

## Ethnography of Online Role-Playing Games: The Role of Virtual and Real Contest in the Construction of the Field

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**Key words:**

computer mediated communication, role-playing games, community, identity, experience, narrative, online and offline ethnography

**Abstract:** This paper invites the reader into the world of MUDs (Multi User Domains). Its underlying goal is to analyse certain social challenges associated with computer mediated communication (CMC), specifically with respect to the concept of the game; the process involved in the construction of the online Self or personality, potentially perceived as the final culmination of the frequent "comings and goings" between the game and reality; the concept of community that develops between two different *frames*—the virtual world and the real one; and, finally, the concept of both online and offline "experience".

The empirical research, focusing on a comparison between an Italian and a Canadian MUDs interactive game, used online ethnography as the basic premise of study and biographical interviews with the players themselves, as further validation of the phenomenon. A fundamental question faces a researcher when conducting the study of a MUD—is the online game the only realm to consider? What is the impact of a multitude of other media (Instant messaging, boards, e-mails, SMS etc.) used by *mudders* to communicate in order to organize the game and become familiar with each other? Is it necessary for a researcher to totally abandon the players' social premise even if s/he is focusing her/his research on online relationships? These are some of the questions this paper endeavours to answer, while also being cognizant of the methodological problems researchers encounter when studying the Internet, both as a medium (of communication) and as a research framework.

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## 1. Introduction

MUDs (text-based virtual realities), the electronic version of the traditional role-playing games, first appeared at the end of the 1970s, and are now considered a very obsolete kind of game if we compare them with the modern graphic games (such as the famous *War of the War Craft*). They are still very common, however, and have a large diffusion on the Internet. One of the reasons for their popularity is the fact that they are free. Even if modern computers can support more complicated game software, a lot of people still play these text games. [1]

Starting from the first years of the 1980s, MUDs became a very common research field and many researchers focused their attention on problems connected with the construction of identity and community in a virtual world such as a MUD<sup>1</sup>. The research I am going to present in this article starts from four theoretical hypotheses, which I will briefly describe in order to better understand the methodological issue concerned with a virtual ethnography. [2]

### 1.1 First step into a theoretical analysis: Are MUDs games?

Since MUDs are considered the online adaptation of the traditional role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, I started my analysis from the concept of questioning whether MUDs can be still considered games or not. At a first glance, it seems that the only difference between the two types of games is a different way of interacting: traditional role-playing games use face-to-face communication, while MUDs employ a mediated one. Actually, the technical support that *mudders* use to interact and to play (a computer and the Internet), has completely changed the mode of playing, not only from a technical point of view, but also in the way people experience play. The concept of game I started from is the one proposed by the Dutch scholar Johann HUIZINGA (1938) in his book *Homo Ludens* and by the French sociologist Rogers CAILLOIS (1967) in *Les Hommes et les jeux*. They affirm that a game is a social activity characterised by certain peculiarities: first of all, a game should be a free activity (that means there should be no constraints); it should be unproductive and always have an uncertain result. The fourth clause is that a game has to be an activity separated from ordinary life: a game has its own space and its own time which should be decided before the game starts and within whose borders only the rules of the game are valid while those of ordinary life are no longer applicable. In my opinion, MUDs, as the online version of the traditional *D&D* game, respect the first three rules while there are some problems in defining the fourth one. In a context of computer mediated communication (CMC), the categories of time and space are weaker than in a physical context. Moreover, the possibility of working at the same time on more than one "window" on the computer screen allows *mudders* to play during work or study time, as we can see from their own words:

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1 There is much research on MUDs and the very different approaches to the problems of what is virtual and how people create relationships in a virtual context such as MUD. Among them we cite BRUCKMAN (1992), CURTIS (1992), RHEINGOLD (1993), and TURKLE (1995).

"I usually play at work and it usually works in background, I'm usually online when there are the people I'm talking to and when I go back home, while I clean my cats or while I'm watching TV I jump there quickly to say 'hallo' or checking something important ... on the weekends, when I have nothing to do and I'm boring I play a couple of hours ..." (CA/3, F, 29).<sup>2</sup>

"Right now my job is predominantly office work, which means lots of telephone calls, lots of paperwork ... In this job there's a break every five minutes, also because in the morning, the game is not very exciting so I keep the window open but my real attention is mainly focused on my office work ... it's in the afternoon when I play a lot, also because in the afternoon 'friends' arrive and so I focus a little more attention on the game" (ITA/2, M, 34).<sup>3</sup> [3]

It seems obvious that the activity of playing is not completely separated from those of ordinary life. [4]

The issue of time and space in online role-playing games can be related to an overall discourse on the ways new technologies of communication change how people perceive themselves and the reality in which they live. Typical of mediated communication is the phenomenon of *disembedding* (GIDDENS, 1990), a term that refers to the complete detachment of places from contextualised spaces and, subsequently, from time. Even if CMC (computer mediated communication) allows people to extend their relationships without the constraint of physical reality, it also obliges people to learn new codes and new languages in order to communicate in a de-contextualised environment:

"Basically because text interaction is not enough, you know, it's good to talk, yes but you also need get together, party, talk freely, laugh, have fun, you know ... distance is lots of the problem ..." (CA/4, M, 21). [5]

The Internet is often described as a *non-lieux*, using the well-known concept of the French sociologist Marc AUGÉ' (1992)—a non-place where there is no possibility to develop identity and genuine relationships. Only solitude and similarity, affirms the author, oppose these places to those which he calls "anthropological places" where there is a symbolic construction of space and people can establish authentic relationships. If AUGÉ's (1992) concept of *non-lieux* can be acceptable for BBSs (Bulletin Board Systems) or newsgroups, where anonymous nicknamed participants exchange opinions about different topics, I think it is not suitable for MUDs where fictional (virtual) characters, animated by *mudders*, have a history and move in a very contextualised environment where the communication, even if mediated, retains a context with its own spatial and temporal dimension<sup>4</sup>. [6]

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2 Every interview quotation is classified with ITA or CA to indicate if the informant is Italian or Canadian followed by the chronologic number of the interview. F and M indicate the gender followed by the age of the informant.

3 All the Italian interview quotations in this article have been translated.

4 Even if they are textual games, MUDs have a precise setting that could be a medieval village or a futuristic town, where only certain kind of characters—coherent to the environment—can exist.

This new form of re-contextualised mediated communication, that is typical of MUDs and that distinguishes these games from other virtual environments, seems to be the result of a (virtual) reconstruction of a physical space, where characters move inside the game, and also the outcome of strong relationships established among players. MUDs can, in fact, be defined as places outside the spatial and temporal dimension of the ordinary life, but not completely detached from it because of the continuous coming and going between the online and the offline dimension, where everything is based on interactions and relationships among players. [7]

Among different models of association, SIMMEL's concept of *Vergesellschaftung* (1917) seems to be the one that best describes relations in MUDs. The German sociologist affirms that even if people usually associate according to commercial, religious or sentimental impulses, there is one form of association that goes beyond utilitarian interests. It is a very interesting form of association, founded on the pure pleasure of conversation. Typical of this sort of association is the fact it could occur only as a particular moment completely detached from reality; a moment during which individuals participate at the interaction solely as human beings, while any other characteristic (age, gender, social status) that is not strictly required is left out of the interaction. That is exactly what happens in MUDs as most of the informants confirm:

"Lots of these people have good relationships through the text and we don't care if you are 150 tons ... who cares!!!" (CA/13, F, 28).

"They weren't judging me, they were judging me for me. They're not judging you on your appearance, they are not judging you in any way, just you for you ..." (CA/15, F, 25). [8]

Information regarding the age, gender, and social status of players remains outside game interactions because they can interfere with the game itself and with the creation of this particular form of association<sup>5</sup>. Since the computer mediated communication that is at the basis of MUDs relations goes beyond the physical dimension of interaction, it allows this particular form of association, even if players know very well that the rules of online *Vergesellschaftung* are very different from those of face-to-face communication. [9]

## 1.2 Modern individuals and community

The second theoretical issue, I would like to raise concerns the concept of the modern individual in relation to the concept of community. The hypothesis I tested in my research concerns the idea that communities created around these games have some peculiarities of both traditional and pre-capitalistic societies and some others, of post-modern ones. MUD environments seem, in fact, to reproduce the typical traditional society based on small familiar groups, in which people live,

5 One of the risk of face-to-face meetings is the difficulty, when in game interactions, of putting aside such individual characteristics that can destroy the particular form of association of the *Vergesellschaftung*. Many informants, however, declare that it is more important to get together and make friends than to have perfect interactions in game situations.

considering themselves as part of a community. In this kind of society, identity is not founded on peculiarities someone has as single individual, but is based on the fact she/he belongs to the community. This means that her/his whole existence is strictly tied to belonging to the community; she/he cannot choose freely her/his own destiny, which remains tightly dependent on decisions that the community make for each member.

"I've become attached to my character and I've tried to make it develop, to make it improve, and try to make it become a famous character, carving its own space, its own circle of contacts and friends, interests ... and the contacts will allow it to change direction of the goals to reach and therefore, as a result of the change in goals its characteristics will change accordingly" (ITA/2, M, 34).

"My game is always and has always only been for the Guild. I've travelled all the steps of the hierarchy slowly ... I've been the deputy Master for a year and a half and now I've been the Master for about eight months. This role is truly more demanding and you really can no longer call this a game especially at this level" (ITA/16, F, 38). [10]

The social environment represented in MUDs is really different from the one we are used to in contemporary society: one of the peculiarity of these "virtual worlds" is the creation of a strong hierarchical society at whose base the so called Newbies (new players) remain while at the top the people who write and manage the game are positioned: Immortals, Gods or Wizards<sup>6</sup>. As in traditional societies, no one could exist in MUDs if not included in this established and very rigid order. On the contrary, in contemporary societies, people conceived of themselves as "individualised" individuals, which means they are totally free from every duty that they might have in the community to which they belong and are free to take decisions for themselves and their future. [11]

The modern world, as Zygmund BAUMANN (2000) in most of his works recalls, is characterised by the speed and continuity with which changes happen in the social environment where people live. It is a world of possibilities, a world where individuals, free from every constraint, can move from one social context to a different one. [12]

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, scholars have talked about the situation of modern individuals who lived in big cities. Georg SIMMEL (1903), in his essay on metropolis, calls the inhabitants of the city of that time *blasé* and defines inhabitant as a man who seems totally indifferent towards what happen around him. This sort of isolation from the external world, typical of the modern age, is a way to protect the Self from the continuous and rapid stimuli people experience from the outside and, at the same time, a way individuals have to protect the personal independence that they gained living in a contest, freed from traditional familiar constraints, as in a metropolis. As complementary figure to SIMMEL's *blasé inhabitant*, Peter BERGER (1984) chooses the protagonist of MUSIL's novel *Man without qualities* (1932). For BERGER, that man is the symbol of

6 On this topic see REID (1999) and TOSONI (2004). Both authors demonstrate how social structure of MUDs is not an example of democracy, in spite of the opinion of many scholars who say the Internet is the best place where democracy can affirm itself.

modernity because he is open to all the possibilities that life offers him. He has a disaggregated Self and always lives continuous shifts from one sphere of reality to another one. He is always *in progress*, as the modern age requires him to be and, even if he is more independent than before, he is condemned to live with a more and more precarious chance of maintaining unaltered the capacity to live without the doubt that reality is different from the way people perceive it. Free people have, in a modern society, many risks, according to the German sociologist, Ulrich BECK (1994). The biography of possibility and conquest of the modern age is a "self-made biography" that can easily turn into a biography of failure. One of the consequences of modernity is that individuals are free from belonging to a community, but they are alone and totally responsible for the choices they make for their future [13]

With regards to MUDs, I believe that people play these games in which they have to submit to a series of strong rules and re-establish a model of "belonging" relationships because of the need people have to recognise themselves as part of a group in a historical period during which these aggregations no longer exist. These are the words of an informant who doesn't play anymore but he still feels part of the community:

"It's my home [...] I'm an Immortal, I pop in once in a while because it will always be part of my life. I can't just abandon them because they are my friends" (CA/1, M, 23). [14]

Moreover, in the game, *mudders* identify themselves with the role that they play in that fictional society and have the duty to accomplish all the tasks that their characters have to contribute to the games' whole society ("When I was an Immortal they gave me an area to check for a while so in that period I was constantly, constantly online ..." CA/13, F, 28). In the community people create as players (but outside game relations), there are duties that can bind people and force them to participate in a series of activities that usually every small group (a clan, a guild or an order) organises. [15]

The commitment which *mudders* have in spending their time in activities for the community (for example administrating a forum, writing Quests in order to let people play or simply being "there" (online) if someone needs to talk) is very similar to the concept of *dépense improductive* that the French sociologist Georges BATAILLE (1967) conceived in opposition to the notion of utility and production. The concept of *dépense improductive* is based on the notion of "*perte*", affirms BATAILLE, "*qui doit être la plus grande possible pour que l'activité prenne son véritable sens*" (1967, p.33). In order to explain this concept of loss (*perte*), BATAILLE gives the example of *potlatch*, the traditional form of trade in some ancient communities where relationships were very important and maintained by this continuous exchange of "gift/donation". In the same way, I think, *mudders* create a strong community that cannot be explained within the classical concept of community, based on the idea of belonging, as classical sociologists like Ferdinand TÖNNIES (1887) and Max WEBER (1922) explained, but on this idea of loss that, in the case of *mudders*, is loss of time they spend playing and being online (whenever they can) for the community. Since the

concept of community is very controversial (in sociology), it seems to me that the idea proposed by the Italian scholar Roberto ESPOSITO (1998) could be very useful in order to understand these new forms of social aggregation typical of contemporary society. Starting from an etymological study, he affirms that the debates on the concept of community derive from a paradox inherent in the term "community" itself. The word "community", in fact, derives from Latin and has two meanings: the most widespread *cummunis* that means "in common" and a less used *cum munus* that means "with a duty/gift" to give and to receive. As ESPOSITO explains in his work, the paradox consists in the fact that a community is not a property, but a quality people who belong to the same group share. There is, in fact, a contradiction in possessing something that should be held in common. On the contrary, the community is something that has to do with the idea of a reciprocal donation. The conception of a debt someone has toward other members of a group is the fundamental principle of a community and establishes very close relations among people of the same family/order. Even in computer mediated environment like MUDs escaping from relationship could be easier than in physical world, nobody disappears without a valid reason. It seems obvious that the duty (*munus*) on which *mudders* found their community is the idea of "being there", of being always present in the relationship, as some *mudders* explained:

"I have just to be available if someone needs me ..." (CA/15, F, 25).

"Well, all my free time is taken up with the game. Any chance I get I have that on my computer" (CA/2, M, 19). [16]

### 1.3 The construction of the self in an online environment

Strictly connected with the concept of community is that of identity. The third hypothesis, around which I developed my research, concerns the idea that, in a MUD environment, the process of construction of the Self is a creative process very similar to the one that, according to Freudian analysis, involves children psychic growth in the first years of their lives. [17]

Starting from the late 80s, many researchers focused their attention on CMC and virtual environments like MUDs, underlining the idea that the massive participation in these games was a way to escape from reality. The idea that players confuse the "real" world in which they live with the "virtual" one of the game has become a common and contributes greatly to a labelling of this phenomenon<sup>7</sup> that is still very frequent. I would suggest a more moderate stance than the very radical position of the American socio-psychologist, Sherry TURKLE (1995) who believes that MUDs are points of non return because players completely lose the capacity to reconcile their "real" life and their "virtual" one. [18]

In connection with the third hypothesis, I found the concept of *transitional objects* by the English psychologist, Donald WINNICOTT (1971) very useful. Developed

7 On labelling phenomenon see BECKER (1963). In his ethnographical studies on two different social groups. BECKER explains the labelling theory and the concept of deviance that could be seen as a consequence of labelling processes.

in his book, *Playing and reality*,. WINNICOTT stated that a child initially makes no distinction between inner desire and outer reality, experiencing the mother's breast (or the bottle) as part of its inner reality that magically appears when needed. In WINNICOTT's account, as the mother becomes less adapted to the infant's needs, the child begins to experience the frustration of failure and the beginnings of a transition to the recognition of the autonomy of outer objects. This is assisted by a *transitional object*, a bit of blanket, toy, or cloth that is under the infant's control and is reliably present when needed. The *transitional object* opens the realm of play, where real objects are incorporated into the world of make-believe over which the child has some control, a realm which is not challenged by the question if objects are part of inner or outer reality. The realm of play is immensely exciting because it is precarious, an interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. It is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. This "in-between area" is the place where creativity takes place and that guarantees a healthy development of personality. Even if adults can clearly distinguish the inner and outer reality, they can still experience this transitional area in particular situations like playing or in some activities like artistic and scientific endeavours.

"I find it really help me for my creative side ... I'm a role player, it allows me to be creative, it helps how to develop my character, he is how I am so help me to figure it out, it's like a mirror of myself" (CA/4, M, 24).

"I create my character and I let her grow inside the game ... and she is like me, because I soon realised that I could not play a character different than me [...] when I play I express myself, I act as I really am ..." (ITA/5, F, 29). [19]

Back to MUDs, the theory of *transitional objects* seems to me very functional in order to explain some phenomena that involve players of these games. In particular, I would like to suggest the idea that the role (character) that every player plays in the game can be considered as the *transitional object* that mediate the relationship between the physical world in which players live and the fictional one in which *mudders* participate as actors in the virtual setting of the game.

"I've never role played before, I don't know but in my case I used to play an extension of myself ... it was easier to be myself, I was teenager at the time and I was terrible shy, terrible, terrible shy, so it was easier for me to talk in that world where you can be what you want to be and you can say what you want to say" (CA/13, F, 25).

"When I'm role playing and I have a different take on it, it's me any longer. I haven't done that in a while, so I don't really know where I'm going with that. It's basically me. I don't think I really act different. I'm a little more sociable" (CA/9, F, 31). [20]

Furthermore, the game and ordinary life are not separate dimensions in players' lives; on the contrary, they could be intended as two complementary cognitive and communicative *frames* (GOFFMAN, 1974). In fact, *mudders'* engagement in the game consists in a continuous coming and going between the online and the



offline *frame*, that is. between the game and ordinary life activities and it could be seen as the intermediate area where people can still experience a retrieval of creativity<sup>8</sup> that, in the game, reveals a regained ability of telling stories. [21]

MUDs are text-based virtual realities. This means that there are no graphic elements in the game but only texts written by players. Every *mudder* logs into the game and starts performing her/his alter ego (character) while interacting with other characters that live in that fantastic world created by players' stories. The involvement that players show in the game is not immediate. On the contrary, the integration into the game world comes about through the player's capacity to tell about her/his character, to create a coherent background of the character's past life and to interweave relationships in the present time of the game<sup>9</sup>. The growth of a character is strongly connected with a *mudder's* capacity to tell about her/his alter ego and to connect her or his character's biography with the main story of the game. *Mudders* don't only chat through performing their characters, but also they create a world with words. Playing a MUD is like a performative utterance (AUSTIN, 1953): what people write is immediately a fact. [22]

The narrative dimension we can find in MUDs, has a double aspect (JEDLOWSKI, 2000): on one side, it seems very similar to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, and on the other side to the modern serial fiction. It seems to refer both in some peculiar aspects of the modern fragmentary experience (*Erlebnis*) and to some characteristics of the experience as training routes (*Erfahrung*<sup>10</sup>). [23]

The relation between online and offline experience can be synthesised by the concept of multiple Self proposed (among others) by the Italian sociologist

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8 I use the term creativity in the same way WINNICOTT (1971) explains it in his book, that is, as the capacity, typical of children but also present in particular aspect of adult life, people have to play with part of their personality.

9 Here one of the example of *mudders* capacity to talk about the character they play:

"Rhyl is not my first character but she was the main character for mostly of the game I played, it's funny because I played D&D for years and I never thought at the character [...] when I was 16 my character was an extension of me and that was not fun, there's no creativity ... so I create Rhyl. She is a drow elf, a dark elf, an evil elf, she lives underground, she was a young character, noble family, she was involved in a simulation project and she joined the (name of the guild) then she grew up and became the leader of the Nation ... she was deported in Civil War that was the most amazing role playing plot that have ever wrote Realm of Despair we rewrote the novel [...] and it partially developed spontaneously and partially rewrote by seven of us and it was brilliant and in that period I was deeply addicted ... I lost lot of time at the university ... I spent all the time playing ... and then she was also involved in the Realm of Nation and she was murdered ... now she is in her evil skin...and lots of the people can't remember she anymore because she disappeared when I realise it was better to stop ... now some people who read the past adventure sometime when we meet say 'you are that Rhyl?? Oh wow!!!' (laugh)" (F, 28).

10 See BENJAMIN (1974, pp.603-653). In his essay on BAUDELAIRE, the German critique makes a difference between the two German words which mean "experience": *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The first term has to do with the idea that experience is in some way tied with individual biography, as BENJAMIN explains: "Wo Erfahrung in strikten Sinn obwaltet, treten im Gedächtnis gewisse Inhalte der individuellen Vergangenheit mit solchen der kollektiven in Konjunktion" (p.611). The word *Erlebnis*, on the contrary, is indicative of a feeling typical of modern society. Benjamin talks about *Schockerlebnis* to explain the way modern individual make experience of continuous external solicitations which surrounded him and, because of their fastness, he has not the time to reflect and let them settle.

Alberto MELUCCI (1991). Contemporary individuals have to get used to multiple situations of the complex society in which they live, and have to learn to shape their identity in a game of continuous metamorphosis. Like acrobats, *mudders* learn to manage the complexity of living various *frames*, whose boundaries are like osmotic membranes<sup>11</sup>, and experiencing the different sphere of life in a continuous coming and going. [24]

## 2. *Extremelot* and *Realms of Despair*: Two Case Studies for a Comparative Research

In order to verify the theoretical issues I have raised, I conducted empirical research consisting of Italian and Canadian case studies. The research started in January 2004 and ended in August 2005. During this period of time I chose the two MUDs, I started play the games with my own character and developed my covert ethnography by writing ethnographical diaries<sup>12</sup>. Since I had never played MUDs or other online games before, my attitude to ethnographic research was that of looking at these "worlds" with the glance of a stranger (GEERTZ, 1973)—that means with the right cognitive distance that a researcher needs when she/he observes a social phenomenon. From a technical point of view, *Extremelot* and *Realms of Despair* are very different games, even if they have some common features. The reasons behind my decision to choose these two MUDs are various. I decided to study *Extremelot*, the Italian game, because of its exponential growth in the last years and for its popularity among Italian *mudders*, while I found *Realms of Despair* interesting because it is implemented with a particular server software<sup>13</sup>. Another difference between the two MUDs consists of the different interaction *mudders* have with the game: the idea of the Italian

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11 On the concept of frame boundaries like osmotic membranes see DRUSIAN (2005). In her research on teenagers and chats, the Italian researcher explains the idea that Internet users are people who are used to living on the border, between the online and the offline dimension, in a sort of liminal space.

12 Ethnography, as an empirical research method in social research, implies some problems that concern the access into the field, the observation of behavioural phenomena and social practices and the interpretation of data. While overt observation is considered a more ethical practice because the observed subjects know about the researcher's identity and aims and they can negotiate the consent, covert ethnography guarantees the fact that social actors are not inhibited by the researcher's presence and their behaviours are genuine. Since I considered the game as a "public square" (ESS, 2002) I chose to use covert participatory ethnography in order to better understand the ways in which people enter into a game for the first time (and it was the same for me), the means they gave in creating a character, in learning to play, and the way that they know people and create communities in an online environment. As soon as I choose my case study, I contacted the owners of the game in order to inform them about my research purposes and the method I would like to use to conduct my research. I did not need any informed consent (I asked for it only for the interviews) for the ethnography because I didn't record any chatrooms but only wrote ethnographical diaries (with observational, emotional, theoretical and methodological notes) as is the very common ethnographical tradition. Even if covert observation allowed me to really experience the game as a personal and social practice, I was very concerned about revealing my real identity in order to collect my interviews: I was afraid players would feel betrayed. To my great surprise the *mudders* whom I contacted granted my request with curiosity and they accepted my invitation to participate in the interviews. I think the fact that they knew me as a player before, rather than a researcher, played an important role in the construction of trust: as many players told me in informal meetings or during the interview that they trusted me as a researcher not only because of the professional guarantees gave them, but also because I was (and I still am) a *mudder* as they were and could properly understand their experience.

13 *Realms of Despair* (RoD) uses SMAUG, implemented in MERC 2.1.

MUD's authors was to create a community around a game so interactions among players are encouraged. On the contrary, the Canadian MUD is a proper game: players have to gain points in order to let their characters grow. Interactions among *mudders* is welcome, but it is something that is secondary. [25]

*Extremelot* was created in 1998 by a group of friends who are still the owners and implementers of the game. Since then it has grown and now counts an average of one thousand users online at the same time daily. Even if the means of diffusion of this kind of game is by word of mouth, there are many specialised web sites or magazines where people can find MUDs. The fate of the Italian game was shaped by the fact they chose to advertise widely in magazines and on web sites; this meant a wide diffusion and the attraction of many curious visitors who log onto the game only to see what it is about. As a counterpart to this choice is the fact that *Extremelot* has a great number of players who stop playing the game after a very short period. There are, however, a certain number who, even if they have never role-played, become fond on the game. [26]

On the other hand, *Realms of Despair (RoD)* was written by one person who is the owner, but it has been implemented by many players at the level of *Immortals*<sup>14</sup>. Created in 1993, it is the best example of a game which utilises a particular server software—SMAUG (*Simulated Medieval Adventure Multi-user Game*). Contrary to the Italian game, *RoD* doesn't have a great number of players connected to the game at the same time; the difference with the Italian game is that doesn't depend on popularity, I think, but on the fact there is a greater number of MUDs where people can use English language than MUDs where the language of the game is Italian. Nonetheless, the number of players in a MUD have a certain relevance because the life of free games like MUDs depends on it: a low number of users allows the owner to maintain the game at a non commercial status, which means small servers and low expenses to manage it. On the other hand, a MUD needs a sufficient number of players in order to have no dead period during the day or the night. Since a MUD is online 24 hours a day, there should always be someone who plays in order for *mudders* to find it attractive; only a great number of players can assure this. [27]

Although MUDs are considered outdated games, (and they are really obsolete if we consider new games with innovative graphics), their attractiveness consists in the fact that they are free. Even if the owners (usually one or two people) maintain the responsibility of the management of the game, that is its proper functioning and its costs, players contribute to a MUDs life, not only playing and organising, but also with donations<sup>15</sup>. The participation in the life of a virtual community like that of MUDs requires a high commitment, both in performing a

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14 *Immortals* are players who gained a certain score and a certain experience in playing the game. Moreover, they have to be trusted by the owner who allows them to know the server code in order to modify the game's structure.

15 While the Canadian game is maintained by players' donations, in Italy players create a cultural association with the aim of organizing reunions and gatherings in order to manage the MUD from a technical point of view.

character and in carrying on other activities not strictly related to the game; that is, building or repairing part of the game, writing quests, organising reunions. [28]

### 2.1 Notes on the ethnography: Covert observation and access into the field

When I started playing the Italian game, I had a partial idea of what a MUD was: that means I had only an academic knowledge of these games and a limited experience of face-to-face role-playing games. I entered the game with my character and I spent the first month watching other people play, reading the *newbies* guide and the various boards. Playing a MUD is not really immediate—a lot of *mudders* confirmed this observation to me during the interviews<sup>16</sup>—and people need a good capacity of self-identification with their character (the *transitional object*) whom they are going to perform and with the situation that is going on in a chat. MUDs are, in fact, like a big chat with different chat rooms, each one represents a place: a church, a castle, a square. People log in and find themselves in the middle of something which is happening: a battle, a ceremony, the celebration of a birthday or a wedding. They have to introduce their *alter ego* in the situation with actions that have to be coherent with the scene. As regards self-identification, MUDs are very similar to the theatre form of acting extempore: there is a setting and a situation and actors have to perform their character in keeping with the circumstances. The only difference between theatre and MUDs is the fact that a drama setting has a physical scene while a MUDs setting has a virtual location. In a MUD we don't see people performing their characters; we can only read what *mudders* write with their keyboards and appears on the screen. As people log into a MUD chat can only read text strings by scrolling quickly, assuming that what is happening consist of real events (for the characters, of course!). A high level of imagination is what distinguishes *mudders* from a video-gamers. [29]

As soon as I began playing, I discovered that the activity of lurking—that was my principal occupation in the first month of covert ethnography—was not enough to understand the game. Even if during my first experience in playing a MUD, I easily realised that people played in small groups of players who know each other, and the more I entered into game relations (I wrote the background history of my character, I joined an elfin clan), the more I discovered MUDs have a double level of interaction. The first one, the surface, is given by the game itself with its rules and its goings-on. The second level does not properly have to do with the game and a player can discover it only if she/he joins an organisation (a clan, an order, a guild). Players of the same organisation talk to each other by Instant Messaging software; they use a forum and mailing list in order to discuss the game and to organise as a small community. Interaction has a double aspect: there is an *ongame* communication where people play and perform their *alter ego* and an *offgame*, one where people chat and know each other as individuals. [30]

Knowing this "subterranean" side of the game is very important because it allows a researcher to understand how communication works in this virtual environment

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16 "In my first month I felt like a fish out of water! I spent a lot of time watching people playing, but without saying a word!" (ITA/16, F, 38)

and, subsequently, how people establish relationships. The relation between these two levels of communication is very similar to the concept of *stage* and *backstage* proposed by Erving GOFFMAN (1959). In the *ongame* situation people play the rôle they have chosen for their characters, performing a play for a public which is composed by the same players who are logged into the same chat room. At the same time, in the *offgame* communication (by Instant Messaging) *mudders* talk about the game, what is "happening" in the chat room, keeping up a running commentary on situations and people but, above all, they chat about personal subjects. [31]

One of the problems in studying the Internet or an aspect of it using ethnography, is the difficulty a researcher has in defining the field. I chose to analyse MUDs, but I soon realised that I could not circumscribe the boundaries of my observation at the game in itself because there was a "world" beside the game, a "world" that is an extension of it. Systems of instant messaging, guilds and clan's websites and boards create a "world" made by discussion, organisation and chatting, a parallel "world" where players create the meaning of their playing. In my opinion, a deep understanding of MUDs cannot be separated from the study of these other media that players use to communicate. MUDs, as *mudders* told me during some interviews, have been created as a chat system to which people added game situations. It is, therefore, the social aspect of these kind of games that players want when they start playing a MUD: they know well that on the other side of their screen that they are not playing with a machine, but with other people (and this is the fun!). Including this aspect of MUDs in ethnographic analysis is important in order to understand how people can create strong relationships in an online dimension. As soon as I realised that players used systems of instant messaging and forums to communicate "outside" the game, I included them in the fieldwork, considering them as two other public arenas where people negotiate the meaning of their playing and their online interactions. As I did for the game, I did not record anything, but only wrote ethnographic diaries<sup>17</sup>. [32]

Moreover, this level of chatting in an *offgame* situation can be considered the step before people meet in a "real" context. In fact, both in Italy and Canada *mudders* use to organise reunions as a moment of social interaction in physical reality. During my 16 months of research, I attended three reunions: two in Italy and one in Canada. The way I carried on my ethnography in the two countries was different as was my position towards MUDs when I attended the reunions. I went to my first reunion 6 months later I started playing the Italian MUD. Nobody knew my real purpose (except from the owners of the game) and I acted like any other *mudder* there: meeting people with whom they play online, talking about game adventures and about personal things. The thing that most puzzled me was the level of intimacy and complicity players have, even if it was their first meeting. [33]

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<sup>17</sup> Writing ethnographical diaries was useful in order to understand and analyse how players perceive, organize, give meanings to, and express their understandings of themselves, their experiences, and their worlds. Observation was useful in order to create the interview schedule I used to let players talk about the social practices which they experienced both in online and offline environment.

Many scholars affirm that one of the peculiarities of CMC is that, behind a screen, people can disguise themselves and say/do things they never would say/do in a face-to-face communication. A sort of *dis*-inhibition characterises, in fact, chat environments where people can log in with different nicknames and for a short period of time. On the contrary, I don't think that it is applicable for MUDs where players attend these games for years, usually with only one character through which she/he is recognised in a continuous coming and going between the online (both in an *ongame* and an *offgame* communication) and the offline dimension. What people say and how people behave in a protected situation as the online communication has to be confirmed in the offline meetings. Constant identities (RHEINGOLD, 2002) and coherent behaviours—both in *ongame* and *offgame* interactions—allow *mudders* to trust each other and, even if a player betrays somebody's trust, they don't lose confidence in the idea that MUDs are good environments where to become friends, and in CMC in general<sup>18</sup>. [34]

When I attended my second reunion in Italy, I had already interviewed some players and many people knew who I was. My participation at the event had a double purpose: to meet people I used to play and collect my ethnographic notes about the event. The very interesting thing was that people whom I interviewed didn't change their attitude towards me, neither in the game nor in face-to-face meetings. Since people attended the reunion in order to get together with those with whom they play and chat everyday online, I was very surprised when I noticed players were not upset that I was also attending the reunion because I wanted to interview some Immortals. If we consider the fact that I played the game for months without saying I was doing research, I don't think players were not disappointed because they appreciated the fact I openly declared myself and also because of my interviews. On the contrary, I suppose they didn't perceive it as a betrayal of "our friendship" simply because they considered me a member of the community. Furthermore, being there, enjoying the company sharing experiences is a fundamental aspect of the growth of the community, even though I was doing it for work. [35]

A completely different situation was experienced in analysing the Canadian case study. Instead of playing as I did in the Italian MUD, in *Realms of Despair* I created a character but I did not really play the game. After a couple of months during which I observed the game<sup>19</sup>, I tried to contact some players in order to have more information on the MUD. I opened a discussion in a public forum, presenting myself as being a Ph.D. student of an Italian University and presented my research, giving some references and the link at my University Department home page in order to give them access to information about me. At my expense (of time that was passing by without results with the consequence of an

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18 Many informants told me about bad experiences they had had with people in the online community, but they still had a good opinion of the game and the fact that it is the best way to make friends. An informant said, in fact, that a MUD is like the world: there is something good and something bad.

19 Even if I had had my own character and I had entered the game and participated in some debates in forums, I had not really played the game because it is very hard to play in a language that is your mother tongue: typing fast on the keyboard in order to interact with other players and follow the play requires very high linguistic competence.

increasing feeling of frustration) I soon realised that the fact that people do feel not obligated to answer surveys in online newsgroup, (as Nancy BAYM [1995] suggests), was true and I had to change my strategy. I then decided to write personal messages to some Immortals, which may have included the owner of the MUD, asking for historical and technical information about the game. With great surprise, two people answered this time, declaring that they could help me with my research. In particular, one of the two informants gave me precious technical information on the server software and the code that *Realms of Despair* coders use; the other helped me in contacting players in order to arrange some interviews. He posted a message in the reunion's forum and he introduced me; he talked about my research and invited people to offer their time to be interviewed. This time many people agreed, writing me private messages and asking about the research and the interview. Although my participation at the reunion was announced by one of the *Immortals* and people who agreed with the interview were waiting for me, Canadian *mudders* acted as I was not there, as though I were invisible. As the famous anthropologist Clifford GEERTZ wrote in his study of "The Balinese cockfight" (GEERTZ, 1973), during his sojourn in the small village he decided to study, nobody seemed notice his presence there, nobody talked with him; on the contrary, they completely ignored him. So *mudders* did with me: during the three days that I spent with them, nobody tried to involve me in their activities and when I tried to ask someone to be interviewed the first thing they asked to me was if I have ever played a game or not. This attitude towards me emphasises the importance of having a "common ground"—as an informant said to me—to share in order to understand each other<sup>20</sup>. [36]

### 2.1.1 The stereotype of geek. Are mudders a "deviant" group?

A very particular aspect of *mudders* attitude towards the game is the fact they don't talk about their passion for the game with people who don't play. During the interviews, both Italian and Canadian players declare that talking about MUDs with people who don't play is a waste of time because they cannot understand and outsiders may judge their passion as childish. So while they show an unconditioned willingness towards people who are interested at the game (for examples the *newbies*), with the same attitude, they exclude everyone whom they perceive as being extraneous to the community. To reinforce this particular feeling of belonging to the community, based on the fact *mudders* cannot share that common ground given by game's rule and practices, is the stereotype of a *geek*<sup>21</sup>, very popular in North America. A *geek* is an individual who develops asocial behaviours which lead him to live an isolated existence. This term in English seems to have changed its meaning: from a general meaning it acquire a particular and negative significance in referring principally to people who have an obsessive interest in computers and programming activities and CMC. [37]

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20 During the interview, both Italian and Canadian informants told me that they don't talk about the game with people who don't play because it is a waste of time: they have no idea of what the game is about and tend to judge them as childish.

21 The meaning of the word "geek" in the Oxford English Dictionary: geek, (informal) 1) a person who is socially uncomfortable or unfashionable; 2) an obsessive enthusiast.

During my interviews many *mudders* define themselves and people they know as *geek*<sup>22</sup> allowing me to delineate a community around this stereotype that, used by players, seems to assume also a positive connotation. The stereotype of *geek*, present only among Canadian players, shows the fact it has a cultural origin maybe due to the longer history of use of the Internet (in Canada) whose practices are already part of players' commonality. [38]

People whose behaviour is labelled as "deviant" (maybe just because it is not very common) tend to protect themselves from the judgement of external people and try, especially if they are teenagers, to attend places and situations, like MUDs, where they are not judged for "being a *geek*" but for what they really are ("*they [mudders] are judging you for you, not for your appearance*", CA/13, F, 25), that is, people who love these sorts of games. At the same time, since they only meet people with the same interests (other players, for example), they underline a prejudice that turns against a whole category of people. In his study on deviant communities Howard BECKER (1963) shows how a group, which is labelled as *outsider* for a particular behaviour society labelled as deviant, develops a series of mechanisms of cohesion within that allows its members to consider as *outsiders* everyone who has nothing to do with them. *Mudders* attitude of considering it a waste of time to talk about the game with non-players seems to me indicative of the fact that relying on having found a group of people "as geeky as they are" and "living" in this protect situation that CMC. They seem not to be inclined to open themselves up to other people and to expose themselves to people's judgements<sup>23</sup>. [39]

Here the use of the term "geek", it seems to me, allows *mudders* to recognise themselves as a group and establish a boundary between who belongs to the community and who is external to it. [40]

## 2.2 Do the physical contexts influence the game and people's attitude?

As we saw in the previous section, the Internet is a very complicate research field and, even if we tried to define a precise boundary in our study, unavoidably we had to reconsider the idea of studying a MUD as an exclusive research field. On the contrary we were forced to continuous accommodations. [41]

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22 An informant said: "I have lot of friends who are computer geeks, and, back at the university, in my second year, I had a friend who was a computer programmer and because I played D&D he introduced me to the MUD world" (CA/13, F, 28). The fact that Canadian players define themselves or their friends as "geeks" was very surprising and obliged me to think about this stereotype in order to understand why they used it.

23 Actually, I don't consider CMC and MUDs as negative, on the contrary, it seems to me that in contemporary society, where people experience a sort of isolation—because of being away from home and family or because big cities don't allow easy movement—virtual environments like MUDs become a "place" where it is still possible to meet people and create very close relationships. *Mudders*, conscious of the fact it is not easy to make friends, are very "jealous" of their "virtual" friends and very proud of being part of a group. As a result it seems to me that the stereotype of "geek" is used in a way that seems that they don't mind if people call them a "geek" (in fact, they use this term to define themselves even if it has a negative meaning), because they have discovered a "world" where people participate just for the pleasure of playing, chatting and meeting other people without any social constraint and prejudices.



At the beginning of the research, the idea of a comparison between two different MUDs in two different countries seemed a very bizarre idea: Computer Mediated Communication goes beyond territorial (physical) frontiers and the common idea is that it doesn't matter where a MUD server is located since people can play wherever they live in the world (of course they have to be able to access the Net). My sceptical attitude towards the possible results of a comparison research disappeared as soon as I realised there were some connections between the location of the server on which the MUD runs and where players live. [42]

The first big difference between Italy and Canada is the fact that the Italian MUD has a natural boundary created by language: few foreigners play *Extremelot*, since they have to speak Italian and few players live outside Italy and, a part from some Swiss, they are always Italians who live abroad. In the Canadian game the language is, on the contrary, a medium to also reach the MUD from abroad: English is, in fact, an international language and it implies that many players could live in other Countries like the U.S.A., Australia, and Great Britain. The interesting thing is the fact that players, in spite of living all around the world, are concentrated in the Toronto area and in the east of Canada. The idea that CMC completely changed the perception of the categories of time and space is true and it has many consequences in everyday life. In regard to time, it is evident that *mudders* perceive it as a flow (SEMPRINI, 2000): "*there is no dividing*" (CA/11, F, 24) between the various spheres of life, as an informant said. Players are always online playing and working/studying, and when they are not *ongame* they are online chatting with people from the game, while doing other activities (cooking, reading, watching television). But the idea that CMC deletes physical distances is only an illusion: *mudders* play for years, spending a lot of time with their "virtual" friends, but, after a certain period, players no longer consider it satisfactory to play alone and all the *mudders* I interviewed felt the need to meet other players whom they could consider friends. Because they are used to "meeting" in this non-physical dimension, players felt a great sense of frustration when they realised that physical distances still exist and they have many difficulties (organisation and cost of the travel) in getting together. [43]

Using ethnography as a research method in an online context has some limits because, although it allows a researcher to understand how a medium works—in the case of MUDs, how people play and how MUDs work—it doesn't allow the researcher to understand what people think about that medium, what its function in their everyday lives is and how they perceive themselves through the use of such medium. In the case of my research on MUDs, it was very interesting to discover how people define themselves in relation to the game and it allowed me to create a typology of players<sup>24</sup>. [44]

24 *Mudders* can be divided into three groups by considering how they define themselves and their attitude and interests towards the game. The first group is composed of *coders*: players whose first interest in the MUD is programming. They start playing but they aspire to a position as Immortal because their aim is to write the code of the game and, in a future, to create their own MUD. In the second group we find *role-players*: people who are experts at role-playing games. Even if they know well the social possibility that a MUD offers, their principal interest is the ludic aspect of the game. Players whose only aim is to make friends comprise the third group. *Chatters* have, in fact, only a social interest in the game. They don't really play, but they try to create good relationships, meet people and organize meetings.

The attitude people have towards a medium, I think depends on users social background: in my face-to-face interviews I discovered many differences, but also similarities, between the Italian and the Canadian contexts. The first difference was related to the degree of socialisation (domestication) of a medium such as the Internet: Canadian higher level of utilisation of the Internet is demonstrated by the fact there is no difference between adult and young users. While in Italy adults *mudders* start playing moved by curiosity—but also by a feeling of apprehension and scepticism—they show a great surprise when they discover the possibility a MUD affords them to make new friends. Canadians (both adults and teenagers) make no difference between mediated and face-to-face relationships and they start playing a MUD with the clear intention to get to know people. Moreover, the unconditional enthusiasm teenagers have for the possibility of making friends through CMC is due to the fact that they have weaker social relationships, while adults, in general, have to manage pre-existing familiar and friendly bonds as well as the new "virtual" ones. Related to this issue is a generalised condition of emotional isolation which characterises both Canadians, and, in a lower percentage, Italians. A conspicuous number of informants declared that they don't live in their native towns, principally because of their employment, and, as a consequence of their loss of close relations with family and friends, are more well-disposed towards mediated communication and the idea of interacting with other people with whom they share the same situation. This sort of isolation is, in fact, often created by the urban context in itself: given the great mobility contemporary society imposes, we have also to consider that particular attitude of total indifference towards external stimulus that, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the German sociologist Georg SIMMEL (1903) ascribed to an intellectualisation of feeling, as a strategy of protection people use to survive in big cities and this is very similar to the way *mudders* live, nowadays. They, in fact, don't show attraction towards any other activities except their principal activity (work or school) and MUDs. It is well known that these kinds of games completely involve players in many activities, but the difference we can notice between Canada and Italy depends also from the social context of where players live. [45]

As *mudders* confirm with their behaviours, real and virtual lives are strictly connected in a sort of circular process in which the two dimensions influence each other: social context and its stereotypes (as we already saw) influence the way people play and the significance they give to the MUD; at the same time game situations and relationships among players can have consequences in *mudders'* real lives (many players marry someone they have met through the game, for example). In the case of MUDs, ethnographic research can have exhaustive results only if the ethnographer learns *mudders'* capacity to live moving from the virtual to the real *frame*. The two aspects are, in fact, inseparable: *mudders* are individuals who live in a precise social context and a researcher should not forget it in her/his analysis, since many of the players' attitudes and behaviours towards the game and towards other *mudders* depend on their social background. [46]

Moreover, virtual communities like these created around MUDs can be considered as communities of practices: the participation is voluntary and the process of socialisation is more oriented to sharing experiences than to reaching common purposes. Members of these communities have in common the desire to take certain routes together, interpreting events as they come and create meaningful environments. They behave freely but always respecting some rules. The satisfaction that participants get from this union becomes a founding value of the community in itself. [47]

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