

Living in Virtual Un/Reality

In the first chapter of Genesis, we hear the story of reality. The image behind the story is of God as an omnipotent ruler whose very word is law. God speaks and it is done. So God says "Let there be light," and there is light. In response to God's word, reality happens. Nothing intervenes between the word of God and reality. God speaks. Reality happens.

Now let us change the image. Instead of an omnipotent ruler issuing commands, let us think of God as a divine computer programmer, sitting at a keyboard. God types "Light" and light happens. God types "Separate light, darkness" and it happens. And as the divine computer program is run, light happens, water happens, dry land happens, vegetation happens, animals happen, humanity happens.

We may feel uncomfortable with that image. Indeed, if I were to suggest that we could make Genesis 1 more relevant by thinking of God as a computer programmer rather than as a heavenly king, the idea would be tacky and trivial. I don't want to suggest that we rewrite Genesis. But I do want to ask you to stay with me with this image for a few minutes. I would like to play with the image of God as a computer programmer in order to help us think about reality.

Those of us who have done computer programming will be familiar with a God-like feeling we get from the power that computers place in our hands. In programming a computer, we create worlds. We type, and it happens. We bring worlds into being ex nihilo - out of nothing.

But what have we created? When we program a computer, what we create is a series of messages. Yet the series of messages - the commands that we give to the computer - are not the worlds that we create. The world we create is what happens when our program is run on the computer. The world we create is what happens when the computer responds to our messages, when our messages take life through the magic of a central processing unit.

As computer programmers, we are very conscious of the transience of our creations. We run our programs. Reality happens. And yet when we turn off our computers, the reality is gone. The physical traces of our program, the magnetic signals on our hard disk that we call a file, is not the reality. What resides on the hard disk not the world we created. The file on the disk is only the way that we freeze our messages so that, at another time, we can issue our commands again without the need of typing them over. Our programs are a reality that happens in response to our commands. When our commands are given, a reality comes into being, only to disappear into nothingness when the computer is turned off, or even when we exit our program.

The reality we inhabit when we use a computer is a reality that is brought into being by the commands of a programmer. Usually, the programs we use are the work of someone else. But if I turn on a Mac, or load Windows on a PC, or even when I use good old DOS, I inhabit a world that has been brought into being by the word of some programmer. The messages, frozen on disk or burned into ROM, create a world that I enter when I use my computer. I enter this strange reality we have come to call Cyberspace.

The analogy between the creation story of Genesis 1 and the experience of computer programs is not, then, so far fetched. Reality happens in response to the word of God. The world that happens in response to the word of the programmer we have begun to call "virtual reality."

(I should note that I am using the term "virtual reality" here in a very broad sense. Virtual reality refers to the worlds that we construct through our use of computer technology. In this sense, virtual reality is not simply the simulation of physical reality that we bring about through the use of special goggles or gloves or earphones. In "virtual reality" I would also include the world of a Windows desktop or even an ordinary spreadsheet. Through the computer we create a space which is not a space, a world in which we can act and react. In "virtual reality" I include all the worlds we enter when we turn on a computer.)

Do we then create worlds out of nothing when we turn on the computer? We are uncomfortable with the suggestion. We know how transient the worlds of our creation are. They are made out of bits and bytes. Bits and bytes live, perhaps, in the memory of a computer or on a hard disk. Yet they are not physical. They are not the atoms in the memory chips or on the hard disk. They are messages that just happen to be carried by the atoms. Our stored messages, our words, bring these worlds into being. And when we exit our programs, the worlds cease to exist. We want to object that our creations are not reality. They are only the ephemeral appearances of reality.

We want our worlds to be solid. But virtual worlds are not solid. There seems to be a difference between the hardware reality that God made and the software reality of our virtual worlds. I know - or, I think I know - that my desk continues to exist when I am not in my office. But does Myst exist when I exit the program? Does the world of the Windows desktop exist when I exit to DOS? A world that is constructed out of our messages does not seem to us to be real. It is, we want to say, the appearance of reality. It is, at best, virtual reality. It is virtual un/reality.

Perhaps we want to distinguish between the hardware worlds which are really real and a software world which is only apparent. The hardware world is solid, stable, permanent. The software world is an appearance that is commanded by the messages that we send to the computer.

That seems reasonable. And yet, when we listen carefully to Genesis 1, it is not quite so reasonable after all. For what Genesis 1 suggests to us is that the hardware world, like the software world, is brought into being by the word, the messages, of God. The old idea, first articulated by early Christian writers, that the world is created out of nothing should undercut our confidence in the stability of the hardware world. What the early Christian theologians wanted to suggest is that the world has no stability, no solidity, no permanence in itself. The world exists only in and through the word of God, the divine command which summons it into being and without which it

would disappear into the nothing from which it came. The more we think about it, the more reality - the world which God has called into being - seems to resemble a world which is created by a computer program.

When I speak of virtual un - slash - reality, I have no intention of minimizing the importance of the worlds that are the creation of our computer software. What I want to call attention to by the slash is that one of the effects of the digital technology that we use day by day is that the distinction between reality and unreality is increasingly blurred. It is becoming more and more difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the real and the unreal. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word "virtual" in this way: "Existing or resulting in essence or effect though not in actual fact, form, or name." What that obscure little bit of prose means is that a "virtual" something is essentially equivalent to the real thing. In other words, if it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, waddles like a duck, we may at least say that it is a virtual duck. But then, we may ask, how do we tell the difference between a real duck and a virtual duck?

This is not a new problem. In the 18th century, the philosopher George Berkeley raised doubts about the nature of material reality. In Berkeley's philosophy, all reality existed in the mind. "To be," Berkeley proposed, "is to be perceived." The real existence of things is not "out there" in some mysterious reality called "matter." To say that a lamp post exists is simply to say that some mind - my mind or the mind of God - perceives a lamp post. There is an anecdote to the effect that Samuel Johnson, irritated at what he thought was the outrageousness of Berkeley's theory kicked a lamp post and declared "Thus I refute Bishop Berkeley." The problem was: Johnson's kick proved nothing. His sore toe was nothing more than just another perception in Johnson's mind.

Virtual un/reality is what we have come to call "cyberspace." Increasing numbers of human beings are coming to inhabit this strange world. It is strange because it is "there" without being there. It is strange because it is constantly shifting, rarely the same from day to day. It is a world of our own making. It is a world, perhaps,

that has some similarity to that of Bishop Berkeley. It is a world that is constructed totally of signals or messages. It is a world that exists in those mysterious forms of mind that digital technology has made possible. In cyberspace, "To be is to be digitized."

But perhaps we need to notice something about the way we use the word "real." I have interpreted Genesis 1 as a story about how reality happens. God speaks. Reality happens. But the text goes further. The text tells us that when reality happens, God pronounces it to be "good."

What God joins together in Genesis, modern thought has done its best to put asunder. I refer to the separation that has been common in modern thought for centuries between "fact," on the one hand, and "value" on the other. To the modern mind, the question of fact is a matter of objective truth. Fact is "out there." Fact is independent of what I might happen to think about it. Fact is objective. To be objective is to be real. Value on the other hand is not objective. It is arbitrary. Value exists only in the mind of the valuer. Values do not change the facts. Values are subjective. Values are matters of opinion. Values are private concerns. Values are unreal.

Most of us are aware that before the scientific revolution - in ancient and medieval thought - there was a close connection between fact and value. For the pre-moderns, the highest being and the highest good were identical. Evil - and this is particularly true for Western Christian thinking - was non-being, the absence and the distortion of being. Being and "the Good" were always closely identified. There was no split between fact and value.

In Genesis, when God sees reality happen, God sees that it is good. To be real is to be good.

I want to suggest that modern thought has not been quite honest about what it was attempting to do. It is one thing to argue that one cannot derive fact from value or, on the other hand, that one cannot derive value from fact. It is quite another thing to equate "fact" with reality. For when we suggest that "facts" are "real" but "values" are

subjective and not "real," we are always making a value judgment. We want to use the word "reality" in what strikes me as a rather prejudicial way. We want to expel considerations of value, of good and evil, from "reality." But we can only do that by implicitly pronouncing the factual, the objective, to be the Good.

Let me put a rhetorical question to you: What did you think when you first heard or saw the title of my talk tonight - "Living in Virtual Un/Reality." Did it not at least cross your mind that I was going to put down what we normally call "virtual reality"? Did you not suspect that I was going to say that what we call "virtual reality" was inferior to whatever it is I was going to claim was "really" "real"? Was there not a suggestion in your mind that I was going to make the claim that somehow analog reality was superior to digital reality?

Well, that is not my purpose. What I want us to do, first of all, is to suspect this word "reality." It is a much more slippery word than we usually think it to be. We are all products of the modern world. We all share the prejudice that reality is somehow "out there," solid and reliable. What I want to claim is that the distinction between "real" reality and virtual reality does not make a lot of sense. I want to claim that digital technology has called into question our metaphysical prejudices. To dwell in cyberspace is to dwell in a different reality than modernity has been prepared to admit. To call cyberspace "unreal" is a value judgment which, in its own way, exposes the contradiction in the modern enterprise to keep reality and values rigorously separate.

We have gathered here in Baltimore as part of that growing proportion of humanity have chosen to begin to live in virtual un/reality. I imagine that very few of us - if any - understood that we were making that choice when we bought our first computer. We did not understand that we were about to disorient ourselves and to lose our grasp on what we used to call "reality" when we bought our first modem. And probably, we are not comfortable even now with describing ourselves as letting go of our grasp on "reality." Neither am I. But we need to use provocative language. For things are not the same. We know that things are not the same because we have

experienced something that does not fit with the way things used to be for us. We know things are not the same when we see the fear and trembling of our Luddite friends who feel blackmailed into entering the on-line world because of the media hype that has surrounded the Internet in the last year or so. To describe what we have seen, we are ultimately forced to do funny things with this strange word "reality."

It is now ten years, to the month, that community we know as Ecunet began to gather. From May 1985 to March of 1986 people of different denominations and geographical locations struggled to understand their new identity and the new intimacy that computer communications had imposed on their lives. Was what we were experiencing on-line really "church"?

We were uneasy about that question. Some of us were very reluctant to move away from the conviction of the church as a physically gathered community. The church, we argued, had to be incarnated in flesh and blood. We believed that a computer mediated community could not express the full humanity that is necessary if the church is to be truly the "body of Christ." But many of our assumptions of what the church had to be were brought into radical question by what happened at the end of January 1986. The Challenger exploded - live, on TV. In response to the universal shock of that awful event, four of our number planned and carried out an on-line "Memorial Service." The effect was electric. They had done what many of us thought could not be done. They had gathered a community for prayer and proclamation. The community was geographically disperse, stretching from Hawaii to Nova Scotia. It reached out to all who were feeling the shock of the Challenger disaster. It demonstrated that, indeed, the Spirit moves where it will and that our inclination to restrict ecclesiastical reality to the hardware world needed to be seriously questioned.

The Memorial Service experience has not, at least to my knowledge, been repeated. In retrospect, I wonder why we did not attempt it again in response to the Oklahoma bombing. But whether or not it is repeatable, the Memorial Service experience taught us that reality

could no longer be the same. We were beginning to live in virtual un/reality.

A few months later, in March of 1986, those of us who had been building the ecumenical community on-line met for the first time as a group. The occasion was the CAMCON meeting in Los Angeles, which was to explore the use of computers in the church. The effect of the physical gathering of the on-line community was electric. The energy of that small group dominated the meeting. We discovered two things. First, we discovered that the community that had been growing on-line was very real. Secondly, we discovered that meeting physically added new dimensions to our on-line community. Our sense of reality was stretched. What was this curious thing called community? Did it become real only when we met face to face? Not at all. But face to face meeting did make a difference. In what did "real" community consist?

The fact is that Ecunet has always been something of a chameleon, taking on different configurations of reality as it has gone from crisis to crisis, as it has moved from UNISON, to NWI, to its present home in Louisville. It has begun taking on different natures again as it continues to respond to the growth of the Internet. Ecunet reflects the shifting, unstable nature of cyberspace, of virtual un/reality. And over the past ten years, we have been learning - slowly but surely - what it is to live in virtual un/reality.

But we have only begun to learn. Ecunet has grown - partly by choice, partly by chance - in a very protected environment. We chose to find a place for the on-line church community apart from the mainstream of the on-line world. We chose, for example, not to be a SIG (that is, a "Special Interest Group") on CompuServe or any of the other public "information utilities." We have chosen not to place our community and our discussion in a perfectly public space where it might - we feared - be stomped over by the on-line Philistines. And we have chosen - at least so far - not to have full Internet access for many of the same reasons.

Over the next few days, in my daily reflections, I will continue to return to the Internet and its relationship to Ecnnet. The explosion of Internet has decisively changed the situation for us in several respects. First, it has made cyberspace - virtual un/reality - very visible in the "real" world. Secondly - and this is my more important point - the Internet is making explicit some unexpected dimensions of virtual un/reality. I will argue here that the Internet has undercut some of our own prejudices about the on-line world.

The first point is quite simple. The Internet has managed to entice the traditional media into believing that cyberspace is real. Rarely a day goes by when there is not some mention of the Internet in the newspapers or on television news. We have all been brought up to believe that reality is defined by the mass media. To be real is to be "covered." Cyberspace is now being "covered." Therefore cyberspace is real.

The problem is that the traditional media represent reality as something solid and fixed. Consequently, cyberspace - virtual un/reality - is consistently misrepresented in the media. Indeed, one might say that any attempt to represent virtual un/reality is to misrepresent it. One can live in virtual un/reality. One cannot define it, pin it down, draw pictures of it. Consequently when we hear of pornography or hate literature on the Internet we begin to think of cyberspace as a pretty seamy neighborhood of reality. Those of who actually live in virtual un/reality realize that while the media reports are true - there is pornography on the Internet - they are at the same time utterly false, utterly misleading.

Wittgenstein in his early work attempted to define reality as the "totality of the facts." So we try to understand virtual un/reality as the totality of what is on-line. The traditional media attempts to make cyberspace fit into this version of "reality." Yet those of us who live in virtual un/reality know that the media account does not fit. The Internet cannot be adequately described in terms of the totality of the documents and files it contains.

That is my first point: The attempt of the mass media to report on the Internet reveals some of the cracks in our conventional understanding of reality. My second point is this: the Internet reveals cracks in the understanding of on-line reality that those of us who have lived in virtual un/reality have come to hold dear. I want to mention two myths which, I think, are brought into question by the explosion of the Internet.

First: Cyberspace is often represented as democratic and anti-hierarchical. Indeed, this was one of the first things that impressed me when I first came on-line. When you connect people in computer networks, then the flow of information is radically changed. One is not dependent on hierarchical patterns of information flow. Instead of passing up and down a bureaucratic hierarchy, information can flow directly from person to person. In the process, as I was often tempted to remark, computer communications marginalizes hierarchy. With a few qualifications I still consider that to be true.

The problem, though, is this: In spite of our clichés, the opposite to hierarchy is not democracy. The opposite to hierarchy is anarchy. Democracy is a system of government where the majority decide. Anarchy is the situation in which no one person or group - not even the majority - have the means of imposing their will. And it is anarchy, rather than democracy, that characterizes virtual un/reality.

The problem of hate literature on the Internet provides us with a convenient illustration. Hate literature appears on the Internet. It may appear in a Usenet news group or it may appear in the form of an Internet node dedicated to the superiority of the Aryan race. Our impulse is to suppress this kind of thing. Indeed, we may assume that a vast majority of Internet users are opposed to making the medium available to hate groups. But it cannot be suppressed. If the government moves to make it illegal to post hate literature electronically, the hate group can move its material to an off shore site. If we attempt to make individuals legally responsible for the content of their postings, the offenders can mask their identity. What the Internet has made explicit is this: In cyberspace, if there is a support group for a certain type of material - including pornography

and hate literature - that material will appear. In virtual un/reality "There is no king in Israel and everyone does what is right in their own eyes."

My first point, then, is that the social organization that is at home in virtual un/reality is anarchy. My second point may be a corollary of the first. It is this: Virtual un/reality does not support community.

I want to state this point very carefully, because it is only one side of the truth. The other side of the truth is that we all know that community has happened for us on-line. Ecunet is the story of electronic community building. I want to say, though, that the community that we know as Ecunet happened by the careful nurturing of what I will call an "electronic neighborhood." Internet, however, has convinced me that the medium, having fostered the growth of electronic neighborhoods, ultimately works at their dissolution.

The typical use of the Internet is a highly individualistic, idiosyncratic activity. One "surfs" the Internet, touching down here and there. Usenet newsgroups, with their threaded structures, encourage readers to pick and choose messages according to their content. The typical Usenet newsgroup - or Listserv mailing list - does not foster community except for a very small and dedicated in-group. On the Internet, one makes brief contact with other individuals with whom, for a brief period, one shares a common interest. It is like ships passing in the night. The result is that, if you can settle down in a neighborhood of virtual un/reality, community may be found. But it is not automatic and most of our activities in cyberspace are not communal at all.

It may be, in fact, that community can happen on-line only where there are "firewalls" in place. It is very unlikely for community to prosper on the freeways of the information highway, exposed to the full force of Internet traffic. For community, one needs a neighborhood. As we have learned in the analog world, freeways tend to destroy neighborhoods. It may be similar in virtual un/reality.

Even Ecunet has long since ceased to be a community. Ecunet is a neighborhood of neighborhoods. One can find communities on Ecunet. They happen in different places. One community gathers, for example, around Stephen Rose's "Renewal 2." Another gathers around the United Church of Christ discussion of "Confessing Christ." I am sure there are many more of which I am not aware. In the early days, the electronic world was small and every place in cyberspace was a neighborhood. So Ecunet began as a neighborhood, as a recognizable community. It was a place where everybody knew everyone else, a village in virtual un/reality. It is that way no longer.

Is this the way things are? Is virtual un/reality an anarchy in which community can exist only behind the protection of firewalls? Yes, that is the way things are. Or, rather, this is a face that virtual un/reality turns towards us.

I would remind you, however, that I asked you earlier to be very suspicious of this word "reality." We need to be aware of the many faces that virtual un/reality turns our way. Those faces are not simply products of our imagination, not simply wish fulfillment. But, at the same time, they are products of our imagination as virtual un/reality is a product of our imagination. It is the creation of our messages. We project ourselves into cyberspace, and yet cyberspace takes on a life of its own. The worlds that our messages summon into being have "falls" of their own. Like God, we can find ourselves alienated from our own creation.

What I have described is no more, but also no less, than a possibility of virtual un/reality. Possibilities are the stuff from which virtual un/reality is made. That virtual un/reality is anarchy is true. That virtual un/reality dissolves community is true. But I could equally well say that anarchy is the possibility of virtual un/reality that is being presented to us at this particular point in the development of the technology. There are other possibilities, other truths of cyberspace. We have recognized other possibilities in the past. We will encounter still others in the future. To live in virtual un/reality is to live in the midst of shifting possibilities. That is why it is virtually un/real.

Keynote address at Ecunet '95, Baltimore, MD

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May 1995

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