

I spent a few hours now exploring Q-Link and CompuServe. I think I pretty much understand what they're all about and have a clear model of their full virtuality.

Q-Link you've seen. Basically, you have a tree structured network of services, most of which consist of the computer typing stuff at you. Each node in the tree has a menu and something that happens there. Mostly though, you just have the menu, wherein you select some specialization of the thing that the node corresponds to. For example, selecting the "Customer Service Department" from the top level menu leads you to another menu wherein you select what function you want wherein you select some sub-function wherein it displays some information or asks you for some information. That's basically it. Some of the bottom levels of the tree hand you over to an interactive module of some sort. The prime example of this is "chat". I didn't get much of a chance to play with chat because there weren't really enough people on.

Compuserve is much more complex, but the complexity comes from the age, maturity and range of services offered rather than from the design itself. The design is basically the same -- you have a tree of screens. Each screen consists of some stuff that it types at you (filling one screen's worth on your terminal), followed a menu of choices from which you pick. Often, this menu consists of one item, like "press return for more text". It's a REALLY stupid system. Most everything is shoehorned into this screen structure. Their CB facility interacts somewhat differently -- once you select CB (after about 5 levels of menus) it pauses and appears to actually hand you over to another CPU, which processes CB stuff. In CB everything you type gets broadcast, unless you precede it with a "/" in which case it gets interpreted as a command of some sort (e.g., to change the CB channel). It continually fills the screen with stuff other people are typing at CB. Each person's stuff is prefixed with their "handle".

CB is *bizarre*. Basically, there are 72 channels, divided into 2 bands of 36, and each band seems to be on a separate machine. Both times I looked (9pm-ish Friday and Sunday nights) there were 5-6 channels in use on each band, each channel with typically 2-4 people on it, except for channel #1 on Band A which had about 70 people on it. These people all had handles that ranged from the merely odd to the almost obscene (some samples: "Manda Lynne", "Group Sex!", "horny hon", "big Dick", etc. Use your imagination.). The primary topic of conversation did indeed seem to be sex, with people basically trying to pick each other up. Picking someone up in this context means making a direct person-to-person private connection with them via the "/talk" command. What most people do via such connections I can only guess. I have two sample data points: two people who decided to "/talk" to me. Being in exploration mode I complied. (BTW, I was using the handle "Fnordly", that being obscure but not too obscure and relatively neutral in the suggestive innuendo dept.) Friday I had an interesting conversation with "Group Sex!" who turned out to be a bunch of people gathered around a terminal in Washington D.C. Whether or not they were actually having an orgy on the other end was difficult to determine. In any case we had an interesting conversation about the goddess Eris and Discordian philosophy. This discussion was triggered by my handle (Have you read "Illuminatus!"? No? Do so.) Sunday I somehow got into a conversation with "lust crazed couple" (I'm serious, that was really their handle) who merely wished to give me a play-by-play (or perhaps blow-by-blow would be more appropriate) narration of what they said they were doing, which you can no doubt imagine for yourself. It was, shall we say, different from the sort of thing you read on "msgsgs".

I'm now going to go explore the games on CompuServe. They have on-line versions of all the traditional on-line sorts of games (Adventure, lunar

lander, etc.) plus the conventional boring stuff (checkers, chess) that you can do with another person plus some more interesting things that look rather involved. The most significant of these seems to be "MegaWars" of which there are 2 versions. "MegaWars I" seems to be 2-10 player real-time fly-thru-space shoot-em-up, though not graphic because it has to talk to dumb terminals. "MegaWars III" (I don't know what happened to "MegaWars II") seems to be more like "Empire" among the stars. They give you some brief instructions, but these games seem to be VERY complicated, with lots of commands and syntax and so on (lots of geek appeal here). CompuServe recommends that one buy a "CompuServe Games Manual" that documents the rules and commands in detail. I'm not sure how much this costs, but we might want to get one just for reference.

More to follow as I explore...