

THE FUTURE OF CYBERSPACE WILD FRONTIER VS. HYPERREAL ESTATE

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"Cyberspace" today is a foggy concept, further muddled by attempts to copyright or trademark the term itself. "Cyberspace" in its broadest sense is a useful term to denote a raw technical frontier up for grabs — though the "frontier" metaphor must be qualified. Cyberspace is not some unexplored natural region, but an utterly unnatural space boiling out from nothingness: a gigantic badland of mirrors which replicate the pioneers' own inner mentalities.

As "cyberspace" is settled and developed, the successful territories within it will take on the status of states-of-media. Following the growing clusters of population, money, and power, we can imagine "scientific visualization" as an early and fertile territory, accompanied perhaps by three-dimensional computer-aided design, artificial reality games, the various sub-provinces of telepresence, and 3-D hypermedia, and groupware.

That is to say: we might forecast such developments, if we examined the strictly technical potential inherent in the "cyberspace" medium. To assume, however, that cyberspace will fulfill its basic technological potential is naive. It is not in the nature of a capitalist society to carry its media to ultimate forms; instead they are optimized for profit, while containing or subverting attempts at revolutionary breakthrough. As Marvin Minsky once wisely said: "Imagine if television were actually good. It would mean the end of everything we know."

A working Gibsonian cyberspace would also mean the end of everything we know. Attempts to end everything we know, while not rare — Cambodia and Iran come to mind — have rarely ended well.

The future of cyberspace today is in the hands of two rival camps, which might be roughly described as technophilic utopian and capitalist/pragmatarian. Their philosophies can be summarized respectively as "Fast Cheap and Out of Control," and "Planned Development of Hyperreal Estate." To continue the frontier metaphor, the utopians might be compared to squatters, mountain men, and trappers — or perhaps hapless tribes of aborigines. The rival camp, which conceives of itself as "civilization," is in basic control of formal land grants, the legislatures, the army and the railroads.

The Fast Cheap and Out of Control crowd has three advantages: speed, reckless courage, and the ability to scrape by on low budgets, i.e. "live off the land." Their ability to govern "cyberspace" over the longer term is almost nonexistent; like other technical pioneers, most will be starved-out, bought-out, overpowered by the consequences of their own success, or simply put out to pasture. At the moment, however, they can strongly influence the emergent shape of cyberspace — and therefore the shape of its future bureaucracies -by confronting society with a series of technical faits accompli. They therefore much resemble the American "filibusters", or the French explorers of Africa, who dragged imperial authority into the wilderness by aggressive, bold, and sometimes illegal explorations. The techno-utopians can jam Adam Smith's invisible hand into the cyberspace data-glove, and force the market to come to grips with the formerly unthinkable.

However, the advantages of the capitalist pragmatarians are manifold and vast. They control the purse-strings, and the levers of power that confer social legitimacy on business, governmental, and scientific enterprises. "Cyberspace" offers a window of opportunity for radical technical change; but the window will not remain open indefinitely. It will be carefully shuttered, lest chill winds disturb the paying customers.

Like a radical movie from Hollywood, a revelatory news program on network television, or a genuinely alarming ride in Disneyland, genuine paradigm-changing antics in cyberspace will be rare. It is not impossible that "cyberspace" will be outlawed entirely, much like lysergic acid, especially if it is surrounded by a technophilic rhetoric that proclaims a revolution in the human condition.

The first workable and widespread "cyberspace" is likely to be the "virtual corporate workspace." This is / will be a simulated 3-D space owned by a corporation for the purpose of conducting its business outside the constraints of normal time and space. It will almost certainly look as much as possible like the business quarters of a well-heeled multinational corporation: halls, doors, elevators, windows, boardrooms, data centers, and so forth. Imagine an airport hotel, with even less character, and made of blurry colored polygons. (It is useful at this point to recall that early horseless carriages often carried the false figurehead of a horse attached to the motor, so as not to panic animals and passersby.) This corporate workspace will be intensely boring and "businesslike," for much the same reasons of design philosophy that cause personal computers to remain beige-colored boxes. Personal computers could as easily mimic sports cars in their flashy variety, or designer handbags; they might even look like penguins or unicorns; but the fact that this is technically possible, means little in the face of cultural resistance.

Toy cyberspaces may beat the "corporate virtual workspace" to market, but since they ARE toys, they will have about the same cultural effect as the lovely but scorned Atari game-computer, compared to the ugly but mighty IBM-PC.

Personal toy cyberspaces in any case will not be able to overshadow the appeal of dedicated mainframe cyberspace amusement parks. The corporate amusement park — surrounded by the revenue-generating potential of souvenir-shops, candystores, cuddly franchised characters, and intense though unobtrusive security — is, as Jean Baudrillard has pointed out, already a supreme realm of the hyperreal. Amusement park corporations are therefore excellently placed to exploit the new cyberspace technologies — not "to the full," but in an optimal commercial fashion. It would be well to look to Japan for the first steps in this direction. The third likely cyberspace is the consumer arena. Attempts to sell consumer goods and services by videotext have signally failed; but strong attempts will almost certainly be made to create the "cyberspace shopping mall," using the well-established marketing techniques of anchor-stores, "bundled" boutiques, and so forth, replicated in a virtual, 3-D realm. As the shopping-mall itself is the apotheosis of the consumer society monitored, abstract, interchangeable, sterile, optimally designed to attract and manage flows of capital — so a properly designed "cyberspace" could be the apotheosis of the shopping mall. Hybrid mixes of simulated mall architecture, combined with "telepresence" techniques for sampling the actual goods, may prove a potent mix.

At this point, however, and in conclusion, it is well to remember a few lessons of history. Nineteenth century Europe's answer to Artificial Reality was known as the "panorama," a 360 degree panned environment which used tricks of shade and lighting to present the illusion of viewer presence within a simulated realm. Some were 15 meters high, 100 meters long, weighing well over 6,000 kilogrammes, and were housed in specially designed buildings in Paris, Munich, Hamburg, Cologne, Leipzig and many other cities. The Austrian "roundview" of Innsbruck ("Raiffeisen Reisebüro Tirol") is one of perhaps a score of "panoramas" still surviving.

Large teams of painters and designers were employed in the panorama trade, and the audience for this early-industrial medium numbered in the millions; but today the "panorama" is a curiosity, eclipsed by other media more sophisticated, less grandiose and more easily manageable. Many efforts in "cyberspace" may have no success at all, limited success, or, like

the panoramas, tremendous success and excitement, but for a limited period. There is no real way to tell what will work, or for how long; what will be touched with gold by the invisible Midas hand of the market, and what will swiftly become as quaint as Pong or the magic lantern. Depending on your philosophical position in the cyberspace camps, this fact is either unfortunate — or very lucky indeed.