

HIGH WINDOWS

Raph Koster

(Before I started, Leigh Alexander, who was the advisor to the summit, cracked a joke that since virtual worlds were originally described as the metaverse in *Snow Crash*, that they have a lot in common with Scientology -- they both sprang from science fiction, right?)

**THE FOLLOWING PROGRAM
CONTAINS STRONG LANGUAGE AND
DISTURBING IMAGERY. VIEWER
DISCRETION IS ADVISED.**

This is where I get all sober and contemplative. How many of you are here because you hope to make a buck from the virtual worlds boom?

WHY GAMERS SHOULD CARE?

I discarded this question because I'd be preaching to the choir at a virtual worlds summit.

ARE THE GAMERS EVEN IN THE ROOM?

There's no point in covering this topic if everyone in the room has already drunk the kool-aid.

WHY VIRTUAL WORLDERS SHOULD CARE

Should I explain why virtual worlders should care about games? No, the VW folk are already at GDC, so there's no point, just walk outside the room.

WHY SHOULD ANYONE CARE?

The problem is that it's very easy to succumb to groupthink in an environment like a virtual worlds conference. We're not normal.

**“VIRTUAL REALITY IS AIR
GUITAR WRIT LARGE.”**

“...and ultimately meaningless.”

• *Robert J. Sawyer*

Despite Leigh's joke, it is a valid question. To what degree is it Scientology? To what degree is it Kool-Aid? To what degree is it castles in the air? I mean, by definition it's often literally castles in the air. We're building a lot of dreams and sometimes nobody is coming to see them. Sometimes we're not building our dreams big enough.

IT'S EASY TO GET MYOPIC

The number of CPUs per human crested 1 this year. But people in this room have an average of five. This is abnormal on a global scale. And yet only an elite few can program them.



There will be discussions in the next two days about how to monetize children.



We'll talk about virtual currencies. And it's all very interesting. Don't get me wrong: this is amazing stuff. This is astonishing stuff, but...



I'm struck by how much those questions look like 'the real world.' But when we get really involved with something, perhaps to the point of obsession, it's easy to get to think that this is the context for everything. With the view from Sand Hill Road, it's easy to think that Milwaukee gives a damn.



How removed is this corpse in Darfur from our torn jeans in Second Life? It is weird and interesting to me that technologies that are not this dream of cyberspace, but rather really simple stuff like signatures onto petitions and uploading photos or making marks on Google maps are more impactful to Darfur than all the Second Lives put together.



This is a picture of Cite Soleil in Port-au-Prince Haiti. My mother worked in Haiti for UNICEF, which allowed me to grow up in some interesting places. That's a little removed from torn jeans on avatars, but it is of us and our world. It is exactly the thing that the Neal Stephensons and John Perry Barlows dreamed of. You look at where we are now, and you wonder how does it address all of the things that we struggle with now that are really easy, stupid, simple problems.



New Orleans wasn't a hard problem. It just wasn't important enough. When you're faced with stuff like Hurricane Katrina flooding the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, you wonder, what do virtual worlds have to say about this? The collective venture capital at the summit has to be north of \$50 million; enough to replace the FEMA trailers the people of New Orleans are living in.

WHAT DO VIRTUAL WORLDS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THAT?

I sit and I look at what we do and I think 'Goddamn we're irrelevant.' Have I brought you down enough yet?

I'VE BEEN PONTIFICATING A LONG TIME

My hair is gray now. What have we really accomplished in fifteen years? We're still talking about technical interoperability, like whether avatars can move from one world to another. We should be talking about people interoperability.

**AND I STILL THINK I AM
NEW AT THIS**

“Information is only secondary. It is the human contact that keeps the Net-addicted coming back.

“Someday the Net , and muds, will have an environment stable enough, extensible enough, real enough, that they can rule themselves--but right now, the implementors still call the shots and it is hard to tell how much that has stunted the growth of virtual realities as a viable political and social force.”

- *LegendMUD interview, 15 years ago*

The questions of governance haven't been resolved. Even in the most open spaces, people are still subject to Gods. How much has the idea of admin-controlled virtual environments stunted the growth of the hypothetical cyberspace? I was typing this on a 300-baud modem and I was already upset about it.

“Most of the new audience is not going to be willing to cope with the intricacies of telnet or, even worse, setting up a mud client. No doubt the number of mudders will increase as the number of Internetters does, but the big explosion in mudding will probably not happen until access can be made as simple as operating a toaster--preferably with a graphical interface.”

- 13 years ago

Why are we still dealing with the complexities of fancy MUD clients? Where is the 'toaster' of virtual worlds? Today we're still downloading MUD clients. They just come with a really, really large graphic cache. Synchronicity was nowhere on the Web. Now it's the killer app that MUDs have and virtual worlds have, but it's also everywhere else. Communities are happening outside the virtual worlds.

“Creating a superior class of godlike beings who inhabit the same virtual space you do and have power over you is going to create resentment no matter what.

“The result is a deep skepticism of their motives and their integrity. This is why I prefer models that empower players...

“If you have godlike beings around to whom you take your problems, what incentive is there to solve them on your own?

“There's no social development, no "virtual reality" developing, if "god" steps in and stomps the problem for you.”

- UO, 11 years ago

There was no PK switch in UO. If we had one, the players would never deal with anything on their own. It turns out that it's really lucrative to take care of players problems. Part of the subscription is to pay for that. But in terms of what is it that virtual reality, metaverses can offer ordinary people? And this is relevant in an election season kinda time... Even in the freest of spaces, 'ordinary people' are still kind of subjects to the gods. So we haven't really pushed that hard on those boundaries.

“We, by participating in this new sort of community, are breaking new ground that will undoubtedly prove important over the next decade, as the Internet acquires more significance in business, education, socializing, and other areas outside of gaming. The dilemmas ... are the key problems of virtual reality for the next several years. And we are only able to tackle them because you are more than just players--you are a self-aware community that reaches beyond "game" and into the Real.”

- UO, 10 years ago

10 years ago, there I am going all crazy idealistic on everybody. We were kind of myopically caught up in the Snow Crash thing. The net was incredibly asynchronous unless you knew all these obscure telnet commands. The synchronicity is now everywhere... we all have IM, we all have presence, things of various sorts popping up. The whole self-aware community is happening in a much more thorough way than a bunch of UO players forming pixelated governments.

The consumers that are the future of our genre are everyday, ordinary people. Most of us in this technology-mad industry frankly have no contact with them. The technology we need to develop isn't the technology of more polygons or better 3d sound or more accurate simulations. It's the technology of people. Of giving them what they don't know they need.

- Online Games 99; 9 years ago.

Lots of developers are still caught up in the technology discussion, when it should be about people. This isn't about tech, it's about people. Except god damn if it doesn't still seem to be about tech. We talk about the tech, we go to sessions about the tech -- why are we still watching tech? That is missing the point. Most worlds are still just getting to the point where they're realizing players should have rights.

Someday there won't be any admins. Someday it's gonna be your bank records and your grocery shopping and your credit report and yes, your virtual homepage with data that exists nowhere else... It may be a little harder to write to Customer Service. Your avatar profile might be your credit record and your resume and your academic transcript, as well as your XP earned...

So yeah. I'm not seriously proposing that we declare the rights of avatars... It's a hypothetical exercise.

For now.

Declaring the Rights of Players, 7 years ago

Consider the IGE legal battle and leaked documents -- because something is on the Internet, it's assumed there is no governance. I only know of two VWs that have a rights document for user rights and information protection. What the hell? This isn't hypothetical. This is your grades, Social Security, medical records. There are COPA and privacy issues, big ones. This is your environment. We haven't gotten around to making clear rules for protecting that information. We haven't even agreed that 'don't spy on your users' is a good idea.

- *They won't be games. They'll be accepted major parts of popular entertainment and the media. Online worlds are a medium—games are just one sort of content they can carry.*
- *We'll have plenty of distributed models around, but I doubt that any sort of standard will have emerged...*
- *The big media properties will have not only had games made, but will be thinking about crossover programming... We may see scriptwriting and the like being shaped by the events in the game. We'll certainly see episodic TV-style stuff... we may have a hit tune [that] originated in a virtual world.*
- *I also think we'll see a bunch of e-commerce flops and educational flops...*
 - *10 year predictions, 6 years ago*

Eventually virtual worlds will be a way to interact with many different kinds of data. My ten year predictions, 6 years ago, were too conservative. One day I walked into Times Square and saw a giant There.com avatar, and it freaked me out. We have arrived, but not to the right place.

**“GET OVER YOURSELVES,
THE REST OF THE WORLD
IS COMING.”**

- *GDC, 5 years ago*

What is relevant to people outside the room in which the Summit was taking place? Outside of the conference? Outside of our little world? I need to push more at the boundaries. I'm not earning my beard. I need to go further. So much that we see is only relevant to us in this room. We have to be conscious of our inbred lingo.

CHANGE HAPPENS FAST,

People have a hard time coming at this stuff objectively because for the most part, to date, Virtual World development has been inspired by idealism. The point of all the looking back is that change happens fast or...

CHANGE HAPPENS SLOW;

change happens slow. That idealism hasn't served the cause very well. It's great to have ideals, but there haven't been a lot of shipped products - and there's almost no diversity.

SO I HAVE NO PREDICTIONS FOR YOU.

What that means for all of you is that I have no predictions for you today. Too many of the predictions that I cared about haven't come true, and too many of the easy, lowball ones came true. The future has to come from the idealistic AND the practical. Commercial AND crazy.

**I AM SICK OF THE
PHRASE “HYPE CYCLE” --**

Oh, the hype cycle is real. But...

ESPECIALLY THE “TROUGH OF DISILLUSIONMENT.”

I've been doing this too long. Eventually the trough just looks like where you are.

“THERE ARE FOUR SIDES TO EVERY STORY:

There are multiple ways to look at the narrative, though. When we talk about the huge success of Club Penguin -- monetizing eight year olds -- and weigh it against larger dreams, there are four sides to every story.

PERSON A

"It's all about the money," says the person skeptical of the commercialism. The hippie crap doesn't matter.

PERSON B

"No, it's about the ideals!" says the person supportive of the idealism inherent in trying to create the safest possible kids' world, and in donating 10% of their profits to charity. Great things can still happen. There are people out there with dreams.

THE TRUTH,

and

It's not that the two sides can't be real. It's somewhere in between. We just don't get to read it. What we tend to read about is about what we have, who's making the money, who's bigger and that kind of stuff.

WHATEVER SHIT THE MEDIA MAKES UP.”

- *Jonathan V, poster on BoingBoing*

Reading about the dreams? That's the human interest story that shows up once every three months.

THE REAL QUESTION

What is our imperative in this room? Why do we do this? And what are we aiming at? Bluntly, the impractical idealism has not actually served us that well. The flip side is the commercial stuff is, eep, a little scary. We don't have the kind of diversity we need. The kinds of dreams virtual worlds can achieve cannot come from just idealists or just commercial interests. It has to be commercial AND crazy.

WHAT IS THE IMPERATIVE?

Moral? Financial? Idealistic? Practical?

The interesting thing is that I remember making remarks a few years ago here about how it's a little weird that the future of cyberspace is going to be established by game designers. Then, other people actually came along and kind of snatched that from us. ...It's more being set by search engines. I don't want my virtual life to be a search engine, all about datamining and ads -- I'd rather it was more game-like.

MOST OF THE MMO WORLDS ARE DISNEYLAND

Have we been reducing the scope of what is possible in order to make our stuff more consumer friendly? I gave a talk a few years ago about how most MMOs today are like Disneyland. what we have tended to make has been not parks, but theme parks. What we've tended to make has been over the years more about reducing the scope of possibility than about expanding it. We've been reducing the scope because it makes it more consumer friendly. Why can't a product be both consumer-friendly AND empowering? **38**

MOST OF THE VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE NO BETTER

Even so, most virtual worlds are no better than MUD1. They just have a big graphics cache. If there's something virtual worlds can do, it should be about breaking the tyranny of that kind of tragedy of the commons. Why are we still thinking in terms of our world, our physics, our limitations? See, for example, the experiments in learning with virtual reality that we learned about yesterday. . Ditching real world physics can empower us, but we're still stuck in our old metaphor.

MOST OF THE WEB ISN'T VERY WEBLIKE

Web 2.0 is an unfulfilled promise. How many times have you entered your friends into the closed Klein bottle of a database? Look, they're still in there! Why are these technologies more about capturing data in databases than about getting in touch with your friends? The Web is still not webbish. Things don't hook up and connect.



Science fiction can be realized. There are flying cars out there. What is that one thing that we dreamed of as kids that we now are older and wiser and know it's stupid to shoot for that flying car? Remember the first time you logged into a virtual world. Remember the first time you saw someone move and talk and realized it wasn't a computer. Do you remember that Holy Shit!? What is our flying car!?

WHAT IS OUR FLYING CAR?

Augmented reality?

Player policing?

Making a difference to ordinary people's lives?

Do you remember the first time you logged into a virtual world? Where is that sense of magic? How do we make a difference in ordinary people's lives?

IT'S NOT MAKING MONEY IN SECOND LIFE.

We need to get that back.

REPLICATING LIFE IN A NEW CONTEXT IS NOT AN ADVANCE.

The stories about commerce and whatnot in Second Life are wonderful, but... we're just scratching the surface. There is plenty of life that we could replicate that we don't want to or isn't the most appealing.



It's odd to me that the distance between a mass grave in Serbia and the aftermath of a WoW raid is very small.

HOW MUCH OF OUR TECH IS KEEPING US APART?

VOICE OVER IP MAKES US MEET LESS STRANGERS.

- *Replicating height differences in avatars results in replicating real-life psych effects.*
- *Add customization, get hypersexualized female avatars.*

VOIP makes us meet fewer strangers; Studies show that replicating height differences in avatars perpetuates real-life psychological effects of submission and dominance. People do know you're a dog on the internet. We spent so much time in Star Wars Galaxies creating an amazing character customization system, only to find that people used it for creating hypersexualized avatars and replicating all the sexism.

NOT TO MENTION 3D GRAPHICS.

- *Both the most democratizing, and least democratizing tech, all in one!*

Despite the tradeoffs in 3d tech that make it both the most and least democratizing tech, we chase the tech anyways.

**“METAVERSE HAVE TO BE
IN 3D, THE REST IS PLAIN
CYBERSPACE:)”**

- *Zarkov, on my blog.*

It turns out that with text interfaces you actually talk to more strangers.

**WE NEED TO ASSESS
WHAT WE ARE DOING.**

The old technology closed more boundaries. Look what we've inadvertently brought over.

WE LIKE “PRESENCE.”

twitter twitter twitter twitter twitter twitter twitter
twitter twitter twitter twitter twitter twitter twitter
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BUT IS “PRESENCE” PRESENCE?

We have to stop using the buzzword as if it meant what it says.

IS “PARTIAL ATTENTION” ATTENTION?

(Science seems to say “no.”)

We need to look past the cool phrase.

BUT I STILL BELIEVE.

All of those quotes, all of those crazy dreams, me personally, I'm still drinking the Kool-Aid. I still do believe that what we do in this room can have an impact -- on the Haiti slums, Darfur, whatever. I can. I think it does. I think there are things we have done that have had an impact.

GAMERS SHOULD CARE BECAUSE...

Gamers should care because games are infecting everything.

XBOX LIVE IS A VIRTUAL WORLD WITH A VERY SIMPLE AVATAR

(And Bioshock is a single-player instanced dungeon.)

And virtual worlds have swallowed everything.

GET USED TO THIS.

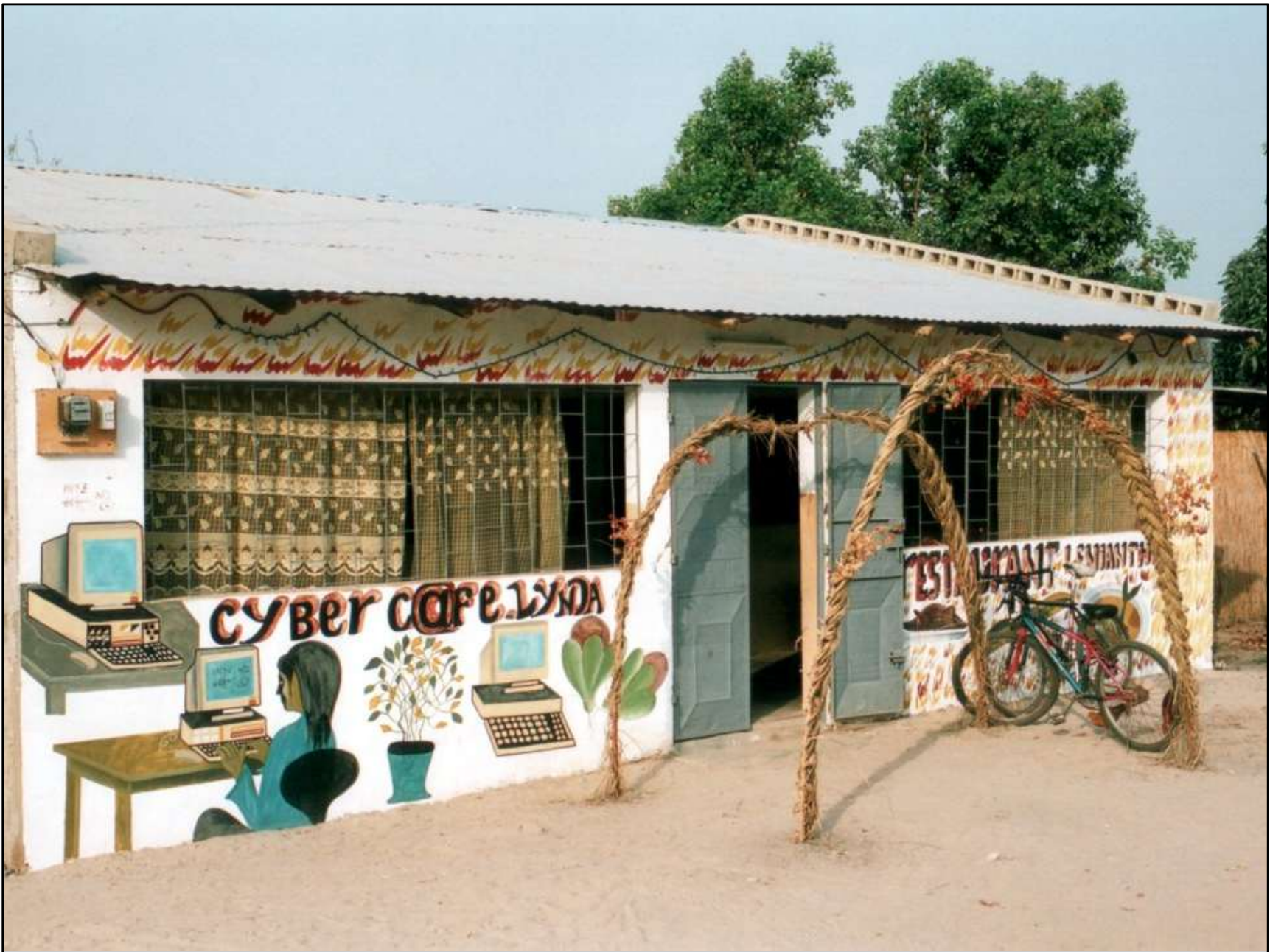
**IT'S WHAT ALL GAMES
WILL BE.**

**MORE, IT'S WHAT ALL
LIFE WILL BE.**

Unless we stop ourselves for some reason.

This is why it matters to gamers. Frankly they're the same damn thing. It's all the same industry.

**AND MAYBE IT HAS AN
EFFECT.**



We have cybercafes in rural Senegal -- people without food and water still have Google. It didn't come from a crazy Snow Crash vision.

VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE ABOUT TO INVERT.

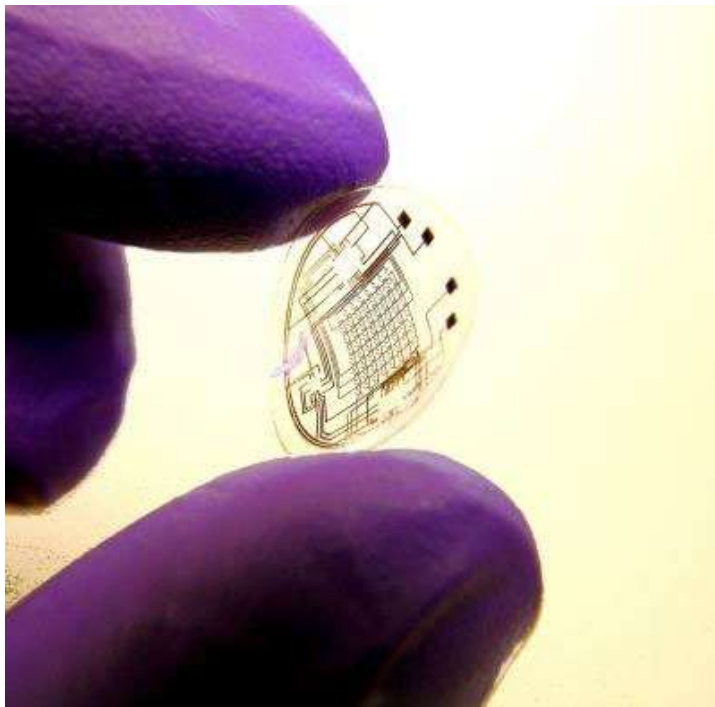
Virtual worlds are going to invert and swallow us. We need to recognize that our crazy dreams don't quite match.

INSTEAD OF SWALLOWING OUR WORLD

Virtual worlds aren't Klein bottles. Virtual worlds are putting a stick of dynamite in a can of paint and waiting for it to splatter everything.

**THEY ARE GOING TO BE
PLASTERED ON YOU, ON
THE WALLS, ON THE
WEBSITES, ON THE FLOOR,
ON YOUR SHIRT, ON YOUR
EYEBALLS.**

It is completely distributed and everywhere -- it is not a thick client. Virtual worlds are going to be everywhere. What's missing is mostly the will, not the means. We need to get some new dreams.



There is a foldable screen you can weave into cloth on the market -- this is on the market right now, you can buy this. Or retina displays. The crazy stuff is here. Digital paper, digital contacts, wearable computing is real. Things like Unreal and thick clients and 3D isn't the client we're working on. It is on any screen on any device it is on RFIDs woven into the hem of your skirt. That is the virtual world. It's not crazy talk. It's here right now.

VIRTUAL WORLDERS SHOULD CARE BECAUSE...

Virtual worlders should care because...

VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE DEAD.

...traditional worlds are dead. The technologies are not MUD 1.

**THERE'S JUST THE
WORLD.**

If what you're building right now is not built for this future, go give your money back to Sand Hill Road.

**AND WE MUST ENGAGE
WITH IT.**

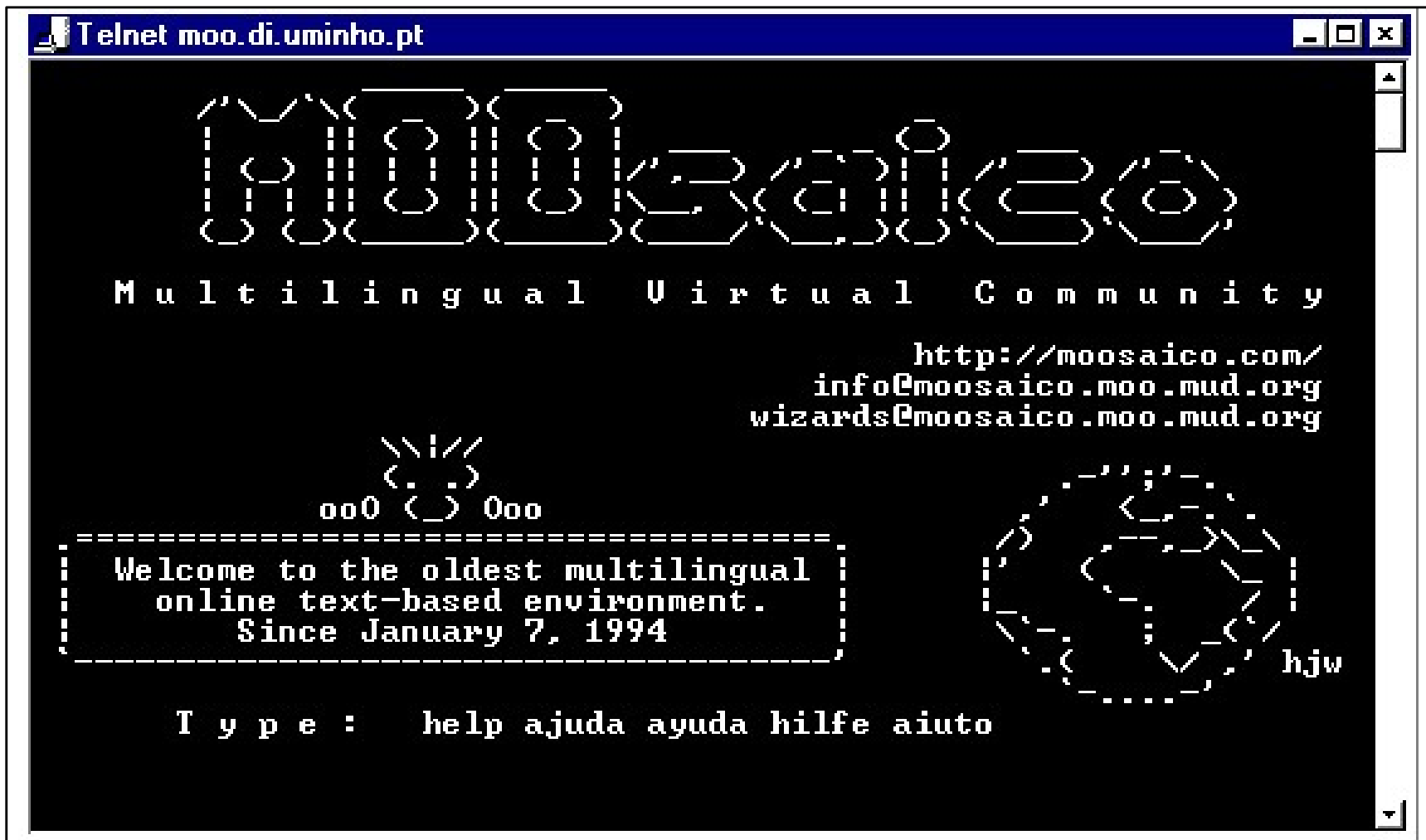
It's not about virtual worlds; it's about the real world. It's about people. That's what makes virtual worlds the killer app. It's us. It's other people.

**WE DON'T SEE VIRTUAL
WORLDS WHEN WE SEE A
CLIENT.**

When we download a viewer, we have to remember that we're not looking at a virtual world.

WE SEE WINDOWS.

We're looking at a window into a virtual world.



This is a window.

There are lots of windows. Here are few from across the years.



Don't get me wrong -- the democratization is a great value. But it's not THAT democratized.



These success stories are wonderful, but we're just scratching the surface here. We have a long, long list of things that we could be doing, and aren't.



The bottom line: we need new dreams. We see windows into virtual worlds when we download the WoW client.

**THE METAVERSE IS MORE
WINDOWS.**

**WE'RE HEADING FOR A
WORLD FULL OF
WINDOWS.**

**THE QUESTION IS WHAT
WE WILL SEE THROUGH
THEM.**



Will it be like a mirror or something new? . It's easy to see this and see squalor OR possibility. It's easy for us to look into the window and see toys. It's about how we can reach through the windows and make contact.

**WHETHER WE CAN REACH
THROUGH THEM.**

We need to use what we already have and make a difference.



This is what virtual worlds are about. Sure, you can make money. You can go to conferences. You can sell virtual goods, but that is not the point.

**WHETHER WE EMPOWER
EACH OTHER.**

These are tools, I want everyone to remember that the hammer is not the point. The point is what you build with it.

*And immediately
Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.*

Philip Larkin, "High Windows"