

Is There a There in Cyberspace?

John Perry Barlow

There's no there there.
Gertrude Stein (speaking of Oakland)

It ain't no Amish barn-raising in there ...
Bruce Sterling (speaking of Cyberspace)

I am often asked how I went from pushing cows around a remote Wyoming ranch to my present occupation (which Wall Street Journal recently called a "Cyberspace cadet"). I haven't got a short answer, but I suppose I came to the virtual world looking for community. Unlike most modern Americans, I grew up in an actual place, an entirely non-intentional community called Pinedale, Wyoming. As I struggled for nearly a generation to keep my ranch in the family, I was motivated by the belief that such places were the spiritual home of humanity. But I knew their future was not promising.

At the dawn of the 20th Century, over 40% of the American work force lived off the land. The majority of us lived in towns like Pinedale. Now, less than 1% of us extract their living from the soil. We just became too productive for our own good.

Of course, the population followed the jobs. Farming and ranching communities are now home to a demographically insignificant percentage of Americans, the vast majority of whom live not in ranch houses but in more or less identical split-level "ranch homes" in more or less identical suburban "communities".

Generica.

In my view, these are neither communities nor homes. I believe the combination of television and suburban population patterns is simply toxic to the soul. I see much evidence in contemporary America to support this view.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, doom impended. And, as I watched community in Pinedale growing ill from the same economic forces that were killing my family's ranch, the Bar Cross, satellite dishes brought the cultural infection of television. I started looking around for evidence that community in America would not perish altogether.

I took some heart in the mysterious nomadic City of the Deadheads, that virtually physical town which follows the Grateful Dead around the country. The Deadheads lacked place, touching down briefly on whatever location the band happened to be playing and they lacked continuity in time, since they had to suffer a new Diaspora every time the band moved on or went home. But they had many of the other necessary elements of community, including a culture, a religion of sorts (which, though it lacked dogma, had most of the other, more nurturing aspects of spiritual practice), a sense of necessity, and, most importantly, shared adversity.

In 1987, I heard about a "place" where they could gather continuously and where I might come amongst them without distorting too much the field of observation. Better, this was a place I could visit without leaving Wyoming. It was a shared computer in Sausalito, California called the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link or WELL. After a lot of struggling with modems, serial cables, init strings, and other computer arcana which seemed utterly out of phase with such

notions as Deadheads or small towns, I found myself looking at the glowing yellow word, "Login": beyond which lay my future.

"Inside" the WELL, were Deadheads in community. There were thousands of them there, gossiping, complaining (mostly about the Grateful Dead), comforting and harassing each other, bartering, engaging in religion (or at least exchanging their totemic set-lists), beginning and ending love affairs, praying for one another's sick kids. There was, it seemed, about everything one might find going on in a small town, save dragging Main or making out on the back roads.

I was delighted. I felt I had found the new location of human community, never mind that the whole thing was being conducted in mere words by minds from whom the bodies had been amputated. Never mind that all these people were deaf, dumb, and blind as paramecia or that their town had neither seasons nor sunsets nor smells.

Meanwhile, The Commons, or something like it, had been rediscovered. Once again, people from the 'Burbs had a place where they could randomly encounter their friends as my fellow Pinedalians did at the Post Office or the Wrangler Cafe. They had a place their hearts could remain as the companies they worked for shuffled their bodies around America. They could put down roots, which could not be ripped out by forces of economic history. They had a collective stake. They had a community.

It is seven years now since I discovered the WELL. In that time, I co-founded an organization, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, dedicated to protecting its interests and those of other virtual communities like it from raids by physical government. I've spent countless hours typing away at its residents, and I've watched the larger context which contains it, the Internet grow at such an explosive rate that by 2004, every human on the planet would have an e-mail address unless the growth curve flattens (which it will).

My enthusiasm for virtual community has cooled. In fact, unless one counts interaction with the rather too large society of those with whom I exchange electronic mail, I don't spend much time engaging in virtuality at all. Many of the near-term benefits I anticipated from it seem to remain as far in the future as they did when I first logged in. Perhaps they always will.

The WELL has changed astonishingly little, which one would generally consider an asset in a small town. Pinedale hasn't changed that much either. And in both places the majority seem to adhere to the common rural dictum, "Even if it is broke, don't fix it." (In my experience, only Bolinas, California rivals Pinedale for the obduracy of its conservatism.)

But Pinedale works, more or less, as it is, and there is a lot which is still missing from the communities of Cyberspace, whether they be places like the WELL, the fractious newsgroups of USENET, the silent "auditoriums" of AmericanOnLine, or even enclaves on the promising World Wide Web.

What is missing? Well, to quote Ranjit Makkuni of Xerox PARC, "The prana is missing," prana being the Hindu term for both breath and spirit. I think he is right about this and that perhaps the central question of the Virtual Age is whether or not prana can somehow be made to fit through any medium but the act of Being There.

Prana is, to my mind, the literally vital element in the holy and unseen ecology of relationship, the dense meshwork of invisible life, on whose surface carbonbased life floats like a thin scum. It is at the heart of the fundamental and profound difference between information and experience. Jaron Lanier has said that "information is alienated experience," and, that being true, prana is part of what is removed when you create such easily transmissible replicas of experience as, say, the Evening News.

Obviously a great many other, less spiritual, things are also missing entirely, like body language, sex, death, tone of voice, clothing, beauty (or homeliness), weather, violence, vegetation, wildlife, pets, architecture, music, smells, sunlight and that ol' Harvest Moon. In short, most of the things that make my life real to me. Present, but in far less abundance than in the physical world which I call "Meatspace", are women, children, old people, poor people, and the genuinely blind. Also mostly missing are the illiterate and the continent of Africa. There is not much human diversity in Cyberspace, consisting as it largely does of white males under 50 with plenty of computer terminal time, great typing skills, high math SATS, strongly held opinions on just about everything, and an excruciating face to face shyness, especially with the opposite sex.

But diversity is as essential to healthy community as it is to healthy ecosystems (which are, in my view, different from communities only in unimportant aspects). I believe that the principal reason for the almost universal failure of the intentional communities of the 60's and early 70's was a lack of diversity in their members. It was a rare commune with any old people in it, or people who were fundamentally out of philosophical agreement with the majority.

Indeed, it is the usual problem when we try to build something that can only be grown. Natural systems, such as human communities, are simply too complex to design by the engineering principles which we insist on applying to them. Like Dr. Frankenstein, Western Civilization is now finding its rational skills inadequate to the task of creating and stewarding life. We would do better to return to a kind of agricultural mind-set in which we humbly try to recreate the conditions from which life has sprung before. And leave the rest to God.

Given that, so far, it has been built almost entirely by people with engineering degrees, it is not so surprising that Cyberspace has the kind of overdesigned quality which leaves out all kinds of elements which Nature would have invisibly provided.

Also missing from both the communes of the 60's and from Cyberspace are a couple of elements which I believe are very important, if not essential, to the formation and preservation of real community. They are an absence of alternatives and a sense of genuine adversity, generally shared. What about these?

It is hard to argue that anyone would find the loss of his modem literally hard to survive, while many have remained in small towns, have tolerated their intolerances and created entertainment to enliven their culturally arid lives simply because it seemed there was no choice but to stay. There are many investments, spiritual, material, and temporal one is willing to put into a home one cannot leave. Communities are often the beneficiaries of these somewhat involuntary investments.

But when the going gets rough in Cyberspace, it is even easier to move than it is in the 'Burbs, where, given the fact that the average American moves some 17 times in his or her life, moving appears to be pretty easy. One can not only find another BBS or newsgroup to hang out in, she can, with very little effort start her own.

And then there is the bond of joint suffering. I think most community is a cultural stockade erected against a common enemy which can take many forms. In Pinedale, we forbore together, with an understanding needing little expression, the fact that Upper Green River Valley is the coldest spot, as measured by annual mean temperature, in the lower 48 states. We knew that if somebody were stopped by the road most winter nights, he would probably die there, so the fact that we might loathe him was no sufficient reason to drive on past his broken pickup.

By the same token, the Deadheads have the DEA, which strives to give them 20 year terms without parole for distributing the fairly harmless sacrament of their faith. They have an additional bond in the fact when their Microbuses die, as they often do, no one but another Deadhead is likely to stop to help them.

But what are the shared adversities of Cyberspace? Lousy user interfaces? The flames of harsh invective? Dumb jokes? Surely these can all be survived without the sanctuary provided by fellow sufferers.

One is always free to yank the jack, as I have mostly done. For me, the physical world offers far more opportunity for prana-rich connections with my fellow creatures. Even for someone whose body is in a state of perpetual motion, I feel I can generally find more community among the still-embodied.

Finally, there is that shyness factor. Not only are we trying to build community here among people who have never experienced any in my sense of the term, we are trying to build community among people who, in their lives, have rarely used the word "we" in a heartfelt way. It is a vast club, many of the members of which are people who, as Groucho Marx said, wouldn't want join a club which would have them as members.

And yet ...

How quickly physical community continues to deteriorate. Even Pinedale, which seems to have economically survived the plague of ranch failures, feels increasingly cut off from itself. Many of the ranches are now owned by corporate types who fly their Gulfstreams in to fish and are rarely around during the many months when the creeks are frozen over and neighbors are needed. They have kept the ranches financially alive, but they actively discourage their managers from the interdependency which my colleagues and I required. They keep agriculture an life-support, still alive but lacking a functional heart.

And the town has been inundated with suburbanites who flee here, bringing all their terrors and suspicions with them. They spend their evenings as they did in Orange County, watching television, or socializing in hermetic little enclaves of fundamentalist Christianity which seem to separate them from us and even, given their sectarian inter-animosities, from one another. The town remains. The community is largely a wraith of nostalgia.

So where else do we have to look for the connection necessary to prevent our plunging further into the condition of separateness which Nietzsche called sin? What is there to do but to dive further into the bramble bush of information which, in its broadcast forms, has done so much to tear us apart?

Cyberspace, for all its current deficiencies and failed promises, is not without some very real solace already. Some months ago, the great love of my life, a vivid young woman with whom

I intended to spend the rest of it, dropped dead of undiagnosed viral cardiomyopathy two days short of her thirtieth birthday. I felt as if my own heart had been as shredded as hers.

We had lived together in New York City. Except for my daughters, no one from Pinedale had met her. I needed a community to wrap around myself against what seemed colder winds than fortune had ever blown at me before. And without looking, I found I had one in the Virtual World.

On the WELL, there was a topic announcing her death in one of the conferences to which I posted the eulogy I had read over her before burying her in her own small town of Nanaimo, British Columbia. It seemed to strike a chord among the disembodied living of the Net People who copied it and sent it to one another. Over the next several months I received almost a megabyte of electronic mail from all over the planet, mostly from folks whose faces I have never seen and probably never will. They told me of their own tragedies and what they had done to survive them. As humans have since words were first uttered, we shared the second most common human experience, death, with an open-heartedness that would have caused grave uneasiness in physical America, where the whole topic is so cloaked in denial as to be considered obscene. Those strangers, who had no arms to put around my shoulders, no eyes to weep with mine, nevertheless saw me through it. As neighbors do.

I have no idea how far we will plunge into this strange place. Unlike previous frontiers, there is no end to this one. It is so dissatisfying in so many ways that I suspect we will be more restless in our search for home here than in all our previous explorations. And that is one reason why I think we may find it after all.

But if home is where the heart is, then there is already some part of home to be found in Cyberspace.

So ... Does virtual community work or not? Should we all go off to Cyberspace or should we resist it as an even more demonic form of symbolic abstraction? Does it supplant the real or is there, in it, reality itself? I'm sorry. Like so many true things, it doesn't resolve itself to a black or a white. Nor is it gray. It is, along with the rest of life, black/white. Both/neither. I'm not being equivocal or wishy-washy here. We have to get over our Manichean sense that everything is either good or bad, and the border of Cyberspace seems to me a good place to leave that old set of filters.

But really it doesn't matter. We are going there whether we want to or not. In five years, everyone who is reading these words will have an e-mail address unless s/he is so determined a Luddite that s/he also eschews the telephone and electricity.

When we are all together in Cyberspace then we will see what the human spirit, and the basic desire to connect, can create there. I am convinced that the result will be more benign if we go there open-minded, open-hearted, excited with the adventure, than if we are dragged into exile.

And we must remember that going to Cyberspace, unlike previous great emigrations to the frontier, hardly requires us to leave where we have been. Many will find, as I have, a much richer appreciation of physical reality for having spent so much time in virtuality.

Despite its current (and perhaps, in some areas permanent insufficiencies), we should go to Cyberspace with hope. Groundless hope, like unconditional love, may be the only kind that counts.