software running, you dial the PSS exchange at which you are registered, connect your modem and key in your identity. Then you enter the PSS address of Essex University's DEC10. A special account has been set up at Essex to permit free access to MUD from midnight to 7am on weekdays, and 10pm to 7am at weekends, when the mainframe is under less pressure. Log in to this special account, and then enter RUN MUD.

The program is continually updated, so the first thing you will see is the date of the latest version. You choose a character name to play under, known as your 'Persona', and you tell MUD what this is. If you are playing the game for the first time then a new persona will be created for you, and you will be classified as a Novice. Levels of experience are:

Level	Points	Male	Female
1	0	Novice	Novice
2	400	Warrior	Warrior
3	800	Hero	Heroine
4	1600	Champion	Champion
5	3200	Superhero	Superheroine
6	6400	Enchanter	Enchantress
7	12800	Sorcerer	Sorceress
8	25600	Necromancer	Necromancess
9	51200	Legend	Legend
10	102400	Wizard	Witch

If you end your session without being killed the points that you have accrued will be noted by the program, and you can continue next time from that score. You get points and increase your level of experience by dropping items of treasure in the swamp, by overcoming the odd problem, by destroying various nasties like rats and zombies, and by winning a fight against another player. If you get killed in a fight with another player your persona is removed from the game, and you must begin again as a Novice, with no points. Therefore, it is always wise to consider alternatives to combat, especially as your opponent may have a stronger weapon or more stamina than you.

You start the game on a 'Narrow road between lands'. Typing 'WHO' will provide a list on the screen of all the others who are playing at that time. You may choose to say hello to one of them. For example, typing 'Jez, hi there – I'm new and could use some advice' would convey that message to the terminal of the player called Jez. You could talk to all the players at the same time by typing 'Shout, OK you terminal junkies, watch out cos here I come', but it is not advisable to start your first game in this way.

Typing 'HELP' will give you some information about how to move and will give a brief explanation of many of the commands. Movement choices are explained in this way: 'Most simple movement commands are allowed, e.g. n, sw, west, up, jump, plus others you'll have to find out!'

The commands available may be listed by typing 'COMMANDS'. There is quite a lot of information available, and scribbling a copy on

paper while the words scroll down the screen is not a realistic option. Some terminal software will allow you to copy everything that appears on your screen onto disk for you to look at later. This will also enable you to construct a proper map of the land, which can be amended after each game. These are the commands that were available on one day:

COMMANDS (abbreviation in upper case)

AutoWho,‹seconds›	Back	BERSERK
BRIEF	BUG	BYE
CONVERSE	DRop ‹item›	DRop ALL
EMPTY ‹bag›	EXITS	Flee‹direction›
FOLLOW ‹name›	Get ‹item›	Get ALL
GIve ‹item› TO ‹name›		go ‹direction›
Help	HELP ‹name›	HINTS
HouRS	HUG ‹name›	INFO
Inventory	KEEP ‹item›	Kill ‹name›
KISS ‹name›	LEVEL	LOG
‹level›, ‹message›	Look around	Look ‹bag›
Look ‹direction›	LOSE ‹name›	MEDITATE
NoPassWord	PassWord	PERSONA
ProNouns	QuickWho	Quit
"‹message› "	REFUSE ‹name›	
RETaliate ‹item›	SAVE	SCore
SHout, ‹message›	SLEEP	SPELL
STeal ‹item› From ‹name›		
tell ‹name›,‹message›		UNKEEP
VERBOSE	WEIGH ‹item›	WHEN
WHO	WRITE ‹object›, ‹message›	

MUD is a large text-based adventure, with lengthy and detailed descriptions of the locations. When you are familiar with the scenario you can type 'BRIEF' and not have to read the descriptions each time. Prestel subscribers will be aware of the slowness and inadequacy of teletext graphics, and whilst graphic-based adventures are an interesting novelty, dedicated adventure games players will always choose a text-based game. A text-only adventure allows a greater imaginative involvement than a graphic one, in the same way that a radio play can be more enjoyable than one on the television. Another disadvantage of a graphic adventure is that each make of home micro will need a different version of the game, because of the different graphic capabilities of home computers. MUD players are likely to be using a BBC micro, an Apple or a Spectrum, but others will have second-hand terminals from junk shops, and therefore the range of machines using the program is extensive.

MUD is expected to be marketed soon. The program's original authors, Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw, are writing a version to run on a VAX Computer, which will be marketed by Century Communications. (A VAX plus software and disk drives costs around £50,000.) The game will still be played via telephone links, like PSS and Prestel, although with enough demand it could well be available on cable, as well. MUD players will then pay a fee to join the game, perhaps £10 or £15 per quarter, plus a small charge for each hour they play.