PRODUCING IM/POSSIBLE SUBJECT/IVITIES
AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE VIRTUAL AND THE REAL

Melissa Altman

A Thesis

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COMMITTEE:

Radhika Gajjala, Advisor

Denise Menchaca
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ABSTRACT

Radhika Gajjala, Advisor

This thesis considers the production of subjectivity at the intersection of technologically mediated and non-technologically mediated environments. The research questions explored here include: First, how do students negotiate non-normative identities in the classroom space? How is this negotiation impacted by the subjectivity production in the MOOspace? Second, who is empowered to speak/exist on the MOO and who is not? This question considers questions of access, including hardware, facility, comfort level, previous experience as well as questions of power? Who is empowered to speak and who is silenced? Lastly, how does dwelling on the MOO impact the performance of "real life" identity in the classroom?

I develop a theoretical framework for examining the process of producing subjectivity at the intersection of virtualspace and realspace. I address Butler's notion that subjectivity is enacted or performed. In addition, I use Bourdieu's notion of habitus to look at the context of sedimented history that frames future actions or performances of identity.

Because the object of study here is specifically the process of subjectivity production, I engage a methodology that considers meaning-making process from the point of view of the participant/subject. Methods used include textual analysis, participant observation, autoethnography, performative writing. I offer a performative writing text employing a narratized account of MOO transcripts (from
engaging MOO technology), journal entries, and discussion board posts in order to
reconstruct the meaning-making process found at the intersection with technology.

I came to this research negotiating im/possible subject/ivities. The MOO serves
as a metaphor, for me, of how production of the self always happens in relation to a
structuring context, a set of rules and requirements and habits that are always in
force, regardless of whether we can see and understand them. The process of
producing subjectivity is negotiation, from various positions of power and
knowledge, but always negotiation with the discourse, the structuring language and
habitus that forms the context of production.
This thesis is dedicated to my family—Liz Morgan, Amber Bryan, and Daniel Bryan—without whose unflagging love and support I could never have started this journey, let alone completed it.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION: IM/POSSIBLE SUBJECT/IVITIES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PERFORMATIVE TEXT: MEANING MAKING ON THE MOO</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ANALYSIS: MAKING MEANING OF WHAT HAPPENS ON THE MOO</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. WORKS CITED</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: I M/ POSSIBLE SUBJECT/ I VITIES
What is it that will give me “identity”? A lot of it is how I am perceived by someone else. Today I seem to have given away this power to people who have a vested interest in seeing me as one thing or the other. . . . I am constantly in the position of negotiating for more space. . . . Do I get more people to negotiate on my side, do I decide that I and only I will decide my identity . . . in a “RL” [real life] world where my identity is already threatened by my own ignorance. . . . Will not the net just be one more place where I am “ignorant”? – Mamidipudi, 1999 – personal email communication to Gajjala (Gajjala, Cyberfeminism 8).

I don’t believe in gay marriages, he said; society just isn’t ready.

don’t believe?, i thought
As though my family can be conflated with unicorns
since when is your belief required for me to exist?
(and yet it is)...
(this is why i became a communications scholar—if the facts of my marriage, the fact of its very existence, can be called into question by someone’s belief, like the existence of the great pumpkin, then how can there be any question that meaning-making is a process, that nothing exists outside the context in which we make sense of it, that facts are not beyond interpretation but inside it)

-- excerpt from a student poem ¹

Perhaps that is the thing from class that the MOO reflects for me again—I can be very aware of my context, I can analyze it, I can even try to step outside of it briefly, but I can’t escape it. Permission denied.
-Bubbles’s autoethnography from MOO exploration²

Labels, definitions and categories such as gender, race and class are shaped through discussions and articulations from within a westernized academy, and are situated in contexts that are culturally, economically and historically specific to only certain populations around the world. This means that populations are allowed a voice only within hegemonically available categories and labels. Discourse itself, however well-intentioned and democratic the rhetoric and ideals contained within it, limits the ability to produce counterspheres. (emphasis added)

--Gajjala, Cyberselves 55

¹ From graduate Communications class, spring 2004
² From graduate Communications class, spring 2004
I come to this research with intimate knowledge of the experience of trying to produce impossible subjectivities. I come to this research as a person, who, in everyday life, experiences code switching, schizophrenia, multivocality, multiple personalities. I come to this research as a person for whom the notion of “performing” and “producing” the self is intuitive—moving throughout my day requires many shifts:

my identity
my appearance
my subjectivity
my demographics
my statistics
my clothes
my self

Postmodern scholars have theorized about whether each of these selves is still me, whether and in what ways the selves can be integrated, even whether an attempt to mend such fractures can or should be pursued. Meanwhile, like many other folks, I go on with my daily life, enduring, negotiating, strategizing, accepting, and resisting the ways in which my subjectivity is produced in each shifting context.

My point of entry to this research comes from the daily experience of occupying multiple im/possible subject/ivities. My identity is subsumed into categories and labels created hegemonically. I cannot speak without this discourse—yet this discourse itself shapes how I am produced as I move throughout my daily contexts, and each
experience shapes how I will be molded the next time (like playdoh pushed through a mold).

I cannot claim selfhood, identity, substance, unless I do so in relation to this ever-present hegemonic discourse. I may not be reflected within the discourse, but this means that I will be reflected outside of it—othered as it were. I must exist in relation to this discourse, somehow, and in return this shapes my subjectivity.

I began this research, intrigued, like many, with the possibilities of technology for circumventing some of those daily fractures—I was interested in how as a cyborg I could escape the “meat”\(^3\) of everyday interaction, rise above my messy, ever-present body and the way it is coded culturally, ascend into a world of words and pure meaning.

What I found was that online I still have to negotiate the production of subjectivities. I do not escape the liminality I experience daily when I go into MOOs, emails, chat spaces, or virtual classrooms. The fractured self that I integrate into the I that speaks as author here is not less fractured online. The fractures/overlaps/shadows look different in different online spaces. But as someone who moves through this kind of shifting maze daily in the various windows of my “real,” non-virtual life (e.g., the spaces not mediated by computer technology), the introduction of a computer interface to mediate communication with others does not solve the crisis of representation.

What I found, and continue to encounter, is that production of subjectivity is mediated culturally in every context, and that online and offline contexts overlap and

\(^3\) from the novel Neuromancer by William Gibson
interact in complex ways, just the same as various offline contexts do. Work and school are two contexts—but personal email and staff meetings are two others. When we think of the self as moving through these contexts, we simplify with the spatial metaphor a process that involves the production of the self—culturally mediated within and across each context. Many times each day “work” and “school” and “home” intersect as we check the email from the boss, chat with a friend, and research articles, all in the same body, in the same chair, facing the same computer. The spatial metaphor is useful for understanding and separating the tasks, prioritizing our everyday life. But it can limit our ability to understand how these spheres, roles and selves overlap, shadow and impact each other.

Because the technological environments that I engage here are learning environments, this research bears important relevance to pedagogy. It is not strictly a pedagogy project, however, because although it is important that we begin to develop critical strategies of virtual pedagogy, before we can plan the virtual classroom we must begin to understand what happens in online environments. In what ways does the introduction of digital technologies impact the subjectivity production of teachers and students? What is made possible through technology? What is made more difficult? What language should we use when we talk about digital technologies? What questions do we need to ask? What are the experiences that participants have in digitally mediated environments? How can we understand the interactions between the virtual and the real? As we address any of these questions, we have to make an effort to define what we mean by “the virtual.”
A conversation that I had recently with the Associate Director of the Honors Program at my institution illustrates the importance of developing these understandings. We’d both come from a meeting with the university president, where budget problems stemming from huge state budget cuts focused everyone’s thoughts on cost-cutting strategies. Some attention had been paid to our institution’s new distance learning programs, which were touted as cost-saving technologies.

Does the Honors Program offer any courses on-line? I asked her.

Not at this point, she said, although there is some pressure from the college to institute some. Some things, she said, just can’t be learned without face-to-face interaction.

One of my questions about online learning, I told her, is about how race, gender, sexual orientation, and other kinds of difference are included in the virtual classrooms.

“Yes,” she said, nodding, “how can a conservative student from a small, religious, and homogenous town in Northwest Ohio learn about any of these differences without encountering difference in the face to face classroom? These classes have to be held where students can see difference.”
I had to smile as I thought about sitting in on sections of intro American
Culture Studies (ACS) classes being taught by my fellow ACS grad
students. The grad students, nearly half of whom differ from their
students on the basis of race, gender, nationality, or other visible
differences, were often the only visibly non-homogenous people in the
room. These teachers took on the role of native informant for their
disinterested students, who often said, both to themselves and out loud in
the classroom “Well, sure, this is interesting to you, but I’m normal. It
doesn’t relate to me.” I shared this experience with her, and asked, “Is it
more important for these students to learn to recognize obvious face to
face differences, or to learn about a wide range of cultures and personal
experiences, learning to see the advantages of significant differences that
are sometimes obscured by obvious similarities of appearance? How
might we use the culture of online environments to encourage privileged
students to understand the experience of marginalization?”

One question that I was asking her, I now realize, is “How can we use
hegemonically-created labels and categories to describe and understand impossible
subjectivities? And how can those negotiating impossible subjectivities find a voice to
express their subjectivity? Are there lessons we can learn from technological interfaces
that will allow us to improve our chances of understanding the process of negotiating both the im/possibility and the subjectivity of impossible subjects?"

When I use words to produce myself, I wonder who decided that I was impossible, and why there isn’t language that allows me to capture my experiences. Why is my shifting identity forever outside of the semiotics of the text? Am I alone as I negotiate the im/possibility of subjectivities? If so, why? If not, how do others solve the crisis of representation/production of the self?

This research centers on my encounters with technology during my tenure as a graduate student pursuing a Master of Arts in American Culture Studies at a state institution in the Midwestern United States. Specifically I examine the intersection of the virtual and the real to consider:

- How do students negotiate non-normative identities in the classroom space? How is this negotiation impacted by the subjectivity production in the MOOspace?

- Who is empowered to speak/exist on the MOO and who is not? This question considers questions of access, including hardware, facility, comfort level, previous experience as well as questions of power? Who is empowered to speak and who is silenced?
• How does dwelling on the MOO impact the performance of "real life" identity in the classroom?
CHAPTER TWO

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY
Theoretical Framework for examining subjectivity production

Butler’s theory of performativity and Bourdieu’s notion of habitus intersect to provide the theoretical basis for understanding the process of producing subjectivity on the MOO.

Butler’s theory of performativity was developed as an intervention into the white liberal feminist project of organizing through identity politics. Women, this movement argued, share similar experiences and perspectives, and as such should mobilize together to gain rights equal to those of men. Butler’s objection to this project is that organizing feminist efforts around the identity of a category called “women” reifies the notion of the category itself. Instead of recognizing gender as a given, Butler argues that gender is an accomplishment—it is something we do, instead of being something that we intrinsically are. As individuals we establish our gender identities by “acting” in particular ways, not in just being born with an essentialized set of characteristics. However, these “actions” are not performed in a vacuum; they do not spring, fully formed, from the wellspring of the imagination of an individual. Identity is created through the “historical sedimentation of acts,” and we must consider the “mundane manner in which these constructs are produced, reproduced, and maintained” (Butler 276). When we look at the ways in which the acts that (re)produce these identities get (re)produced, or changed, we are considering the culture within which the individual produces his or her identity. Though Butler was applying her theory of performativity primarily to gender when she created it, we can see that this notion of the
“materializing” of identity, the process in which it is produced, can be used to talk about many different kinds of identity (272).

This “sedimentation of acts” resembles Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, which has aptly been applied to the notion of technology by Jonathan Sterne.

[Habitus] is essentially sedimented social history as it is lived and embodied in social life. It is spontaneous and generative because agents can act in creative ways, but it is nonspontaneous because the basis of their action is rooted in education, cultural memory, upbringing, and social circumstance (376).

Our individual actions are performed in a context, with a history and surrounded by a culture of previous performances. The weight of repeated actions and repeatedly made meanings forms the structure, the culture, in a sense the “technology” within which we can act to make new meanings.

Technologies, argues Sterne, can then be understood as “little crystallized parts of habitus... a social, cultural, and material process (which is to say that it is all three at once) crystallized into a mechanism or set of related mechanisms” (Sterne 376).

When we are considering technology, we must consider both what is made possible or limited by the interface itself (as in the way the programs are structured to allow or deny certain actions) as well as the social context in which habitus is based. Technologies, says Sterne, “should be considered not as exceptional or special phenomena in a social theory, but rather as very much like other kinds of social practices that recur over time” (376).

To understand the way in which technology functions, we have to look beyond just the design of particular interfaces and study the practices of technology.
“Technologies are always organized through (and as) techniques of the body; and so the ‘form,’ ‘use’ and ‘function’ of a technology cannot be separated from the practices with which it is bundled” (Sterne 385). These practices are essentially what make technology in the first place—they are the way that particular technologies come to have meaning.

To understand the process of producing subjectivity at the technological interface, we must understand both the structuring forces of habitus (social, contextual, and technical) as well as the way in which these forces are enacted through the process of performativity—Butler’s understanding of the self as the “materializing of possibilities” (272).

How is agency available to the subject given this conception of performativity? Subjectivity is produced in the context of ongoing discourse that predates and persists beyond the individual—we produce our subjectivity in concert with/resistance to/collaboration with a set of sedimented acts that form the language available to us to produce ourselves. Technology becomes one more layer of the social sedimentation of habitus that structures production of the self.

A MOOtrip to Melissa’s Metaphor

You move to Melissa’s_Metaphor.

All around you you hear the small sounds of horses munching on hay, cats settling in for a nap, the smells of hay and stable. You can see the fields where the horses laze in the sun and hear the stream run through
the meadow, and there is a sense of peace in the air.

You view Melissa's_Metaphor <http:129.110.23.74:8000/28268/>

Interesting items: bale_of_hay, pitchfork. This room has no conventional exits.

I type “emote laughs”

Bubbles laughs

I type “emote sit on bale of hay”

Bubbles sit on bale of hay

I type “pick up bale_of_hay”

I don't understand.

I type “pick up bale_of_hay”

You pick up bale_of_hay

I type “drop bale_of_hay”

You drop bale_of_hay

I type “@look exits”

I don't understand

I type “@view exits”

I see no “exits” here.

I type “@go diva's”

You can't go that way.

Permission denied
diva's (#425) won't allow you in.
I type “@examine Melissa\'s_Metaphor

You view Melissa\'s_Metaphor <http:129.110.23.74:8000/28268/>

Interesting items: bale_of_hay, pitchfork.

All around you you hear the small sounds of horses munching on hay, cats settling in for a nap, the smells of hay and stable. You can see the fields where the horses laze in the sun and hear the stream run through the meadow, and there is a sense of peace in the air.

No visible exits.

I don\'t understand.

Permission denied.

Permission denied

Permission denied.

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**Defining the field of study—what qualifies as technology?**

When I talk to folks about “technological mediation” of communication, I began to realize that the advantage of the visible interfaces of digital and electronic technological media is that that visibility (materiality) makes the mediation of identity transparent. I negotiate my im/possible subjectivity in a face to face classroom, a cramped board meeting with bad coffee and huge bagels, when I use email, when I go on the MOO, and when I take my daughter out to the movies. In each situation mediating interface is present. Instead of understanding technology as “new media”
and a new way of conveying meaning, we should understand technological contexts as interfaces through which we produce meaning, just like face-to-face and other "unmediated" interactions. This means we can use the tools from other communications research to investigate how meanings are made in online spaces. It also means that studying visible interfaces like email, chat, and MOO can help us understand the workings of the structure and culture of other, less obvious interfaces.

While the modernist rhetoric of technology as progress continues to dominate the market-sodden field of discourse about "technology" and "new media" studies, this analysis will attempt to benefit from Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of field and capital. Per Bourdieu, the important task of cultural analysis (sociology) is to define the boundaries of the field of the subject of study. Much energy and imagination in relation to technological inventions has historically been devoted to bridging the "digital divide" between the "haves" and the "have-nots;" this research seeks a finer understanding of the subject/object of technology. Traditionally, Marvin says, we understood that "with new communications techniques, the idealized world of technologists would be extended automatically to the less fortunate periphery—less fortunate because it was at the periphery" (192). This rhetoric of progress has made it hard for the study of technology as a social phenomenon to proceed. When technology is assumed to be benevolent and universally positive, we have little cause to look closely at the way it works in the world.

This research is based on my encounters with technology in multiple classroom contexts as a graduate student working on a Master of Arts degree in American Culture
Studies. As a student of Dr. Radhika Gajjala I had the opportunity to collaborate with her in investigations regarding the use of technology in the classroom. The technologies used ranged from simple email and instant message programs, to web design and surfing, to creating a MOO “virtual classroom” of sorts for students to explore. The project spans multiple classes, including both graduate and undergraduate classes, classes taught fully on line as well as classes with regular face to face meeting times, and classes in the disciplines of Communication Studies, Interpersonal Communications, American Culture Studies, and Women’s Studies. Though the findings presented here benefit from the larger investigation conducted in multiple classes, I primarily draw from a graduate Humanistic Research Methods Course in Communications.

In addition to the MOO, the evidence for this analysis is drawn from “discussion boards” used in the graduate classrooms. More “everyday” kinds of digital communications technologies—such as email and instant messenger—also serve as resources for the encounters.

Specific Cyberspatial Contexts—singing and dancing in the MOO

Although the programs and programmed artifacts themselves are not the sole field of study for this research, some background on the various technologies will be useful for the reader. Amongst the technologies encountered is MOO, or “Multi-User Domain (MUD) Object-Oriented.” MOO spaces are text-based (meaning that the bulk of interaction is via typing and reading text), and also object-oriented (meaning that the
participant navigates their way through text-based rooms and objects). The MOO is “organized around a metaphor of a three-dimensional space. It gives the participants a hyperlinked text geography of thousands of interlinked rooms that are available to navigate, explore, and inhabit, which gives the user of these systems a feeling of being somewhere” (Sunden 21). MOO interaction is generally synchronous (although a few seconds delay can occur depending on the user’s connection and the server lag). Many MOOs are primarily social and gather members around particular subject matters or themes. The MOO encounters here are reflections of MOO experiences in an educationally based MOO—LinguaMOO.

\[\text{4 such as LambdaMOO at } \text{http://www.lambdamoo.info/}\]
I first became involved in this research as a participant/observer in a Graduate seminar on Computer Mediated Communication in spring of 2003. In this MOO exploration, the environment and objects had been pre-constructed by Dr. Gajjala. The student participants interacted with the virtual classroom as guests, a way of interacting which granted students only opportunities to interact with existing structures and objects, not the capability to build new objects and spaces. Thus the students were more like tourists/voyeurs, and their experience was shaped by a limited ability to code and shape the interface. After the students proved more apt at negotiating and learning MOO coding and culture in a short period of time than initially hoped, a second
graduate course seemed an ideal time to assign students more extensive abilities to build rooms and objects.

This class, Humanistic Research Methods in Communications (spring 2004), the project used the MOO exploration to help entry level graduate students learn the importance of situating themselves, to understand context, and to problematize subject-object relations in Research Methods. For the MOO Ethnography and Research Methods assignment, students were asked to build rooms and explore the MOO. The site was LinguaMOO. At various stages of the MOO ethnography, students were asked to program objects and items to illustrate theoretical concepts and personal location in relation to their objects of inquiry. Each student also completed journals and an autoethnography of their MOO experience. After the exploration and building stages were done, students were to form groups and write research proposals based on their examination of the MOO and understanding of various methodologies introduced in the course.

It is important to consider why the MOO in particular is a useful venue for considering the process of subjectivity production in online spaces. MOOs are not new technologies—they predate chat rooms and instant messenger and actually are one of the first synchronous (or nearly so) socially interactive technologies to be available. Although nearly all of the graduate students involved in the MOO encounters were familiar with chat programs (such as Yahoo Chat or the university's educational forum, Blackboard) and had used Instant Messenger programs such as AOL IM or Yahoo IM, almost none of them had experienced the MOO. This lack of familiarity with the
software or the specific LinguaMoo interface is important to the production of the self in a particular online context. The lack of familiarity produces a contested, dynamic, techno-mediated space, unsettling notions of digital technology as fostering immediacy and efficiency in a world defined by the rhetoric of “progress.” Not only are these in-between and dynamic in-formation spaces in the way they are used, in allowing for uncertainty of participant experience and encounter, they are also sites for the explicit contestation and negotiation of co-produced and technologically mediated meaning-making processes and of the pseudo-binaries of “virtual” and “real.” Further the fact that MOOs require the user to establish an avatar and description for their character creates, as Beth Kolko points out, “explicit engagement with identity... [that] makes them fertile ground for exploring how identity and interface interact” (214).

New users to the MOO are asked to choose a screenname and password, and then, before they can proceed, a gender. The following explanation of gender on a MOO\(^5\) is taken from Lingua MOOs help menu. Note that there are various possible “genders” offered.

Syntax: @gender <gender>
@gender

The first form, with an argument, defines your player to have the gender <gender>. If <gender> is one of the standard genders (e.g., 'male', 'female', 'neuter',...), your various pronouns will also be set appropriately, making exits and certain other objects behave more pleasantly for you.

The second form tells you the current definition of your player's gender, your current pronouns, and the complete list of standard genders.

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5 It's noteworthy that MOOspace requires the selection of a gender and not a selection from other categories of identity, such as race, sexual orientation, age, etc. (see Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman, 2000; Altman & Gajjala forthcoming and others for discussion of race on MOOs)
It should be noted that some of the "genders" on the standard gender list need verb conjugation in order to work properly and much of the MOO isn't set up for this (...yet). For example, you should expect to see `they is' a fair amount if you @gender yourself `plural'.

Your gender is currently female.

Your pronouns: she, her, her, hers, herself, She, Her, Her, Hers, Herself

Available genders: neuter, male, female, either, Spivak, splat, plural, egotistical, royal, or 2

In addition to these first few steps, MOO users quickly note that others have chosen graphics or “avatars” to represent their characters. Each character also has an attached “description” that the MOOintro space suggests they use to describe themselves. When a user first logs on she selects a screenname and gender (Ralph, female), then types {@view Ralph}7, she'll see this message:

You see Ralph, a character who needs to type “@describe” and enter her description.

In order to understand what goes on in text-based technological encounters, we must understand not only the static, final text that was produced in the encounter, but also the text-in-production—the process that creates a text and an encounter. Sunden states that a distance—both spatial/physical and between the mind/body—is created between the typist and subject typed into existence in such an encounter:

This distance is on one level introduced in text-based online worlds through the act of typing, and further reinforced by the mediating computer technology itself. By actively having to type oneself into being, a

---

6 This excerpt was taken from Lingua MOO’s help menu on gender
7 I am using {} these brackets here instead of quotes to represent what is typed because quotes are a tool used by participants(programmers) on the MOO.
certain gap in this construction is at the same time created. The mediation between different realms, the very creation of texts by the means of computers, makes the interspace that always exists between myself and the understanding of this self particularly clear. Following the idea of a subject that can never have a direct and unmediated access to herself, that the I writing and the I written about can never be seen as one, cyber subjects are always at least double (4).

The action of producing oneself in the MOOspace is enacted through typing; a particular participant's agency comes from the act of typing and the programming that results. Although typing oneself into existence on the MOO resembles other typing actions, such as typing on a Microsoft Word document or in the body of an email, the results of typing into the keyboard while logged into the MOO are specific to the MOOs as a particular technological context—the words typed into the screen function as not only typed collections of letters but also cause programs to run within the MOO. For example, when a MOO dweller who is logged on with screenname “someone” types `{emote is carried away by emotion}`, the MOO program produces `{someone is carried away by emotion}` on the screen, for all participants within that programming space (room) to see.

When all of these students visited the MOO for the first time, it was in the context of a graduate class taught by a “third-world woman.” In addition, they were in a very specific pedagogical situation—they were visiting the MOO as an assignment (for a grade), they were not just social visitors, and they had received very specific instructions about their moo explorations:
Log in to the MOO at http://lingua.utdallas.edu:7000 and consider what happens in your encounter with this technology. If you have trouble, type @help to get a list of commands to guide your exploration.

In response to students’ frantic frustration at their lack of success, either in logging into the MOO because of hardware or software problems, or in navigating the interface once they were logged on, Dr. Gajjala responded:

If you have trouble with the technology, what happened? Document your experience and bring your documentation to class to discuss.

As a consequence of their lack of familiarity with the interface, as well as these (deliberately) vague instructions, students did not understand how the MOO interface worked when they first encountered it. This is a common experience, according to the authors of Mooniversity: “The sense of dislocation, the uneasy feeling of disembodiment, and a general lack of overview that often accompanies the first few MOO visits are things that every newbie experiences. But we can assure you that once you get more experience with the MOO environment, you will start to feel much more comfortable and at home” (Haynes and Holmevik 27). Students first task on the MOO, in fact, was to discover how the interface worked, what the results of typing or doing certain things were in the MOOspace—to investigate, in fact, the culture of the MOOspace itself.

What was not clear immediately to these students was that all participants in the MOO have a certain amount of programming power, even if they don’t create their own objects but only interact with the objects of others or even if they never choose a
screen name and only enter the MOO space as a guest. This means that all MOO dwellers are programmers, not just visitors or even characters.

This facet of the MOO interface, along with the engagement with identity noted above, makes the MOO an ideal technological interface for considering the process of the production of subjectivity. The reason for asking these questions about production of subjectivity in a MOOspace is that in the MOO language impacts the landscape of the MOO, directly—both because the MOO landscape is made of words, AND because the words work as programs to shape the environment and act on it. Language does not just reflect the world, it shapes it. Autoethnographer Ron Pelias tells us, “Performative writing rests upon the belief that the world is not given, but constructed, composed of multiple realities” (8). In the MOOspace, this notion is both theoretical and literal—language, typed into the MOOspace by a person-logged-on-and-represented-by-screenname, literally changes what happens in the MOO world.

This is not to say that ANYTHING can happen on the MOO at any time. As a participant on the MOO, what I type into my screen interacts with the infrastructure of the MOO and the previously created programs (otherwise represented on the MOO as objects, rooms, persons, etc.) to create a result. Like everyday life, my actions (words typed on the screen) are shaped by the structure of the context in which they are introduced—the culture and habitus of the context in which I interact. In this way, the subjectivity is “produced” in a particular encounter with technology.

The form of a MOO transcript will appear differently depending on whose vantage point is being transcripted. In chapter three I utilize two different types of
transcripts—those taken from a direct screen capture, and those taken from a
recorder—an object (program) in the room (another object) designed to record what
happens within it.

An object in the MOO is really a program designed to behave in a particular way,
both externally (e.g., to all participants interacting with it) as well as in ways that are
invisible to those in the same “room” with the object on the MOO. In addition to
characters or rooms, another object that figures for this research is a recording device
such as “Panopticon.” Encountering a recording-style programmed object in the
MOOspace that was named “panopticon” was not an accident. The object, which was
created by Dr. Gajjala and placed in the “virtual classroom” where the class had been
invited, was designed to elicit the question of surveillance that might be made possible
with high technology, as well as to actually provide transcripts or recordings of what
happened during MOO visits. The transcripts could be used by both teacher and
students to further analyze the MOO encounters.

METHODOLOGY and METHOD

The MOO transcripts, journal entries, and discussion board posts in the
performative text in chapter three reference what happened in the encounters with
technology in the context of the Graduate Communications class. The entries are not
wholesale “data” excerpted from the recording Panopticon or from participants’ logs of
their trips around the MOO; with few exceptions, the screennames are changed. What
is found here in a MOO transcript may have been from a discussion board post or from
a journal; the discussion board posts may be (re-)creations of what was said in the face to face classrooms, and so on.

There are two methodological questions suggested here. First, why write about the MOO findings by juxtaposing a MOO transcript with journal entries and discussion board responses? What insights might these juxtapositions make possible? Secondly, why use “fictionalized” data? These questions must be answered by considering the methodological and theoretical tradition in which this research is grounded. Though this format certainly appears more interesting than a traditional-style academic analysis, it can be also be more difficult to interpret for those uninitiated to the MOO. Neither of these, though, is in itself a good reason to transgress conventional analytic form.

As Sunden reflects in her research of MOO interactions, meaning-making within the MOO happens in the process of dwelling in the MOO and interacting with the programs/structure/culture of the MOOspace, both the pre-programmed objects and rooms and other participants logged into the space at the same time. Says Sunden: “Ethnographic texts must thus be understood as constructs to be read against the background of the cultural framework in which they are written. An emphasis on this relationship between ‘reality’ and ‘textuality’ is not only fluid, but utterly dissolved, since the reality of online worlds is a textual reality” (18). However, online textuality always intersects with offline reality—there is always a body at a keyboard and a monitor. To understand meaning in a particular context, a particular intersection with technology, we must understand how meaning is made inside and between both online and offline contexts. Since this research is interested not just in meaning, but also in the process
of making meaning, the performative text offered here attempts to evoke that process for the reader.

Part of the reason for using the MOO transcript is because this project is about the process of producing subjectivity. Although the identities produced in the MOOspace are interesting, this project is about how the subjectivities are produced—what process is engaged by/engages the user in relation to the culture of the MOOspace.

Another reason for employing performative writing (that includes MOO transcripts and other conventional forms) is because this research is exploring im/possible subject/ivities, trying to find, through discourse, a way to escape hegemonic discourse. Della Pollock tells us that one task of performative writing is:

> to resolve the alienation of meaning and reference within postmodern textualities not be reinscribing presence per se but by making writing exceed its determinations within structures of absence/presence in order to perform a social function. Performative writing spins, to some extent, on the axis of impossible and/or regressive reference and yet out into new modes of subjectivity and even referentiality (76).

The answer to this question about form grows from (auto)ethnography’s admonition to “show, not tell”. If MOOspace has its own culture, structure, and form, then in understanding what happens in that space, the researcher needs to consider the ways that culture and structure shapes meaning. Using MOO transcripts as evidence in the analysis of MOO interaction is to consider the habitus of the MOO.

Likewise, the process of producing subjectivity in a classroom space that is utilizing these technologies is a process that moves forward on multiple levels simultaneously—
interactions on the MOO signify not only on the MOO, but also in the “realspace” of the classroom.

MOO transcripts read a bit like poetry and are difficult for a non-MOO user to understand. MOO interactions are usually considered to be “online” or “virtual” communication. Juxtaposing this kind of text with more straightforward prose style of discussion board posts and journal entries, which are usually considered to be more “real” and less virtual, highlights the ways that “real” and “virtual” communications intersect in the production of our everyday identities.

Unlike a static MOO text recorded by the Panopticon, meaning on the MOO is made not only in a particular MOO space, but also in the space occupied by the body typing into the computer, the space of the classroom meetings, the discursive space of the discussion board of the class, as well as in interaction with other spaces outside the classroom.

This brings us to the question of why to use “fictionalized” accounts as part of the evidence of this analysis. Why not use actual MOO transcripts, drawn from logs of participants or recording devices such as the panopticon?

Autoethnographers continue to battle the question of the role of “narratized” or “fictionalized” accounts in the research question. (See Ellis and Bochner; Pacanowsky). The notion that narratized accounts of “real life” events can be more or less real begs the question of (re)presentation, and yet the notion that we can tell the story with more or less accuracy persists. The idea that a “pure” MOO transcript from a recorder or log would be “more true” ignores the context in which the MOO was engaged for the
participant. For example, in a classroom lab environment where all students are logged onto the MOO using computers side by side simultaneously, oral comments and events become an integral part of the meaning being made on the MOO. These comments will not be explicitly visible on the transcript, but form an important part of the process of meaning-making that each participant experiences.

In much the same way, meaning is made simultaneously in the physical classroom space (which includes the MOO transcripts in their many variations), the discursive space of the discussion board, emails between instructor and particular students or groups, classroom face to face discussions, and even in informal chats between students outside of class.

Juxtaposing these particular forms and (re)presenting various meanings that were created in the classroom via those forms is a way to more faithfully represent the meaning-making processes that happened than reading a strictly “pure MOO” transcript could be.

A word about auto in autoethnography

This way of (re)presenting the research allows a composite picture of the analysis of the process of producing subjectivity across a group of participants, instead of just in the question of one particular individual. Evidence was drawn from my experience as a participant in these graduate classes, but also comes from autoethnographies written by the students themselves about the process of engaging with this technology. Although this analysis of the process of subjectivity production at
the intersection of MOOspaces and realspaces is drawn from my personal experience and understanding, which autoethnography takes as a valid source of evidence, it is also drawn from my classmates’ and instructors’ accounts of MOO interaction.

Bubbles is the screen name I use on LinguaMOO and various other MOOspaces, but the transcripts here reflect not just my experience as Bubbles, but also take advantage of the experience reflected by other students in their assignments, discussion board posts, emails, and MOO transcripts shared with the class.

Bubbles here could be me, but I am not Bubbles.

Questions of validity

Understandably, the question of the validity of the meanings (re)presented in this fashion is an important one, particularly in this unconventional format. Evaluating validity in autoethnographic texts requires attention be paid to the tenets of evocative writing—How significant is the message being told? How well does the text deliver aesthetically? How has the author been reflexive in the telling? How well does this piece express and embodied, lived experience? (Richardson 254)

In part, the question of validly representing the experiences of others is addressed by drawing analysis and evidence directly from the autoethnography assignment that students completed about their MOO interaction. Additionally, the text itself and its analysis directly incorporate the reactions of not just myself as a
participant, but also the instructor Radhika Gajjala, and when possible, other students from the classroom.

Although autoethnography can speak directly about the self and from the self, the findings of this research are not about the process of only one individual—myself or any other. This research owes much to the collective process of understanding developed in the classroom experience, and to ongoing dialogue with student colleagues and Professor Gajjala.
CHAPTER THREE

PERFORMATIVE TEXT: MEANING MAKING ON THE MOO
**From Bubbles MOOlog:**

You view The Barn <http:129.110.25.76:8000> Interesting items: gate_to_pasture, milk_bucket. Exits (out) to Pasture, (up) to Loft, (South) to Town.

   I type “pick up bucket”

I don’t understand.

   I type “sit on bucket”

I don’t understand.

   I type “exit”

I don’t understand.

   I type “pick up milk_bucket”

You pick up milk_bucket.

   I type “throw bucket”

I don’t understand.

   I type “Bubbles throws bucket”

I don’t understand.

   I type “I want to throw the bucket”

I don’t understand.

   I type “help bucket”

There is no help on ‘bucket’

   I type “@look exits”

I don’t understand
I type “@view exits”

(out) to Pasture, (up) to Loft, (South) to Town

I type “out ”

I don’t understand.

I type “@go out”

You can’t go that way.

Pasture (#574) won’t let you in.

Permission denied

**From Bubbles’s Journal**: What a trip! Maybe starting graduate school was a mistake? In class today she tells us to “go on the moo”. The what? I typed in the address and it was pretty much downhill from there. I keep entering the commands the way it says in the help list, and all I get is “I don’t understand I don’t understand.” I asked for help a bunch of times, but I can’t keep up with the instructions she is giving. The computer just doesn't like me. ... typing with no success as my words go off into cyberspace to clutter the information superhighway, never to be seen again…
From Bubbles MOOlog:

Obvious exits: [out] to Discodiva_Abode

You move to Discodiva_Abode. Helena, discodiva, Alphie Goodlove, and White Rabbit are standing here.

I type @examine Discodiva_Abode

You view Discodiva_Abode <http:129.110.23.567567.01> Interesting items: panopticon, jukebox, spinning_silver_disco_ball

Energetic disco music fills the air; light flashes off the spinning disco ball, you resist the urge to tap your toes and break into dance. Obvious exits:[out] to diva’s_hut.

Alphie_Goodlove says, "maybe a sticky cow now and again"

discodiva says, "Good to know"

White_Rabbit says, "if you smoke, your lungs will turn black and you DIE. if you don't smoke, your lungs won't turn black, and you DIE"

White_Rabbit laughing
discodiva giggling

Alphie_Goodlove says, "this is HYSTERICAL"

discodiva bidding on fabulous items

White_Rabbit says, "PLINKO"

White_Rabbit says, "SHOW ME THE PLINKO!!!!!!!!!!!!"

White_Rabbit says, "one dollar, bob"

Alphie_Goodlove says, "I want a black lacker armoir"
From Bubbles’s Journal: I couldn’t believe it—I was so embarrassed!!! I finally managed to get on the MOO today and discodiva asked me “why are you sleeping in my room all the time?” I finally realized that my avatar, when I’m not around to move her, appears as “asleep” in Discodiva_abode. Is there anyway I could look more rude and out of place than falling asleep in someone else’s home? I guess I wasn’t the only one having trouble with the moo— One kid in class today said, “so does the moo have a point?” I guess it does, but I am so FRUSTRATED that I can’t get it to WORK! How can I figure out what the point is if I can’t get it to DO anything?
From Bubbles MOOlog:

I type @examine Discodiva_Abode
You view Discodiva_Abode <http:129.110.23.567567.01> Interesting
items: panopticon, jukebox, spinning_silver_disco_ball
Energetic disco music fills the air; light flashes off the spinning disco ball,
you resist the urge to tap your toes and break into dance. Obvious
exits:[out] to diva’s_hut.

I type @who
Helena, discodiva, Alphie Goodlove, and White Rabbit are standing here.

I type @take panopticon.
You take Panopticon.
Alphie_Goodlove says, "higher higher"
>> A red light on the Panopticon flashes to indicate that it has been
turned on and is now recording everything that is being said in
Discodiva_Abode <<
You drop Panopticon (recording).

From Bubbles’s Journal: So I finally got myself to stop sleeping in someone else’s room, and
now I can’t believe how much I feel left out. They don’t have to say a word to me to make me
feel like the thirteen-year-old who didn’t get invited to the party. It’s like I can’t get the joke, or
something. I come in; they just ignore me!!! I’m invisible and can’t make myself exist.
"Panopticon" log, April 4, 2003 4:25pm

Alphie_Goodlove says, "good point princess"

Alphie_Goodlove says, "normal"

Bubbles leaves for Emotional_basketcase

Alphie_Goodlove says, "sticky cow"

discodiva says, "Bubbles left and never said good bye"

Alphie_Goodlove thinks that is mean

discodiva singing with the crowd

discodiva tap dancing

discodiva break dancing

White_Rabbit says “see you in a few”

White_Rabbit leaves for gypsy's_camp.

Alphie_Goodlove is impressed

discodiva humming

Alphie_Goodlove easily amused

discodiva stripping

White_Rabbit arrives from gypsy's_camp

discodiva says, "Yo Rabbit"

Alphie_Goodlove says, "I like this song but I don't know what it is"

From Bubbles’s Journal: I like the professor, although most of the time I don’t think I understand what she is saying. I don’t mean her accent, that’s not a big deal, she doesn’t have
much of one, I mean WHAT she says. As in what it means, or what the assignments are. Or
WHEN anything is due. That kind of looseness with the syllabus drives me crazy, but not as
crazy as it makes the rest of the class. Not that I’d know—I still feel like an outsider who
doesn’t know how to play their “reindeer games.” Even if I did know how, they wouldn’t
include me.
From Bubbles MOOlog:

The Barn

You view The Barn...


George (idle 13m) and Gypsygurl are standing here.

George drops cow.
George drops milk bucket.
George drops farmer.

You take cow.
You hand cow to Gypsygurl.

You take farmer.
You hand farmer to Gypsygurl.

Gypsygurl drops farmer.
Gypsygurl drops cow.

You take milk bucket.
You drop milk bucket.

"Barn" is ambiguous.

Matches: To_Fifth_Dimension and Barn in Tennessee

"The Barn" is ambiguous.

Matches: To_Fifth_Dimension and Barn in Tennessee

"The_Barn To_Fifth" not found in room database.

Gypsygurl picks up cow.
You say, "good job Gypsy"

I see no "exits" here.

From Bubbles’s Journal: I went into class and rewrote the syllabus today. Our professor had moved readings so many times I didn’t have a clue when we needed to do any particular assignment, and for once I know I’m not the only one. So I took the changes I had and made a new version and asked her if that was right. She keeps saying that we can contribute to shaping the syllabus, that it is really a work in progress between students and professor… p.s. for the first time the rest of the class seems to appreciate what I said, instead of looking annoyed that I opened my mouth.

From Bubbles MOOlog:

George says, "if you have a room, do you need renter's insurance?"
You say, "and can we paint it bright purple?"
Gypsygurl says, "can you yell "Fire" there and not get in trouble?"
You say, "maybe. it depends who else is around i suppose?"
George says, "Do people still tell you to "get a room" if you have one?"
You say, "Gypsy, would you like a cookie? …"
You say, "George put them down, but I think they are great."
Gypsygurl says, "only if my avatar won't get fat"
You say, "you can always exercise..."
You say, "and they are fat free"
Gypsygurl says, "yeah, right,, I can't really talk here -- I'd like to see me
attempt jumping jacks!"
You say, "you'd be surprised, it's probably easier than in real life."
You say, "no sweat."
You say, "no pulled muscles"

**From Bubbles’s Journal:** So is that what I am doing—theorizing subjectivity? Carving a theoretical space for a particular subjectivity, and in some ways, looking at the ripples that the new space causes in the ways that other subjectivities are shaped?

**Panopticon” log, April 4, 2003 4:25pm**

Helena, discodiva, Alphie Goodlove, and White Rabbit are standing here.
Alphie_Goodlove says, "all these autoethnographers whine—it’s really annoying and self-centered."
discodiva says, "Good to know"
White_Rabbit says, "I mean, they have the same choices I do and you don't hear me whining about it"
White_Rabbit laughing
discodiva giggling
Alphie_Goodlove says, "this is HYSTERICAL"

*The professor writes to the discussion board:*

Choices exist. No one was/is saying they don’t. The disagreement was about the conditions under which choices are made and
whether or not. (note: some may feel these are not choices - but they are - even if these choices are oppressive). Just that the choices are made within the limits of the choices offered and within unequal power structures. Students in this class, for example have a choice not to do some assignments and yes, if you make that choice - there will be consequences. But you can make those choices (consequences or not) only within (going macro to micro...):

1] the framework of the *logic* of higher education as it is framed in the U.S. -

2] the framework of the implicit consent you gave by entering this institution (and yet if your goal in life was a certain kind of upward mobility - did you have a choice in how many kinds of ways you could work towards such upward mobility. Were these choices too not limited by who offered them and how they were offered and how the larger power structure- economic, political and cultural - within which you live defines what it means to achieve, to deserve to make more money...etc)

3] the design of the M.A. in the school of communication studies

4] the contract between the students and teacher - heavily biased towards a hierarchy that assumes that the teacher knows more about what you need to know in regard to the subject matter

But you submitted to the logic -
... so what does it mean if you say you have a choice not to do an assignment?

you do have a choice... of course you do)...

**Panopticon” log, April 4, 2003 4:25pm**

Helena, discodiva, Alphie Goodlove, and White Rabbit are standing here. Alphie_Goodlove says, "all these autoethnographers whine—it's really annoying and self-centered."
discodiva pulls herself up by her bootstraps
White_Rabbit says, "EXACTLY!"
White_Rabbit says, "How can I really argue with them, but how in the world can this be research!!!!!!"
discodiva pulls herself up by her bootstraps
Alphie_Goodlove says, "and who cares, anyway?"
discodiva says, "uh-huh"
White_Rabbit laughing
discodiva giggling
Alphie_Goodlove says, "this is HYSTERICAL"

**From Bubbles’s Journal:** As I go to post my MOO research questions to the class Discussion Board, I feel painfully visible, reductively visible, and my questions will just make me more so.
**Panopticon** log, April 4, 2003 4:25pm

Helena, discodiva, Alphie Goodlove, and White Rabbit are standing here.

discodiva says, "can you believe those three dykes in class?"

White_Rabbit says, "I mean, they completely attacked you!"

White_Rabbit says, "That midget is the worst."

Alphie_Goodlove says, "Man, I’m afraid of midgets!!!"

White_Rabbit laughing

discodiva giggling

Alphie_Goodlove says, "this is HISTÉRICAL"

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**From Bubbles’s Journal:**

MOO research questions

- How do members of the class negotiate non-normative identities in the classroom space? How is this impacted by the research use of the MOO?

- Who is empowered to speak/exist on the MOO and who is not? This question considers questions of access, including hardware, facility, comfort level, previous experience as well as questions of power? Who is empowered to speak and who is silenced?

- How does performance on the MOO impact performance of "real life" identity in the classroom?
From a Performance Theory Class on Gender and Sexuality:

When I presented my paper about subjectivity production within hegemonic discourse, the professor responded: "You are never in a "forced position"-- you **ALWAYS** choose how you're going to position yourself." She meant that considering my strength of personality (as outspoken as she hears me to be) I always choose what I am going to be called.

As though all that is required is to choose not to succumb to peer pressure.

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**Panopticon** log, April 4, 2003 4:25pm

Helena, discodiva, Alphie Goodlove, and White Rabbit are standing here.

Alphie_Goodlove says, "If it is important enough to you, you decide what you will be called."

White_Rabbit says, "They have the same choices I do & you don't hear me whining about it"

Alphie_Goodlove says, "If you don't like the choices on the census form, don't fill it out!"

discodiva says, "If you do, it must not be that important to you."

White_Rabbit laughing
discodiva giggling

Alphie_Goodlove says, "this is HYSTERICAL"
It’s not that I never can pass, nor that I never do. In fact I pass daily, in one, two, and three ways—
again and again and again

Each negotiation bleeds me

*I’m keenly aware of the ways in which I cannot be known.*

**From Bubbles’s Journal:** The way she positions me does it to me again by reading me as apolitical, disingenuous, strategically positioning myself as it is useful; she leaves no space for my words to have another meaning. She proves my point, that speaking my reality in an attempt of self-positioning does indeed position me, but it cannot give me access to a positionality which does not exist in social reality. The trick, I realize, is to find a way to speak that creates my position and yet, if the point of my position, as Bornstein says, is the ludic, playful, fluidity of sexuality, gender, desire, identity & then what position is that to speak from? It offers two options—the whoring, promiscuous pervert (dyke), or the commitment-phobic passing queer who claims the privileges associated with being able to pass.

Despite queer theory, feminist theory, every other theoretical move, that shows how the two are diametrically opposed, I empirically occupy both positions simultaneously, with all of the apparent contradictions and impossibilities
oozing out of every pore.

I am still genuinely me, even if that is contradictory and incoherent.

Theorizing my impossibility does not eliminate my existence.

I have both the pain and pleasure of my everyday breath to substantiate that.
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS: MAKING MEANING OF WHAT HAPPENS ON THE MOO
In the MOO, the interface and the “language” it offers to the user is made up of the context of the MOOspace, the particular programs and objects surrounding characters. However, this subjectivity is also shaped in discourse with a broader context— with the context where the body who is “enacting” the character resides, in the physical space of the classroom, in the multiple intersections of real and virtual worlds that serve as the sedimentation of acts that creates the discourse within which we are produce our subjectivity.

So meaning is made at the intersection of the realspace and virtualspace, and the notion of a unitary, solely online “cyberspace” must be set aside to consider the actual specific context of meaning making processes.

When we look closely at the context of this specific intersection of real and virtual, we see that one common theme amongst almost MOO transcripts is “action”— in two senses:

First participants went around almost frantically trying to act on the MOO environment to try to understand its parameters (which are invisible if you don’t know it’s structure and culture). During my first visit to the MOO I went around to various rooms and “took” objects, bringing them back and “dropping” them to make a hefty collection in Diva’s Hut. I did this not once, not twice, but 10 or twenty times. Long-time MOO dwellers later pointed out to me that this “taking” of other’s objects in MOOspace is considered anti-social and completely inappropriate. I did it because it was the only thing I could figure out HOW to do. This need to “act” on the
environment in some way was enacted throughout the encounters analyzed in this research.

The second sense of “act” though, that can be seen in the transcripts is the way that participants in the MOO caused their characters to “act”. By using the “emote” mode or typing “emote” before an entry, a participant can create an action for their character.

For example, I type {emote laughs}) The “emote” mode programming takes the text after the word “emote” (in our example {laughs}) and pairs it with the characters screen name. (hence {Bubbles laughs}).

A common feature of the transcripts is the use of the emote mode to produce characters who “acted.” This transcript shows participants laughing, giggling, smiling, pulling, taking, giving, standing, sitting, bidding, thinking, leaving, moving, being (impressed/sad/etc.), breakdancing, humming, stripping, arriving, dropping, handing, etc. etc. etc.

This emphasis on action is in part, built into the structure of the MOO itself. It is not by accident that the MOO has an emote mode—an opportunity for participants to produce embodied behavior or feelings in their characters. The MOO is designed to create a text-based reflection of an everyday movement-oriented world—the equivalent of what we might find in (Braille) text if a movie was “subtitled” in text for someone blind. Because actions can only be seen on the MOO through text, an “emote” mode makes it possible for those actions to exist.
However, this emphasis on action on the MOO carries with it the constellation of meaning that clings to the other sense of action—that acts are carried out by discreet individuals with agency to “act on” the world around them. In the case of the MOO, the world where participant’s agency is in question is not just the text-based programming world—but also the worlds in which that interacts with others—all the physical and virtual spaces of her life. The interweaving of transcript and journal entry and discussion board posts reflect the ways that real and virtual worlds cross and impact each other as meanings are made.

Participants’ discourse on the MOO and in the classroom was permeated by a rhetoric of free choice. However, students’ journals, discussions, and autoethnographies commented again and again on their frustration with the MOOspace, and the ways it “made them” behave. One student said, “the technology served as a gatekeeper—I tried to login and was rejected. Everything I tried got me a “permission denied. I couldn’t figure out how to BE on the MOO, how to be important or mean something” (student autoethnography). Despite students repeated assertions that each person has “choices” and “I can be anything I want to be,” students expressed frustration with the conventions of the MOO that they had to negotiate in order to exercise those choices.

The structure of the MOO served as the culture within which students had to produce their subjectivity and interact. MOO “performances are always grounded in a complex interplay between typing and responses/ initiations from what could be called the ‘MUD[MOO] program’” (Sunden 24). Though the structure of the MOO program
was not obvious to students at first, it nevertheless worked on their interactions and their attempts to exercise their “free choice.” This structure was described by students in two distinct ways—technological or technical, and social or cultural. Students noted that the set of practices built into the programming of this text-based world required that they learn particular conventions—what commands will move your character around, how must they be entered (for example, you must type @go, not just go). They often identified the cultural competence that they needed to negotiate this structure as “technological savvy.” Simultaneously, students needed another set of skills required to negotiate the MOO comfortably—the cultural competency to understand how to behave within the socio-cultural structure.

What’s interesting about the MOO is that these two cultural competencies, while often referenced distinctly by students, cannot really be separated, just as we cannot separate virtualspace and realspace. These layers of the structuring context overlap and magnify each other. Insecurity about negotiating the technological interface of the MOO interacts with insecurity about MOO cultural norms and behaviors. Students experience these combined sets of structures (technological and social) as constricting/impacting the ways in which they can make meaning on the MOO.

Gypsygurl “felt invisible—she didn’t exist.” In part, we can see this from the socio-cultural structure of the class that was built around cliques of particular students interacting in predictable, regular patterns repeatedly. She wasn’t imagining the fact that some students were busy chatting and laughing with each other and weren’t acknowledging the presence of certain other students.
However, Gypsygurl’s invisibility also came from issues of the technological structure of the MOO. Characters are seen on transcripts—they become visible—if they “do” things. This means that students had to actively type themselves into existence. If a student was trying unsuccessfully to negotiate the MOO world—for example if she is trying to pick up and manipulate objects and can’t master the technological competence to do this successfully, her transcript will read “I don’t understand” for each failed command. The transcripts of others, however, will not even mention that person unless the others are @looking or @examining the room. In this way a problem with technological competence becomes recognized as a lack of socio-cultural competency. Similarly, the student “sleeping” on the MOO understood this as a social misstep, a cultural incompetence. The students socio-cultural slip, however, was created by a lack of technological competence in negotiating the structure of the MOO. When participants are not logged in, their avatar appears as “sleeping” in whatever room is set to home for the character. Since she had not learned how the technological conventions worked here, and she hadn't learned how to “see” herself in the MOO, she experienced this as a lack of cultural competency.

Cultural competence in the process of producing subjectivity on the MOO is both technological and socio-cultural, and in fact the two can never be completely separated.

The MOO is a terrific opportunity to show students that lack of cultural capital is not just an academic exercise. When they go on the MOO and don’t know the rules, don’t know how others see them (or how to see themselves), they feel silenced, or feel differently abled than they did before, they can truly begin to understand how it feels to be a person moving through a space where they don't have cultural capital. For students who may have lived their whole lives in spaces where the people around them are very much like “them” (or who they perceive to be
similar), and who may have never felt in a “minority,” the experience of
ACTUALLY BEING THE ONE instead of just intellectualizing about it, is
priceless. -student journal

The MOO is a space where real material effects are created through discourse—a
place where Butler’s notion that speech is an “act” and that language is constitutive, not
representational, takes hold. Students experience these material effects at the
intersection of the MOO and the “real” classroom—they begin to understand how the
layered habitus of the context—technology as gatekeeper, culture as gatekeeper—
shapes the meaning making process.

Subjectivity production is influenced by the cultural competencies or “literacies”
that students can exercise in relation to these two structures—in what ways are the
students good at or familiar with negotiating the technological structure of the MOO?
In what ways are students able to negotiate the socio-cultural structure of the MOO?
Though we can make a distinction between issues of “technical” structure such as the
fact that the MOO requires gender selection, and issues of sociocultural structure such
as norms about how to treat the “belongings” of others, these two actually intertwine to
become the nearly indistinguishable “culture” of this intersected virtual-real
environment.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION
Technology has clearly fallen short of the promise of liberation from identity and subjectivity, from location and subject position. Perhaps this is because we continue to think of ourselves as subjects, even as the postmodern turn deconstructs subject/object distinctions. Close examination of the processes and practices at the intersection of the virtual and the real make it clear that we have much to learn from considering the visible interface of technology. Technological and cultural proficiencies layer and intertwine to form an inextricable habitus—bearing witness to the need to radically contextualize our analysis in order to consider the specificity of practices that make up the process, to help us understand what technologies actually DO, what happens at our intersection with technology.

I came to this research negotiating im/possible subject/ivities—a subject whose felt always outside the discourse, ineffable as it were. What I found was that producing subjectivity in the context of technology is not an ungrounded process. Cyberspace does not magically free us from the technologies of identity; Bubbles does not suddenly become ethereal and untethered in a cyberspatial context. In chapter one I discuss the problem of producing subjectivity in relation to hegemonic discourse, and introduce the idea of exploring this on the MOO.

In chapter two I consider Butler and Bourdieu as I develop a theoretical framework for examining the process of producing subjectivity at the intersection of virtualspace and realspace. I address the notion that subjectivity is enacted or performed, and that the context of sedimented history in which this takes place forms the habitus that frames future actions. I consider how technology as an object of study has been
framed, and how it must be reframed to consider the process of meaning-making for a particular participant or subjectivity.

This research suggests not just the need for radical contextualization, but a need to consider closely our methodologies as we study various virtual, digital, and online technologies. While straight textual analysis can yield a particular kind of understanding of what happens in online spaces, considering the processes of meaning making, not just the resulting text, yields another understanding, one that is vital if we are interested in understanding the subjective experience of participants in online spaces.

The methodology utilized for this research is based in Bourdieu’s notion that defining the field of study is a critical act—we must be careful that in bracketing our “object” of study we don’t define preempt the critical questions that we need to ask when examining social phenomenon. This researching at the intersection of “virtual” and “real” worlds was guided by the work of technology scholars or cybertheorists such as Kolko, Nakamura, Munt, Gonzales, and Marvin, and benefited greatly from the methodological grounding of Jenny Sunden’s work on MOOs and gender. Because my primary interest was in exploring the ways in which meaning can be made, the processes for making meaning and producing subjectivity, methods such as textual analysis were complemented by participant observation, autoethnography, and performative writing.

Because the object of study here is specifically the process of subjectivity production, Chapter three offers a performative writing text that attempts to
reconstruct the meaning-making process found at the intersection with technology.

This chapter juxtaposes the different textual forms of MOO transcripts, journal entries, and discussion board posts in order to produce, for the reader, a sense of how meaning can be made in the context of intersecting virtualspaces and realspaces. In part, this chapter conveys the experience of the process of meaning making on the MOO because it draws the reader through the experience of the confusion of reading and understanding a MOO text.

Chapter Four offers further discussion of how to understand what the performative text reveals about meaning-making in the classroom and MOOspaces. Understanding that those uninitiated to MOO transcripts will find it a challenge to read and interpret a transcript, this chapter draws out the ways that the real and technological interfaces intertwine to create habitus, and explores the questions of “free choice” and performative action that came to the forefront in the classroom.

Making meaning on the MOO is a social and cultural act; it is a technological act; it is an act of belief. Language is material in MOOspace—as it is material in our everyday contexts that we don’t consider technologically mediated.

I don’t believe in gay marriages, he said; society just isn’t ready.... since when is your belief required for me to exist? (and yet it is)....

What is required to make meaning on the MOO is not only words, not only typing, but also a social and technical knowledge of how to produce the self in relation to the socio-cultural and technological structure of the MOO. These two structural threads intertwine to create the specific context in which meaning is made, in which
belief in the product of meaning-making can be situated. Butler tells us that we should consider “constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (271). When we consider meaning-making at the intersection of the virtual and the real, the collision of the MOO and the physical classroom, we must consider the ways that the process of producing subjectivity requires not just our words, not just the text, not just our bodies, but also our beliefs.

I came to this research negotiating im/possible subject/ivities. The MOO became a metaphor, for me, of how production of the self always happens in relation to a structuring context, a set of rules and requirements and habits that are always in force, regardless of whether we can see and understand them. The process of producing subjectivity is negotiation, from various positions of power and knowledge, but always negotiation with the discourse, the structuring language and habitus that forms the context of production. “It is the exhaustion that results. The tired body and heavy mind that wants to throw in the towel, but where would you throw it, in which corner?” (Menchaca 17). Producing the self is an act of faith, but also one of engaging continually in the process, the struggle, to fit into a discourse that predates and persists despite/in spite of/ in the face of the subjectivity I know I want to claim.
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WORKS CITED


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