he became immortal for all practical purposes. The history of William is that he himself built the Moon Palace, and then the character Azhanith was created to rule the palace. The "real power" behind the Palace is forgotten, or not revealed. This gave Azhanith/William a wide field to play on, as it could be evil, and twist his intent of aiding Arcana into serving Dragon.

This becomes part of the history of the game, which some of its players experience through their characters, just like there are witnesses to those or evidence of some kind of events reported in the history of the world. At the next level there is the private history of the characters – the Court of Mystery became where Erinn and Eristeth left their stillborn child after a disastrous birth. That is also the place where Eristeth came back to life after having given his life up to Azhanith in the body of Eystyx. And this is just the private history of two characters; the game became packed with such events that made the game or certain parts of the game a *place* for its players.

We can argue that it isn't really a place; there is nowhere to put your feet, or even your fingers, down on a physical spot. But aren't territories claimed and defined in the minds of its inhabitants, rather than by geological phenomena?

The place common to the ethnologist and its indigenous inhabitants is in one sense (the sense of the Latin word *invenire*) an invention: it has been discovered by those who claim it as their own. Foundation narrative are only rarely narratives about autochthony; more often they are narratives that bring the spirits of the place together with the first inhabitants in the common adventure of the group in movement. (Augé 1995:43)

The players and the administrators weave the stories of their characters together, and the intruder, the stranger strolling by and deciding to linger finds that there is history to each and every one of the characters about him, history on several levels, just as it is to the people in a flesh-world geographical space.

How can I talk about *place* though, when there is no physical surrounding *space*? Augé (1995:53) answers this for me, when he addresses Louis Marin. Louis Marin, for his part, borrows Furetière's Aristotelian definition of place ('primary and immobile surface of a body which surrounds an other body or, to speak more clearly, the space in which a body is placed'[3]) and quotes his example: 'every body occupies its place.'

Adhering to such a definition of *place* I could make no claim to such status for a game, which is, physically, a certain arrangement of electromagnetic pulses stored on a disk. However, Augé continues:

> But this singular and exclusive occupation is more that of a cadaver in its grave than of the nascent living body. In the order of birth and life, the proper place, like absolute individuality, becomes more difficult to define and think about. Michel de Certeau[4] perceives the place, of what ever sort, as containing the order 'in whose terms elements are distributed in relations of coexistence' and, although he rules out the possibility of two things occupying the same 'spot', although he admits that every element in the place adjourns other, in a specific 'location', he defines the place as an 'instantaneous configuration of positions'. (Augé 1995:53-54)

While it's a long stretch to claim that a MUD is a physical place, to claim that it is a social place is easier. Not the least of signs to that is what I mentioned before, the territorial behaviour. There is also the social behaviour, the way the inhabitants tend to seek each other out in certain clusters, which are resistant to outside pressures or attempts to split them. One player whose character Hordir was a member of Privateer (independent seafaring mercenaries/pirates) admitted that he would like to play in Arcana (the mages' clan fighting against Dragon), but if he did, he would betray his IC clan mates to his Out Of Character friends. The game did not only have the characteristics of an arena with teams, it had the characteristics of a place where humans dwell. It might not be McLuhan's global village, more of a global city - with many ooc neighbourhoods, cultures and subcultures occupying a commonly

perceived area with history, culture, rules, codes of conduct and intertwining relationships of love, like, dislike and aversion[5].

The idea that there might be actual places as in anthropological or social, on the net, is denied by Bolter and Grusin, who also use Augé for their discussion as the net as a place of a non-place:

To Augé's list of non-places we would add cyberspace itself: the Internet and other manifestations of networked digital media. Cyberspace is not, as some assert, a parallel universe. It is not a place of escape from contemporary society, or indeed from the physical world. It is considered a non-place, with much of the same characteristics as other highly mediated nonplaces. Cyberspace is the shopping mall in the ether; it fits smoothly into our contemporary networks of transportation, communication, and economic exchange. (1999:176)

This settles neatly into my own thoughts about the status of the net as a place – it does however not give credit to the places that are experienced as more than shopping malls online. They give an example of the characteristics of a non-place:

> Nonplaces, such as theme parks and malls, function as public places only during designated hours of operation. There is nothing as eerie as an airport at three o'clock in the morning, or a theme park after closing hours. When the careful grids of railings and ropes that during the day serve to shepherd thousands of visitors to ticket counters or roller coasters stand completely empty. Such spaces then seems drained of meaning. (Bolter and Grusin 1999:177)

This gives the assumption that the *places* in Cyberspace actually stand empty. *Dragon Realms* was never empty, unless something had happened to empty it out, like the server being down. There were always at least 4-5 people logged on. It was a meeting-place without closing hours. If you logged off at bedtime, you could expect something to have happened before you logged on the next day – the game lived on, it wasn't an amusement park where the carousels were turned off at 10 pm EST.

This was of course caused by the fact that DR had players from all over the world in the same way *The Well* has participants from all over the world. First, their own presentation of what The Well is:

> The WELL is an online gathering place like no other -- remarkably uninhibited, intelligent, and iconoclastic. For an action-packed fifteen years, it's been a literate watering hole for thinkers from all walks of life, be they artists, journalists, programmers, educators or activists. These WELL members return to The WELL, often daily, to engage in discussion, swap information, express their convictions and greet their friends in online forums known as WELL Conferences. (The Well 2001)

And then their own declaration of internationality:

> Where Is The WELL?
>
> The WELL is a cluster of electronic villages on the Internet, inhabited by peo-
> ple from all over the world. A discussion on the great eateries of Paris might
> include playful banter from people typing to one another from San Jose, To-
> kyo, Boston... as well as the Left Bank. Yet the ambiance is all WELL. More
> than just another "site", The WELL has a sense of place that is nearly palpable.
> (The Well 2001)

As Augé distinguishes between places and non-places, they are distinguished by
the fact that people pass through the non-places and pass by the places, not by the
signs or what Bolter and Grusin calls remediation. Remediation, the act of
translating or transferring content from one medium to an other does not create a
non-place, more than anything a non-place is distinguished by a certain feeling,
'something resembling freedom':

> When an international flight crosses Saudi Arabia, the hostess announces
> that during the overflight the drinking of alcohol will be forbidden in the air-
> craft. This signifies the intrusion of territory into space. Land = society =
> nation = culture = religion: the equation of anthropological place, fleetingly
> inscribed in space. Returning after an hour or so to the non-place of space,
> escaping from the totalitarian constraints of place, will be just like returning
> to something resembling freedom. (Augé 1995:116)

This is the same opposition between the non-places of the net and the more closed
places of games, non-anonymous chat rooms and other areas where the individual
is no longer passing through, but returning. "The totalitarian constraints of place"
are imposed on the players in a MUD, and logging off the game is returning to
something resembling freedom... the return to the place of departure, which is not
going home.

Topography in Cyberspace

Mapping out the landscape of Cyberspace seems like a mission impossible. The
places as well as non-places shift and move constantly. But if we approach the
problem from another angle, the topography of Cyberspace creates Cyberspace.
This sounds like Umberto Eco's playful dilemma when he writes of the impossibility
of drawing a map of the kingdom in the scale 1:1. The essay contains six demands
to a map in scale 1:1, and I am translating the sixth:

6. That the map at the end becomes a semiotic tool, which means that it's able to signify the kingdom or refer to it, particularly in the occasions where the kingdom cannot be realised in other manners. This last demand excludes the possibility of the map being a transparent cover stretched over the kingdom, and where the landscape of the territory would be reproduced precisely. In that case any extrapolation on the map would mean a simultaneous extrapolation on the territory beneath, the map would lose its function as a maximally existential diagram.

This is why it's necessary that (a) the map is opaque, or (b) that it's not on top of the territory, or (c) that it's placed so that the points of the map are not touching corresponding points in the territory.

It will turn out that all these three solutions leads to insurmountable practical difficulties and theoretical paradoxes. (Eco 1994:166[6])

The essay continues through a wide range of amusing paradoxes, but the most important is that the use of such a map will change the territory that it maps out, and as such, the map will no longer be correct. Or, as Eco says: "At the moment the kingdom draws the map, the kingdom can no longer be represented. (1994:174)"

This logic takes a different turn in Mark Nunes' discussion of "Virtual Topographies" (1999:61). His article points out how naming Cyberspace creates Cyberspace.

Topography serves as a highly appropriate word within the discussion of how these metaphors 'write' space. In the way J. Hillis Miller uses the term, topographies are performative speech acts that simultaneously map and create a territory (4-5). With Internet, this performative function is even more marked, since no reassuring "ground" rests beneath the writing of place. (Nunes 1999:61)

Nunes goes on to point out that Cyberspace is perceived as a place by its users, "as real as the work and play conducted in it." (1999:61)

In his discussion of Cyberspace as a place, he refers to Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of striated and smooth space. Striated space in the case of Cyberspace is supposed to be more functional than real space through more efficient point-to-point communication. Smooth space rebels against the striated space of grids, contact and control. "From within a State/striated topography, nomad/smooth space appears a dangerous zone, in need of containment. References to smooth space within striated topographies refer to it as a "wild beyond" or as a frontier waiting for its settlers and pioneers. (Nunes 1999:65)"

When comparing Augé's term non-place to Nunes' presentation of Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of striated and smooth space, they both come tantalisingly close, and conflict in interesting manners. The non-place is the area of transport as well as of commerce. A place to use to go from point to point with the highest possible speed. It's also a regulated place, marked by rules and regulation, and filled

with signifiers rather than history. Striation according to Deleuze and Guattari is what transforms territory into "land," which awaits allocation as property/proper place. On the other hand, holding property is associated with the home, the place, not the non-place of Augé, but the place where you are part of history, culture and social networks. Nunes uses the MOO as an example of a striated place, and also of a place not of departure, but of arrival:

> In a MOO your presence expresses itself in terms of proximity to other players within this "virtual space". In fact, players literally inhabit rooms in the MOO; a player-object stays "inside" the MOO, waiting for its player to log on and "awaken" it. All actions occur within this closed, defined system of the MOO "as a whole" (a cybercity), and within the strictures of a hierarchical arrangement of permissions. (1999:71)

This gives the striated space the qualities both of place and non-place. It is the space of connections and point-to-point communication, but also of arrival, property, and home.

Smooth space is according to Nunes represented through the surfing, as opposed to point-to-point contacts of telnet, email and ftp. Web-browsers permit for a rhizomic movement rather than a hierarchic structured travel. This puts the smooth space/striated space in a different dichotomy of that of Augé's place and non-place. The striated space covers both, while the smooth space covers neither. What Augé's dual image lacks is the wilderness, the area of rebellion and exploration. The new frontier has no history or culture yet, through which it can be defined, the roads can have no signs to tell us where we are or where we can go from here. The smooth space is all departure, a departure into the white areas on the map – or home. Going into the frontier, we can discover that the globe is round and return home, or we can find dragons. Augé offers us no white spots on the map to explore, only "a sense like freedom."

So where's the place of play?

In these dualistic settings of places and non-places, striated and smooth spaces, I find little room for the play. Bolter and Grusin claim that amusement parks or theme parks (1999:177) are non-places, which should make the non-places places of play. But are non-places *playgrounds* in the understanding of Huizinga? They fit with the limited locality, the different rules, the meeting of many, but are the playgrounds marked with signs and not with culture and history?

"If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with

identity will be a non-place. (Augé 1995:78)." The question is – is the playground defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity or not?

If the playground isn't a non-place, by Augé's logic, it has to be a place. But it is still a place apart. The football field is apart from the home and daily life, just like a game of football is an experience apart:

> More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga 1950:10)

The playground in relation to striated and smooth space defies definition. It is an area of strict rules, often a world apart: "Inside the play-ground absolute order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme" (1950:10). This is the characteristics of striated space – but at the same time, striated space represents the state, demands and restrictions (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:491), which play does not acknowledge: "Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task" (Huizinga 1950:8). This is a characteristic not of a hierarchical space, but of a movement dependent on pleasure, desire and enjoyment. According to this, play demands a smooth space, a space of something not just 'like freedom' but freedom itself. Play is freedom.

Where do the players play?

Somewhere in between striated space and smooth space, somewhere not a place and not a non-place, but touching and using all of these, we find the place of play, the playground. Even if I could map all the places where play is supposed to happen, the designated playgrounds, play happens elsewhere as well, simultaneously. Play happens on the mailing lists when they suddenly take off into the ritual of flame wars, and play happens in the home pages of institutions or individuals when there is excess. Because play is born from excess and from pleasure, and will slip out of

any designated play spot to happen elsewhere, be it sexual play or silliness, role-play or competition.

To be able to study play I have to accept that it will happen everywhere, and that the spots particularly assigned to play online are just theme parks on the net – closed areas to escape into - while play wants to be free and breaks out, mutating and taking over any resource it can thwart to its purpose of pleasing and challenging the player.

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Notes

1. Radway quotes one of her interviewees; Dot.

2. There are several links concerning this story at *Useless Information*, http://home.nycap.rr.com/useless/sir_alfred/, last visited Monday, 17 June 2002

3. Augé quotes Louis Marin: "Le lieu du pouvoir à Versailles', in *La Production des lieux exemplaires*, Les Dossiers des seminaries TTS, 1991, p 89

4. Here Augé quotes Michel de Certeau (1990 edn): *L'Invention du quotidian. 1. Arts de faire*, Gallimard, 'Folio-Essais'.

5. Perhaps the teams do fit in this description, as even professional football players will be in a quarantine for a while when they might risk playing against their old team-mates, because ties of loyalty and social commitment will always matter, even with those who are paid very well to ignore their former partnerships.

6. This is translated to Norwegian by Siri Nergaard, and is a collection of playful essays covering a wide range of topics, all of them with humour, irony and a touch of sarcasm. Some of the essays are written in a scholarly genre, but they cover topics like: "How to be a Hollywood Indian", or "How to recognize pornography".