## HUMAN LAWS / CODED CONDITIONALS

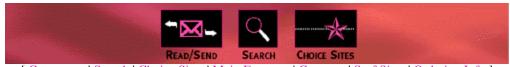
Out there on the electronic frontier, code is the law. The rules governing any computer-constructed microworld-of a video game, your personal computer desktop, a word processor window, an automated teller machine, or a chat room on the network-are precisely and rigorously defined in the text of the program that constructs it on your screen. Just as <u>Aristotle</u>, in <u>Politics</u>, contemplated alternative constitutions for city-states (those proposed by the theorists <u>Plato</u>, Phaleas, and Hippodamos, and the actual Lacedaemonian, Cretan, and Carthaginian ones), so denizens of the digital world should pay the closest of critical attention to programmed polity. Is it just and humane? Does it protect our privacy, our property, and our freedoms? Does it constrain us unnecessarily or does it allow us to act as we may wish?

At a technical level, it's all a matter of the software's conditionals -those coded rules that specify *if* some condition holds, *then* some action follows. Consider, for example, the familiar ritual of withdrawing some cash from an ATM. The software running the machine has some gatekeeper conditionals; *if* you have an account and *if* you enter the correct PIN number (the one that matches up, in a database somewhere, with the information magnetically encoded on your ATM card), *then* you can enter the virtual bank. (Otherwise you are stopped at the door. You may have your card confiscated as well.) Next the program presents you with a menu of possible actions -just as a more traditional bank building might present you with an array of appropriately labeled teller windows or (on a larger scale) a directory pointing you to different rooms: *if* you indicate that you want to make a withdrawal, *then* it asks you to specify the amount; *if* you want to check your balance, *then* it prints out a slip with the amount; *if* you want to make a deposit, *then* yet another sequence of actions is initiated. Finally, the program applies a banker's rule; *if* the balance of your account is sufficient (determined by checking a database), *then* it physically dispenses the cash and appropriately debits the account.

To enter the space constructed by the ATM system's software you have to submit to a potentially humiliating public examination-worse than being given the once-over by some snotty and immovable receptionist. You are either embraced by the system (if you have the right credentials) or excluded and marginalized by it right there in the street. You cannot argue with it. You cannot ask it to exercise discretion. You cannot plead with it, cajole it, or bribe it. The field of possible interactions is totally delimited by the formally stated rules.

So control of code is power. For citizens of cyberspace, computer code-arcane text in highly formalized language, typically accessible to only a few privileged high-priests-is the medium in which intentions are enacted and designs are realized, and it is becoming a crucial focus of political contest. Who shall write the software that increasingly structures our daily lives? What shall that software allow and proscribe? Who shall be privileged by it and who marginalized? How shall the writers of the rules be answerable?

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