Baudrillard in Cyberspace

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1995

From AT&T advertisements to White House policy statements, the past two years have prepared America for a changed world -- or more precisely, a new world : one that exists on the shimmering surface of our computer screens. In the first six months of 1994 alone, the number of computers connected to the worldwide network of Internet jumped by one million to a total of 3,217,000 "host" machines (InterNIC). In response to this rapid growth, the media has refurbished that old American icon of both progress and freedom : the highway. Soon, every American will be back on the open road. New roadside businesses will emerge as the map of Internet continues to encompass the globe. But in its current figuration, the 'net does more than network the globe; it creates a metaphorical world in which we conduct our lives. And the more ecstatic the promises of new, possible worlds, the more problematic the concept of "the world" becomes.

Internet, both as a technological artifact and as a popular image, provides a site for exploring "the world", and the position of such systems of totality in postmodernity. Perhaps more so than any other contemporary theorist, Baudrillard provides a provocative heading for "navigating" this hyperreal terrain. Although he has not addressed worldwide networking and Internet in the specific in his writing, his comments on telematics, along with his more general critiques of modernity, provide an interesting means for exploring the metaphoricity of Internet. Of particular interest in this Baudrillardian reading are the geographical metaphors for Internet -- the topological framework beneath the "Information Superhighway" that allows for travel, distance, and speed in a metaphorical world. "Cyberspace" no longer strictly refers to the fictional "matrix" in William Gibson's novel, *Neuromancer*; it has now entered into common speech on and off the 'net as a shorthand for this conception of computer networks as a cybernetic space. From a Baudrillardian perspective, this figuration of Internet as a kind of cybernetic terrain works to undermine the symbolic distance between the metaphoric and the real. It abandons "the real" for the hyperreal by presenting an increasingly real simulation of a comprehensive and comprehendible world. This heading points the way toward Baudrillard's "hypertelia", that fated catastrophe when the sophistication of a model outdoes the reality it attempts to comprehend.

If Baudrillard's critique of modernity applies to the current acceleration in information and communication technology, as well as the media euphoria surrounding these occurrences, then Internet likewise provides a context for understanding Baudrillard's image of fatal technology. This image in Baudrillard, and conversely, the shadow of Baudrillard cast upon information technology, foregrounds the contemporary challenges to "the real" in postmodern culture. This reading also suggests, however, how Baudrillard can be used to dissuade Internet beyond its modern closures. Replacing the one world with possible worlds, Internet ultimately offers both the seductions and subductions of a postmodern "world".

For Baudrillard, the shift from the real to the hyperreal occurs when representation gives way to simulation. One could argue that we are standing at the brink of such a moment, marked primarily by the emerging presence of a virtual world. Just as the highways once transformed our country, the "Information Superhighway" offers an image of dramatic change in American lives through a change in virtual landscape. Although this expression originated in the White House as a catchy term for the proposed National Information Infrastructure (NII), the expression quickly entered into popular parlance as a pseudonym for the already existing worldwide network of Internet. The overused expression does little to represent the actual network architecture which connects these machines, yet the metaphor of the highway persists as a media image, functioning as a conceptual model for the

world created by this technology. One doesn't "go" somewhere when picking up the telephone. But when the computer couples with these same telephone lines, suddenly spatial and kinetic metaphors begin to proliferate. The "Information Superhighway" depends upon a more subtle metaphorical figuration -- a virtual topography in which speed, motion, and direction become possible. Internet becomes a simulated territory we traverse via computer/modem roadster in which the computer screen replaces the windscreen. Baudrillard, following Barthes, notes how easily motion can transform into a visual experience in which the driver/viewer interacts with images, rather than with the physical world (*Ecstasy* 13). Unlike this metaphorical transformation of the physical world into images "on" a windshield, "cyberspace" presents the simulation of "beyond the screen". The real no longer serves as a referent for this postmodern version of Alberti's Window. The scene/screen of simulation is a "depthless surface" which allows for no play of images between metaphor and the world it (re)presents. For Baudrillard, the screen presents an example of the "satellisation of the real" by achieving the escape velocity of hyperreality : "That which was previously mentally projected, which was lived as a metaphor in the terrestrial habitat is from now on projected entirely without metaphor, into the absolute space of simulation" (*Ecstasy* 16). No longer a metaphor for change, the simulated highway of Internet becomes a form of virtual reality.

In this model, the screen becomes a hyperreal vehicle for travelling across a simulated world. A large number of Internet "guide" books make use of this geographical metaphor, evoking images of navigation and exploration. Software companies are picking up on the metaphor as well, developing "geographic interfaces" to augment the virtual desktop; users will now be able to "jump out [a simulated office] window for an aerial view of information generating sites represented as buildings" (Fisher F9). Rather than treating this endlessly repeated image of "travels in cyberspace" strictly as a clever marketing gimmick, I would like to suggest that this conceptual model serves a definite purpose in contemporary culture, one which creates the simulation of a form of power. Paul Virilio suggests that the computer, or telecommunications in general, functions as "the last vehicle", one which threatens to resolve all topographical concerns ("Last" 108-109). Motion, speed, and travel lose their "real" meanings, while gaining power as technological simulations. For Baudrillard, this transference of power from the real to the hyperreal presents the fulfillment of the modern drive to master the world. Geography "implodes" into one hyperpotential point :

> Where all trips have already taken place; where the vaguest desire for dispersion, evasion and movement are concentrated in a fixed point, in an immobility that has ceased to be one of non-movement and has become that of a potential ubiquity, of an absolute mobility, which voids its own space by crossing it ceaseless and without effort". (*Ecstasy* 39)

A virtual potential space replaces real kinetic space, or rather, "real" potential translates metaphorically into a virtual "kinetic" energy. The image of "cybertravel" has currency precisely because it offers a metaphorical world on/beyond a computer screen, a "globe" that no longer stands for the world because it has become "the world". This perspective on the current media images of Internet suggests that the conceptual model of a cybernetic "space" does not augment the world; it abandons the world for one which can be fully realized and fully encompassed -- a world of transparency and immediacy.

The technology that aims at containing distance eventually creates a virtual world which destroys the conceptual possibility of distance. In this vertiginous moment of physical stasis and virtual travel, the "Voyeur-Voyager" experiences an immediacy which dissolves space and time : "a perpetually repeated hijacking of the subject from any spatial-temporal context" (Virilio, *Aesthetics* 101). Baudrillard sees the world as entering an orbital era : "the perpetual tourism of people who no longer undertake voyages in the true sense, but simply go round and round in circles within their circumscribed territory" (*Transparency* 29). From this critical perspective, then, Internet collapses space into one "hyperpotential point" which implodes all concept of distance, spacing and

separation. Going beyond Virilio's description of this aesthetics of "picnolepsy", Baudrillard suggests that ironically, telematics might *require* a distance in order to overcome it. In some of his most direct comments on computer networking technology, he writes that the "Telecomputer Man" experiences "a very special kind of distance which can only be described as unbridgeable by the body... The screen is merely virtual -- and hence unbridgeable" (*Transparency* 55). Although he cannot cross his screen, he can "circulate" himself through the media. The implosion of real distance creates the need for a strategy of deterrence : a simulation of space and distance which the body cannot breech, but which a simulated self (complete with computer prostheses) can travel.

Baudrillard imagines a day when driver and car will become a cybernetic unit, an informing network/vehicle. One can extend Baudrillard's line of thought to Internet and note that the on-line computer already presents this network/vehicle for the virtual world of Internet, "the fundamental stake" and "perpetual test of the presence of the subject" in the information age (*Ecstasy* 13). The ability to physically circumnavigate the globe holds less value than the ability to electronically travel that distance. Thus Internet does not simply lay down a mesh of connections between real-life nodes/computers, annihilating distance; it creates and maintains its own simulated world in place of the physical world of spatial distances. No surprise, then, that businesses are scrambling to "open shop" on the Net : computer networks are no longer simply tools for making a profit; they have become a "place" to conduct business by establishing "sites". International business -- Internationalism in general -- disappears, subsumed by a simulated world of international networks. As Internet moves closer to its dream of total connectivity, one might imagine with Baudrillard that moment of closure when this metaphorical "cyberspace" becomes the hyperreal -- more important than the real space it once simulated : "As soon as behavior is focused on certain operational screens or terminals, the rest appears only as some vast, useless body, which has been both abandoned and condemned. The real itself appears as a large, futile body" (*Ecstasy* 18). No longer does technology encompass the world; now it replaces it with a "more real than real" simulation.

In its "real" material presence, the Internet consists of a complex redundant network of host machines which communicate over phone lines. As opposed to the elaborate system of bridges, jumps, and links that occur across real space, the geographical figurations of host "sites" and user "addresses" creates a simpler virtual terrain for the user -- one in which travel amounts to a tracing of connections from site to site. The metaphor of cyberspace presents Internet as a globe to its own world; virtual territory only exists once it has been traced onto a pre-existing code of connectivity. Jameson connects the development of the first navigational "globe" in 1490 to an emerging conceptual model of "the world" as totality, as well as the realization that "there can be no true maps", only "dialectical advance in the various historical moments of mapmaking" (52). In comparison to the modern conception of the map, and its relation to the unrepresentable totality of the world, Internet as postmodern map *becomes the totality itself*, superseding the world. Baudrillard refers to this moment as the "precession of simulacra", when the globe/model defines the world it once approximated (*Simulations* 2). Borges's story of a map so accurate that it completely covers the land provides Baudrillard with an allegory for the preeminence of simulation over reality itself : "Henceforth, it is the map, that precedes the territory... it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map" (*Simulations* 2). One could argue, following Baudrillard's heading, that Internet as virtual territory revives this fable. The 'net creates neither a counterfeit world, nor a reproduction of the world; it is a map/model of a reproducible world, Baudrillard's third-order simulacrum, valued for its structural potential to be endlessly circulated (and orbited), and endlessly reproduced (*Simulations* 100-101). This potential for connectivity precedes the virtual world it purports to trace; the "map" of this territory is itself the territory -- both globe and world at the same time.

This metaphorical topography offered up by Internet presents the simulation of a vast, undiscovered country in which only our imaginations limit our abilities. From a Baudrillardian perspective, the immanence of this realm -- its very vastness and limitlessness -- is nothing more than the simulation of these significations, simulacra that perform a strategy of deterrence, holding back the *realization* of the spaceless, limited world of

the code. Distance disappears into immediacy, and presence becomes a state of simultaneity and transparency. The hypertelic moment of postmodern technology simulates presence "without even the faintest glimmer of a possible absence, in a state of radical disillusion; the state of pure presence" (*Ecstasy* 32). If a machine "goes down" on the 'net, it is not absent; it ceases to be part of the virtual world. The code cannot call forth presence from absence; any attempts to "reach" that site return nothing, not even the equivalent of the telephone's absent ringing (or its tantalizing busy signal). An off-line machine no longer exists : *host unknown*. Likewise, Internet has no frontier because its territory has already been comprehensively mapped; the connections between nodes precede the attempt to explore this terrain, meaning that every "journey" in cyberspace is a repetition and a retracing of steps. Internet has no provision for "undiscovered country", only the simulation of such, like a planned treasure hunt. Gopher, a program which allows users to search for information at multiple sites, demonstrates that Internet only simulates an unknown terrain of knowledge. The possibility of reproducing a particular coding of information precedes -- and precludes -- any attempt to locate it. One never *discovers* on Internet; one only *uncovers*. By definition, Gopher, and other searching tools, are comprehensive because information on Internet exists in a closed system; nothing "exists" beyond its search parameters. More generally, any "place" not on Internet simply does not exist. Hyperreality presents a totality without even the possibility of a beyond. Rather than engaging in the *fort:da* game of absence and presence in which the subject calls forth an absent object, Internet presents an immanent realm in which the operator can only interact with known elements, established sites, and comprehensive codes.

Baudrillard comes closest to discussing Internet in his comments of the French Minitel system in "Xerox and Infinity". He compares this closed system of telematics to the topology of the Mobius strip in which the operator/subject questions and is questioned by the parameters of the computer/object, creating "a superficial conflation of subject and object, within and without, question and answer, event and image, and so on" (*Transparency* 56). He notes that in function, however, telematics operates as an open system in that it is constantly accelerating with each turn of the Mobius strip. This "extreme phenomenon" is driven by a "fatal" telos in which "the logic that informs a system's expansion then proceeds to devastate it" (*Transparency* 40). The postmodern moment announces not the breakdown of modernity, but rather its fatal perfection :

> So long as there is a dysfunction in a system, a departure from known laws governing its operation, there is always the prospect of transcending the problem. But when a system rides roughshod over its own basic assumptions, supersedes its own ends... then we are contemplating not crisis but catastrophe. (*Transparency* 32)

Baudrillard's comments suggest that the current condition of telematics is a fulfillment of the telos of communication, primarily that of immediacy and transparency. The ironic revenge of the system, he claims, is that through the ability of technology to obtain -- and supersede -- these goals, we have reached a catastrophic moment in which "speaking" no longer has a place in the world.

Currently, writing is the dominant means of communication on the 'net, and as such, it finds its place within a general history of writing as a material presence for communication (as opposed to the more "ephemeral" voice). Baudrillard's comments on communication, however, would seem to position Internet at writing's "hypertelic" moment, beyond its own ends. Derrida calls writing the first communications technology in that it offers a means for "overcoming" time by aiding memory and by simulating the immediacy of speech (*Dissemination* 75). Leibniz's non-phonetic writing, Derrida argues, takes us another step toward the language of the machine, while at the same time moving writing closer to the inferred immediacy of speech (*Of Grammatology* 77-79). Both of these events fall within Derrida's history of the post, the *fort:da* game of absence made presence through writing. One could follow this history to the telegraph, which allows the spatially absent object to become present for the subject. Writing truly becomes tele-graphy, distance writing, in that it

"breeches" spatial and temporal constraints on a culture (Lyotard, *Inhuman* 49-51). The computer offers the next step in this history of the post, presenting itself, as Lyotard notes, as destination/destiny for its own telos, a closed system of progress "exercised by remembering its own presuppositions and implications as its limitations" (*Inhuman* 53). But for Baudrillard, this technology goes *beyond* its own ends, achieving a hypertelic implosion of this history of writing. As communication becomes more immediate, absence/presence and writing/speech distinctions lose meaning; the *fort:da* game of emergence and disappearance begins to implode. The written word takes on a more immediate nature and begins to function *as though it were speech*. No longer a counterfeit or a reproduction, writing achieves its "transcendence" on Internet : as third-order simulation of speech.

For Baudrillard, as with Marshall McLuhan, telematics supersedes this history of writing : an apotheosis of immediacy through the medium. But as Arthur Kroker points out, in place of McLuhan's utopia of the "global village", Baudrillard sees the hyperreal world of immediacy as a cold, desolate realm of communication and information (70). Instead of providing a "universalization", these media create a satellisation : "It is man with his planet Earth, with his territory, with his body, who is now the satellite. Once transcendent, he has become exorbitate" (*Transparency* 30). Satellisation, however, does not yield alienation; rather, this state is one of "overproximity" to a simulated, transparent world (*Ecstasy* 27). No need to represent the absent other : the simulation is always immanent, waiting to be reproduced. Baudrillard sees this immanence as the essence of hypertelic communication : "Picturing others and everything which brings you closer to them is futile from the instant that 'communication' can make their presence immediate" (*Ecstasy* 42).

With increasing immediacy comes the simulation of "transparent" communication in which the medium appears unmediated. What makes telematics different from other forms of mediated communication is the transparency of the link-up -- the distanceless distance, the disappearance of an imagined absence made present. On Internet for some time now, for example, users have been able to "talk", via a text-based telephone-like connection. Unlike the telephone, however, the sense of distance becomes transparent the moment connection occurs. The words are "present" on the screen, yet they have also "gone" to their destination. No longer a *fort:da*, Internet's tele-graphy is here and there at the same time. With the telephone, telematics maintains the same symbol of totality : the globe. Phone lines encircle the globe and allow our voices to travel around the world, and we, remaining comfortably in our homes, can express our wonderment at how close a voice sounds. But because of the geographic metaphors both built into the UNIX backbone of the 'net and laid on top of it by the media, we are invited to interface with our computers in a different way. Those same real phone lines encircling the globe have less of a "real" presence than the virtual globe of Internet, a hyperpotential world of connectivity.

Here again, Baudrillard's reading of "fatal technologies" seems fitting, and in general, his conception of a "hyperreality" lends itself well to this "more real than real" metaphor of virtual terrain and cybernetic space. In the place of the mirror -- with its illusion of depth, distance, and an other side -- the screen serves as a depthless surface which returns no gaze (*Transparency* 54). All modes of representation collapse into a realm neither real nor imaginary, but simulatory. Baudrillard's "unreal" of simulation parallels the fantastic presence made possible by this figuration of cyberspace. The more compelling the metaphorical geography, the closer Internet comes to imploding the "sovereign difference" between the real and imaginary (*Simulations* 2). Baudrillard writes of this transformation : "The unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself*" (*Simulations* 142). In place of the symbolic totality of "the world", Internet offers up a simulated world of totality, a closed loop of immediacy and transparency. The experience within this simulated globe becomes an experience of the cybernetic real : no longer a reality, but a virtuality.

Although we may associate virtual reality with projection goggles and body suits, one need not use any technological prosthesis other than a screen and a keyboard to experience the simulation of reality. Although much of the preceding discussion has touched upon metaphorical distance, motion, and space on Internet --

what for Baudrillard would amount to the hyperreality of simulation -- the technology of networked machines has also led to a more conscious attempt to explore virtual presence : a text-based virtual space called a Multi-User Dimension, Object Oriented (MOO). MOO's are a subspecies of a class of programs known as MUD's -- Multi-User Dimensions. In its most basic form, a MUD is a multi-user, interactive fantasy game which simulates a terrain through textual descriptions. Players become characters in a world where they can interact with their environment and, most importantly, with other players. Unlike the original MUD's, a MOO allows characters to "hack at" the code that determines this world. Through the use of a simple programming language, players can create objects in their virtual world : rooms, landscapes, vehicles, food, cameras -- even characters (Baudrillard would be pleased : the MOO is void of subjects -- only objects inhabit its space). Although plenty of fantasy MUD's still do exist, complete with dragon-slaying elves, MUD's and MOO's have gone far beyond their original gaming focus -- including, starting with LambdaMOO in January, 1991, attempts at becoming virtual communities (Curtis). These virtual spaces provide opportunities for individuals to gather for any number of reasons, from professional conferences and business meetings to virtual sex.

PMC-MOO, sponsored by the electronic journal, *Postmodern Culture*, provides an appropriate example of this form of "text- based virtual reality". One might expect postmodern theorists and literary critics to haunt PMC-MOO, given its declared interests, and at PMC-MOO conferences, meetings, and discussion groups are indeed not uncommon. PMC-MOO has also served as a site for ongoing poetry "slams" with The Nujorican Poets' Cafe, and it recently took part in a virtual exhibition in conjunction with the Sandra Gering Gallery in Manhattan. But alongside these more academic and artistic endeavors, it is just as common to encounter, when "wandering" from virtual room to virtual room, two players discussing last night's television shows (perhaps MTV's *The Real World* ?), or this coming weekend's entertainment plans. At the center of this prototype for a "global village", the fascinating and the banal overtake one another. Paradoxically, the first-hand experience of the "ecstasy of communication" is hardly noticeable and ultimately quite "ordinary", since this highly mediated form of interaction simulates unmediated communication. "Where are you in real life ?" is a fairly common question in the MOO, but I would argue that the text-generated world works against this sort of interaction, encouraging players to communicate with each other according to metaphors of proximity, not distance. Perhaps more illuminating is the question, "Where are *we* ?" I "travel" to Virginia by way of Internet, where UVA's RISC-based server runs the PMC-MOO program code; once "inside" the MOO, I "meet" others who have also "arrived" at this destination. Here (wherever that is), the play of *fort:da* no longer makes sense : I am gone and there at the same time. I am present and absent, distant and near. The MOO creates the simulation of space which players use to present simulations of themselves. The question "Where are you in real life ?" becomes less important than one's ability to simulate/assimilate oneself to this new space.

By calling for the creation of a prosthetic or cybernetic self, one capable of inhabiting this new terrain, the MOO foregrounds the conceptual models which frame Internet "as a whole", a metaphorical world treated as a reality. Likewise, the "naturalness" and comfort of players in this virtual space emphasizes just how "real" cyberspace has become. Through Internet, distance becomes transparent, making room for a virtual space, an experience quite different from other forms of telecommunication. On the telephone I revel in how close a voice sounds. I gain comfort in knowing that I am overcoming distance. In the MOO, I no longer overcome distance because the screen does not bridge space; it replaces space with a simulation of the world on the surface of my screen. Depthless and infinite, Baudrillard's screen appears as the "superficial abyss", a hypnotic transparency which simulates and denies space at the same time : "An aesthetics of the hyperreal, a thrill of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a thrill of alienation and magnification, of distortion in scale, of excessive transparency all at the same time" (*Simulations* 50).

Baudrillard describes this fascination as a mutation in pleasure from *seductio* to *subductio*, from the seduction by the other to a hypnosis of the self, endlessly repeated on the screen (*Ecstasy* 25). A simulated presence escapes the possibility of counterfeit and the possibility of reproducing an original, because the original no longer exists (*Simulations* 97). The fax machine, for example, sends a reproduction over phone lines, but e-mail

produces and sends a simulated document : one which can be copied infinitely, forwarded simultaneously, reproduced in multiple formats, etc. E-mail obscures the concept of "the original", but it likewise throws into question both origin and destination, since a virtual address is independent of the user's physical location. The move on Internet from simulation of the post (e-mail) to the simulation of presence (the MOO) is a fated or fatal step toward creating a "more real than real" reality, the hypertelia of communication technology. Carrying this Baudrillardian reading to its furthest limits, one might conclude that telematics only deters the recognition of what has already occurred : the end of space through cyberspace, the end of knowledge through information, and the end of the imaginary through the hyperreal.

The MOO simulates human activity and presents the user with an arena of immense freedom in communication. But for Baudrillard, the simulation of liberty can never escape its own "fatal" or predetermined operational parameters. As John Unsworth points out, the predetermined "core" code of a MOO functions as an unescapable fate, limiting every player's free will (Unsworth). Likewise, the pre-existing operational code of any closed communication system "restricts itself to putting things that already exist in contact with each other" (Gane 57). As noted above, Internet is ultimately a tracing of a map of connectivity; one cannot "create" new contacts on Internet. This inability to "self-transcend" is what separates communication from community and society in Baudrillard's work : "Communication is more social than the social itself : it is the hyperrelational, sociality overactivated by social techniques... Communication, by banalizing the interface, plunges the social into an undifferentiated state" *Transparency* 12). The attempts to figure Internet as a space capable of supporting communities differentiates it from other systems of communication using those same real telephone lines. Once again, one could read this shift as a symptom of Internet's status as a hypertelic form of communication. Having superseded its own telos, technology aims at simulation and deferral; simulations of the communal and the social become more "real" to defer the fact that the "real" has long since disappeared.

Those unfamiliar with virtual communities may not yet appreciate the strength of these interactions between virtual bodies in virtual space. In a 1993 *Village Voice* article, for example, Julian Dibbell describes in some detail an incident of "cyber-rape" at LambdaMOO, detailing not only the emotional trauma of the female victim, but also the repercussions of such an act in the virtual community. The crime brought players together in a heated discussion over the state -- literally *the state* -- of their virtual community, and how to balance justice with liberty. The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (the WELL) provides another example of a virtual community, and in fact, one of the earliest : a set of electronic bulletin boards on which groups of "citizens" could communicate with one another. Howard Rheingold, author of *Virtual Communities* and long-time resident of the WELL, describes this and other virtual communities as electronic *agorae*, offering the possibility of becoming "one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall" (26). Already Internet has its own civil liberties group, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) which, as its name implies, connects virtual topography with the American conception of frontiers and liberty. EFF and other groups place great hope in cyberspace (if democratic principles cannot prevail in the "real" world, perhaps they can in cyberspace). Mitch Kapor, founder of EFF (and Lotus Corp.), argues that virtual communities hold utopian possibilities :

> Life in cyberspace... at its best is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentered than hierarchical... In fact, life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted : founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community. (53)

For literally millions of "netters", cyberspace is a real place with real potentials -- and it is precisely this blurring of the real and the unreal which marks Baudrillard's postmodern moment of the hyperreal. From this perspective, the compelling image of "Internet as world" pushes us beyond the world, beyond its containment,

all the while pursuing the same Enlightenment goals which drove the world beyond its own ends and into hyperreality.

To apply Baudrillard to this utopianism, one would have to conclude that cyber-community offers nothing more than a strategy of deterrence; like a Disneyland for Enlightenment conceptions of community, it creates "an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter" (*Simulations* 26). The model of community can exist in such an immanent form precisely because it is a model, a simulacrum of community, deferring the moment of realization that community longer exists. More precisely, community can only exist in a mediated society via the medium because no other "real" exists. Baudrillard argues that "the compulsion of the virtual is the compulsion to exist *in potentia* on all screens", and that this community of circulating, simulated selves results in the disappearance of "real" self and "real" community through a proliferation of these signs (*Transparency* 57). No longer fragmented, the self and community becomes "fractal", capable of infinite division into self-same parts, each part a simulation of a whole that no longer exists. This threat of disappearance by proliferation is far different from the fears of informational "overlords" or computer-mediated panopticons. In fact, the dream of utopian possibilities and the threat of imminent informational catastrophe provide the same function for Baudrillard : a strategy of deterrence. The promises of an America that will provide its citizens with free access to a world of information and the threat of a world in which this information is controlled, parcelled out, or withheld are part of the same deterrence. In short, the image of free and infinitely increasing information does nothing more than deter the realization that the Enlightenment pursuit of "knowledge" has imploded. "Information" has become a term to describe movies on demand, electronic malls, and expanding numbers of television channels; the media is "accelerating in a void" of the banal (*Transparency* 3). Increasing sophistication in technology produces more convincing simulations of information and more convincing strategies of deterrence. The fascination of the depthless screen -- "the superficial abyss" -- keeps us firmly rooted. With a wealth of information, we have no time to realize that we have nothing to learn.

Although a Baudrillardian reading of Internet provides a compelling critique of a postmodern hyperreality, his criticism might also provide an "other" heading of sorts : one that places a stake in this technology rather than pursuing it to catastrophe; one that poses a challenge to the 'net. For the most part, this current analysis of Internet has followed Baudrillard to his "fatal" conclusions -- the fascination beyond the closure of a system driven to simulation and hyperreality. But Baudrillard has also often written of the necessity of seduction and challenge in the face of the insistence of a telos. In a recent interview, he explains : "There is a game, which has nothing to do with the forced realization of the world, a game in which things demand to be solicited, diverted, seduced. You've got to be able to make them appear as well as disappear... Writing is nothing but that, and theory as well" (Gane 45). In place of this "forced realization", theory disrupts the total vision of a system. It takes the place of "the other" to the system -- the accidental, the unaccountable, the accursed share. Rather than attempting to expose (and hence, realize) "the world", Baudrillard dissimulates its totality, leading it off course and out of orbit :

> All kinds of events are out there, impossible to predict. They have already occurred, or are just about to heave into view. All we can do is train our searchlight, as it were, and keep our telescopic lens on this virtual world in the hope that some of those events will be obliging enough to allow themselves to be captured. Theory can be no more than this : a trap set in the hope that reality will be naive enough to fall into it. (*Transparency* 110)

Although his critique of hyperreality calls attention to Internet's metaphorical existence as a virtual "world", placing Baudrillard in cyberspace may also lead to the question : can Internet produce a locus of challenge or seduction, "a locus of that which eludes you, and whereby you elude yourself and your own truth" (*Ecstasy* 66)

? Can the screen gain depth ? In light of the fascinating transparency of the media, can this "virtual realm" do other than endlessly repeat its own model ?

The challenge of Internet, one might argue, is in its potential to derail the very assumptions which have led to the postmodern moment. Baudrillard, in other words, could be used to raise the stakes in that banal MOO question, "where are you in real life ?". Might cyberspace, rather than providing a simulated, hyperpotential world of hypertravel, provide for a "deterritorialization" (*Transparency* 150) ? From his somewhat utopian perspective, Rheingold notes that although virtual interfacing facilitates community by obscuring many social barriers (age, race, and sex, in particular), this same interface allows for deception and artifice, leaving virtual citizens vulnerable to "electronic impostors" (164). The possibility of elusion, illusion, and allusion has no place in a utopian community. These "evils" however, in Baudrillard's "other heading" may prove to be resistances which prevent closure (assumptions about what it means to be an "authentic" self in an "authentic" community), and which keep a system open to experiment, drift, and "peregrination".

On the 'net, one will expect to find the banal at every turn. One would also hope to find objects of seduction and artifice, objects that turn us away from our intended goals. One might even find something resembling Lyotard's "passiblity". Lyotard refers to this resistance as an attempt to rewrite modernity, to displace determination and complexity by writing past the assumptions of its telos (*Inhuman* 28). He suggests a "working through" (Freud's *durcharbeitung*) in place of modernity's directed work; a free play in place of strategic play (*Inhuman* 54, 117). Lyotard and Baudrillard, while worlds apart in many regards, merge on this point : the desirability of escaping the containment of a totalizing system driven toward (and beyond) its own assumptions. In Lyotard's words : "Being prepared to receive what thought is not prepared to think is what deserves the name of thinking" (*Inhuman* 73). The virtual utopian sees the immediate and immanent fulfillment of Enlightenment ideals in a world liberated from itself through virtuality. Perhaps, though, the very immanence of the model can challenge the assumptions which have led to its creation.

In this reversed image, then, Internet might offer a virtuality which resists our attempts to totalize it as a world, presenting instead loci for playing with the assumptions that we have taken for granted in modernity : community, information, liberation, self. In general, virtual communities pose more questions about how individuals construct connections than they answer concerning the ends of achieving an electronic democracy. Rather than working toward (re)producing a model community, cyberspace could just as easily keep us moving beyond our ends, toward new connections : new "*chorographies*" that would demand new discourses (Virilio, *Aesthetics* 110). Likewise, the virtual body sets us astray from our assumptions about what it means to have a "real" body. In the virtuality of Internet, our words are our bodies, an aporetic copula which forces a reexamination of "the body" as both physiological (noumenal) entity and phenomenological experience. In each instance, Internet provides the medium for disrupting models, rather than confirming them. Following this other heading, Internet might present a seduction rather than a subduction : a challenge to modernity's assumptions of self and body, of individual and community.

Internet, rather than presenting a simulation of totality, might provide a space of play. Rather than pursuing ends through this technology, one might instead turn oneself over to the drift and *derive* of "cyberspace". Baudrillard's fatal vision shimmers on the surface of our computer screens. His vision, however, also challenges us to find a depth to the screen, to find -- or rather, lose -- ourselves on a different heading, off our familiar paths.