Matrices, Webs and the Neutron Bomb

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> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...
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> -- William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

Gibson's conception of "cyberspace" as a consensual hallucination is certainly compelling. The idea of hacker/cowboys floating around through virtual space is nearly irresistable. More and more of Gibson's ideas are being implemented, particularly in the last five years with the advent of the Internet and, more specifically, the World Wide Web.

The major differences between his conception and the current technology, of course, is that in the Sprawl Virtual Reality is sent directly to the brain through electrodes, while the WWW consists solely of visual items -- text and images (plus some sound). This capability makes Gibson's Matrix so real, so fantastic, that Case is obviously addicted to it more than any of the other drugs we see him take. We are told that experienced hackers stance involves "a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat".

Obviously, no one becomes addicted to the Web in such a way, and yet though the execution is different, I think there are more similarites than differences between the Web and the Matrix :

- Both are primarily means for information dissemination and retrieval, whether that information is government census info, the latest cybersoap (present or future), or something seen through the eyes of Tally Isham.
- Both are basically groupings and organizations of related data -- the Web through domain names and links, the Matrix through 3D graphical representations of "buildings", such as the scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority.
- Both are highly commercialized.
- Both are utilized extensively by a certain underground element.
- Both feature restricted access areas, meant for access only by a limited group of people. Firewalls and ICE, however, seem to be made to be penetrated.

However striking these similarites might be, I think that both Gibson's Matrix and our own World Wide Web have an inherent fatal flaw : the lack of people. This is the neutron bomb theory -- that Cyberspace is a ghost town with all the buildings and none of the people. Later we see Case interact with Wintermute in the matrix, but the landscape as a whole is inert, un-alive, and un-compelling.

The Internet is constantly changing, and I believe that the World Wide Web is simply a phase, an intermediate

stage before we move toward a much more compelling vision of virtual reality, such as Neal Stephenson's Metaverse. The Metaverse is populated by millions of avatars -- virtual representations of people in the real world. These avatars allow for a type of interaction that transform the Metaverse from a simple representation and organization of data to a dynamic, vibrant community.

The Matrix is dead. Hail to the Metaverse.