The Soul of the Machine: The Search for Spirituality in Cyberspace

Organizers:
Celia Pearce
Erik Davis, Author/Journalist
Panelists:
Mark Pesce, VRML Guru/Author
Paul Godwin, Composer/Musician
Char Davies, Artist
Rita Addison, Artist

"If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?" – Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan first identified the rise of the "information age" and introduced the concept of "The Global Village," an electronic universe of information, ideas and images that could be shared by all. Although his ideas were precipitated by television, the telephone, and the embryonic computer, McLuhan anticipated that all of this would grow together into a new form of collective consciousness.

Today, McLuhan's prophesy is being realized beyond even his wildest imaginings. The astronomical rise of the Internet as a mass medium, continuing advances in immersive virtual reality, and the dramatic shift of media from analog to digital are all leading us to a new level of consciousness, understanding and connection. From Virtual Reality, to electronic music, to the Internet, "The Soul in the Machine: The Search for Spirituality in Cyberspace," brings together a group of esteemed artists, producers, inventors, and authors who are actively investigating, exploring and creating spiritual experiences in the digisphere.

Celia Pearce

Perspective

Celia Pearce's work as both a producer and writer/lecturer has been dedicated to creating and supporting alternatives to the highly visceral content which has dominated commercial interactive multimedia. She is very concerned with the psychological, sociological, and cultural implications of interactive media, and as such has written, taught, and lectured on such topics and interactive art, nonlinear storytelling, alternative VR, and fundamentals of game structure. Her concerns about the human side of technological content led to the idea of proposing a panel on the topic of spirituality in cyberspace. As panel organizer, Celia's emphasis will be to provide an irreverent, entertaining and informed philosophical overview of the subject matter.

Position

Quoting from Marshall McLuhan, Aldus Huxley, and others, I want to introduce the topic in a lively way. My vision of the panel is that it will be more about questions than answers, more about waking people up to issues than giving them information. I want to engage people and challenge them to address issues which might otherwise be taboo. To many, any discussion of spirituality seems antithetical to the computer. But nothing could be further from the truth. As people begin to use cyberspace as a gathering place on a mass level, the result is everything from on-line romance to terrorism. The inevitable "digitization of everything" has profound implications on a spiritual level. Aldus Huxley defines "The Perennial Philosophy" as the divine unity of all things. By converting all media into a single form, we have created a new paradigm for such unity. It is also important to me that the panel not limit itself to pundits pontificating on the possibilities, but that it represent creative individuals who are making real work that addresses some of these issues. This, combined with my own philosophical overview and Erik Davis' closing historical and cultural views, will allow us to deal with this issues at a variety of levels of resolution.

Mark Pesce

Perspective

The development of VRML, the authoring language for creating 3D environments on the Internet, was one of the lead stories in computer technology of 1995. Mark Pesce's contribution to making on-line cyberspace a reality at the exact moment when the Internet has become a mass medium is destined to revolutionize the world. This is clearly Mark's intention. Mark, who was featured on the cover of Wired magazine for its "Techno-Pagans" issue, makes no bones about his commitment to the spiritual applications of computer technology. He will provide his unique perspective on the transcendent qualities of cyberspace as a means to self-awareness through collective consciousness.

Position

Cyberspace is the realm where communication occurs, at the boundary between self and other. In a world which is entirely self-created with the single exception of this boundary between the self and the other, the other assumes the role of the agent of divine novelty, preserving us from the boredom of our own reflection, and acting as the agent of initiation, presenting us with that which removes us from ourselves and places us into a new understanding. Reading from sections of my soon-to-be published Self/Sacred: Body and Being in Cyberspace, I will discuss the nature of the other, the divine, and the essence of communication as the encounter with the sacred self.

Paul Godwin

Perspective

As a composer and musician, Paul has a great deal of experience in musical collaboration, both in composition and performance. His interest in improvisation has led him to create a number of collaborate virtual music spaces that allow people to participate in virtual "jam" sessions. Paul will discuss the process of simulating live jams in cyberspace, and the idea of creating a collective consciousness through real-time, remote collaboration.

Position

I believe that Cyberspace is a vessel for the transmission of human consciousness. The species is literally investing itself into the digital noosphere. The World Wide Web parallels the "real world" in many ways through commerce, education, entertainment, information, and social interaction. But where does the spiritual aspect of human life fall in the entire spectrum of digital activity? How do we feel each other's presence in a consensual, digital world? How do we harness the psychic biological energy fields that resonate in a "brainstorming" or "jam" session?

To address these questions, I will present some of my work in this area, including:

- The Worldsong Project, created in collaboration with Mark Pesce and Dr. Bill Martens, is a distributed network project using VRML to navigate a stratified matrix of the world's audio material. Presented at The Doors of Perception, Amsterdam.

- Ritual Ground Zero, YORB-TV, (Time-Warner Cable TV, NYC) developed with interactive designer Amee Evans, is a live "jamspace" on Interactive Television is controllable by four separate callers, who trigger Gamelan music samples using their telephone's touch-tone buttons. The "physical" jamspace was rendered using SGI Alias and is in full operation each Thursday night on NYC Cable Television.

- SOLACE, or Sacred On-Line Active Communal Environment, is a generic term for a type of space that can be shared spiritually on the Net. One example is an on-line Zendo or vocal meditation space. Here, participants sing or tone into microphones on remote workstations; they hear the other members of their group singing along; as their voices reach unison, the visual interface reflects that unity (a 1-5 point visual mandala generator is employed) and a space for attunement is created.

Char Davies

Perspective

Char Davies' seminal work OSMOSE has been described as a digital meditation space. In contrast with the other projects, all of which emphasize communal consciousness in remote or shared physical spaces, Char's work is based on full-body solitary immersion. OSMOSE is a place for quiet self-discovery and reflection. The visual aesthetic and sounds of OSMOSE are evocative and ambiguous: the user interface is based on intuitive biofeedback of breathing and balance. Together these tend to create a euphoric sense of being unbounded, while simultaneously grounding the experience in the body-core. Quite often, immersion in OSMOSE appears to induce a shift of awareness in participants, in which conceptual boundaries between inner/outer, self/world dissolve, and desire for control and speed is replaced by a serene and contemplative free-fall. Drawing on insights gained from her experience with OSMOSE, Char will discuss the potential of immersive virtual space as a medium for exploring the perception of consciousness.

Position

My work in cyberspace is focused on immersive virtual space – as a spatial-temporal arena for exploring "being-in-the-world." I am somewhat wary of the trend towards collectivity and mind in cyberspace: such a realm, in which the subjective body is denied, may in fact prove to be the epitome of Cartesian desire, symptomatic of an almost pathological denial of our mortality and our materiality, seducing us to turn away even further from the earthly environment in which we, as incarnate beings, are embedded.

My goal is to use the technology to suggest an alternative, re-affirming the role of the body in cyberspace, approaching this space as a medium for stripping away habitual assumptions and re-configuring how we experience ourselves as embodied consciousness enveloped by the world. Forty years ago, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote in ‹La Poetique de l'espace› "...by changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating. For we do not change place, we change our Nature."

OSMOSE is such a space.

Rita Addison

Perspective

Rita Addison's work is profound on several levels. In her landmark work "DETOUR: Brain Deconstruction Ahead," Rita created an immersive experience simulating the perceptual damage that she underwent as a result of her 1992 automobile accident. This type of experience cannot be effectively expressed in any other medium than immersive Virtual Reality. The emotional impact of this is immense; one can literally live in another's mind and see the world from their perspective. Unlike most VR, which emphasizes imagination and fantasy, Rita's work is concerned with simulating "real" shifts in perception as a mode of creative expression. Though highly personal, Rita's work is also collaborative in nature, putting people together in a

shared space to experience these perceptual shifts as a group. "Synesthesia" has the feeling of an audio-visual jam session in which participants combined biofeedback triggers movement in the environment.

Rita's work is also a testimony to her courage in taking a tragic experience and transforming it into an expression of understanding and enlightenment to be shared with others. As such, her personal journey is the ultimate expression of the resilience of the human spirit.

Position: Authoring Your Own Virtual Environment Journey

I'm keenly interested in discovering new interfaces that will enable us all to more freely create and explore virtual environments. One of the paths I'm exploring is the potential for biosignals to function as not only a "joystick," i.e., as a control, but also as a bridge over which emerging, real-time neurophysiological data can travel to a computer which serves much as a launching pad and returns the data to the observer in a different way than which it was first perceived. I certainly do not have any answers. Rather, I will share what I've learned so far on my exploration with bio-sensing interfaces, including my recent experience producing and showing "Synesthesia" at SuperComputing '95.

Erik Davis

Perspective

Erik Davis is an author and journalist who has devoted his work to the study of digital culture. He has emerged as one of the leaders in discussions of techno-spirituality and has written on this topic for both the technological and theological communities. Erik's background and knowledge of religious traditions and his diligent research into history and trends in digital culture bring a broad scholarly perspective to the subject matter. Erik's presentation will also include a glimpse into the darker side of cyberspace. Just as the opening statement provides an overview to set the stage for work-specific presentations, Erik's closing remarks will bring the topic back into the larger perspective, touching on the past, present, and future of techno-spirituality.

Position

In my brief concluding talk, I will put the other panelists' discussions about spirituality in cyberspace into a larger cultural context, focusing in particular on the role of the religious or spiritual imagination in navigating and responding to the dizzying possibilities and dangers of the telecommunications revolution. I will discuss a few concrete examples of the crossover of spirituality and high technology, and explore what these visions tell us about the cultural and cognitive potentials of computers in general, and the Internet in particular. But while I am encouraged by the magical and utopian strains of thought that have accompanied the massive spread of digital technology into our lives, I also believe we have as much to gain by looking at the dark and paranoid mythologies that have also grown up around the new machines. In our faith in virtual light, we believe our monitors to be windows onto a new world, but we should also consider that we are still seeing through a glass, darkly.