

Neverwake

The New Novel by Tobias O. Meissner

“Virt” and “neverwake”—two terms that run like a thread through the young German writer Tobias O. Meissner’s latest novel *Neverwake*. Neverwake is a fact, as Meissner makes clear to the reader right up front:

“Neverwake is the prevailing mental attitude of the twenty-first century.”

What’s up with that? Meissner takes the reader into a 21st century in which armed conflicts have not simply been replaced by live broadcasts of sports spectacles like in the film *Rollerball*. Instead, fighting, war, and the duel are played out in cyberspace. These are extremely brutal online games featuring virtual weapons systems, and for which players design their own figures and equip them with capabilities like physical strength and mental toughness, speed and acrobatic abilities, weapons skills and personal courage. And then the fun begins! 16-year-old computer freaks who have dubbed themselves Suicider and Smugglerboy attempt to work their way up from the lowest fighting division to the V League. That means training for hours a day, spending hour after hour in front of the monitor, hour upon hour in cyberspace, in the virtual world in which there’s no longer a place for real reality. You’ve now arrived at neverwake. What you are in real life doesn’t matter; in virtuality, you have to move up the ranks and optimize your play in order to become a real “virt,” a member of the cybercommunity. And a virt is a player, one with the desire to make it all the way to the top. Virt, according to the glossary the author has appended to his book, comes from “virtual,” from “virtuosity,” as well as from “virtue.” And virtue consists of acknowledging cyberspace as one’s own world, as the actual world. And so the community of virts consists of “cyberspace junkies,” “online outcasts,” “computer game gladiators,” and “network nomads.” They all struggle day after day to make it at all costs to the V League—where the masters play, where the duels are broadcast live, where money and fame beckon, and where you can be a *star for one game*. The masters, however, are mostly not much older than the computer kids who are just starting out on their careers. By 30 at the latest, they’re burn-outs, physical wrecks with hardly a chance of making it in the real-time world of work. But the virts live by other rules:

“Since the introduction of tuition and fees, going to school had really gone out of style among kids from less well-off families. And anyway: who needs a classic bust-your-ass education when you can be a virt and, in the truest sense of the word, play your way to fame and fortune?”

Only the senior players, the over-30, over-the-hill virts, know that the promises of easy money in cyberspace are virtual bullshit. A guy like Otis Esch knows it, but he still can’t stop playing. A mediocre minor-leaguer, this virt makes his way from battle to battle earning his pay as a virtual sparring partner for the stars of tomorrow.

Then Esch receives a most unusual assignment. A computer firm has developed a totally new kind of game, one that generates its virtual worlds via feedback loops with the brain of the respective player. The first version was tested by legendary former champi-



Beate Geissler & Oliver Sann, 2001

“Kai 0/1, 115”

on virt Laurence Tader. Only, in reality, Tader has never returned from cyberspace; his body lies in a coma, but his mind plays on and on. Now, Esch’s task is to track Tader down in the virtual world of play and bring him back. And track him down he does. Esch and Tader meet up in the virtual realm, they talk to each other, and super-virt Tader makes one thing perfectly clear: since his body is being provided with artificial nourishment to keep it alive in so-called reality, he can play on and on in cyberspace, he can advance from level to level, going forth into undreamt-of cybergalaxies, fighting against ever-more-unpredictable opponents, a battle that will never-never-never end. Here, in this game, Tader has, in his own words, made it “to heaven.” Hasta la vista, Baby! And thus it is Esch who returns alone to reality. Even as a virt, Esch is enough of a realist to know what he has just experienced:

“Today I saw paradise, and it was hell.”

Tobias O. Meissner has achieved something astounding in his book *Neverwake*: the language and the imagery that he presents in his text hit the trash vocabulary of cyberkids dead on. And even so, the fascination of the world of virtual gaming is reproduced down to the most minute detail. When you read this book, you feel the powerful effect of the drug, or better said, how powerful it could become in a not-too-distant future when a network-linked world could make an endless variety of cybergame worlds available online. And as for the real world—as it was in the 20th century, as it is now, as it will likely remain—the hand we’ve been dealt is going to make it damn hard for us to explain to the virts of tomorrow—that is, our kids—why submerging yourself in cyberspace is supposedly bad for you. “Neverwake” could actually become one of the prevailing mental attitudes in the future.

The novel *Neverwake* by Thomas O. Meissner was published in 2001 by Eichborn/Berlin.