



## Hygienic reality

### Description

Many people take it for granted that we occupy two worlds: the physical and the virtual. In 1997 MIT digital researchers Ishii and Ullmer stated that people potentially “live between two realms: our physical and virtual” (Ishii and Ullmer, 1997). They took on the challenge of connecting the two spaces together.



Advocates of virtuality and cyberspace are generally referring to

the storage, presentation and experience of data in some form, understood through the metaphor of spatial geometry.

The concepts of cyberspace and virtual reality are bolstered by the power of dynamic 3d imagery, the automation of rapid perspective rendering, and their combination with networked communications. The ethereal otherness of supposedly virtual spatial experience occasionally dominates people’s reflections on digital media, accented by immersive games, multi-user 3d environments such as Second Life, and other MMORPGs (Oliver, 2002).

The discourse of cyberspace is potent and alluring. But there is growing resistance to the concepts of virtuality and cyberspace. Many critics think the theme of virtual reality distracts from engagement in everyday experience (Kline, et al., 2003). Many of those who now study digital media from a social

perspective oppose the imaginative but non-verifiable assertions of the enthusiasts of cyberspace, a protest that is gaining ground amongst researchers into pervasive computing (Weiser, 1991). Concepts of space are after all subservient to concepts of society; space as place is socially as well as materially constructed (Lefebvre, 1991), not the product of three-dimensional geometrical presentations to the eye.

From a pragmatic point of view we could ask: what value does the idea of virtuality add to discussions about computing and digital media? At best we are dealing with a metaphor – the metaphor of spatial geometry. In *Technoromanticism* I argued that digital narratives that take as their starting point the idea of an invisible *other* realm, a digital communicative substrate to the material world, find resonance due to our familiarity with Platonic Idealism, though in highly technologized form.

Some architects like the idea of another spatial substrate to the material. Virtual reality brings digital studies into the architect’s domain of space and environment, as – virtual architecture. Cyberspace clearly inspires fans of fantasy and science fiction.

A simple test of the utility of the cyberspace metaphor is to apply this descriptive technique to other technologies. When I call someone up on the telephone am I immediately transported into – phonespace? When I watch television am I in – mediaspace? Operating the washing machine do I merge into – cleanspace? or – hygienic reality? If the narrative strategy seems to work everywhere then perhaps it works nowhere, or perhaps we are now in the realms of – absurdspace, or as Andr  Breton called it, – surreality.

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1. Techno-utopias

## Tags

1. cyberspace
2. technology

3. virtual reality

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