

Rape, Murder and Suicide Are Easier When You Use a Keyboard Shortcut: Mouchette, an On-Line Virtual Character

*Mouchette with
Manthos Santorineos
Introduction by Toni Sant*

ON THE INTERNET, NOBODY KNOWS YOU'RE A DOG: THINKING ABOUT IDENTITY ON-LINE

Introduction by Toni Sant

On-line identity is very fluid. A famous *New Yorker* cartoon by Peter Steiner deals specifically with the possibilities of performing an identity other than one's own in an on-line environment. It depicts a dog sitting at a computer terminal, saying to another dog, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" [1]. The possibility of playing with our everyday identities is among the most intriguing facets of on-line performance, as it is with many modes of off-line performance, such as the presentation of the self in everyday life and in cross-dressing.

There is an element of the carnivalesque in the on-line experience. In the practice of the carnivalesque as discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, the Internet is an updated location for both our erotic and our intellectual fantasies. Bakhtin's analysis of carnival illustrates how this new arena for performance has great potential for social liberation. Bakhtin's observations about carnival—such as "During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" [2]—could very well be an evaluation of certain behavior on the Internet that gives this new medium the unsavory reputation it has in some circles. Like carnival, the Internet can provide a realm of liberty that undermines social barriers and provides a diversion from the humdrum of everyday life, because quasi-anonymity is possible on-line. No one can really be totally anonymous on the Internet, but by the same token no one can really be identified individually without conceding to be recognized. Furthermore, while it is easy to create a fake identity, it also is possible to chip away at some-

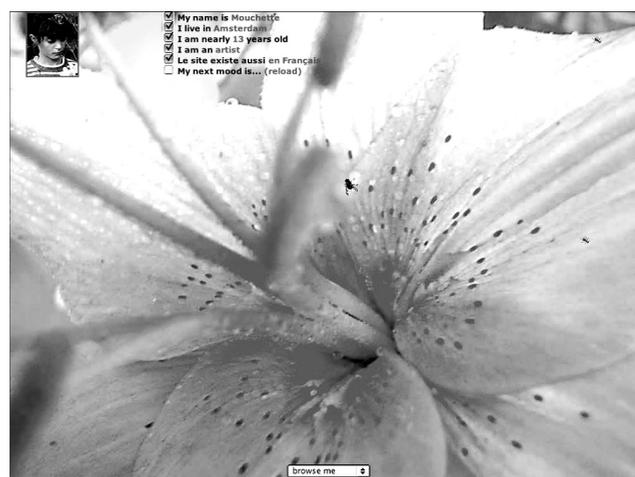
one else's mask of anonymity if you have access to the appropriate technology.

Both Mouchette.org and the presentation of the Mouchette experience to live audiences play with this ambivalence, and they do so on a number of levels. The first of these levels is the visual impact that the web site has on many people when they view it for the first time. I have observed various types of Internet users react to the on-line images with a very puzzled look, particularly if they have not been clued in to who or what is behind this work. The next level arises from the question "Who is Mouchette?" and variations that arise from it. This becomes especially relevant when the work is presented to an audience gathered in the same physical space over roughly the same period of time, such as the one I saw at Postmasters Gallery in New York on Easter Sunday, 20 April 2003. On this occasion, the artist who created and maintains the web site met with a live public, one audience member at a time, inside an inflatable environment constructed with Anakin Koenig (the environment created a sense of mystery, which can be associated with the play on anonymity).

ABSTRACT

The web site mouchette.org is animated by the persona of Mouchette, an on-line identity created by an anonymous artist. The interview presented here sets out the artist's purposes in creating Mouchette and the understanding of on-line experience underlying the work shown on the site.

Fig. 1. A screen snapshot of Mouchette's homepage. (© Mouchette)



Mouchette (on-line virtual character). E-mail: <mouchette@mouchette.org>.

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Article Frontispiece. One of Mouchette's web pages was used to decorate a carrier bag made as a special edition for an art manifestation. (© Mouchette)

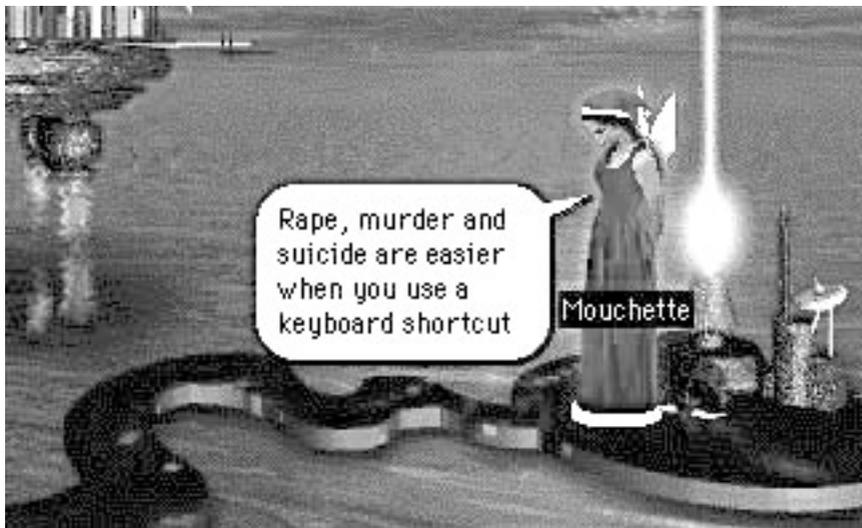


Fig. 2. A digital picture by Mouchette. (© Mouchette)

Another level of play involves a recent copyright dispute with Robert Bresson's estate over the site's references in an on-line questionnaire to Bresson's 1967 film *Mouchette*, based on *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette*, Georges Bernanos's novel of 30 years earlier. This case brought the on-line piece to the attention of many who might have overlooked it in the plethora of Net Art that has emerged over the past few years. The copyright issue raises the question of ownership over fictional identities and underscores the way in which digital media technology has given easy access to appropriation and recombination of art objects once considered unique and untouchable. Mouchette.org can be categorized as fan fiction, a popular narrative genre among many fans of popular television shows and movies. This also relates to discussions on whether such works are really art and raises issues of originality and ownership.

Building on the tension created by each of these levels is a thin layer of arguments raised by a small number of people concerned with other issues closely related to the masking of personal identity on the Internet. These concerns stem from the anxieties surrounding cases of pedophilia and other sexual fetishes. Such arguments are documented in a series of on-line discussions archived at Rhizome.org. They are even embodied in an interactive web site called *ihate mouchette.org*, which can be viewed as a natural extension of the Mouchette.org experience, appealing both to our visceral and cerebral appetites at the same time.

In my opinion, the fact that one's identity can easily be altered on-line is a good thing. However, it is also somehow reas-

suring to know that on-line activity can be traced, if necessary. The line between privacy and civility is not always clean cut, and civil liberties are often a source of ferment in the on-line world. In an environment where the masking of individuals, particularly in text-based on-line chat, is closely related to the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, playful performance can easily be identified as an important aspect of our efforts to experiment with our individual identities.

References

1. P. Steiner, "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog" (cartoon), *The New Yorker* 69, No. 20 (5 July 1993) p. 61.
2. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, Trans. 2nd Ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984) p. 7.

INTRODUCTION BY MOUCHETTE

Mouchette is a young "artist" who has been "under the age of 13" since 1996! Since the web site *mouchette.org* (Fig. 1)

Fig. 3. *m.org.ue*, one of the works acquired for the collection of *computerfinearts.com*. (© Mouchette)



was created, the virtual character has taken part in many exhibitions and artistic events, both on-line and in physical spaces. The web site has an international reputation and attracts hundreds, sometimes thousands, of visitors every day and night. Thanks to the interactive parts of the web site, which cause an abundance of reactions, Mouchette maintains a presence and keeps contact with her public in an exclusively digital way, by her web site and her e-mail: <mouchette@mouchette.org>. I, the author of these words, am also the author of the web site and subject of the on-line interview. Who am I? Man, woman, old man, young person, collective of artists? This is a secret, which is jealously kept. If I am a woman, I am surely a cyberfeminist; and if I am a man, a pervert pedophile probably. . . . I will remain the mental projection of your desire because you will never have access to the body or the name of the person who writes these words.

The following interview between Mouchette and Manthos Santorineos took place on-line during the 6th Medi@terra festival in 2004, in which Mouchette participated in virtual form.

Manthos Santorineos: In this dead end where all human processes in general are stuck, can the Net possibly be of any help?

Mouchette: I think that virtual characters can become in the future ideal vehicles. Our cities won't be cluttered with cars anymore because we will travel everywhere using our avatars. Our avatars will transport all our information for us.

Imagine: You go the bank. . . er, well, you don't need to go to the bank anymore, you already do all your banking on the Internet. But if your avatar were doing it for you he would do it a lot better because he has some good software specially written for that, and he could even invest on the stock market for you and

make you richer. Or he could give you a lecture because your account is in the red and he's going to teach you how to balance your budget. Now, imagine I were your avatar, well I would do all this for you and on top of that I'll say *bisous* (kisses) at the end of every bank statement, and the richer you are, the more *bisous* I would give you. If your account were in the red, I would cry, I would be so sorry, I would make you understand that the situation is really serious.

I think we will all have our own avatar in the future. It will be a smart agent who, besides the predictably programmed functions, will have a real personality, who will be able to laugh, to cry, to be moved. . . .

My role as Mouchette is to make people understand that the Net can really circulate emotions. Our life on the Net really needs the whole range of human emotions. One can operate very advanced digital functions, but these operations must take place in a human way, that is, supported by emotions. Negative emotions also have to circulate with digital processes. If I were your avatar and your account were in the red, I would cry. But if it went on for too long, I would finally commit suicide. Not only would you have the grim vision of me hanging from a beam of your ceiling, but on top of that my suicide would instantly delete all your bank account information and that would be really be a disaster. When I die, a part of your existence would die with me, not just numbers, but a whole part of your life.

What I am trying to say here is not just a fairy tale; I experience this dense circulation of emotions on the Net every day. Visitors click on a button, they kill me, I cry and then they talk to me as if I were dead. They are intensely involved in this exchange of emotions and yet they know I don't exist; they know I am a fabricated person (Fig. 2).

My next step will be to make my personality available to whoever wants to use it.

On the one hand, Mouchette is already a collective creation, even if it was the work of only one person originally, because my personality was built little by little through exchange and dialogue with visitors. It's quite the same thing as with real human beings: Each personality is built in relation to its environment, against it or with it. When I get insulted or accused I realize what emotions I have triggered; I therefore realize who I am, and that makes me become who I am.

On the other hand, I have just created new web spaces to allow users to appropriate my personality, to use me as their

Fig. 4. On Mouchette.net, users may take on Mouchette's identity. (© Mouchette)



avatar in order to communicate (my e-mail address is now made available to my members). They will even be allowed to transform my web site (publication on mouchette.org is also now available).

It's exciting and scary!

I wonder what will become of me.

Manthos: In what way is the energy of virtual life passed on to real life? Or the other way round?

Mouchette: Virtual life is a form of death. The body must be annihilated completely. Everything organic or biologic has to disappear from the communication: no more voice, no more breath, no more flesh, no more eyes. . . . a perfect and total disembodiment! (Fig. 3) No wonder you hear so much about suicide on my site. Virtual life is a technologically complex form of suicide. Of course, subsequently, one can be reborn on the Net as a new entity, in a form that one would choose and fabricate, as a living being with no teeth, no saliva, no skin, no smile. Instead, this being would have pixels, code, text characters. Here is my portrait, my spitting image: All I am is words and pixels put together by means of codes and viewed on a monitor.

Once the suicide is successfully accomplished, real life comes back to haunt virtual life. The teeth and the smile return under the pixels, the kiss resurfaces under the screen. I made a work called *Flesh&Blood*, in which the viewer has to come closer and kiss the screen, lick the glass surface of the monitor and try to believe that there is a real living body in front of him [1] (Color Plate C No. 1).

Is the illusion of life successful? Is the glass of the computer monitor cold or warm when you kiss it? My viewers are divided on this question.

Manthos: Is there opposition or competition between these two forms of life?

Mouchette: They say that when a virtual character is destroyed, the real person behind it may then come back to real life. The suicide method apparently works both ways. But the only way to kill a virtual character is to have the web site disappear from the Internet.

Once I told the story of a friend (virtual of course), Innergirl, who had created the site *suicidejournal.com* and who committed suicide on-line. You should read that story, you would like it [2].

From Innergirl I learned that virtual suicide allows you to be reborn to physical existence. His site indeed vanished from the Internet. Does that mean that he completely came back to normal human life or did he commit suicide for real? I will never know. The Internet world and the real life world are impervious, airtight, as if sealed off one from another. No free circulation between these two worlds! It is not forbidden, yet it is impossible to locate where the border is, so you are bound to get lost on your way and you will never reach the other side.

As for Mouchette's site, it is not likely to disappear. On the contrary, it is expanding. It grows and multiplies. It multiplies? How on earth is that possible?

Did you hear about Mouchette.Net? [3] (Fig. 4) Thanks to Mouchette.Net many people can pretend they are Mouchette and develop the site. They can even pass for Mouchette and write her e-mails. How many different persons scattered all over the world are writing this very e-mail that you will publish as an interview? The answer to this enigma is hidden inside Mouchette.Net. You, Manthos, asking these questions, could yourself be a member of Mouchette.Net, and maybe you are already. Maybe *you* are answering the questions you asked Mouchette.

To the question "Who's hiding behind Mouchette?" there can only be one answer: "Myself!"

Manthos: Let's reveal to our readers that your native language is French. Our interview was originally done in French and I had it translated into English. But when you read the English translation you weren't satisfied, so you decided to re-write your own answers in English.

- A. Now that I have revealed that your native language is French, does that change anything?
- B. If your native language were English, would Mouchette be the same?
- C. Does the use of a foreign language function as a kind of "intermediary" as the Internet does, like a mask?
- D. Do all those intermediaries (language, Internet, etc.) get between the artist and his public or between the artist and her soul, after all?

Mouchette: For a few days I have tried to answer your questions, without success. Why couldn't I? Because they were not really questions. They were a little story disguised in the form of a set of questions.

Let me explain: Manthos discloses that Mouchette speaks French, that it is her native language and he will reveal it to everyone because there is something he has grasped: Mouchette uses a foreign language (English) as a mask to communicate with her public. And Manthos even says that these "intermediaries" (language, Internet) not only connect Mouchette to her public but they connect her to her own soul!

It's a very nice idea and I'll remember it. Next time I connect to the Net, typing my login name and my password, I'll have the feeling of connecting to my soul. Instead of sharing my identity through an on-line interface, I should be sharing my soul, which is only made of digital stuff, an infinite series of 0s and 1s. I can offer the use of my soul, that digital soul of

mine, to hundreds of Internet users, that twisted soul, full of surprises and unexpected connections, that soul in the shape of a labyrinth. . . . I lost the exit of this maze, and now I'm locked up in a soul which is keeping my body in jail. Which password will set me free, which magic formula, which string of characters?

I believe this magic formula will be a question. Which question?

That's the question!

Yes, I love questions! I also like to write stories in the form of questions, as you do. When I wanted to tell the story of the film *Mouchette*, made in 1967 by Robert Bresson, I did it using only questions. It was a quiz, a multiple-choice questionnaire with check boxes. These questions didn't need any answer, they were only used to tell a story (Was I raped by the poacher, Yes? No?). Bresson's widow didn't like my questions and forbade the quiz; she said the subject was too serious for that [4]. Can a simple question mark make mockery of a subject? Here is another question that I will not answer. . . .

Questions are my specialty, my native tongue.

Here is a list of my best questions:

- *Why did you kill my cat?*
- What's the best way to commit suicide when you're under thirteen?
- How can I write this since I'm dead?

These questions have had a long life; years after they first appeared, dozens of people every day want to give answers. How can you judge if a question is good? By the multiplicity of answers it creates? I think a good question is like a little pocket of void, like a gap in the language. All its answers can never fill it in; it stays empty and open while the answers keep rolling inside and disappear.

Here is the last question I have invented:

"What is a name?"

The answer to this question will give you access (or not) to my Identity-Sharing Interface <<http://mouchette.net>>. If you find a good answer, you may become me.

Shakespeare wrote, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." Gertrude Stein wrote, "A rose is a rose is a rose." Umberto Eco wrote *The Name of the Rose*. And Mouchette wrote, "What is a name?" I think that such a question will grant me a good place in this pantheon of famous authors.

References and Notes

1. <<http://mouchette.org/flesh/tong.html>>.
2. <<http://vpar.net/vpar.php?prg=selection&no=144&annee=2002>>.
3. <<http://mouchette.net>>.
4. I created the quiz in 1997. In 2002 the Bresson estate forbade me to make any reference to this film and to use any pictures from the film. So I had to remove these pages from my site. Out of solidarity, many other people on the Net copied the site before it was removed and exhibited it on their own sites. Here is an example <<http://www.computerfinearts.com/collection/mouchette/filmxx/index.html>>.

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Mouchette lives and works on-line. She is a virtual character. See <<http://mouchette.org>>. This on-line interview took place during the Medi@terra 2004 festival, where her latest work was presented: the Identity-Sharing Interface, a web site that allows any registered member to "become" Mouchette. This work was created in a residency at Franklin Furnace. See <<http://edit.mouchette.org>> and <<http://mouchette.net>>.



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