Sue Thomas (UK)
THOMAS@INNOm.co.uK

THE[+) NET[+] OF DESIRE

I have just finished writing my third novel, *The [+]Net[+] of Desire*. My first book, *Correspondence*, 1992, was about the meeting of mind and machine, and *The [+]Net[+] Of Desire* is about the meeting of mind and cyberspace. It is set at LambdaMOO, where an entire personality can be condensed into a sentence or two or even just a smiley icon:) The book has been incredibly difficult to write, and this is ironic because when I first started I thought it would be incredibly easy - so much rich material there, so many interesting people and interactions - although as I settled in I found myself reluctant to use real material, and now I feel very strongly that we should enjoy privacy in our virtual lives. But generally, it seemed to me that text-based virtuality could only equal Heaven. It is Fiction in action, happening on *the* spot. A player writes a phrase, and then another player takes *the* mental image and adds elements of their own to expand and construct it in rather the same way as we download a compressed file and *use* pkunzip or stuflit expander to unpack it and make it active - except in this case we ourselves are also active in changing and contributing to the final product. In other words, we add our own preferences to the mindmix and make out of it whatever we will.

The problem that although virtuality engages our most intimate intellectual imagination, it is inITTdi-bly difficult to express that conjunction, that feeling of being logged on, to a reader who has never experienced it. How does one describe, for example, the intimate union of minds which occurs when you *type* a message to someone several thousand miles distant and you know, you just know, that you are linked to this person in some incredible and inexplicable way?

In *Ct!rrespondence*, I had made a small start with this in my attempts to imagine how it might feel to log on five years before I actually got the chance to experience it for myself. In 1989 I wrote:

> •*rou love that reeling ..• ! You hook in, and you wont to stay there. You con feel the feather-duster tickle of digital switches clicking in your brain, and when the power is high they send frissons of elearical charge through your body like a series of impulse orgasms.•*

Well, the impulse orgasms were a touch of cyberoptimism, a disease which is still fairly rampant, but it's true that being logged on, being thus engaged, turned out to be a singular experience unlike any I have ever known. By 1996 I was able to write about it again in *The [+]Net[+! of Desire,* but this time with some authority:

> •..• *she direct, the flickering arrow onto the angular N of Netscape and double-dicks, She presses-the11 storing rapt at the screen as her pupils expand, her skin tightens, and her breathing quickens in antidpatio11. The red dot glows brightly as it searrhes for a starting point and … now! … connection is established She glides forward inro virtuality, her brain opening itself wide like o rolling summer sky in dnemascope. •*
>
> *The beeps and clicks of her synapses tune i11 melodiously with the fast ru11ning machine modem and together they sweep through the sea of information parting before them as they approach.*
>
> *This is meat and elearicity conjoined, as they should be, as they were designed to be, as they always have been.*

Of course, this is a grossly optimistic exaggeration. It is a good example of the electronic romantic sublime, treating the phenomenon of cyberspace as if it were some kind of weather, or some emotional state, or some mystical atmosphere, rather than what it really is - a collection of bits of wire and plastic joined together by electricity. But I do think something new and strange is happening in cyberspace. I think that when we enter the world of machine-driven information we experience new and different sensations. The problem is that so far we seem to lade the conceptual lexicon with which to describe them. In everyday life we are ecoistomed to processing the data collected by the senses of touch, taste, hearing, sight, and smell, and indeed, without them we would have no way of knowing what is going on beyond the prison of our own skins, out there in the outside world. But the experience of cyberspace is different from that It has created a new and complex phenomenon which, for lade of a better word, I have called the cybersensorium.

So how do we define the cybersensorium? To begin with, sight *seems* to be the predominant sense in cyberia - after all, one needs to be able to 'see' the screen. But whilst our eyes are obviously very useful, our reliance upon them can often prevent us from taking the imaginative leap necessary in order to enter virtuality. After all, the act of looking implies distance, detachment, objectivity- and often control. We depend upon it utterly. The predominant senses used to be touch and smell, but since Alberti formulated his technique of linear perspective in the fifteenth century, and since literacy became widespread, the western world has been enslaved by its own eye. Now virtuality is tugging us away from our safe and fixed position as immobile spectators in a visible world. *What you see is what you get* no longer applies here. One of the first lessons the novice cyberian traveller has to learn is not to believe the evidence of her own eyes. There is always more to discover than that which is revealed at any one time.

So let us leave the eye behind for a moment and tum instead to the third century theologian Origen, who identified a set of spiritual senses which twinned the physical ones and which facilitated the perception of transcendental phenomena such as the sweetness of the word of God. This doctrine of the five spiritual senses was seen as highly significant throughout the medieval period and subsequently gave birth to the idea of the "inward" sensorium {comprising memory, instinct, imagination, fantasy, and common sense) which acted as a processor for the data gathered by the physical senses. I venture to suggest that much of the thrill of cyberspace comes from stimulation of these "inward" sensoria - especially the calls it makes upon our memory, imagination, and ability to fantasise. We must accept that in virtuality, Descartes' five senses are no longer enough.

Technology does not necessarily push us into the future. Sometimes it loops us back into the past. When I was working on *Ct!respondence* in the late 1980s, and I told people I was writing a novel about nature and about computers, they laughed in disbelief at the notion that the two could ever hope to occupy the same universe. But in my work I was repeatedly mingling images of the organic with the inorganic, and when I looked for other writing dealing with the same experiences the nearest srrrulanty I could find was in the work of a metaphysical poet from seventeenth century England – Andrew Marvell. His poem 'The Garden• carried the abstract sensuality I'd been searching for. No matter whether it occurs beneath the heavy branches of a laden peach tree, or out in the swirling mindmelds of cyberspace, it is the same process in which imagination and reality bring us together to create and enjoy new shared reahnes Describing the euphoria of stumbling through a richly-scented orchard, he notes how the heavily physical sensuality of the place provokes a parallel ecstasy in the mind:

> *The Mind, that Ocean where each kind*
> *Does streight its own resemblance find;*
> *Yet it creates, transcending these,*
> *Far other Worlds, and other Seas;*
> *Annihilating all that's made*
> *To a green Thought in a green Shade.*
>
> {from *The Garden,* by Andrew Marvell, 1621-1678)

Here at last was the conjunction I'd been striving to discover. In his lyrical description of inorganic sensuality, Marvell had identified the buzz of a meeting of minds which would excite me and many others three hundred years later. Not, this time, in a ganlen hung with fruit. but in an infinite space replete with colours, abstractions and wonls. The following extract from *The (+)Net[+]   of Desire* illustrates how I have tried to create my own interpretation of the "green Thought in a green Shade:"

> *umsider the virtual player sitting at the keyboard, eyes intent on the screen, fingers poised in thought, or rapidly typing. The only noises are those of breathing and of the CPU fan massaging the air.*
>
> *Watch onotne; the lover of the first, as the body hardly moves, barely makes a sound, and yet inside that meaty shell blood tounes through the veins, the heon races, the mi11d rushes on ..*
>
> *They are here and they are not here; they are in separate rooms but they are also together inside a binary labyrinth where their tllood is changed into current their arteries into wires, their brain activity inro code.*
>
> *(Dnsider them as they concentrate, most of their major physical sensoria set lll idle... their senses of taste, smell, hearing, touch off subdued and running in the background, whilst a11 other set takes over, entering through the portol of their eyes and using only the medium of sight ro trigger the pathways of the brain.*
>
> *Cyberspace engages our most intimate intellectual imagination in a way never before encountered Once accessed by sight, sound or rouch, the computer bypasses the physicol senses to hook us in directly a11d soon we are there*
>
> << *inside at last* >>
>
> *finally released from the gridlock of meat and bone which has held us in thrall for so long.*

For the purposes of the novel, I have replaced Marvell's garden with the landscape of Yirtuality and built a suite of rooms at lambdaMOO which form the location of the story and which can be viewed by anyone who cares to visit (Room #87887 is the starting point). lambdaMOO is, of course, host to some very shallow and childish behaviour, but it is also a place of heady experiment where intense and unforgettable connections are forged. In the novel, I wanted to write about people who experience that meeting of minds and who are transformed by it. I wanted them to be enlarged and expanded by their experiences. I wanted them to understand that gender can be fluid, that identity can be a prison, that the body can be re-formed and re-inhabited in new and different ways. This sounds like a fantasy, but it is not. I have met people who have been transformed by virtuality, and I have met people who have been severely damaged by it We might begin by trying to play at being virtual, but we soon discover that it is indeed a very serious game. I would like to end with a second short extract from *The [+]Net[+]   of Desire*. One of the most powerful aspects of the cybersensorium

is that our relationships with others are hugely constructed from what we bring to them ourselves. Of course, flesh relationships are like this too, but what is special about virtual relationships is that they seem to involve a great deal of loving oneself. There is a powerfully onanistic element to them, especially with regard to the masturbatory elements of virtual sexuality, and I explore that in the extract which follows.

This is the point in the story when the main protagonists, two very ordinary people called Louise and Oliver, are startled to find themselves suddenly and intensely brought together. Their real lives are very different from each other, but in virtuality *they* have developed a number of new personas.and of these it is Louise's character Liis,and Oliver's character Obsidian, who connect so abruptly.At this moment in the story Oliver's elderly computer has just crashed and disconnected him ...

> *He rums an the radio to calm himself, then leans across and jiggles the wire at the back of the computer, repeating the operation several times as the machine hisses and sputters until finally everything connects and the screen blinks tts way to life. He starts to type. But now the machine saeeches and screams in time to the efec:lric guitars as the signals sing ra each other from radio ro computer and tx,ck again. He grill his teeth. His nerves* ore *jangling with the noise, the burstl of static, the flickering light of the screen. He hits the off button on the rodio and tries to concentrate.*

Meanwhile, disappointed, and feeling acutely lonely, Liis has returned to the shady retreat of her own virtual room when Obsidian reappears.

> "Hello!" she says softly."! thought I'd lost you ... •
> He smiles.
> •oh no ... just a small technical hitch."
> 'Good! I'm glad you're back!"
> Silence.
> Spasm
> So what happens here now?
> A shift.
> A flux.
> A dive.
> For just a moment Obsidian hesitates, but something is happening that he can't ignore.
> 'kiss me .. ."
> *Oliver is frozen with emotion. Every nerve tingling, his penis thickening, his heart surging.*
> 'kiss me .. ."
> *Louise stares at her fingers on the keyboard and imagines their twins, somewhere halfway across the world, typing exactly the same words at the same time.*
> Here they sit, embracing, but speaking not a word, until suddenly he finds himself whispering into the dark:
> 'I want you."
> *His words flicker their screens bock* tll *life.*
> "Yes; she murmurs.
> She leans her head on his shoulder.
> *Louise is locked ro the screen. Her brain is rodng, her blood pounding through her veins.*

In the space of just a few seconds, something has occurred here. There is a recognition, a patterning, a synchronicity which defies explanation and *yet* is almost tangible in the swirling air of cyberspace.

> *It is certainly tangible in Real life, where Louise~ fingers tremble against the keyboard, and Oliver's forehead shines* with *SW!?at.*
>
> *In the many-gendered charocterofOb//iq, Oliver has performed virtual erotics many times, but liis feels like his first-ever /aver. With her he is Obsidian, he is a virgin once more.*
>
> *He leans bock in his chair,pulls the keyboard onto his knees, and proceeds* tll *make love to her slowly, tentatively, waking her in, his hands caressing* first *the keys, then every part of his body in tum. He rtrokes the tender skin of his belly, his throat, the tightness around his eyes. He finds himself running a finger along the inside of his lower lip, twitching* at *it with his tllngue, as if it belongs not ro him but to his lover.*
>
> *And Louise begins to understand haw hollow are other pleasures compared to the joy of being so close to Obsidian, this consdousness so intimate with her own. She reaches out* tll *touch the saeen and traces the 0 of his name, longing to push her fingers inside him as if his whole body is an 0, as* if *the only reason he exists is ro encompass wuise and her hunger. Then patiently, gendy, she finds in herself a strange and delightful newness.*
>
> *It tokes Vl'ry little ro fall in love in virtuolity. But what causes it? There ore no physical interactions, no sights, smells, or sounds, no pheromones, no body language. You cannot see or smell or rouch each other. You can't hear your lover~ voice or taste their lips.*

Louise doses her eyes, opens them,and he is still *here,* his sentences running horizontally across the glass like a ribcage of desire containing only their two beating hearts.

Here, there are only words, words and electrons. That is all.

END