The Radio Days of Cyberspace

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I am a strange loop, my computer, my mouse and me.

I am a technophile. This is a recent admission for me. I had tried for years with Neo-Luddite fervor to ward off the invasion of technology into my skin. To no avail.

I had an experience the other night that tells the whole story. As I was whizzing around The Matrix, I glanced over at the thick tangle of grey cords that sprout from the back of my computer table. The mouse, the keyboard, the CPU, the phone, the modem, the printer, even my coffee warmer - everything has a cable - colored Macintosh Grey. I was thrilled by the sight and by the knowledge that I was part of this wiring too, via my "mouse finger". In that instant, I could feel my mind spill from head, down my arm and into that crude tangle of wires. I felt, for the first time, physically connected to a network of hundreds, even thousands of people thinking together through a similar set of wires and hardware. And then it hit me. I realized that five years ago, several weeks after getting my first computer, I had had a completely opposite experience. I had looked at that same bundle of wires and stacks of hardware and felt very ashamed. It was as though I had given in to The Machine and it was going to change me in some negative way. The computer and its language (CP/M) was foreign and unforgiving. I spent weeks trying to serve its needs, so it might serve mine. It never offered me any help. Its only prompt was a single period staring from a green screen. I read lots of error messages.

Machines are no longer my adversaries. They are simple augmentation; they extend my range, expand my capabilities. I am a cyborg with a digital brain annex and an international computer network built right into me. No fits of Spokian logic have assailed me. I'd dare say that I'm even better because of my new machine parts.

I am a strange loop, my TV, remote control, and me.

I have more than just computer augmentation. I also have a copy machine, a TVCR (our group house has 6 TVs and 4 VCRs), a phone, a fax, an answering machine (6 phones on 4 lines in the house), banks of stereos, sound and video equipment, plus miscellaneous walkpersons, boom boxes, and other electronic toys. This stuff is all melting into some kind of singularity. Computers are now stereos, video players, and telephones; while TVs are getting computerized and phones are being answered by video monitors. Sooner or later this will all end up in one box and continue to shrink 'til it disappears inside of us. At the same time we experiment with cybernetic gizmos in our home, the planet itself is being covered by the same thickening web of cables and talking beams of light. These are the radio days of cyberspace. We are gearing up to enter a new world of our own creation that has slowly been installing itself since the days of telegraph, radio, and telephone. Our brains are tutored daily on how to deal with this new pace and surreality : through our television sets. Your average commercial or music video provides the basic training for the speed of the new signal. Time and space are elasticized, images rush by like Kubrickian stargates, electronically edited to cuts by the second. Your local movie theater's opening bumper illustrates the world that you'll soon be stepping into. You know the scene : The lights go down, the curtain opens and you travel, in split seconds, inside the theater chain's logo, through fields of computer-generated shapes and landscapes which explode and then are reconstituted to read "Feature Presentation". Hundreds of computer-generated images compressed into 10 seconds of technicolor mind-fuck.

I am a strange loop, my data suit, my virtual world, and me.

"Virtual Reality" (VR) is the techno buzz word for the early nineties. The technology that it names, all hyperbole aside, will be at least as important as any of the media machines mentioned above. Simply put, virtual reality is a 3-D computer generated world that an individual can enter with the aid of stereoscopic goggles and data-sensing clothing. A computer is programmed with an environment that is fed to the user via the goggles. As the person in VR turns their head, the computer generates the view, such that the illusion of actually being in a Tron-like world is created. Fiber-optic sensors fitted into gloves and even a full-body jump suit provide the computer with enough information to create a simulation of the user. If you hold up your hand, you see a computer rendered hand. If you look down at your body, you see a computerized version of it. Another person can don a similar suit and climb into "cyberspace" with you. But neither of you need to look like your real-world selves. You can re-create yourself in a new image and interact with a new image of your partner. You can play Roger Rabbit to someone else's Jessica. Or you can climb out of humanoid altogether and be race cars or trees or Kafka's roaches. There are few limits. A recent demo of this duo-VR system had two architects design a daycare center over the phone, from two different locations. They then were able to scale themselves down to kid size and enter their design as children. Doors, windows, walls and other design elements could be picked up and moved.

Eventually, virtual reality will spill over, like my mind did, through the telephone system and into the Matrix. The houselights will come on and William Gibson's cyberspace will be open for business. Things will get very interesting in this world outside of space. People will be able to generate facsimiles of their dreams and nightmares and then crawl into them. Cybernaut gangs might meet in the matrix to fight Valhalian wars in which any atrocity exhibition is possible, but no one will get hurt. You'll be able to meet a friend in c-space and show them your latest hallucination. They'll counter with theirs. You'll try to out-trip each other. Megacorp businesses will hold board meetings and seminars in cyberspace. Lonely guys will hump virtual sex dolls. Lots of people will have VR phobia and will never venture beyond their eye-balls. Psychologists will scramble to answer questions about virtual addiction and fantasy/reality confusion. Things will get stranger.

Everybody wants to know what will happen with virtual reality. Will it be used for good; as a way of improving human communication and learning more about the nature of consciousness, non-ordinary reality, and imagination ? Or, will it be trivialized, commercialized, commodified, and co-opted to extend the hand of Big Brother ? The answer is simple : it will, like all the technology before it, be used for both.

I am a strange loop, my eternal optimism, my angry cynicism, and me.

References

- *Disappearing Through the Skylight*, Jr. O. B. Hardison.
- *Virtual Reality*, Howard Rheingold.