MUSERS NOT LUSERS!

Tod Foley visits MIT's "Cyberion City"

The bright outlines of the Cyberion City Transporter Station slowly come into focus. You have been beamed up here (at considerable expense) from one of the Earth Transporter Stations. You are among the adventurous and moderately wealthy few who have decided to visit (and perhaps dwell in) Cyberion City, the largest space city in the solar system. You are welcomed by the transporter attendant, who gives directions to all newcomers to this space city.

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Contents:
Attendant

Obvious exits:
Out

Welcome to MicroMUSE. Your name is Guest2.
Attendant says "Welcome, Guest, to Cyberion City."
Attendant says "Feel free to contact any Official for aid."
Attendant says "Be sure to use our extensive online help command."
Attendant says "I hope you enjoy your stay."
The attendant smiles at you.
You step down off of the MTRS platform and walk out into the lobby.
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Thus began my electronic travels through the alternate reality of MicroMUSE / Cyberion City, a complex computer simulation of an immense self-contained space city orbiting the Earth in the 24th century. As a "Guest," my span of possible interactions was somewhat limited, but this didn't bother me -- I was more than happy with the handful of MUSE commands I had mastered so far. I was able to walk around the city freely and easily, examining and interacting with its areas and objects, and meeting its inhabitants, both living and artificial. The basic format, reminiscent of text-based adventure games like "Zork" and "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," was both familiar and logical.

In a few short days I be registered as a "Citizen," and the temporary name of my electronic alter-ego would be changed to whatever I wanted. In fact, as a Citizen I would be able to alter and animate any aspect of my simulated self to suit my mood, and to engage in virtual commerce with virtual money. But by far the most enticing aspect of this computer-world was something I had already begun to acquire. Idling there in the Main Transporter Receiving Station, I was filled with an almost overwhelming sense of the creative power that would soon be granted me: the power to create, describe, and fully animate any place, thing or character I could imagine.

This is the Game that Moves as you Play

MicroMUSE is a "Multi-User Simulated Environment" conceived and founded in 1990 by programmer/head wizard Stan Lim, aka "Jin." The title of "wizard" is a throwback to the

early days of MUDs (Multi-User Dimensions), which were usually based upon the roleplaying game "Dungeons and Dragons." Executive users are now called 'Directors' in MicroMUSE. This user-built, fully interactive world has undergone numerous political end conceptual changes since its inception, including near-extinction due to "data bloat" and "virtual civil war."

The massive database which contains the "city" is held within a Motorola M88K RISC computer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This computer is colloquially known as "chezmoto." Internet users from all over the world are able to access MUSE information freely via FTP (File Transfer Protocol), and enter the simulated reality. Indeed, within my first few hours in the city I met characters whose real-life users were located in Northern California, Florida, and Czechoslovakia. To date, over 1,400 people have visited Cyberion City, roughly 90% of which have become Citizens. The database, looming dangerously large at 15.5 megabytes, includes almost 50,000 individual objects. And all of these objects are interactive. This means that the commands you place in their memory registers will take effect whenever any character looks at them, takes, drops or tries to enter them, depending upon what you specify. You don't even have to online. And you can address these registers any time you want to, instantly changing wishes to horses, thought to form.

Things weren't always so cushy for Lim and his world. In its infancy the simulated environment was a virtual battleground of artistic styles and programming goals. In late 1990 several MUSErs, entrusted by Lim with advanced programming capabilities and administrative positions, began to abuse their power, neglecting their responsibilities and threatening the delicate social balance (and electronic size) of the entire construct. Petty confrontations and covert secession began to occur as the wizards feuded over the virtual territory like Joint Chiefs of Staff in a flesh-and-blood war.

Finally one disgruntled user created a "berserker device": a virus-like object which moved from area to area of the MUSE, destroying everything it encountered. In response, Lim was forced to restore the database and revoke all wizard powers. The creator of the virus was never identified.

The continued existence of Cyberion City -- and even its name -- may be directly attributed to the efforts of a remarkable educator named Barry Kort. One of the MUSE's earliest visitors, Kort (as Moulton") quickly rose to prominence, building the city's Science Center, the Computer Museum, Children's Wing, Curio Shoppe and something called -- intriguingly -- the "Logic Quest."According to "Early MUSE History" by "Sholin the Historian," MicroMUSE -- then called MicroMUSH -- came into grave peril in 1991. Kort's letters to the California State University at Fresno had already borrowed a few extra months on the University's Sun 4/11O computer, but now that time was about to end -- and with it, the world. In the face of near-certain extinction, Jin

gathered a new team of trusted Builders and set about transforming the place into the creative utopia it is today. New letters were sent, outlining the uses of the MUSE as an educational environment, and expounding Lin's nonviolent, creative philosophy. Finally, in April 1991, Kort managed to secure a new home for MicroMUSE at MIT, and has since invited scores of new visitors. Today, thanks largely to Kort's herculean efforts, Cyberion City is rapidly growing in size, population and diversity, and is finally approaching the utopia of its original altruistic vision.

We are the World

The reality depicted in Cyberion City is an idealist's view of the future, created by today's young computer community: a golden age of exploration and invention, enjoyed by a society based upon educational progress, cultural tolerance and personal creative freedom. The expansive virtual environment is comprised of hundreds of painstakingly detailed smaller areas, almost all of which were created in ad-hoc fashion by the inhabitants themselves. These "Rooms" -- as they are called, regardless of their size -- are mostly located within the virtually-hermetic hull of the orbital city, although users have created "functional" spaceships, planets, and even dimensional gateways, leading through the internet to yet more artificial realities.

Like all MUDs and MUSEs, Cyberion City is written in a programming language which allows users to create dynamic areas and items of their own. And, like all MU's, the simulation is really a huge relational database, linked to advanced telecommunications hardware which allows users to interact with each other's characters in real time. Unlike most other MUs, however, Cyberion City grants "Builder Privileges" to all Citizens; this and other unique features vastly increase the depth and variety of the simulated world. The most laudable of these features has to be "The MicroMUSE Charter"; a sort of mission statement which espouses the most altruistic of human goals. This insightful document protects the inhabitants of MicroMUSE -- many of whom are minors -- from the senseless attrition and fiercely competitive behavior which tends to plague such fictional worlds.

> **From the MicroMUSE / Cyberion City Charter:**
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> MicroMUSE is chartered as an Educational MUSE, with preference toward Educational, Scientific, and Cultural content. MIT in Massachusetts provides the computing resources for
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> MicroMUSE with the understanding that these resources are to be used in accordance with the University's general policies and guidelines for propriety and relevance to MIT's Educational Mission. Since MIT is funded in part by Federal taxes, we have an obligation to ensure that those taxpayer dollars are not used to

support activities of questionable or objectionable nature...

1. Purpose of MicroMUSE

A. Educational: MicroMUSE allows the cooperative exploration and construction of simulated worlds, past, present or futuristic. The educational aims of the Muse are as varied as the people who use it. Some such uses include learning basic programming techniques, producing simulation models of real-life phenomena, exploring such simulated models to learn about the systems that were modeled; learning by teaching others; classroom projects; meeting people from other parts of the country or the world; reading and learning to write clear, understandable prose.

B. Recreational: Provides a congenial atmosphere and comfortable environment for socializing and exchanging ideas.

C. Visionary: MicroMUSE models an optimistic possibility for a future world inhabited by a productive worldwide community of people and of the tools and machines they have built.

D. Communication and transfer of ideas: MicroMUSE is geared towards the promotion of communication and the transfer of new ideas.

The MicroMUSE programming language, known as "TinyMUSE," is an amazing piece of code. For all its flexibility, it is remarkably user-friendly, and possesses several levels of Power and Civic Function. By associating user access level with civic responsibility, MicroMUSE creates an environment which enables all citizens to progress through the hierarchy in accordance to their desire, their skill, and their willingness to help others.

HyperArt Imitates SuperLife

So what can you do in Cyberion City? Better to ask "What can't you do?", provided you're not scared of learning a few new commands. As Moulton says, the best way to learn is to jump in and start doing it, and the good Citizens of Cyberion City are always willing to lend you a hand, teach you a trick, or stop your runaway widget.

My registration notice arrived today via email. Wasting no time, I took Telnet directly out to Cyberion City and dove right in. Engrossed in my "play," I quickly created and detailed my first character, following it up with several "Rooms" to live in and a few-odd "Things" to carry around. All these objects are getting more and more complex as I continue...

I'm thinking about adding six adjoining Rooms, each with its own decorative theme, literary style, and interactive puzzle to solve... Or maybe that adventure movie I've had in my head since I was thirteen... Or then again...

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To connect with MicroMUSE you must have Internet access.

1. At telnet type "open michael.ai.mit.edu"
2. At login? type "guest"
3. At welcome screen type "connect guest"

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