

LIVING AT THE PALACE

PART I — The Cyber Identity Crisis

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he hottest thing in interactive web technology is clearly The Palace, what can probably best be described as the world's biggest cartoon cocktail party. Using two-dimensional icons called "props" or "avatars" of their own choice and/or design and "speaking" in word-balloons like comic book characters, members and guests mingle in a mansion's worth of 3D-rendered rooms that includes a bar, cafe, spa, study, etc. There are also several rooms whose doors can be locked from within, spots for uninterrupted private conversation ... and cybersex. On any given night it's not unusual to meet people from Europe, Australia, to "hear" them speak several languages, for guests and members to act as interpreters ... it's truly becoming an international phenomenon.

By V. X. POTENZA

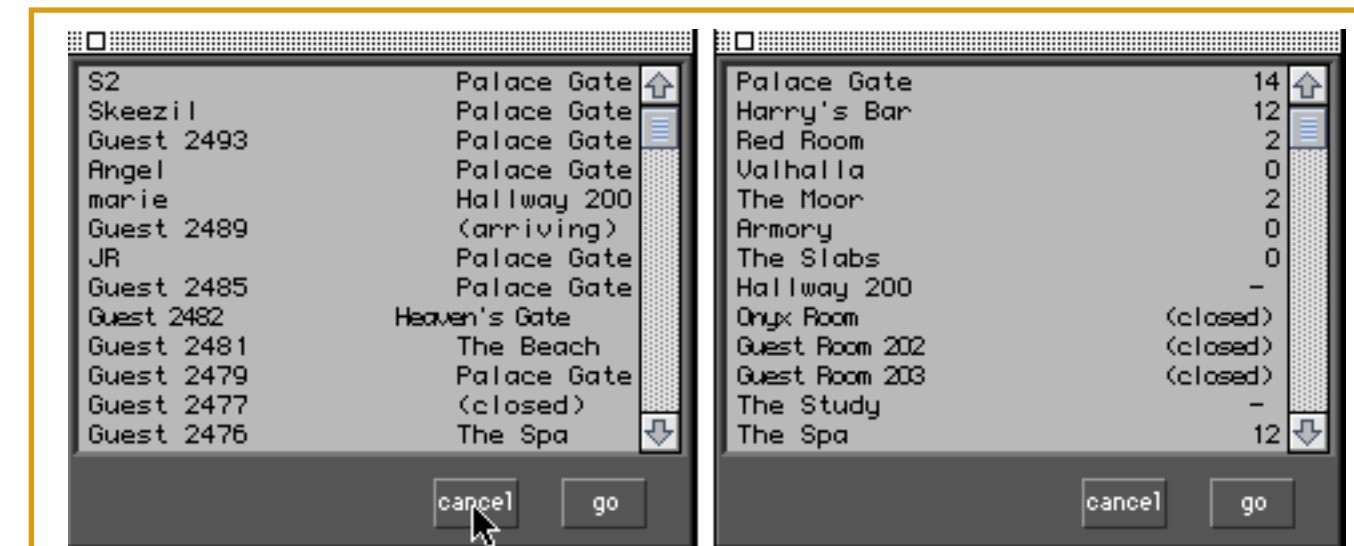
Beginning with this piece and continuing with PART II later this month, SIGNUM looks at the aspects of this new technology that set it apart from other "chat" environments and nearly all on-line experiences. The most obvious of these is the graphic nature of The Palace interface, which expands the realm of expression and interaction far past the bounds of the usual, cryptic, "chat shorthand."

The convention in these pieces will be to refer to the icons that represent members as avatars and any ancillary graphic as a prop — i.e., props are what avatars hold or wear.

What's My Name?

Is the gathering at this particular confluence in cyberspace really a new community? Are we witnessing the emergence of a new culture, with its own customs, notions of probity, rites of passage, mating rituals? Or, despite the warning to the contrary at The Palace gate, is it really in essence just another, slicker, video game?

The first decision you have to make upon becoming a member of the Palace community is how to refer to yourself — to choose the name that will appear under your avatar when you materialize at the Palace Gate. By far most people choose not to use their given names. Though this aspect of living in cyberspace is not unique to Palace dwellers — it's



The Palace client software's Find User window (left) and Go To window allow users to see who's at The Palace and where and to navigate from one room to another without using doors. In addition, by clicking once on a user's name in the Find User window and typing as you normally would, you can send a message to or "ESP" them, even though you're not in the same room. This is clearly one of The Palace's methods of communication that has no parallel "In Real Life."



The Palace client software's prop window facilitates avatar and prop use.

common to use “screen names” in other online environments — it’s still an interesting and important aspect of the Palace experience. If we accept the premise that what happens in cyberspace at the very least resonates in parallel with the lives we know in the realm of flesh and blood, then names and the act of naming are a powerful and primal declaration of much more than mere individual identity. (For more on this — and a brief tirade — see the sidebar *What’s In A Name?*)

A unique aspect of the cyber experience is that since it takes place outside of space it allows us to effectively lead a separate and distinct life in ways that physics and economics make impossible elsewhere. Imagine that, instead of being a virtual place in your computer, The Palace were an actual building in your city. The first time you go there you walk

How Anonymous is Anonymous?

With all this talk of “net stalking” and cybersex in the media we’d be severely remiss not to address the issue and alert people to the potential dangers of taking the idea of anonymity — liberating as it may be — too literally. It’s all too easy to forget that those little cartoon figures dancing around those Palace sites really are people who exist in flesh and blood and, though it may feel like you know them, you really don’t — all you know about them is what they want you to know. (More on this in Part 2 of this piece, “Are We Really Saying Anything?” to be released March 30.)

Jim Bumgardner, the creative force behind The Palace at Time Warner, has some sobering information for all us surfers. “The sysop *can* get an IP address, although she can’t get a username (unlike IRC for example, which provides both IP addresses and usernames to everybody). Nonetheless ... if the sysop wants to badly enough the person can often be traced. The key concept here is *badly enough*. I should also mention that it would be easy for an experienced hacker to obtain IP addresses even if the server software didn’t provide it in text form. There are utilities created for folks who are developing and debugging network hardware and software that, nonetheless, can be used by hackers in a malicious manner.”

So before you head off to someone’s Palace — or other Net site — for a round of cybersex or some other potentially embarrassing or emotionally entangling endeavor, consider that, in a way, you may be putting yourself in the sysop’s hands the same way you’re putting yourself in the hands of the proprietor of a local pub when you walk through his or her door with the intention of getting stupid. Don’t be foolish — check out the crowd and the neighborhood before you pull up a chair!

On the Net ... Not at All!

What’s In A Name?

I never had a classmate named Chauncey or Taylor or Caldwell. All the guys were Williams or Roberts or Stevens. In fact I remember that in one of my grade-school classes there were about *six* guys named Robert. I also didn’t go to school with anybody named Fritz or Pierre or Sven or Claudio. Guys named Hubert or Clyde were regularly beaten up after school and only the cruelest of parents would have named their son Marian or Francis or even Stacy because after school they would have been beaten up by Hubert or Clyde. I grew up from infancy with a neighbor whose real name was Francis and I didn’t realize it (his real first name, not that we were neighbors) until we were teenagers. Everyone, even his family, called him Buddy. He had six brothers ... no sisters.

The same sort of thing went for nick-names, and here at least we found a way to assert ourselves, free of parental tyranny. For instance anyone who introduced himself to you as *Michael* was not to be trusted: you were *Mike* or you were ignored. Likewise, if you walked up to some guy on the playground at recess

and said, “Hey, *Thomas* ...” the two of you would be grappling in the dirt within moments.

But out of grade school and past puberty the power of *inventing* nick-names from thin air became apparent. Buddy, because he’d written an imbecilic poem in English class allegedly from the point of view of Father Time, became Father Francis. Another from-day-one neighbor, Timmy, whose last name began with the letters A-F-F-A — and because *affa* is German for *gorilla* — became The Ape. One of those grade-school Roberts, who as a teenager consistently did his best to annoy everybody, became Bobnoxious ... etc.

And therein lies some of the magic. I haven’t seen Buddy or Timmy for something like twenty-five years and yet if I ran into and called either by the appropriate name those years would, in a very real sense, melt away — because those names bind us to a place and time. I think this is what the American Indians had in mind when they refrained from bestowing a name on a brave until he came of age — in other words, until he attained an identity — and

his name would forever bind him to the moment he passed into manhood, with all its implications: *Speaks-Like-Thunder*. Now is that a self-image, or what?

Of course the Native Americans weren’t alone. The whole concept of *dubbing* knights — literally, the bestowing of names — was common in Medieval Europe. Achieve knighthood, get a new name worthy of the accomplishments that brought you there: *Sir Drinks-A-Lot*. (That’s not as facetious as you might think — being able to hold your ale was by all accounts considered a manly virtue in those days and, if you think about it, that’s a pretty bizarre social attitude that survives to this day.) The privilege of dubbing was reserved for the sovereign, the lord of all he or she surveyed. Does this remind you of Adam?

In my life away from the keyboard I myself have always been famous for dubbing people, and over the years I’ve had a lot of time to think about why. One slant would be to say that deep-down I’m a control freak and this practice gives me power over those whom I dub — I become their “sovereign.” The control thing may indeed be an emotional component, but what I think more likely is that the naming is an

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How often have you heard someone say something like, “I knew him before he made a name for himself”? It’s a fairly common expression and an interesting concept — the roots of which, according to my recent reading, probably arose at the dawn of history.

It says in Genesis that God granted Adam the privilege of naming the animals He had populated the Earth with. I remember reading that as a kid and thinking, “Big privilege. I don’t get it.” Nor did I get “The Begats,” as they used to be called: “And Seth begat Jeram, and Jeram begat Ham, and Ham begat Jehosophat ...” or whatever. Name after name after name with little or no other information and for no apparent reason. Who were these guys? Why is a list of names so important?

Well, in that large, through-the-millennia historical sense I guess it isn’t. But as I grew up I realized that in the smaller, sociological sense names are terribly important and there is a great deal of power involved in naming things.

The most obvious case in point has to do with the names our parents give and bequeath us because they carry the aura of class, ethnicity and gender. For instance during my middle-class-suburban childhood

How Private Is Private?

Whenever two people don't want others to overhear their conversation at The Palace they can click on each other's avatars and enter "whisper mode," in which their word-balloons appear only to each other and in italic type. Though no other members can hear this conversation, is it possible that the The Palace Wizards or other administrative personnel can? According to Jim Bumgardner, the software has been designed so that private conversation is absolutely private. "Not even the sysop/god can eavesdrop. In addition, there are no facilities provided for logging chat of any kind (public or private) to disk on the server side (although there is on the client side). In addition, all chat (public and private) is scrambled so it can't be easily monitored ..."

Please notice, however, the reference to logging chat on the client side. This means that *either* of two people in a private conversation can save the dialogue to a disk file and *anybody in a room* can log the public chat to disk, even though system personnel can do neither.

Though it's common knowledge that the laws governing Net communication are still hazy at best, in light of the fact that there's no such thing as true online anonymity, this is worth remembering.

At The Palace ... Very!

in wearing a name tag that says "Hi! My name is Phil." Everyone at The Actual Palace knows you as Phil and, since you always go there Fridays after work and you're in a good mood because the workweek is over, everybody at The Actual Palace knows Phil as a happy, good-time guy.

Until one day at lunchtime one of The Actual Palace members comes across you rushing across the street to a meeting you're late and, what's worse, ill-prepared for. This person meets a completely different Phil — a cranky, confused nitwit who's gruff as all get-out. By the time you next walk into The Actual Palace the tale of this encounter has made the rounds and people aren't quite as friendly as before, certainly not the person you blew off in the street because — voila! — your personality has undergone a drastic change.

Of course it hasn't really, but its perception in a particular context certainly has. This concept is nothing new and we've all experienced it to some degree. We all have "work friends," "gym friends," etc., relationships that, for one reason or another, probably

wouldn't work outside a particular environment. Most of us also know people who have one personality at the office and another, perhaps even radically different one, outside it.

What differentiates the above scenario from one at The Palace is that, in the vast majority of cases, no one at The Palace will ever experience what you're like outside that environment — certainly not if you don't want them to — so there is no "other" you for comparison. If you as Phil don't feel happy on a particular Friday or for a month of Fridays you have the option of not going to The Palace and so risk ruining your "image" there. You probably don't have the option of not going to work or of avoiding all your coworkers for a month.

What also sets the cyber experience apart from the actual variety is the ability it bestows upon us to change names — and summarily lose all their baggage — at will. In the above example, if the reaction to your faux pas in the street were strong enough, you might decide not that you didn't want to return to The Palace, but that you wanted to return as some-

attempt to make sense of things, which I believe to be a very great need of mine — hence all these expositions on meaning. The first step in understanding anything is to recognize it for what it is, which means differentiating it from what it is not. Naming does this in an emotionally charged way.

To wit, back to the Middle Ages: it was said that for a necromancer to conjure and control a demon it was necessary only to speak its name. If you knew its name you had knowledge and hence power over it. Remember the story of Rumpelstiltskin? This is nothing but a demon story disguised as fairy tale and once again the name signifies knowledge and power. Goofy superstitious nonsense, isn't it? We're too enlightened to do that sort of crap now, right?

Oh yeah? "In the name of God! In the name of all that's holy! What have you done?" Isn't it clear that by "speaking the name" we hope to invoke the pres-

ence of God? It's still conjuring! We still make that connection! "Don't mention that name in front of me!" we say, not because we don't want to be reminded of someone, rather because we want that someone not to be. No name ... no existence.

When we *nominate* someone to a position or duty — *nomen* is Latin for name — aren't we actually invoking their presence and directing them toward the task at hand merely by "speaking their name?"

There are other obvious religious connections. One of the Ten Commandments states "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Meaning His name is very very powerful: don't mess with it! When Catholics ask for God's blessing by making the sign of the cross they say, "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Chanting "the names of the Lord" is a common practice in Eastern religion.

In many, many societies one of the greatest honors you can bestow upon someone is to name a child after them. The implicit meaning is, "By giving this child your name we hope it will grow up to be like you." It's a Jewish tradition that children be named only after deceased relatives. Thus if one Jew says to another, "I hope someone names their child after you!" it's not exactly a compliment. In any event the bestowed name is a head start. It confers the namesake's spirit, points to a path and thus can be a beacon or a burden to the child who bears it.

So names are important. My wife and I like to amuse dinner guests by asking them to name Snow White's Seven Dwarfs. "Okay," they say. "Grouchy ... Mopey ... Smiley ... Flaky ... Hungry ... Sleazy ..." Just about every person we pull this on comes up with a new permutation that we all find hilarious, some that I don't even know how to spell: *Shy-ey*; *Cry-ey*;

Cough-ey? Yet more than a few of the guesses, but for some writer's frame of mind, might very well have been the correct names — *Grouchy* instead of *Grumpy* — and we tend to laugh hardest at those. I find that funniest of all.

I also find it curious that the trend in our language over the past few hundred years has been the exact opposite in spirit from the dubbing days — no longer do we take on a name worthy of our accomplishments; rather, if they're mighty enough, our accomplishments take on *our* name. This is an interesting and subtle twist because in a very real way, through that same magic, it divorces us as people from what we do in the sense that it no longer matters *how* we "make" that name. So whereas at one time a certain man's name may have been *Exploits-The-Poor*, in our culture we have instead a certain Henry Bigbucks, founder of Bigbucks Industries, who passes on

to Henry Bigbucks II a name ringing with power — which would certainly not be the case if Junior were called *Son-Of-Exploits-The-Poor* or *Exploits-The-Poor-Also*, or even *Inherited-Stolen-Money*.

The other aspect of this practice that I find unsettling is that, through this vain celebration of personal accomplishment — and, let's face it, this stinks of the immortality bit — it can needlessly saturate the language with verbal icons when more often than not a simple descriptive phrase would prove much more lucid. Here's a random sample of name-terms I've gleaned from my dictionary:

Avogadro's law — states that equal volumes of all gases under identical pressure and temperature contain the same amount of molecules, after Count Amedeo Avogadro (1776-1856), Italian chemist and physicist.

Benedict Arnold — a traitor, after the American Revolutionary War general.

Bluebeard — a man who kills his wives, after the character in an old story.

Boetian — rude and uncultured; after the pastoral people of Boetia in ancient Greece, whom the Athenians considered dullards.

Bohemian — unconventional or irregular in lifestyle, as artists or musicians tend to be; after the province in Czechoslovakia, thought to be the home of Gypsies who arrived in France by way of Bohemia in 1427.

Caesarian section — delivering a baby by cutting through the abdominal and uterine walls, after Julius Caesar, who was supposedly born this way.

Casanova — a man who thinks highly of himself; after Giovanni Jacopo Casanova de Seingalt, Venetian adventurer and author (1725-1798).

Don Juan — a womanizer, rake; after the character in Spanish legend.

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one else. Phil is dead — you're now Frank!

Will the other Palace members recognize you? This is an interesting question. Aside from the obvious fact that we all have distinct pasts, just what is it about the way we behave and communicate in cyberspace that's unique, that makes us *us*?

What Do I Look Like?

Here's where The Palace begins to leave other interactive online environments behind. With the option of choosing an avatar to represent your identity, a new, realistic and powerful method of communicating emerges. Just a few visits to The Palace will confirm that members choose their

avatars with at least as much care as they choose their names. There are other striking features of avatar usage from which we can infer some interesting parallels, if not conclusions.

Women's avatars tend to be smaller than men's. Once you figure out which is which, it's clear that the vast majority of women prefer physically smaller avatars. Smaller — not less interesting and certainly not less attractive ...

Women feel more comfortable using sexually provocative avatars than men do. Spend an hour at The Palace these days and you will see many half-naked female avatars — in bikinis, fantasy-inspired skin-tight leather with swords unsheathed, clinging leotards or flowing negligee-like

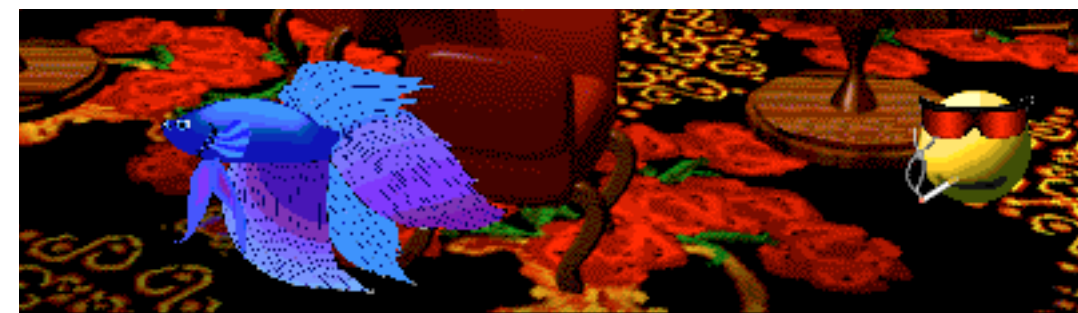
gowns. Yet out of perhaps fifty or sixty male members you might see perhaps one studly-looking, g-string sporting male avatar. On the other hand ...

Men are more apt to use female avatars than women are to use male avatars. Men seem to have no problem slipping on a slinky female avatar, yet women very rarely reciprocate by "becoming" men. In certain situations women will become fantastic, grotesque, threatening monsters much more readily than they will assume the visage of a normal human male. But avatar usage doesn't only follow sexual lines ...

Younger members tend to use bigger avatars than older ones. Take an age-count in a given room of The Palace on any given night

and, if the answers you get are to be believed, it will become obvious that younger people prefer larger avatars. Not only that ...

Young males tend to have the largest and most elaborate avatars of all. The temptation to draw parallels to the actual world of biology is irresistible. If The Palace is indeed a virtual society, then the proclivity of young males to attempt to draw attention to themselves — in particular the attention of young females — manifesting itself in choice and size of avatar is a gimme. The competitive aspect of all this is particularly evident when avatars become hot and/or fast cars or wildly colorful semi-amorphous forms reminiscent of male tropical fish.



After I'd written that young men frequently show up at The Palace as "wildly colorful semi-amorphous forms reminiscent of male tropical fish" a young man actually *did* appear as one!

Young Palace males are also most apt to use scripts — mini-routines that allow them to do "impressive" things like make words appear in other members' mouths or cause props to navigate across a room — more attention-getting devices.

What should we make of the other observations? If men are more apt to be ostentatious, then why not sexually in a blatant — rather than merely symbolic — way, as the women seem to feel so comfortable in doing? What does it mean that men prefer not to

Donnybrook — a rumble or free-for-all; from the former fair, annually held in a village by the same name near Dublin, that was famous for its drinking and fighting.

Faustian — sacrificing spirit for curiosity or gain, after the character in German legend who sells his soul to the devil.

Fibonacci sequence — 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 ... wherein each number is the sum of the previous two, after Leonardo Fibonacci, Italian mathematician (d. about 1250).

Guillotine — the famous execution device; after its French inventor, Joseph Guillotin (d. 1814), a physician.

Herculean task — a task very difficult or dangerous, after the ancient Greek demi-god Hercules.

Judas — a treacherous person, after Judas Iscariot, the apostle who betrayed Jesus.

Lesbian — a homosexual woman, from the practices attributed to the Greek poetess Sappho (c. 600 B.C.) and her followers on the isle of Lesbos (now called Mytilene) in the Aegean Sea.

Machiavellian — duplicitous, treacherous; after Niccolò Machiavelli, a Florentine statesman and author who advocated same as a political expedient.

Malapropism — a ridiculous misuse of words, after Mrs. Malaprop, a character in R.B. Sheridan's play *The Rivals* (1775), in turn after the word *malapropos*, meaning inappropriate: "Mozart was a child progeny."

Murphy bed — a bed that swings up into a closet

or cabinet when not in use, after 20th century U.S. inventor W.L. Murphy.

Murphy's law — "If something can go wrong, it will." This Murphy has eluded historians.

Pandora's box — anything best left alone. In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first mortal woman, sent by Zeus to punish mankind for the theft of fire by Prometheus. When she opened the box Zeus gave her she let all human ills loose into the world. (Equivalent to the modern *can of worms*.)

Pharisee — someone who is hypocritical and sanctimonious, observing the letter but not the spirit of the law, after the ancient Jewish sect.

Philippic — any declamation full of acrimonious invective, after the speeches made by Demosthenes (385-332 B.C.), a Greek orator, against Philip, King of Macedon.

Philistine — conventional and/or uncultured, not after the people who warred with the Israelites for the control of Palestine beginning around 1200 B.C., but adapted by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), English poet and critic, after *Philister*, a term used by German university students to denote outsiders.

Platonic love — not physical but spiritual, after the Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.)

Puckish — mischievous, after Puck, an elf in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Quisling — a traitor, after Vidkun Quisling, a Norwegian who betrayed his country to the Nazis.

Shylock — a merciless businessman, after Shakespeare's moneylender in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shyster — a person, especially a lawyer, who uses unethical methods; probably after a certain Scheuster, an American lawyer frequently rebuked in New York court (c. 1840) for same.

Socratic method — a means of teaching by asking questions, after the Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 B.C.).

Wagnerian — the repetitive use of a specific musical theme to identify an emotion or character, after Richard Wagner (pronounced Vahg' ner), German composer: the aural equivalent of "bad guys always wear black."

It's obvious that some of these terms — either because they've been with us for so long or because prior to their existence there was simply no way to describe what they refer to — are useful. It's equally obvious that *Benedict Arnold*, *Judas* and *Quisling* all mean the same thing and, unless you're familiar with the attendant histories, are equally incomprehensible. Why not the much more graphic and easily grasped *turncoat* — someone who changes sides as easily as turning his uniform inside-out? Or why not say something *original*?

Which bring us to the other danger with these name-terms — that, because of the magic, they have a built-in sort of glibness that just barely keeps them from being buzz-words, if at all: it's just too easy to

toss one out in lieu of thinking. For instance I'm sick to death of hearing folks describe things as *Kafkaesque* — first, because I'm sure most of them don't know what it means; and second, because even though I've read oodles of Kafka in the original and all that woo-woo intellectual stuff I'm not sure I know what it means: it's not like the guy wrote one book or that his entire life's work was one ceaseless, unvarying drone of despair, any more than *Whitmanesque* adequately describes the person who wrote *Song Of Myself* and *When Lilacs Last By The Dooryard Bloom'd*. When I was in college a professor once asked a classmate to describe Don Quixote and the kid said ... *Quixotic*. You see what I mean?

Ape binds me to Timmy precisely *because* it's esoteric and ultimately arbitrary. When we play the Name Game in language-at-large, however, we're begging for brain-death for the exact same reason: adolescent elitism does not become a truly civilized society. I see no meaningful difference between a bunch of obnoxious teenagers creating names to reinforce their fragile and necessarily limited view of reality and a group of academicians or *literati*, for example, turning names into adjectives for the sake of doing the same for theirs — to the exclusion of the uninitiated. The only difference is that the latter should know better because the purpose of language at all times should be to *communicate*.

I'm waiting for somebody to describe that as a *Potenzal* attitude.

appear sexually provocative as men but have no problem appearing that way as women? And why do women apparently prefer not to appear as men at all?

The Guest/Member Phenomenon

Before I get into the specifics of communicating at The Palace I'd be remiss not to mention what every Palace member knows: Guests are obnoxious, members are not — at least not to other members. Being obnoxious to guests is another matter entirely.

If there is a single, most compelling argument for The Palace as a virtual culture then this phenomenon is it: I've seen guests use incredibly vile language, hurl racial or sexual epithets and worse, but once someone decides to "join the community" — as one member described the act of registering and relinquishing the (relative) anonymity of guesthood — he or she almost without exception does his or her best to get along with other members, be polite, respectful of others' rights, and so on.

One could argue that anti-social types would never join a community anyway and this argument might have been valid in the early days of The Palace, yet the sheer numbers involved now make this more than less moot. (At any given moment there are four to five or even six times as many Palace users now then there were just two months ago.) One would think there are simply too many people involved now for there not to be more than several proverbial bad apples. Yet that doesn't appear to be the case. At least not yet.

There are certainly reasons for this other than the innate

goodness of humankind. Among these we can no doubt count the fact that becoming a member requires a registration fee that most people probably don't want to lose by getting banned; there's the desire to be accepted by the group; and the not-so-subtle psy-

props and avatars; they frequently complain about not having a name. The designers of The Palace clearly understood this when they made choosing a name one of the benefits of — and hence huge selling point for — membership.

It also then follows that

Members pick on guests and not each other because guests are not part of the group and therefore don't deserve the same respect — they're nameless and hence not "people" the way members are. All in all it's a relatively innocuous but still very real and extremely eye-opening variation on prejudice.

chology involved with not being a guest any longer — "I'm no longer a randomly assigned number. I have a name and an identity." Guests rarely complain about not being able to go to certain rooms and only sometimes about the inability to fully manipulate

members pick on guests and not each other for the same reason: Guests are not part of the group and therefore don't deserve the same respect — they're nameless and hence not "people" the way members are. All in all it's a relatively innocuous but still very real

and extremely eye-opening variation on prejudice, bigotry and mob psychology, with the endless stream of guests perpetually providing the minority of pariahs.

The Nature of Cyber-Communication

What is it about online communication that causes it to appear, at least, as if we're actually communicating? Even, in some cases, to make it seem more intense than are actual, in-real-life experiences?

For one thing there are less auditory/visual clues to aid or ground us in interpreting input so, just as in reading fiction, we have a greater tendency to participate — to invest interactions — with our own emotional needs and proclivities, in a way hearing what we want to hear, which naturally makes it all seem so much more real. As an analogy, consider *The Savage Curtain* episode of the original Star Trek, in which Abraham Lincoln appears on the

bridge of *The Enterprise*. At one point Kirk says, "I know it's impossible, but he seems so real!" Spock counters by saying something like, "The aliens used your mental image of him as a template — it follows that he would seem real to you!"

can seem more real, more vital, more important than what's happening in our actual lives. This filling-in phenomenon has been documented in regard to sensory perception — the same concept is the basis for film technology — and so the distance to the realm

There is so little real information presented us online that we're forced to fill in the gaps with the only thing we have at our disposal — ourselves. Because we invest online relationships with so much of ourselves they can seem more real, more vital, more important than what's happening in our actual lives.

And so with cyber-communicating: there is so little real information presented us online that we're forced to fill in the gaps with the only thing we have at our disposal — ourselves. Because we invest online relationships with so much of ourselves they

of emotional perception requires no great leap of faith.

Consider one small example: You are "speaking" to someone at The Palace. You say, "I think all Republicans should be gagged." He replies, "Yeah right!"

In the actual world there would be several indications of what he meant by this: facial expression, tone of voice, body language, etc. With none of these clues you have no idea whether the reply is meant to be a hearty agreement, totally sarcastic or somewhere in between — something you would no doubt be able to decide immediately if this were an actual face-to-face conversation.

Innumerable instances of these types of nuance continually creep into every online communication. In PART II, "Are We Really Saying Anything?" I'll look at how some of these nuances are — or are not — captured with The Palace technology, what advances are in store for it in the near future and what effect these might have on The Palace community.

