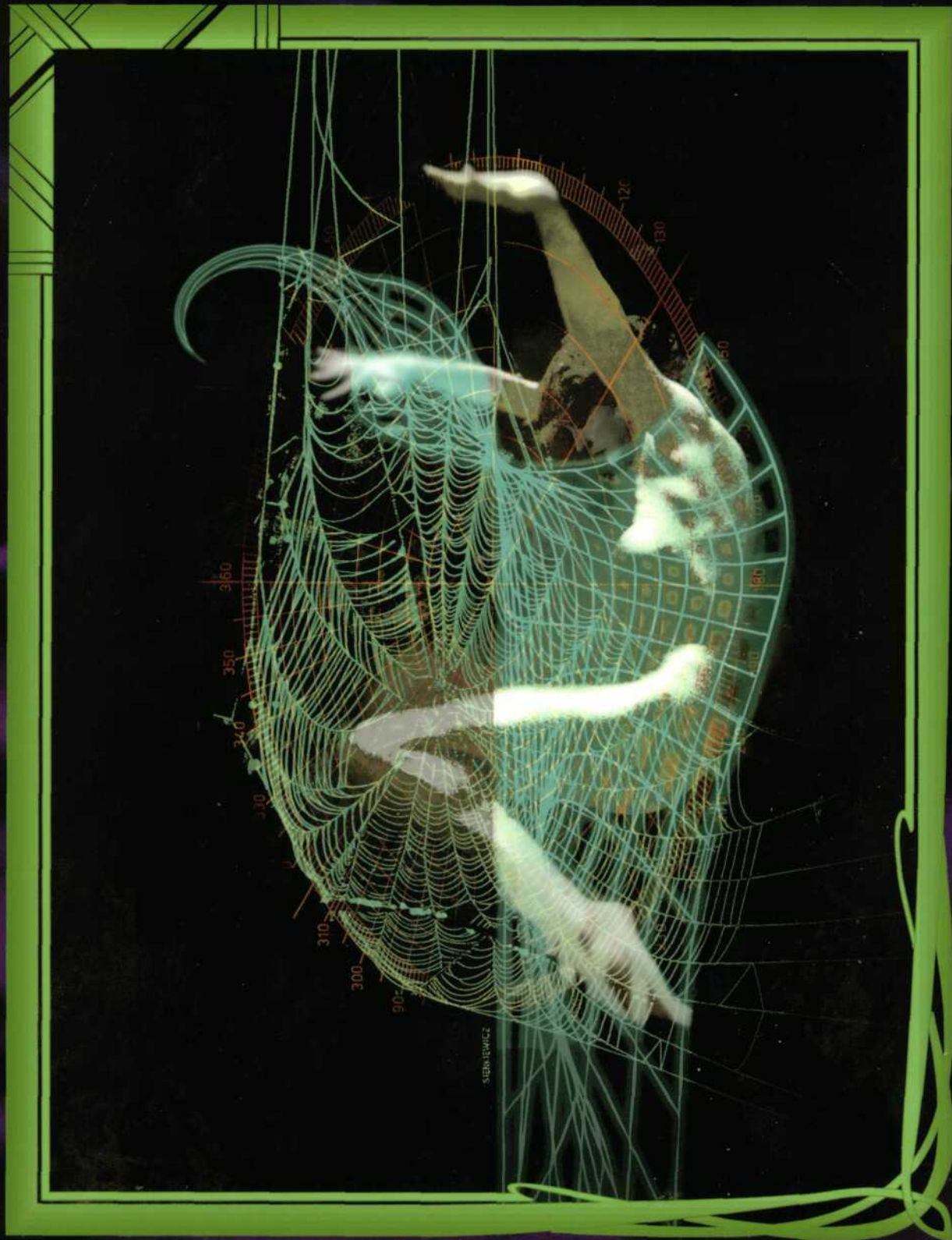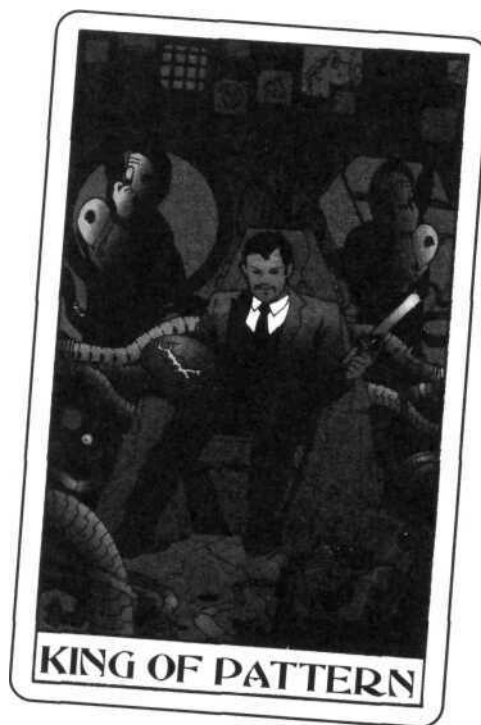# DIGITAL WEB 2.0

A Sourcebook for Mage: The Ascension

DIGITAL WEB 2.0

We are in the beginning of a major revolution...
The whole way we see nature will be changed.
— Joseph Ford, physicist

KING OF PATTERN

**By Phil Brucato, Jennifer Clodius, Roger Gaudreau,
Jesse Heinig, S. John Ross and Jaymi Wiley**

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Jane "Toastie Spice" Palmer, for bein' the Best Woman.

Carl "Beastie Spice" Bowan, for statin' up da crittaz.

Rich "Pool Fu Spice" Dansky, for gettin' that sinking feeling.

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WHITE WOLF GAME STUDIO

DIGITAL WEB 2.0

PRELUDE: BACKLASH

BY JAYMI WILEY

THE CRISP EDGES OF REALITY FADE AWAY AS MY MIND MELTS INTO THE WEB. BLACKNESS PLUNGES DOWN OVER MY VISION. I RAISE MY ARM, REACHING, GRABBING, TRYING TO DEFINE A FAMILIAR SURROUNDING. I FEEL NOTHING. NOTHING HOLDS ME, NOTHING SURROUNDS ME, NOTHING MOVES INSIDE OF ME. I SCREAM. NO VOICE. MY VOCAL CORDS HAVE BEEN CUT OFF. MY MIND DROWNS, GASPING FOR AIR. DO I EVEN EXIST? I CRY OUT; NO ONE IS AROUND TO HEAR ME.

LIGHT. A PINPRICK HOLE IN MY VISION GUIDES MY MOVEMENT. STRAIGHT AHEAD, PHOSPHORESCENT, IT GROWS CLOSER. IT ELONGATES, FLATTENS AND THE HOLE WIDENS, DEEPENING TO ACCEPT MY ENTRY. I TURN MY HEAD. THE LIGHT STRETCHES OUT AND TAKES ON A THREE-DIMENSIONAL DEPTH. A LINE, AN UMBILICAL CORD GUIDING ME, BIRTHING ME. I RELAX INTO ITS GRASP, FEELING THE JUNKIE APPETITE AND EXCITEMENT SEND SPARKS DOWN MY SPINE.

THE WORLD CATCHES UP TO ME AS THE SPEED DROPS ME SLOW. I'M DRAWN IN, SUCKED INTO FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS. BLURRY IMAGES AND COLORS AND TEXTURES AND FEELINGS SWEEP TOWARD ME, MERGING INTO MY NEW BEING. THEN A BRIGHT TECHNICOLOR FLASH, AND EVERYTHING DEEPENS AS I HIT THE DATA STREAM FULL FORCE. TOUCHDOWN.

OVERHEAD, THE FLAT, TWO-DIMENSIONAL HTML PAGES FLOAT, AWAITING THEIR TURN TO GET WHISKED AWAY TO SOME REALTIME USER'S COMPUTER TERMINAL. WHEN WILL THEY LEARN THAT *THIS* IS THE ULTIMATE WAY TO EXPLORE VIRTUAL REALITY? THERE'S NO REAL CONNECTION, NO FEELING WHEN ONE SURFS THE WEB LIKE THAT, BUT THAT'S ALL IN THE PAST FOR ME——THE *REAL* WEB IS WHERE IT'S AT NOW. ICONS BRUSH BY ME, ALWAYS IN A RUSH TO GET SOMEPLACE FAST, SOMEPLACE NEW. NOT TOO MUCH TIME TO CHAT HERE IN THE CROSSCORNERS BETWEEN THE WEB SITES.

"DROP DOWN MAP, HIGHLIGHT 'FISHBOWL,'" I CALL OUT. THE GATEWAY MAP SPREADS OUT ACROSS MY VISION. A GREEN HIGHLIGHT MARKS MY DESTINATION. I TOUCH THE HIGHLIGHT AND ZOOM AWAY TO CHATLAND.

"Hi, SHIBA!" CALLS A WANDERING HAPPY FACE.

"WAZUP?" I REPLY, SCANNING HIS AUTHENTICODE. A WIDE SMILE APPEARS ACROSS MY OWN FACE. I FEEL AS IF I'M RETURNING HOME TO MY FAMILY AFTER A LONG VACATION.

THE FISHBOWL IS A KEWL HANG. DESIGNED BY SOME WEBSPINNING FISH LOVER, THE FISHBOWL IS A GATHERING PLACE, INFORMATION DUMP, HEAD TRIP, AND PARTY. PEOPLE COME HERE TO ESCAPE THEIR LIMITATIONS. WEBSPINNERS USE THE FISHBOWL TO WHEEL AND DEAL.

CONTACTS ARE MADE HERE, ONLY TO BE BROKEN LATER, REPLACED BY MORE TANTALIZING OFFERS. ON A WEDNESDAY NIGHT, WHEN REALITY OFFERS LITTLE TO NO STIMULATION, THE FISHBOWL IS FOAMING WITH ACTION. OVER 60 ICONS DART THROUGH THE TANK ALREADY, AND THE NIGHT'S JUST BEGUN. TOO MANY FISHES IN THE POOL, SO TO SPEAK.

<FISH ICONS PERMISSIBLE ONLY> CALLS OUT THE SYSOP MESSAGE. I SHIMMER MY ICON INTO A SMALL GUPPY AND JUMP INTO THE TANK. BRIGHT FLUORESCENT PALMS AND WATERY FLOWERS WAVE IN THE ENVIRONMENTALLY ENHANCED WATER. ROUGH, COLORED ROCKS CONCEAL ICONS MAKING DEALS OR GETTING HIGH. PHOSPHOROUS LIGHTS DANCE OFF COLORFUL ICON FISH SCALES. AN ANGELFISH, WHOSE SCALES FLASH SIGNS REQUESTING INFORMATION ON YAZJU, DRIFTS PAST. MUTED UNDERWATER SOUNDS OF WAVES, WHALES HUMPING AND DOLPHINS SINGING ARE PIPED IN THROUGH UNSEEN CONTROLS. HUNGRY ICONS WAFT TOWARD THE BOWL'S UPPER OPENING, THEIR FISH-SHAPED MOUTHS BEGGING FOR FOOD. THERE ARE ABOUT 50 OR 60 ICONS SWIMMING AND COUNTLESS ANIMATIONS FLOATING AROUND. I SCAN THEIR AUTHENTICODES. NO SIGN OF MY MEET. SHE'S GOTTA BE HERE TONIGHT, THOUGH. SHE PROMISED. EVEN HER MAIL SAID SHE'D MEET ME HERE. A COUPLE OF SWEEPS LATER, THERE'S STILL NO SIGN OF HER.

MY CONSOLATION PRIZE IS THAT 1 0 OTHER ICONS I'M FAMILIAR WITH *ARE* HERE. MAYBE ONE OF THEM CAN PROVIDE ME WITH THE INFORMATION I'M AFTER. REDUX MATERIALIZES OUT OF THE VOID AND SHIMMIES OVER TO ME.

"EXCITING NEWS?" I SAY. MY WORDS FORM BUBBLES AND, DRIFT UPWARD.

HIS EYES DART ABOUT. IT LOOKS LIKE HE'S AFRAID TO BE CAUGHT ONLINE. LOOKING OVER HIS DORSAL FIN, HE JACKS INTO A PRIVATE CHANNEL. A HUGE BUBBLE SWELLS AROUND HIM. I MATCH THE PRIVATE SHIELD AND ENTER THE BUBBLE.

"COME ON, SPILL IT. WAZUP?" I SAY AGAIN. NO BUBBLES THIS TIME.

His VOICE IS TENSE: "SHIBA, I WAS TALKING TO THE PROPHETS AND SOMETHING'S COMING. SOMETHING BAD is GOING DOWN AND THE WEB'S GONNA BET HIT."

"REDUX, CALM DOWN. NOTHING CAN TOUCH US HERE. IT'S SAFE." I FLICK A PLAYFUL FIN IN HIS DIRECTION. "MAYBE THE PROPHETS WERE TALKING ABOUT THE WEBS IN YOUR BRAIN, MY MAN. THE WEB is SAFE."

HE DOESN'T BUY IT. MY STOMACH TURNS AS HE GLARES DEEP INTO MY EYES. "LOOK SHIBA, DON'T TELL ANYONE I WARNED YOU, I*M OUT OF HERE. CYA."

THE PRIVATE MODE DISABLES AS REDUX DISAPPEARS WITH A "POP." NO MORE BUBBLE, ONLY EMPTY SEA. I SCAN THE SITE ONCE MORE. SHE'S STILL NOT HERE. MAYBE IT'S FOR THE BEST. ESPECIALLY IF REDUX IS RIGHT.

A SHOCK WAVE SCREAM HITS THE FISHBOWL. MY EARS GO NUMB AS I MORPH BACK TO HUMAN. ALL AROUND, ICONS CHANGE FORM, TRYING TO ESCAPE, DARTING ABOUT OR FLAILING LIKE DROWNING MEN. THOSE CAUGHT IN THE WAKE OF THE SCREAM ARE TORN APART OR SPLIT BETWEEN TWO RUNTIME PROGRAMS.

THE CURTAIN OF THE FISHBOWL'S OUTER WALLS TEAR. TWO HOLES EXPOSE PARTS OF THE SECTOR'S NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS. "*HOME*!" I YELL, DESPERATELY TRYING TO GET THE PANIC COMMAND TO WORK. NO GOOD. JUST BUBBLES. MY SYSTEM IS FROZEN. THE SHOCK WAVE RIPPLES IN. I CLOSE MY EYES, EXPECTING TO BE SHREDDED WHEN IT HITS.

A TECHNICOLOR FLASH FILLS MY VISION ONCE AGAIN. BLURRY IMAGES. COLORS. TEXTURES. WATER DEPARTS. THE BRIGHT AND FAMILIAR WORLD DISAPPEARS, FADING INTO THE PAST. AN UMBILICAL CORD SHOOTS ME UPWARD THROUGH THE CHAOS, ANOTHER PINPRICK HOLE IN THE ELECTRONIC SKY. I REACH OUT. BLOOD RUSHES THROUGH MY EARS. DEAFENING. LOUD.

AND THEN

SILENCE

REALITY JERKS MY MIND BACK INTO MY BODY. DARKNESS COVERS ME LIKE A BLANKET. MY SENSES ARE ON OVERLOAD. ADRENALINE PUMPS PURE THROUGH MY VEINS. BACK ARCHES. CAN'T BREATHE. FINGERS CLUTCH FDR MY NECK. MY. FINGERS.

MONITOR IN FRONT OF MY FACE DISPLAYS <VITAL SIGNS NORM>.

GOD.

I'M IN A ROOM WITH FOUR WALLS. STRANGE OBJECTS AND MELTING COLORS OCCUPY THE ROOM. THE AIR IS WARM, STALE. THE SMELL OF BURNT MEAT MIXED WITH OZONE FILLS THE ROOM. WHERE AM I? MY HEART RACES. BUTTERFLIES CHASE EACH OTHER IN MY STOMACH. STRAIGHT AHEAD, ON TOP OF A BROWN BOX, RESTS THE ONLY FAMILIAR OBJECT, A DIABLO 6G SURF DECK. A GREEN LED LIGHT FLASHES TO THE SOUND OF A SPINNING HARD DISK.

I TURN MY HEAD TO THE RIGHT. A LARGE CIRCULAR VIEWPORT EXPOSES AN OUTSIDE WORLD. FOUR TRIANGULAR IMAGES WAVE IN THE AIRFOIL OUTSIDE. CONFETTI SQUARES POUR DOWN FROM ABOVE, SOME STICKING TO THE PORTAL'S PLASTIC. EVERYTHING IN THIS WORLD SEEMS LIFELESS AND DISMAL; DRAB HUES OF BRAY AND BLUE COLOR THIS WORLD. NOTHING SEEMS FAMILIAR.

STANDING UP, I WALK AWAY FROM THE DIABLO. BEHIND IT APPEAR THREE MORE OBJECTS. A THIN, CLEAR METAL RECTANGULAR FORM SITS SUSPENDED BETWEEN TWO CYLINDRICAL COLUMNS. NEXT TO IT ON

EITHER SIDE LOUNGE TWO UPWARD-SLOPING SQUARES. CLOSER EXAMINATION REVEALS THAT THEY'RE SMOOTH AND SOFT. MY BREATH BECOMES SHORT ONCE AGAIN. STILL, NOTHING SEEMS FAMILIAR. ABOVE THIS ARRANGEMENT, COLORED OBJECTS HANG ON THE WALL, PINNED BY UNSEEN FORCES. WILD DESIGNS SPLASHED WITH COLOR COMPOSE THE INNER IMAGES. NOW THIS IS UNREAL, I THINK, AS I HEAD BACK TO THE DIABLO AND SIT DOWN.

I SLIDE MY HANDS DOWN MY SIDES. WARM MEAT. THEY HIT SOMETHING COLD AND HARD BENEATH ME. A CHAIR, I THINK. THIS IS A CHAIR. I INHALE DEEPLY. NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE. I TURN MY HEAD ONCE MORE TO THE RIGHT. THE TRIANGULAR SHAPE IS NOW TAKING ON A DIFFERENT APPEARANCE. ITS OUTLINE BECOMES MORE PRONOUNCED, FEATHERY. I CAN SEE INDIVIDUAL LINES WAVING IN THE BREEZE. THAT'S A TREE, AND IT'S RAINING OUTSIDE. A SMILE CRAWLS ACROSS MY FACE AS THE WORLD SLOWLY DILATES BACK INTO RECOGNITION.

I GRAB THE BASE OF THE CHAIR. ARM MUSCLES TIGHTEN AS I FORCE MY BODY TO RISE. ONLINE UNLINE   REAL LINE UNREAL   UNREALITY REALITY HOME, MY MIND CYCLES. HOME, BUT HOW? THE ELECTRODES ARE STILL TAPED FIRMLY TO MY SCALP. THEY'RE STILL HOT TO THE TOUCH, TOO. STANDING HALFWAY UP, THE SHOCK AND SOUND OF WEB CONNECTION BUZZ AROUND ME. ONCE AGAIN

I FEEL THE ADRENALINE JOLT RUSH THROUGHOUT MY BODY. THE CRISP EDGES OF REALITY FADE AWAY AS MY MIND ENTERS THE WEB,

BLACKNESS ENSHROUDS MY VISION. I RAISE MY ARM, REACHING, GRASPING TRYING TO DEFINE WHAT IS HAPPENING. WHAT THE HECK?

NOTHING HOLDS ME, NOTHING CONTAINS ME. NAUSEA AND DEJA-VU TUG DEEPLY AT MY STOMACH. I'VE DONE THIS BEFORE. THE DOT, THE LINE, THE UMBILICAL CORD. I'M BEING JUMPED DOWN THE DATA STREAM. THE BRIGHT TECHNICOLOR FLASH MARKS THE LAST LEG OF MY SPLIT-SECOND JOURNEY AND I FIND MYSELF BACK...

...TO WHERE THE FISHBOWL USED TO BE.

I STAND IN THE MIDDLE OF WHAT LOOKS LIKE THE SITE OF A VIRUS BOMB EXPLOSION. VOICES ECHO WITHIN THE DESOLATE SPACE. I ALMOST EXPECT TUMBLEWEEDS TO ROLL PAST AT ANY MOMENT. EVERYTHING is IN RUIN. THE SHOCK WAVE HAS TORN TWO GIANT HOLES IN THE OUTER WALLS OF THE FISHBOWL. FLASHING PALMS AND PARTIALLY EXPOSED SITE MATTER LITTER THE AREA. THE UNDERWATER SOUNDS OF MAMMALS ARE REPLACED BY STATIC AND CLICKS. ICONS WHO WEREN'T FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO ESCAPE THE WAVE HANG SUSPENDED, RUNNING WHAT IS LEFT OF THEIR RUNTIME PROGLETS. THE ICON FLASHING MESSAGES ACROSS HIS SCALES IS ONE OF THE UNLUCKY ONES. "YA JU" IS THE ONLY THING LEFT VISIBLE. YA JU REMINDS ME OF THE VOODOO WORDS FOR BAD KARMA,

AND I SHUDDER WHILE CROSSING MYSELF.

WEBSPINNERS FROM ALL-OVER THE GLOBE RESURFACE, DEVASTATION WRITTEN ON THEIR FACES. I FEEBLY SMILE AND ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR PRESENCE. WE ARE OUT OF OUR LEAGUE HERE. NO ONE KNOWS WHAT TO DO OR SAY NEXT. THIS IS OUR COMMON BOND. WE'RE SURVIVORS OF A FATE WORSE THAN THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR PLANET.

"SHIT, MAN. NOW WHAT DO WE DO?" A DARK-FACED ICON SPITS TO KEEP FROM WEEPING.

KICKING A BLOCK OF SAND OUT OF MY WAY, I WANDER OVER TO HIM AND PLACE MY HAND ON HIS SHOULDER. "I GUESS WE REBUILD," I TELL HIM, MY VOICE LITTLE MORE THAN A WHISPER. "THAT'S WHAT WE DO, RIGHT? NOTHING HAS EVER STOPPED US FROM BUILDING AND CREATING, SO WHY SHOULD THIS STOP US NOW?"

A BALL OF LIGHT APPEARS, CENTIMETERS ABOVE MY PALM. I WAVE MY HAND AND WHISPER A FEW COMMANDS INTO THE BALL. THE GLOBE EXPANDS AND BRIGHTENS AS ENERGY FLOWS INTO IT. AROUND ME, OTHERS ARE DOING THE SAME THING.

CONCENTRATING ON THE HOLES, I REBUILD THE SITE'S OUTER WALL. THIS TIME, I EVEN DESIGN AN ADDED BONUS, A PREVENTATIVE WARNING SYSTEM IN CASE ANOTHER SHOCK WAVE HITS THE WEB AGAIN. A FEW SECONDS LATER, THE PROGRAM RUNS SEAMLESSLY AND ENTERS THE MAIN DIRECTORY OF THE SITE.

SOON, WEBSPINNERS BAND TOGETHER TO REBUILD THE SITE. THE CUBES AND GRIDLINES MARKING THE ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL OF THE SITE DISAPPEAR BEHIND THE FAMILIAR FORMS OF SAND, ROCKS AND WATERY FERNS. THEN THE FISHBOWL'S ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS KICK BACK ONLINE. THE PALMS AND FLOWERS SPROUT UP, WAVING IN THE "SEA" ONCE MORE. EVEN THE ROCKS AND OUTCROPPINGS THAT MARK THE HIDDEN NICHES MATERIALIZE FROM THE SAND. RESTORED, THE FISHBOWL LOOKS THE SAME; YET, THERE'S SOMETHING DARK LOOMING IN THE CODE. THE INESCAPABLE PRESENCE OF ESCAPING DEATH HANGS THICK EVERYWHERE.

THE FISH WON'T SWIM SO FREELY ANYMORE.

MY FRIEND? NOWHERE TO BE FOUND. I HOPE SHE MADE IT, BUT I CAN'T BE SURE. EVEN IF OUR PATHS CROSS AGAIN, WHO'S TO SAY WE WILL RECOGNIZE EACH OTHER?

EVERYTHING'S CHANGED. NO MATTER HOW MUCH THINGS GET BACK TO NORMAL, THE OLD RULES ARE GONE. THERE ARE GHOSTS IN THE FISHBOWL, AND COLD WINDS ONLINE.

WE ARE NOT SAFE. WE WERE NEVER SAFE. WE CAN NEVER FEEL SAFE AGAIN.

WE ARE THE BRIGHT, LIVING SHELLS OF WHAT WAS, THE SAVIORS OF THE RUINS. WE'VE EXPERIENCED THE WORST BACKLASH THE WEB HAS EVER SEEN, AND SURVIVED. OTHERS, THOUGH, WERE NOT SO FORTUNATE. WE'VE ALL LOST FAMILY HERE, AND EVEN AS THE FINGERS START POINTING AND THE ASSURANCES TRICKLE DOWN, THERE'S A CHILL IN THE HEART OF THE DIGITAL WEB.

OUR WORLD CRASHED ONCE IN A WHITEOUT STATIC HAZE. WHO'S TO SAY IT WON'T DO SO AGAIN? AND NEXT TIME, WE MAY NOT BE SO LUCKY.

WHY MUST IT ALL FEEL SO FRAGILE?

·SCOTT BAXA·
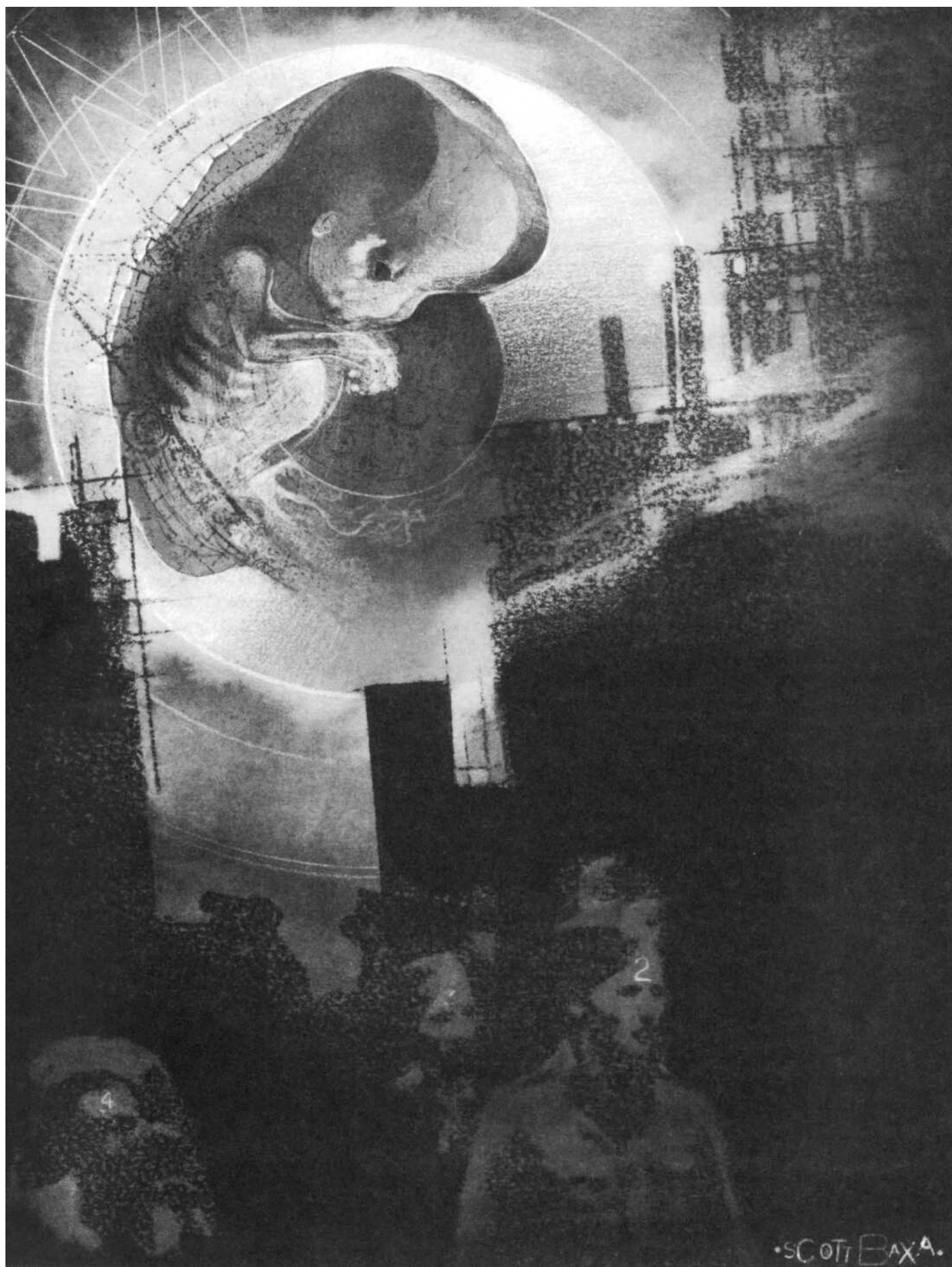
INTRO.DUCTION

The Internet is full. Go home.
— poster for benicetobears.com

This is a book about being *there.*

Where is "there," exactly? That's simple. It's neither where you are nor where I am. It's where we are together.

Take this example: You and I talk on the phone. We may be at opposite ends of the country, but for all intents and purposes, we're in the same room. That room does not exist in our "material" reality, but nevertheless, we are there. We can hear each other clearly. With effort, we can practically sense each other's presence. In material terms, though, we are not in the same room. We're *here,* not *there.*

You and I can't step into that room. We may be aware of it, but we can't enter it physically — yet.

Some people can.

This is a book about those people, that room, and the stories that take place in *there.*

Reality 2.0

The meat is rotting. That's no big surprise to anyone. For the last three decades, the Virtual Adepts have been trying to prepare a place online for humanity (or at least the good parts of it) to move when the vultures finally feast. In their comer: the wild idealists of the Etheric Cybernautical Society, and a few clueful mortals. Against them: The Technocracy (would-be CEOs of Creation, who were none too pleased with the merger between the Virtual Adepts and the Traditions), a few random elements like Neffies and Mad Ballz, and a horde of clueless mortals. The ring: a new, essentially free Zone, a Noah's Ark for the future of humanity. The rules: what rules?

Well, on reflection, everyone noticed one really *big* rule: Don't crash the Net. As the contestants for Reality 2.0 soon discovered, large or violent shifts in the strands of the

Web cause the whole area to shut down. At best, a so-called "Whiteout" kicks Webspinners offline in a hurry. At worst, it can kill.

On November 10, 1997, it killed — a lot.

For three eternal seconds, it all went away. Every connection between RealSpace and Webspace was shattered by a gargantuan wave of pure White. When things came back online, dozens were dead, hundreds were dazed, crazy or catatonic, and decades of formatting had been undone or corrupted. In the mortal world, screens went blank, networks froze and data disappeared. In the deeper, more magickal levels of the Web, the damage was far more severe.

Now the rebooting begins.

One additional complication: Although both the Adepts and the Technocrats planned to eventually bring "normal" humans online to share their new paradise, no one anticipated the sudden explosion of Net-mania... or the traffic that would come with it. With very little help from Awakened conspirators, the "sheep" turned the Net inside-out practically overnight. The "Information Boom" of the '90s has turned an Elite playground into all that is best and worst about humanity. Even worse (to some views), the new technology, perceptions and creativity that came with the Boom blurred the lines between Sleepers and the Awakened to such a degree that even the magi are often confused. Once again, the vaunted Awakened and Enlightened Ones have underestimated the so-called "Sleepers." Reality 2.0 has just grown far more complicated than anyone was prepared to handle.

Welcome to the Net, heebo. The future is now!

How To RTFM

For the most part, Digital Web 2.0 is presented "in character" — that is, through the eyes of its masters, the Virtual Adepts. SITE I: UNCLE TOAD'S NET *TOUR* offers a guided trip through the important parts and parties of the modern Net. SITE 2: LIFE ONLINE dives headlong into the societies, manners and particulars of spinner life. SITE 3; SECTORS AND AVATARS takes you into the Spy's Demise, passing by other important sites and legends as you go. SITE *4:* ADMINISTRATION goes into gamespeak, offering Storytellers a host of hints about Web-based chronicles. SITE 5: PROGRAMMING SYSTEMS offers the rules of the game and a plethora of toys, and SITE 6: RUNNING IN THE REAL *WEB* rounds the book out with details about online gaming.

What're you waiting for? Armageddon? I've seen it, and the movie blows.

Point and click..

Talkin' the Talk

Hone yer biochop, heebo! The language of the Web is always changing, and what was spicy years ago sounds totally VI now.

Anarchy: Despite stereotypes, anarchy's concepts are based on the abolition of government *and* the self-government that allows for that abolition. Most people forget the latter part.

Bleaters (a.k.a. Bleats): Derogatory slang for Sleeper end-users. Inspired by the sound sheep make when stepped on.

Biochop (a.k.a. Meatspeak): Conversation.

Brand: Spinner punishment where the offender has his icon labeled with a blazing stigma. (See *rawhiding.)*

Buzzbomb: A rogue hacker-mage (often an ex-Virtual Adept) who causes trouble for the hell of it.

CGI: Computer Generated Imaging.

Chaos Dump: A horrible fate in which a spinner's consciousness is split between her body and her disrupted icon, which shatters into a fractal pattern. Worse than death.

Conduit: A passage between sectors.

Constraint Realm: A sector formatted to accept certain kinds of icons or activities, and to bar others. (See Prelude for example.)

Corrupted Web: Sector that has been twisted into a mind-and-soul-ruining mass.

Cryptkeeper (a.k.a. Crypter): Old (or old-fashioned) Virtual Adept. The name is a play on words, crossing "encryption" with the name of a crotchety old E.G. horror comics character.

CT: Conspiracy Theorist; also called a **Mulder.**

Data Beasts (a.k.a. Zerks): "Living" incarnations of information gone mad, or artificial creatures specifically created to cause trouble.

De-Rez: To disrupt another spinner's icon, booting him offline.

Digital Dollz: Artificial icons, run by basic programs and possessing singularly shallow personalities. People who aren't really people.

Drag (a.k.a. Lag, Thrashing): Localized slowing of time caused by overuse, congestion or careless magick.

Eclectronics: Skillfully changing icons to suit different social groups or sectors.

Egg-Burning: Frying your brain, often through online trauma or sensory overload. This term is based on those "this is your brain on drugs" commercials.
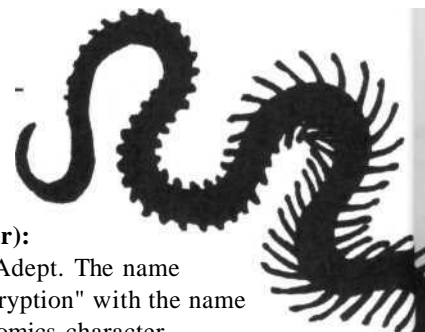
FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions, a kind of help file posted to Usenet newsgroups, on Web pages, or appended to user's manuals.

FOAD: Fuck Off And Die.

Formatted Web: A sector that has been set into a pattern, as opposed to open and unformatted space. (See *Virgin Web.)*

Fractal: A somewhat symmetrical pattern caused by chaotic, dynamic activity.

FREEKS: Free Ranging Electronic Encroachment Kill Systems—countermeasure icons that threaten Webspinners with various messy ends.

Fuzz: To de-rez someone or something.

FWIW: For What It's Worth.

Glip: A Whiteout; possibly based on the sound of a computer warning.

GODZ: Spinners who have assumed some "divine" status, either through worship, P.R., accomplishments, or all three.

Grid Sector: A sector dominated by Sleepers and their business.

Hamburger Country (a.k.a. Meatsville and a host of variants): Where the meat comes from; IOW, the material world.

Haunt: Place inhabited by a literal ghost in the machine.

Heebo: Affectionate term for "kid" or "dummy." Origins unknown.

Icon: The virtual representation of a person; a Webspinner's online "self," usually customized with whatever features the user wants to display.

IMHO: In My Humble Opinion.

IOW: In Other Words.

Iron: Technological hardware. (See *Splat*.)

Ironteeth: A cyborg; also used to denote a badass, Technocrat or both. A variation, **Ol' Irontooth,** refers to the Technocracy as a whole.

IT: Information Technology; IOW, computers, the Net, media, and all the technology associated with them.

Junkland: A horribly screwed-up sector, often caused by bad formatting or a disaster.

Lame: If you have to ask, you probably are.

Madball: A Marauder.

Meat: The physical body.

MU*: A generalized term referring to any form of multi-user domain, including MUD, MUSH, MUCK, MOO, LP, and others.

NDTWR: I'm Not Dignifying That With a Response.

Neffie: A Nephandus. Also called Billy-Boys.

Netizen: Someone who spends enough time in VR to be considered a "citizen," as opposed to a *skipper* or *trendie* (q.v.).

Offline: Literally, off the Net; figuratively, away from the rest of the group.

Parallaxing: Creating several different icons and "living" through them simultaneously.

Pix-e Dust: The invisible trail of log ons and switches that follows an icon who moves between conduits.

Prog: Program; also short for "progressive."

Rawhiding: Catching an annoying spinner and giving him a *brand.*

Realtime: Instantaneous; without a delay.

RealSpace: Old term for the material world.

RSN: Real Soon Now.

RTFM: Read The Fucking Manual.

Sector: An area that has been formatted into a stable environment; IOW, a Realm in the Web.

Skipper: A loser who breezes through sectors without taking the time to actually get to know anyone (or get to be known). In short, a poseur with no sense of commitment. Often mocked in passing. *("Hey, Skipper! Wazup?")*

Skweeb: A treacherous spinner, known for betrayal or other Lame behavior. Based on the sound of a rat being sucked into a jet engine.

SO: Significant Other.

Spice: Balls, savvy, chutzpah. Also powerful technomagick.

Splat: Biotech hardware. (See *Iron.)*

SRVRZ (a.k.a. TechnoTurf): Short for "Secured and Restricted Virtual Reality Zone," these sectors provide home bases for Technocracy agents.

Stacked File: A landmark sector known for tranquillity, fun or inspiration.

Trendie: A newbie (also newbi) who got into cyberspace because everyone else was doing it.

Trogs: People who never get online and know nothing about it (although they think they know enough to make decisions about Web activity).

Twip: A minor annoyance being deleted. Derived from the sound of a twink or twit going "blip" and disappearing. Also a verb ("Somebody twip this bleater already.")

Unformatted Web: *Virgin Web* (q.v.).

VI: Version One, that is, obsolete.

Virgin Web: Unformatted Webspace, eagerly sought by spinners.

Wazup?: "What's up?"

Webspinner (a.k.a. Spinner, Webber): A *Netizen.*

Wetware: A human, or more specifically, a human brain

Whiteout: A localized crash, usually brought on by careless magick. To "White" something or someone is to trigger a Whiteout.

WIBNI: Wouldn't It Be Nice If...?

Witchy-Poo: A Verbena or other pagan mage; derived from the villain on *H.R. Puffinstuff.*

WMTFM: Who Made This Fucking Mess? A common question after a Whiteout.

WYSIWYG: What You See Is What You Get.
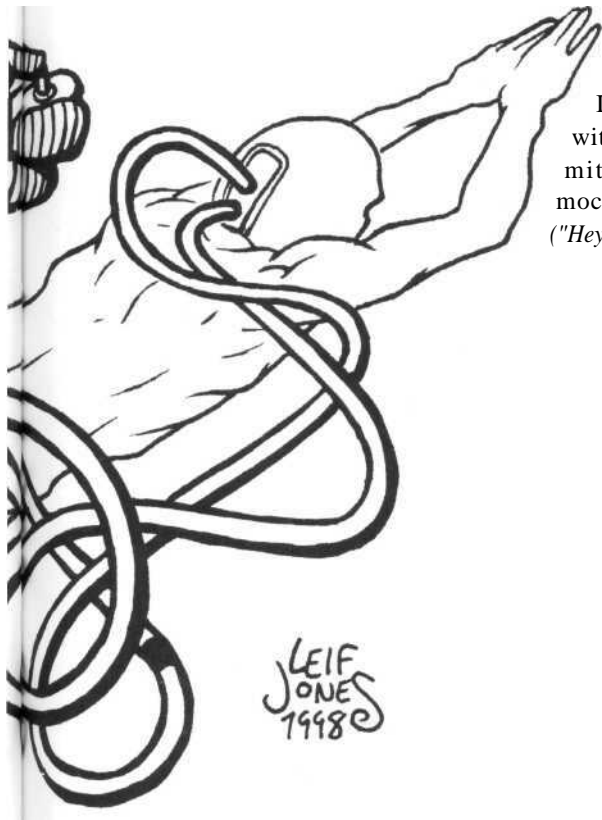
SITE I: UNCLE TOAD'S NET TOUR

Give me forged histories. Ludicrous assertions. Naive hopes.
Spaced-out icons. Whimsical elixirs. Doppleganger technopoliticians.
Time and vision all dressed up and no space to go.
— R.U. Sirius, "Skyward Zeitgeist Pinata"

[Entering alt.secretsocieties.adeptusvirtualis]
[Password accepted]
[Initiating VR conference mode...]
[Fatal hardware error detected. VR conference mode disabled.]
[Initiating text mode...]
[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

All right. Now that we have the last of our sightseers, let's get started. Glad to see you finally made it. Too bad your VR rig's on the blink. Guess you'll have to get by on text only. Hope you read fast.

Okay, boys and girls, welcome to Uncle Toad's Wild Ride. It won't he much of a ride for anyone who can't see the pictures, hut pay attention to what I show you tonight, 'cause this stuff might mean the difference between you living to the age of 25 or the EMTs carting you away from your burnt-out rig, wondering how those goggles melted to your face.

I know you've all been around the Web and seen some of what it's got. Hell, most of you were confirmed Net-junkies before you knew that Awakening even existed. But trust me, you all have something to learn here today. I know you'll all ignore some of what I say, and some of you'll ignore *everything* I say, but don't come to me for sympathy when you find yourself on the wrong side of some H-K code construct.

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]

Are we supposed to think you know everything or somethin'?

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

I ain't claiming to know everything. I'm also not twisting your arm to make you listen to this stuff. You can go anytime you want, but shippin' out now'd be pretty dumb.

So why am I telling you all this? Frankly, it's 'cause I've seen enough of my friends get dumped. I don't mean the soft

de-rezzing shit you might have heard about. I mean the hard dump that fries your meat back home. Yeah, the Technocracy's got some mean dudes in the Net, but they ain't the only ones to watch out for. If I can stop a couple of you from becoming packets lost on a loose wire, I'll consider it time well spent.

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]

Oh, THANK YOU for sparing a few precious moments for those of us still wallowing in the slime, O Great Lord. We're not worthy.

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

Can it and listen up. Let's get this tour underway. Everyone step into the center of the vehicle and make sure to hang on tight. Parts of this ride get a little bumpy....

HISTORY OF THE WEB

The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur.

- E.B. White, *One Man's Meat*

The first thing we're gonna do is talk about the history of the Digital Web. We're starting with this 'cause the first step in understanding the Web is learning how it came to be. Current facts are nothing without background. It's like practicing science without philosophy: You wind up with a dangerous thing that's barely under control. Let me load this little rote I wrote (I love saying that), and... it's ready. Watch the windows. I've turned 'em into display screens so you can see images of what I'm talking about. (I'm afraid our tardy friend will have to make do with reading.)

Ancient History

This sourpuss you see here is Charles Babbage, the first of what I call The Big Three, the three men most directly responsible (at least in my mind, though a lot of folks tend to agree) for the evolution of the Digital Web as we know it today. Yeah, none of them lived long enough to see their accomplishments, but that's pretty much the way it is with great people. They see things the Sleeper world's not ready to handle, and the full effects finally hit years or decades later.

[Input address = 197.292.504.42]

I heard of him. Didn't he invent some big mechanical calculator or something?

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

You could call it that. You see that mechanical monstrosity next to him in the picture? That's the original Difference Engine, the ancestor of the modern computer.

Charles Babbage was an Electrodyne Engineer (the original name of the Sons of Ether), and he invented the Engine in the early 1800's. It's based on the idea that you can solve complicated equations without using multiplication or division. You only need to repeatedly add and subtract in small increments. (Don't ask me for the details on the theory — I'm no mathematician.) Babbage had some problems at first, but once he got his machine running, it could solve any equation you gave it.

A little clique of Etherites sprang up around Babbage; they called themselves "the Difference Engineers," after the invention they obsessed over. They modified and improved the engine, replacing the hand crank with steam power and enhancing its mechanical memory capacity until it became a pretty reliable means of storing and retrieving information. Here you can see what one of these Engines looked like. Pretty rad, in a Victorian sorta way. These improved Engines led to the first theory of the information Sphere:* the concept that reality is made of information and shaped by manipulating the facts. Most of the rest of the Order of Reason thought the Difference Engineers were nuts, but we're used to that by now. As for the theory itself, well, at its base it's essentially Advanced Magick Paradigms 101 — you know, the idea that the Big Boys have been fighting over since the 1400s? The old guys didn't use machines, but the concept is the same: Change the paradigm and you change the reality.

But I digress —

"Virtually There"

By themselves, Difference Engines were basically complicated toys. Another device gave the Difference Engineers the kick in the pants they needed: the telephone. Alexander Graham Bell, the second of the Big Three, invented the telephone in 1876, and things really started to get interesting. By 1880, Difference Engineers all over the U.S. were experimenting with the device, communicating instantly with friends in other cities. Sure, we think nothing about picking up the phone and calling the other side of the globe now, but in those days it was a big deal to be able to talk to someone across the state, never mind across the country.

The telephone converts sounds into electrical impulses and then back again on the far end. This inspired visions of electrical mini-Difference Engines. The thought of electrical Engines communicating and calculating instantly across any distance got the Engineers psyched; they realized the combination would allow them to free information from any constraints or boundaries. Some of you, if you paid any attention to your FAQ sheets, will recognize this as the basis of the Virtual Adepts' philosophy.

Here we find the origin of our Tradition name. The idea of electrical Engines got everyone worked up, and most debates about the best way to implement them happened over the phone. It was a helluva lot easier than writing letters or gathering everyone in one spot.

The Difference Engineers realized that during a phone call, the participants experienced a non-existent, shared space. Neither person actually stood beside the other, but they were both together in some way, communicating. This space obviously existed *somewhere,* but no one could see it. At first, they described this as "the place where telephone conversations take place," a place that was "virtually there" to those who communicated within it. In time, an Engineer named Dr. Stewart Blacksin postulated that the telephone had opened up a new Umbral Realm, one founded on the Theory of Correspondence, where all things related to a single unified location. Obsessed with communicating only in this virtual space, a pack of Engineers renamed themselves the Virtual Adepts.

(Brief Digression *#1:* Some scruffy old dudes claim that the Web is really a Realm named Mount Qaf, a place that used to belong to an ancient Tradition called the Ahl-i-Batin. My history's fuzzy on that point, but I don't believe it; people are always trying to take away your glory. It's like saying Columbus didn't really discover America, or something.)

By the turn of the century, the Adepts built the first practical electrical computers. For a while, they worked with the Sons of Ether to create the design, but then the Etherites defected to the Council of Nine and communication got rough. Then the World Wars and communist revolutions exploded onto the scene, and the Technocracy tied up all its resources trying to control the outcome. The Adepts managed to improve their tech even though they constantly had to dance to the Technocracy's tune. Still, there were no real conceptual leaps until the arrival of Alan Turing, the third of the Big Three.

Turing Discovers the Web

Some say the Digital Web wouldn't exist if not for Alan Turing. I'm not sure that's true, but no other single man, before or since, has had as much impact on it. In the '40s and early '50s, Turing was the most Elite of the Adepts. The first computers he invented were at least five times as powerful as anything else the Adepts had at the time. He broke secret Nazi codes and fed them to England to help the Allies win World War II. According to most sources, ("official" ones, anyway), he invented the trinary computer, and discovered (or created, depending on who you ask) virtual reality.

[Input address = 197.292.504.42]

I've heard about trinary computers, but I don't really know what they are.

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

How long you been an Adept, kid?

[Input address = *197.292.504.42]*

Three days.

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

No shit. Welcome to the gang! All right, let me explain. Most computers operate in a binary language of ones and zeros, the logical states of "Yes" and "No." Trinary computers also understand the value -1, giving them a third logical state, "Maybe." These computers can use the same kind of "fuzzy logic" as the human brain, making them a lot more powerful than the most advanced Sleeper machines... and perfect for our special brand of technomagick.

[Input address = 197.292.504.42]

Are they expensive? Where can I get one?

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

Talk to me after class, and I'll give you the email address of a guy I know who'll give you a decent deal.

(End Brief Digression #3)

Anyway, Turing started experimenting with the idea of intelligent machines. He wondered if reality itself could be defined as a set of equations; if it could, he could program it. Turing negotiated a truce with the Sons of Ether and got them working with the Adepts. They used his trinary computer designs to build a logical model of reality *inside* the computer — a place that existed virtually. Turing figured that if someone could actually reach this place in a metaphysical state, he would experience a virtual version of reality. The term "virtual reality" was coined.

Turing had limited memory for his VR program, but I've heard it had a few rooms big enough for a person to walk through. Not happy with the limitations, Turing decided to experiment. He developed special machines and procedures that allowed him to project his Avatar into the computer memory through a phone line (the techniques we use today are mostly refinements of Turing's work). While inside the computer's virtual reality, he started working out some deeply esoteric computations; his colleagues outside the machine-realm did the same. Theoretically, the work could eventually digitize the computer into itself, expanding its memory to infinity.

Unfortunately, Turing never got out of the computer alive. According to some stories, his meat was scrapped by a couple of assassins (either from the NWO or the British Secret Service — stories vary); others say he made an error in his calculations, while still others say he meant to anchor himself in the Web and transcend his flesh. (By that time, Turing had been totally disgraced by being "outed" as a homosexual — *not* something 1950s' Britain was ready to accept in its heroes!) The official story is that he committed suicide, but don't you believe it. Whatever happened, Turing was trapped when the computer physically folded itself into virtual reality. Some of the mages who were there are alive today. They still have nightmares about the screams they heard.

Some say Turing's computer wound up at Mount Qaf and formatted a piece of it, which started the Web. Other guys claim Turing's machine created the Digital Web all on its own. There are even some folks who say they've seen Turing's machine in the Web's dark corners, churning out new Virgin Web (more on that later). Everyone talks and everyone has an opinion, but no one knows the truth.

According to some cryptkeepers, that's where the history of the Digital Web begins. I say their floating point's off a decimal or two. Sure, the Web finally got its start with Turing's accident (if you believe the folks who say we only re-discovered the Realm, you could say the Web got its *new* start at that point; either way, the Web as we know it started when Turing recursed himself into oblivion), but it didn't stop there. Despite the horror stories, any Adept worth the name was soon hacking his way into VR. Some went to search for Turing, some went to go exploring, but most just went to get away from a world that seemed to have nothing better to do than produce death camps, nukes and purges.

(Brief Digression #4: If it seems like our gang has a chip on its collective shoulder, consider our origins: renegade idealists hemmed in by two massive wars, a hundred smaller ones, and a world of sheep too fucking stupid to see their own damnation scrolling by on a TV screen. Add a break with a world-spanning techno-conspiracy that betrayed its own ideals, the genocidal witch-hunt that followed the break, and a forced marriage to a hidebound bunch of Loonytoons, and you'd be grouchy, too. At least we've got a higher purpose than those devos who just see VR as an opportunity to flash or flame the world! Rant concluded... for now.)

For a while, the Web was the exclusive playground of the Adepts, and we had a blast. But Sleeper reality started catching up with our little games. Soon, the bleaters found their way in. The Web hasn't been the same since.

The Sheep Go "Ma Ma!"

This spiky little ball is the contraption they say really started Sleeper involvement in the Web: Sputnik. The first artificial satellite publicly put in orbit by bleaters, it was the marvel of its day. (Void Engineers — creepy little dudes who run the Technocracy's answer to NASA — had done the same decades earlier, but the Masses weren't ready for that little fact yet… and even less ready for the reasons the Voids had done it. Ever seen *Alien?*) The fact that the Russians put it up had the Americans scared shitless. The Cold War was in full swing, and the U.S. government woke up in a cold sweat every night at the thought of the Reds spying on 'em, using their little satellite to guide their nukes to soft targets. So Ike Eisenhower told the Department of Defense to figure out a way to protect against it, and they started the Advanced Research Projects Agency. ARPA set out to build a decentralized military research network that could survive a nuclear attack (at least partially, anyway) so that the U.S. could still control its bombers and missiles for a counter-attack if the Big One ever came. It took a few years, but in 1969, ARPANET went online, connecting four big universities across the country.

It didn't take long for the Adepts playing around in the Web to notice. Some applauded; others were appalled. The communication going back and forth across the wires between the ARPANET computers was pretty much like the ancient phone conversations that led the old Difference Engineers to recognize the existence of a virtual world in the first place, and all of it happened in exactly the same space. What I wouldn't give to have seen the expression on the first Adept who realized that the "new sector" he'd just run across had been imprinted by a Sleeper! (Probably imprinted by Tim Berners-Lee. Man, if that guy's *not* an Adept — and I've never seen an indication that he is — he's pretty damned close!)

The Sleeper presence in the Web grew slowly at first, mostly because the public at large didn't have much access to computers. For a while, the Net remained a toy and tool for scientists and researchers. Even with that limitation, though, the sheep had pulled a coupla" hundred host machines online by the beginning of the '80s. That's when things *really* sped up.

I'm sure you recognize what's on the screen right now. By the mid-80s, the PC (not "politically correct," moron, "personal computer!") craze had computers going into Sleeper homes by the thousands. At first, the only computer-to-computer communication outside ARPANET ran through BBS's; there, a computer with a modem would dial up to another computer and they could exchange information — information that could be seen in the Web. It didn't take long for companies to spring up and take advantage of the possibilities. People wanted their computers to talk to each other, and the first Internet Service Providers came on the scene.

From there, everything happened in a jumble, with computer and communication tech constantly changing and improving. Trendies followed in a wave, as they tend to do, and the so-called "Information Superhighway" (Gag! The guy who made *that* phrase up got coal in his stocking, you can bet!) was soon bumper-to-bumper with clueless newbies. The whole thing turned into a kind of biofeedback loop, with each advance fueling research into the next and each breakthrough coming more quickly than the previous one. Before we knew it, there were millions, then 10s of millions, of Sleepers using the Web. Information was flying every which way, every day. The trickle became a stream and then a flooded river. Oh, the Technocracy tried to control it, but there was just too much. It was glorious.

Then things got a little less glorious. Remember: Everything a Sleeper does with his computer, assuming he does it online, has a reflection in the Web. If he goes to an online catalog and buys something, his icon walks into a bare-bones shop in a Grid Sector. If he uses the Web for research, his icon might go into a sector that looks like a library, or go from sector to sector picking up pamphlets and books. If he goes online to take out his frustrations by calling other Sleepers fucking idiots, we see his icon walk around starting fires.

[Input address = 999.104.47.301]

So what. He's just a Sleeper. How much trouble can he cause?

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

You're not really as new at this as that question implies, are you? It might not be a big deal to have a Sleeper walking around starting a few small fires, but imagine 30 million Sleepers in here, lots of 'em starting little fires, and a few starting big ol' honkin' bonfires. Better yet, consider those old dims who disposed of their garbage by dumping shit out the windows. After a while, it doesn't matter how big the shit itself is. Shit is shit, and we were — and still are — in it up to our armpits.

It got bad. Trash piled up in the cleanest sectors, and Fate help you if you waded through a sector that no one cleaned up regularly. Digital soot stained the walls, and sometimes the whole Web smoldered. Some sectors burned to the ground, consumed by Sleeper flame wars until they dumped themselves and went offline for good. Others are still buried under mountains of crap, gradually filled by Sleepers typing endlessly about nothing, or blasted by millions of folks voting about how some commercial shown during the Superbowl should end. Freedom of Information has finally been achieved, and most Sleepers squander the gift, abusing the Web and taking us down with them. Most Sleepers still aren't ready for the freedom the Web gives 'em. Anyone wonder why we call 'em "bleaters?" Or why we've started fencing off their grazing grounds?

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]

Listen to you, man, talking like a Technocrat. "Good shepherds," my ass! You can't control Information; it wants to be free. There's nothing you can do about it. Fences only delay the inevitable. ANARCHY! NO FENCES! NO LIMITS!

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

Look kid, buy yourself a clue. Reality ain't static, and nothing stays the same forever. Yeah, I used to think anarchy was all good, and believed information had to be set free. I *still* believe in the freedom of the facts, but I learned one important thing in my 10 years on these virtual roads: Anarchy requires responsibility. You can't just tear down the system and walk away.

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]

Why not? Everybody should be ready to take care of themselves, no matter what happens.

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

You remind me of a guy I knew who'd break into bank systems and skim five bucks from every account. "Service fees," y'know? Even called himself "Servis Feedr." What an asshole. He figured he was stealing the banks' money. When I pointed out that he was stealing the money of normal folks, he said they should have put their money in a bank with better security. What he didn't get was this: People want to feel safe. You start fucking around with their money or their credit accounts or any of that shit, and they start looking for ways to stop you. They end up wanting tighter security on things. They practically *ask* for Big Brother to save them, and that plays right into the hands of the Technocracy and its vision of static, mindless, but very safe conformity.

It comes down to this. You light a fire in a crowded theater, you're responsible for the deaths when people stampede. You give a kid a loaded gun, you're to blame when he shoots someone. We gave the Sleepers a gun that was bigger than we knew, and now we have to put on the safety or take out the bullets.

(End Brief Digression # Whatever)

Anyway, let's get back on track. The hordes of Sleepers in the Web started causing problems, both minor and not so minor. That's when the big fight happened in the Spy's Demise.

Showdown at the OK Demise

I'm not gonna go into a lot of detail about the Spy's Demise here. Call it a neutral zone, a safe spot in the Web where people set aside their differences and have a drink in peace. Fighting's not allowed in the Demise, and spinners who want to duke it out have to take it outside. One day, a couple of groups decided they weren't gonna follow the rules anymore, and they used the Spy's Demise as their private battlefield to settle some personal score. After flinging around some heavy juju, they Whited the place — total crash. As I hear it, about a dozen people were permanently de-rezzed, most of 'em bystanders. No one knows what the idiots were fighting about, but no one's seen 'em since.

You might not think a fight in some random neutral sector would be a big deal, but the Demise ain't no random neutral sector. It's the place where spinners from opposing factions can meet and relax in peace, people conduct a lot of business there. This has been going on for so long that the Spy's Demise is a symbolic representation of Web commerce as a whole. The fight in the Demise caused lots of trouble for Sleeper business on the Net, and practically invited Syndicate reps to take over. Remember when Net security, electronic commerce protocols and secure sockets

were such a big thing? The Syndicate had a field day, putting clamps on the Net, lapping up the Sleepers' need for security on the Web and extending the Technocracy's hold on global finance. Now, maybe that fight didn't directly cause all that, but it sure didn't stop it from happening. Some of the mages in that fight were Technocrats, though, and a few others were hurt in the fallout.

From there, we started to learn the real meaning of anarchy. Sleeper icons have become so advanced it's gotten almost impossible to tell a mortal from a mage. Sleeper flame wars set some sectors perpetually on fire. The weight of all the shit running down the streets put such a drain on the processors in some areas of the Web that everything dragged on its way through. Talking to someone sitting across from you could take so long it felt like you were waiting for a signal to bounce out to Cerberus, and some sectors kept crashing from the load of all the trash. Then what's-his-name invented the Digital Dollz, and before long a third of the people in the Web were artificial, too. Some newer Adepts went on newbie-dumping campaigns, trashing Sleepers to keep 'em out of the Net. (That's freedom of information for you!) Throw in the occasional Whiteout from a big fight, and you get a picture of the vile (but still oh-so-exhilarating) brew the Web became. Until it all came crashing down.

Doissetep Goes "Twip" …and Then Some

Yo! Anyone! Hey! WHERE'S DOISSETEP? DOISSETEP DOESN'T ANSWER!!! YOU HEAR ME?? DOISSETEP DOESN'T ANSWER!!!

— frantic email posted by Chorly the Horla, 11/10/97

White Wednesday, the Great Crash of '97, was the most painful three-second eternity of my life. On November 10, 1997, it *all* went down. Every sector, every machine, every connection went dead. More than a hundred Webspinners de-rezzed for good. Thousands were hurtin' for weeks or months, and some never recovered completely. Every sector that wasn't permanently erased was damaged. When I finally got to log back in, the place looked like the opening scene of *Terminator,* with a few stragglers picking through the rubble of an old nuclear blast.

For a while, we didn't know what caused the crash....

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]

BULLSHIT! You cryptkeepers crashed the Web on purpose. You were losing the Race and figured you could dump everybody and have it all to yourself.

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

LEIF JONES
1998

Yeah, you're right. We deliberately crashed everything and killed a hunch of our friends just so we could wipe the slate clean and start a new Race with everyone at the same starting line. Hello! Anybody home? That shit makes no sense. When the Race first started, we had a head start. This time, everyone else already knows everything they need to give us a run for our money. Why the hell would we throw away our advantage like that?

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]

YOU'RE JUST PISSED THAT EVERYONE FOUND A WAY BACK IN! LAME-ASS CRYPTERFUCK!

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

[Twip.] Bye-bye.

As I was saying, for a while, we didn't know what caused the crash. We have our ways of finding shit out, though. Eventually we heard about the destruction of Doissetep, a badass Chantry deep in the Umbra. Rumors differ on the cause,

but from what we've been able to piece together, the stupid fucks blew themselves sky-high. Whatever happened, the shock wave tore the hell out of everything connected to the Chantry, and gee oh wow! there just happened to be about a half-dozen backdoors into Doissetep via the Digital Web.

Big lesson, kiddies: Doors swing both ways.

The Crash wrecked a lot of work. Even now, almost a year after the fact, most of Netspace looks like a war zone. You might hear some people say the Crash was a good thing 'cause it cleared out a lot of deadweight, but the folks who say that the loudest are the ones who didn't lose any friends. In the meantime, we're busy rebuilding. Standing around bitching doesn't do any good.

As you wander the Web, you'll see ruined sectors that haven't been fixed sitting side-by-side with new construction, and you'll see sectors at every stage in between. All of which brings me to my next topic—

CASTLES OF SAND

We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.
— anonymous Chinese anarchist

Now that you know a little history, we're gonna talk about exactly what the Web is. Well, we're gonna talk about what we *think* the Web is, since the debate goes on and on and on__

Most cosmologists call the Web a "Zone," a place-that-is-no-place-yet-touches-all-places. The metaphysics and mathematics aren't as important as this simple concept: It is a new reality, not a shadow of the old one. The two may be linked, but they may very well be independent of each other. Spinners of a theological bent speculate that the Web resembles the Earth before God or whatever brought it into its final form. More humanocentric folks wonder if this was like the world the earliest humans encountered, a place of unformed possibilities and fluid laws. I've heard a few theories claim that the Web is a semi-sentient creature or a spirit entity, a god that's only beginning to wake up.

What feeds it? That's a tricky question. Based on the incredible spread of the Net, its semi-electrical nature and its undeniable mystick essence, the reigning theory speculates that the Web consumes Quintessence energy from computer users. The more effort and time people put into computer-based work, the more the Net grows. The more it grows, the more it consumes. Computer users feel the burn in the form of headaches, backaches, carpal tunnel syndrome and a dozen other aliments that hardly existed before the Information Age.

Can the Net sustain itself without that daily input from Hamburger Country? That, my friends, is a very troubling question. We don't know yet.

Going back to Webspace, there are two basic types of space in the Web: Formatted and Unformatted. Unformatted Web is any area that hasn't yet been molded into shape by Webspinners or Sleepers. Formatted Web is everything that has. There are a bunch of categories of Formatted Web, so we'll start with the simpler one.

Unformatted (Virgin) Web

Also known as Virgin Web, unformatted areas are "blank" parts of Netspace, areas that haven't been imprinted. They're the sand waiting for someone to come along and build a castle, the unexplored frontier of the Digital Web. Unformatted Web's not always found on the edges of known Formatted Space, though. Sometimes you find it tucked between two sectors that have been around forever. No one knows if these spots have just been overlooked or if they just pop up in random locations. Some say Turing's computer is still out there, spinning new strands of the Web. I think the Virgin stuff appears as more Sleepers use computers. As more information flows into the Web, the Web grows to make room.

For those of you without visuals: Virgin Web looks like ghostly angel-hair spaghetti, or like cobwebs of shimmering light. Unlike the strong strands of energy binding sectors together, these bits of floating Web look more like clouds than like patterns. Once a sector or conduit is formatted, this cloud takes shape, first as a glistening spiderweb, then as a matrix pattern (like a 3-D graphic skeleton), then into a more-or-less solid representation of the formatted subject. All the "clouds" in the area flow into a kind of energy vortex when a sector is formatted; by the end of the program, the Virgin Web has had its cherry burst. Those fuzzy clouds are gone for good.

Even though the Web is theoretically infinite, Unformatted Web is hard to find. In a place that sees *millions* of users a day, Virgin Web is rarer than a virgin hooker. That makes it valuable. If you find some, format it if you're Elite enough, or turn it over to someone who is. The Adepts and the Void Engineers are both hot to get their hands on any Virgin Web they can find, but they're not the only ones looking to shape Reality 2.0. A good chunk of Virgin Web is the find of a lifetime; it's worth its virtual weight in bandwidth.

[Input address = 419.81.760.3]

Why is it so hard to find Virgin Web? Shouldn't there be a bunch of it laying around as a result of the Great Crash?

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

Not a half-bad question. The Crash wiped out a lot of sectors, erased 'em clean off the Web, but they were still previously formatted. You can re-format them, but the new design isn't as clean as a format on Virgin Web. The first imprint is always the strongest, and elements of it always pop up through whatever anyone puts on top. It's kinda like recording a new movie on top of an old one. The video tape's a little worn, so the picture's not as sharp, and if you look closely, you can sometimes see ghost images of the first movie in the background.

Now, I'm not sayin' that re-formatting an erased sector ain't valuable. It's just that finding pure, innocent, new sand is so much sweeter.

Formatted Web, Sectors and Conduits

Formatted Web is where we spend 99.9% of our time on the far side of Hamburger Country. There are two major types of Formatted Web: sectors and conduits. Sectors are the places inside the Web, and conduits are the pathways between them. Some say sectors are just places where conduits collide and make an open space. Either way, sectors are where the action is. When you format Virgin Web, it becomes a sector, and it spawns conduits that connect it to other sectors. Sectors sometimes spawn conduits to unexpected places, and some Adepts like to build conduits between sectors that have no business being connected.

Sectors are all classified as either Free or Restricted. Free Sectors are where information travels freely; you don't need a password and there's no security. You find 'em all over the place, 'cause they're more common than Restricted Sectors. A lot of Webwalkers don't bother spending much time in Free Sectors 'cause it's too easy to get in and out of 'em; they figure the only good data is protected data.

(Minor Digression #367: I've got two things to say to skweebs who think that way. First, some people have pretty strange ideas about what needs to be protected. I once spent an hour cracking an encryption code on someone's grocery list. Second, read "The Purloined Letter.")

Restricted Sectors are protected. Theoretically, those locks keep random or unauthorized users out. Typical Restricted Sectors include Virtual Adept Chantries, military and financial systems, and anything the Technocracy builds. These places are guarded by everything from dumb password programs to Paradox spirits. Most include enough layers of blinds, dummies and traps to confuse the most diehard hacker. You can fight your way in — if you don't mind everyone inside hearing you coming — but the best spinners sneak in unnoticed or set up a back door. The processor drain required to move through the constant verification routines makes everything slower, but everyone who's *supposed* to be in the sector has the same problem. Oh, and be careful about picking a fight in a Restricted Sector; getting dumped from one hurts more than getting dumped from a Free Sector. A lot more.

As I mentioned, a sector takes the clouds of Web and spins 'em into the desired shape. Most sectors are mammoth geometric shapes connected to "wires" or "spiderwebs" of conduit lines. For the most part, spinners 'port from sector to sector, or travel through conduits. It takes spice and a combination of Correspondence and Spirit knowledge to get outside a sector and look at it from the long view.

On the inside, sectors look like whatever the makers want. Most are pretty abstract, brimming with fractals, colors, grids and whatever else. Some get pretty ornate — Victorian mansions, endless deserts with living cacti, swirling fractal storms, that sort of thing — and seem to go on forever in all directions. Concepts like space and time vary from sector to sector, and don't really relate to the space outside very much; the Grid Sector for the World Bank Exchange is titanic on the inside, but takes up very little "space" when seen from the area between sectors.

Depending on the traffic inside the sector and the protections on it, the outside "surface" shimmers with living light. A high-density Website glows like a neon sign, surrounded by the Christmas tree bulbs of a million individual sites. Most times, you can tell a Restricted Sector from a free one by the color of the surface (not to mention the guards, wards or warning signs on the conduits leading to it). Most free sectors glow with friendly "cool" colors — green, blue, etc. — while restricted ones often feature warning colors like yellow or bright red. Total shutdown sites (those with the tightest security) tend to shimmer with faint black and silver light, but some glow like living ice, just *waiting* for someone to try to fuck with their countermeasures....

Corrupted Web

One more warning. Watch out for something we call Corrupted Web, Webspace that got all screwed up in the Great Crash. These sectors weren't wiped out, but they sure as hell don't exist in a "normal" format anymore. Like corrupted files on your hard drive, everything in a Corrupt Sector is scrambled and doesn't make sense. *Unlike* corrupted files on your hard drive, these sectors aren't easy to get rid of.
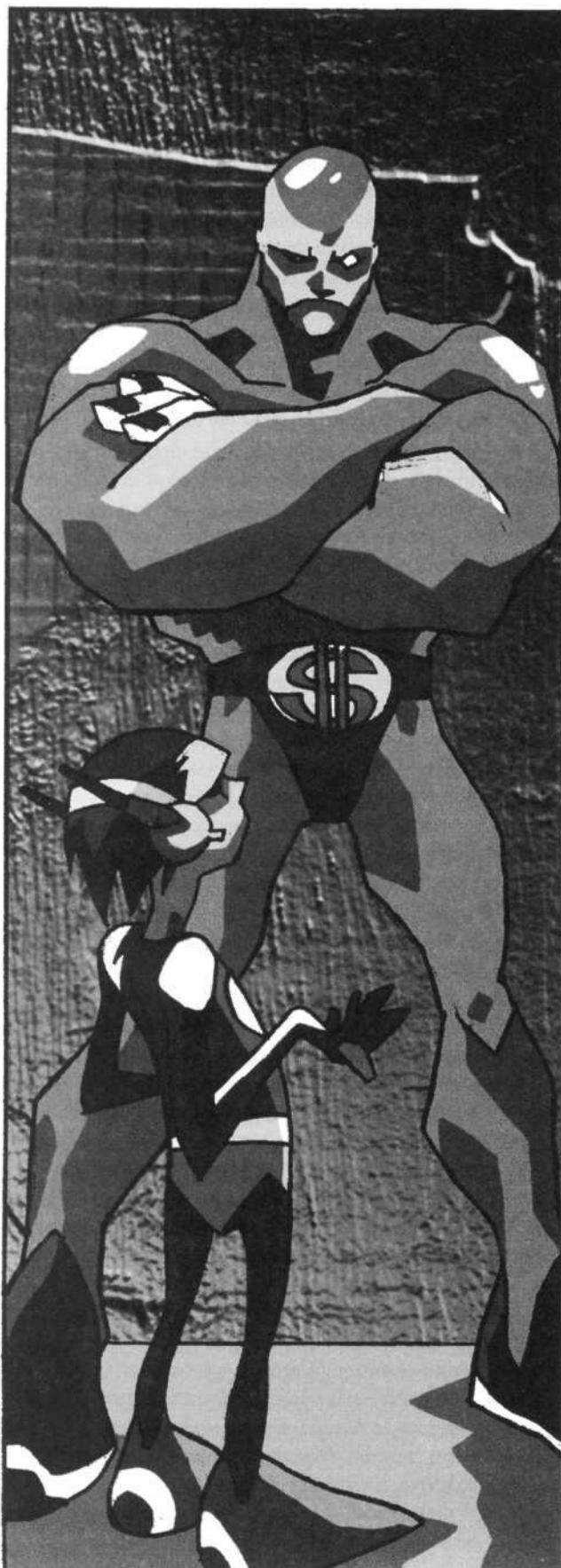
Most Corrupted sites resemble twisted versions of what they were before the Crash, visions of a reality no sane willworker wants to see. Staying too long in these places can seriously fuck with your head. Some say Corrupted Web comes from a Nephandi format, and what I've seen is just what I'd expect from the Billy-Boys. It's scary to think the Nephandi are in the Web, twisting it to their image of Descension, but I know we can't keep 'em all out. Even creepier is the thought of Web formatted by a Marauder. All I can think of is a place where reality is like that old Spin-Art toy, and visiting mages are the paint. My advice? Stay the hell away.

Grid Sectors

Remember how I mentioned the "fences" built to corral the sheep? Well, the posts for those fences were driven by the bleaters themselves. For now, anyway, Sleepers can only access our Web to a certain degree. When they do, they open up Grid Sectors, the holding pens for their kind.

In these simple sectors, lots of Sleepers interact with the Web. If you've seen a wide black plain overlaid with a green or amber grid that stretches out forever, you've been to a Grid Sector. You see pretty simple geometric icons running here and there? Those are end-user applications. They're easy to crash if you're in the mood to dump newbies. If you'd rather talk to the locals, though, you can do that, too. The Sleepers you talk to will see your words whipping across their screens and think you're a helluva typist.

Grid Sectors are easy to get into from the "World Wide Web," but a Sleeper needs some decent spice (or weird luck) to step outside of one. As a precaution, most Grids now feature restriction codes on their outgoing conduits. You can hop from Grid to Grid without trouble, but getting into the wider space of the Net is tricky (though not impossible). The codes don't keep Awakened spinners from going in and out (they're not supposed to stop *us*), but they do screen the rest of the Web off a bit from the unbelievable traffic on the mortal Websites. Not that Sleepers can't get out of the Grid Ghetto — we *want* them to, but we'd generally prefer that they have a clue before they go poking through the Demise again!

There used to be more Grid Sectors in the Web, but some have been changed over the last couple of years as Sleeper tech gets better. You can tell the "improved" Grid Sectors from technomagickal formats, though. Everything has a two-dimensional look to it. The colors are bright and the images interesting, but they don't have the same depth. That won't always be true, though. Some Sleeper sectors have started to take on a 3-D presence, and some Webspinners deliberately format their sectors with the 2-D look of an improved Grid Sector, just to throw visitors off balance. (Maybe it's out of some retro fixation. Who am I to question the motives of my fellow spinners? *Don't* answer that, or we'll be digressing all day.) What I *can* tell you is this: Some of us spend a lot of effort reinforcing the

"walls" around Grid Sectors, trying to keep the sheep shit out of the rest of the Net. It's impossible to fence the whole thing off, but the idea (contrary to popular opinion) is *control,* not domination.

And that, boys and girls, is one of the great ironies of the Web. We who support personal determination, who chant "Information wants to be free" and all that shit, have been forced into the role of shepherds by the stupidity of the flock. Believe me, this is a subject of more debate than I could possibly begin to tell you, but for now, at least, it's a sad fact. Look at it like this: Until he learns how *not* to burn the house down, it's a good idea to keep the matches out of your kid's hands. Are the Sleepers our kids? Yes and no. They're their own people, but they rode in here on our rails and they often rise or fall by our examples and innovations. If nothing else, we all live in the same house. Now, considering that we want the kids to *inherit* that house someday, don't you think it'd be a good idea to make sure they don't burn it down first?

I'm sure all tyrants can rationalize their policies that way, but honest to GODZ, we're *trying* to do right by the kids. Is it better to let the whole thing burn down in the name of personal freedom?

Don't answer that right now. Just think about it. If we stop to digress again, we'll never get outta here.

Junklands

Sectors that were ruined in huge fights, imprinted by powerful negative emotions, or spoiled by screwed-up formats are called Junklands. These places are whacked, and not in a fun way. The images are disturbing, the sounds grate on your nerves, and the whole place has you wishing you were somewhere else in a hurry. A Junkland's like a horror movie done on some surreal, psychotic level, and you're the alpha victim. I've heard it said the Junklands are like nightmares on a bad acid trip, but the one I saw wasn't even that pleasant. You could say they're watered-down versions of Corrupt Web... which means you might actually get out of one with your mind in one piece.

Stacked Files

A strong burst of positive (or at least not outright hostile) emotion can format the Web into a Stacked File. Such places are usually damn cool, and they get a lot of visitors. As time goes by, they change to become more appealing to the people who visit them most. Eventually, they turn into landmarks, sectors that almost everyone has heard about and most folks have visited. Sometimes someone tinkers with a Stacked File to make it draw a bigger crowd, but for some reason, the "artificial" ones are never as popular as the ones that spring up on their own. A couple of famous Stacked Files include: the Crater, a collection of combat pits where mages go for some friendly (and not so friendly) fisticuffs, and the Pool of Infinite Reflection, a peaceful spot where you can literally get away from it all.

According to Web legends, Stacked Files literally have their own souls. Supposedly, the original visionaries who patterned the early sectors often died during the process. In many cases, their souls stayed behind, shaping paradises from the formatters' good intentions. People say the dreams of these online martyrs took the best possible forms, and still preserve those forms as oases for future generations. Comforting, innit, that your soul might provide an online monument for you long after you've kicked off?

Nice thought.

Constraint Realms

A Constraint Realm is a sector formatted to accommodate a specific theme. Built-in laws make sure anyone who enters sticks to that theme. If your icon looks out of place in a Constraint Realm's setting, you have to change it to something appropriate before you can get in. Let's say someone set up a sector to look like a big tank of tropical fish; you'd have to change your icon into an image of a fish. Sometimes you can get away with some other appropriate form, like a sunken ship or a treasure chest. Whether you can do that or not depends on the strictness of the access laws and the sense of humor of the hosts.

SRVRZ (TechnoTurf)

The Black Hats refer to their home sectors as Secured and Restricted Virtual Reality Zones, or SRVRZ for short. We call 'em "TechnoTurf." As the name implies, these sectors have been imprinted by the Technocracy. Be careful — the Ironteeth mean business! These sectors usually look like the digital landscapes you see in your typical cyberpunk movies: lots of straight lines and right angles, all washed in glowing neon. It's enough to drive you nuts. Some of the more idealistic Technos prefer Victorian rooms, pure white labs or endless control panels, but the majority of the SRVRZ I've come across are built for function, not style.

Being Technocracy strongholds, these places are all Restricted as hell and heavily guarded. Don't laugh at a virtual HIT Mark; it won't de-rez you quickly or softly. It'll latch onto you, download brain-cracking feedback, and make sure your icon is stuck in place while it does it. Then it'll trace you back to your rig, in case the feedback doesn't do the job. Add password programs that shoot to kill, energy screens, and patrols of silver robot icons armed with virtual blasters that'll set your real hair on fire, and you've got a situation you don't want to mess with. Worst of all, though, are the Drainers. They often look like MIBs, but occasionally resemble leeches, doctors, spiders or femme fatales. Once they get ahold of you, Drainers lock you down, crack your codes and hack into your system — first the iron, then the meat. After a few dozen screams, you become a puppet on their strings. I saw a guy get jumped by a pile of arachnid Drainers once; he's still around, but I wouldn't talk to him for all the plastic in Bill Gates's pockets. I know who he's working for now.

Sigh Now that I've detailed the horrors of TechnoTurf, I'm sure you little monkeys will be on your way to an Irontooth sector the minute we end our friendly chat. Just don't say I didn't warn you.

Warzones

Speaking of warning...

Remember when I said that *everything* Sleepers do online winds up reflected here in the Web? Well, consider the sectors created by networked video games — especially shooters. True, the Warzones actually originated with Technocrat training grounds and Adept "paintball" arenas, but in the last few years they've grown to truly epic levels. People (Awakened or otherwise) just can't seem to get enough of killing (simulated or otherwise). To feed the need, Warzone Sectors have sprung up all over the Web, each one devoted to war games of various levels of intensity.

Essentially, a Warzone is a sector featuring some kind of terrain, a variety of weapons, and targets... including yourself. Most feature "medical kits" and "recharging pills" of different kinds, as well as an array of weapons strewn around for the players to pick up and employ. The majority of Warzones are Sleeper-based Grid Sectors, although a good number (like the Crater) have been set up by spinners for their own amusement. All are Constraint Realms of some kind — you usually have to adjust your icon into a massive fighting dude or cartoon character. Most are cool as shit. Imagine playing *Doom* for real. If you're killed, you get dumped back at the starting point, unless you're holistically immersed (more on that later), in which case you get punched back into Hamburger Country with a nasty headache and some minor burns.

A few Warzones, however, are lethal. If you get killed in one of those, you're history. Your icon is de-rezzed (usually in some spectacularly gory fashion), and deadly feedback turns your meat into steak. In most cases, lethal Warzones are clearly marked. To enter the sector, you have to key in your ID code; doing so removes any obligation the host has toward protecting you. At that point, you're on your own. Some spinners use Warzones to settle grudges; while most of 'em prefer the common setup, a few go for the lethal ones instead. If you get called out, be careful, and make sure you know what you're agreeing to before the blast-bolts start flying.

The *really* nasty Warzones originated with the U.S. Army's VR training grounds. You didn't know about those? Yeah, the military has hundreds of battle simulations online — maps of Iraq, Kuwait, Moscow, even New York City — and it uses 'em to train troops, plan missions and test battle scenarios. Fun as it might seem, don't *ever* get caught near one of those! Every one of them is fatal to Webspinners. For sheer destructive power, the world's baddest HIT Mark can't touch an Apache attack 'copter or Abrams tank. Get nailed by one of *those,* even in VR, and your Avatar takes a very permanent vacation.

Haunts

It's a metaphysical fact that death, especially agonizing death, leaves traces long after the body is gone. In a Haunt Sector, a dying spinner literally reformats the area as he fries. The result? A creepy place where the spinner's death plays over and over and over in a recursive loop of terrible sadness. There are a lot of them these days, thanks to the Great Crash.

Visually, your average Haunt resembles a normal sector, de-rezzed into spinning wisps of sparkling smoke. Others look literally like ghost sectors — broken shadows of the "buildings" and "structures" that had once been there. Some of these ruins still contain the ghosts of the spinners who died when the area crashed. These howling fragments terrify veteran Webheads. After all, that furious, trapped presence could just as well be you—

You've got to be strong to stick around in a Haunt. No matter how tough you might think you are, the dying emotions get to you. It's hard to say exactly *what* you'll experience in a Haunt. Everybody's death is unique. Personally, I've visited three Haunt Sectors. In one, I heard screams that almost split my head open; another was empty, but the grief and sadness hanging in the "air" were so strong I had to be carried out, blubbering. The last one was peaceful enough, but I couldn't shake the feeling that *something* was always watching over my shoulder....

A necromancer friend of mine told me these sectors overlap the Underworld. In addition to hosting the ghosts of the deceased, they actually weave themselves into the fringes of the Land of the Dead. I've never really believed in "underworlds" myself, but it's an interesting theory. Considering what I've felt in those three sectors, I wouldn't be surprised. Underworld or no Underworld, visiting a Haunt Sector is a sure way to bring on nightmares.

The Trash Sector

Sort of the "elephants' graveyard" of VR, the Trash Sector has been the center of rumors and tall tales since Webspinners actually began to project themselves online. Also called "the Rip" and "YRFN (You're Really Fucked Now) Land," the Trash Sector supposedly sucks lost data into information hell.

Theoretically, a cold, dark riptide rides just around the edges of established sectors. If something dumps, the legends claim, a swirling maelstrom can be seen from a distance, sucking the icons and systems into a black undertow. Spinners who never return to their bodies after a dump are said to have been drawn into this tide, which rides out into the Trash Sector. In this wasteland of forever-lost data, the souls of dumped spinners drown eternally in fractal seas — endless loops of chaotic information fragments recursing into mind-shattering shapes. Supposedly, online Marauders spawn in this demented mathematical soup; according to one rumor, insane vampires use the current to swim up from their swampy brains and into Webspace. I couldn't tell you one way or the other whether any, all or none of these stories are true, but I know this much: When an area dumps, you can feel the whole place go cold for a second, and I swear you can hear the Net swallow.

Down the hatch, and into... what?

Hung Sectors

These things are death traps. You've seen programs caught in infinite loops, or ones that have eaten up all your machine's memory and just sit there? When that happens on your rig, you just re-hoot and start over. Well, Hung Sectors are like those programs, but there's no re-booting option to solve the problem. If you get stuck in a Hung Sector, you either repeat the same action over and over, or you get frozen in a bubble of time, unable to move or think. I've heard stories about spinners who went into a Hung Sector and got out on their own, but most of those who wander in have to be rescued.

Saving someone from a Hung Sector is dangerous in itself, 'cause you risk getting sucked in, too. It's like trying to rescue someone who's fallen through ice; the ice at the edge of the hole is cracked and thin, and you'll be swimming yourself, if you're not careful.

Scary thing about Hung Sectors is that they look just like normal ones. If you're lucky, some clueful or considerate spinner will have sealed up the conduit or posted a warning about the nasty thing behind Door Number Three. If you're *not* lucky, you might be the first spinner to blunder onto a HS — or at least the first one to recognize it for what it is. If you're *really* lucky, you might get out in time to warn others about your "discovery."

I've heard some Adepts say Hung Sectors are Paradox Realms inside the Web. As if Paradox Whiteout doesn't cause enough problems, we've supposedly got Paradox *traps* sitting around, too. I can't wait until the day we can be open about what we are and tell Paradox to kiss our Awakened asses!

Sex Sites

Speaking of Hung Sectors.... Oh, quit acting shocked, you little perverts. Hey, if you believe the hype, *everyone's* online to get laid! That's crap, of course, but the predominance of sex-oriented sectors (and the fun things that go on in them) makes 'em worthy of mention.

Technically, sex sites are simply Formatted Sectors where spinners get laid. Filled with beautiful icons of all kinds (and often Digital Dollz and Sleepers, as well), these sectors provide fantasy backdrops for any form of sex you can imagine and a few you'd have problems with. Beaches, backalleys, strip clubs, dungeons... hey, whatever you want, it's out there. From the simple to the swank to the totally sleazy, these sites provide a 24-hour outlet for virtual booty. Without the limitations (social, physical, gravitational) of meatsville sex, visiting spinners can have it any way they want it.

In lesser quality sites, 2-D icons drift in stasis. They are usually naked figures or sexual scenes often surrounded by variations of the same person or tableau. While such "centerfold alleys" hold a certain magnetic charm, the presence of fuzzy 2-D bleater icons wanking off tends to dull the effect... unless you like your sex sleazy and pathetic.
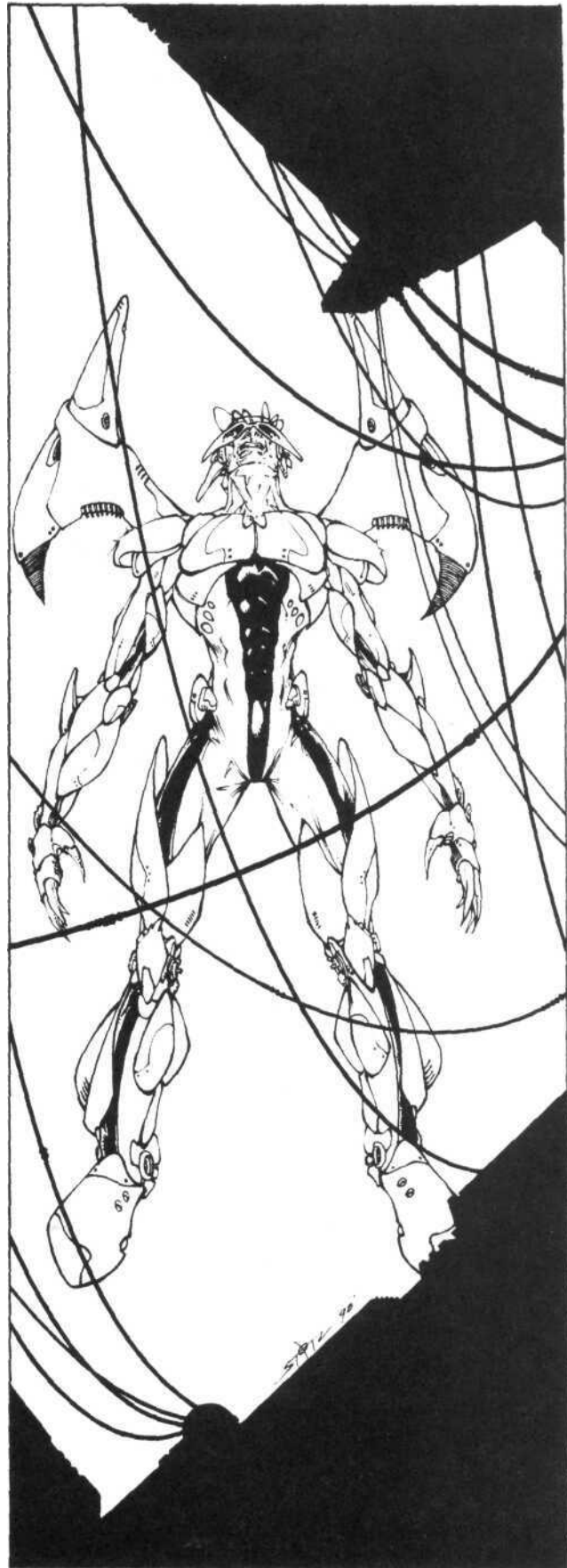
The dark side of the game gives online sex its stink: slave-block sites, where pitiless fucks sell imaginary (or real!) sex slaves to their clients; kiddie-traps, where children get lured into meatworld liaisons with molesters and slavers; sharks, who key onto desperate folks, show them a kind face, and lure 'em into parasitic affairs; and fast food fryers, where online lovers wind up getting their meat and minds crisped by sensory overload. Even if you manage to avoid these hellholes, the inhuman pleasures of the virtual flesh sometimes provide more stimulation than a person can walk away from. I've known a spinner or two whose meat decayed while his senses remained locked in an endless VR orgy.

Hey, don't say I didn't warn you. Have fun, kids.

Conduits

I left the conduits out of the list of sectors 'cause they're not. Sectors, that is. Conduits *connect* sectors; they form the pathways between virtual realms through which all that beautiful data flows. Since you're basically just a data construct while you're here, conduits allow you to move around.

Conduits usually look like tunnels or hallways, sometimes with doors you open. In the old days, most looked like tubes of light or circuitry, but with advances in Sleeper tech, a lot of conduits started taking on cooler-looking forms. You can usually figure out a little bit about the sector at the other end just by looking at the doorway: If it's made of mold-spattered granite blocks hung with cobwebs and sporting a door bound in rusted iron bands, you're probably looking at the entrance to a dungeon sector, or maybe a B&D realm. If the door is clean and simple and slides aside with a "shuik" sound, it's probably some kind of space station or spaceship realm. Sometimes your passage through a conduit is affected by the sector you're visiting. I remember one sector imprinted by a Lovecraft fanatic; I might never eat calamari again.

Now and then, you'll find a cluster of conduits—a "hotlink room," like the kinds of link pages that a lot of Sleepers use. They're usually round rooms with doorways (anywhere from a handful to a few hundred) leading deeper into the Web. I know of folks who look for these rooms and explore each doorway in turn, trying to figure out the relationship between all the joined sectors. Some say that hotlink rooms are really sectors in and of themselves, but if they are, they're still pretty rare.

The Space Between, and the Matterhorn

If you choose to travel without a conduit, you'll have to rely on your Elite knowledge of Correspondence Arts and Sciences to get around. Lacking enough Correspondence to move from place to place, you'll need some kind of vehicle, specially built for Net travel, that allows you to "fly" out of a sector and into the space between sectors. This space — an endless latticework of glowing fibers not unlike a gargantuan web — hangs in the "air," surrounded by a faintly luminescent fog. If you look *really* closely, you'll notice that the "fog" is actually minuscule characters — ones, zeros, and odd glyphs that no one has been able to decipher. Some VAs consider this "data stream" to be the operational functions of reality itself.

Spinners who've gone through that fog tell me there's a colossal mountain deep in the mist. No matter which direction you go (and I tell you from experience, "direction" is a meaningless concept once you leave the sectors), the mountain is waiting for you, sloping off up, down and away in all directions. Most spinners call that mountain the Matterhorn. Only the most Elite have actually seen it, although lots of people claim to have been there. One guy — who I *know* wasn't lying — says he saw cowled figures moving around on the mountainside. Me, I've never noticed, but I trust his word.

Maybe there's something to that Mount Qaf stuff after all.

SPIDERS IN THE WEB

I am a firm believer in the people.
— Abraham Lincoln

What would the Web be without people? I couldn't tell you, but my guess is it'd be boring. You all know the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, right? The concept that an observer dictates the reality of the thing observed? Well, the general consensus among the Elite (which is not, I should mention, the *only* opinion on the subject) is that humans—or, more precisely, Webspinners - define the shape of this virtual reality. Without us, it *might* still exist, but in a radically different form. In other words, it appears the way it does because our observations tell it should look that way, or because we Webspinners make the Net into what we think it should be.

Takin' that into account, it stands to reason that the most important aspects of the Web are the people in it. You, me, ol' Irontooth in the background, all of us, even the bleats — as I mentioned earlier, their idiocy can ruin whole sectors if left uncontained. The strands of the Web are the thoughts and dreams of the people who live in it. That's why we call ourselves "Webspinners"; we're the spiders in this particular Web, and our designs — formats — shape it.

Whiteouts and the Great Race

As you all know, there's a bit of a scrap — a Great Race, as some nimrod labeled it — going on over the format of the Web as a whole. Sort of like that stupid "battle for reality" thing going on back in Hamburger Country, but the stakes are higher. See, in the meat-packing firm, the battle's

already pretty much lost. Our fellow "traditions" don't want to admit it, but there it is. The air is filth, the water's sludge, the ground is glowing and everything you eat is full of cancer. The Web is a clean slate, a chance to start over. Round One goes to Irontooth, may he rot in Hell 2.0. He's not gonna win here as well.

As I'm sure you can guess, the Black Hats see things differently. Like us, they know the world's overheating like a Mac Classic in Death Valley; like us, they want to shift the data over to another system before the whole mess gets lost forever. They also view the Web as a second chance to get things right, and they wanna make sure they don't mess it up... or get too late a start this time. In Meatsville, it took 'em a few thousand years of no sewage, constant war, endless plagues and a few dingbat religions before they managed to build their system. It took 'em 500 *more* years for them to read the manual, and by that time, things was pretty much fucked. Partly their fault, mind you, but there it is. This time out, they were in the garage when the business was just beginning. Yes, it's true — the Difference Engineers were Ironteeth back in the day, but overhauling reality seemed like *a* good idea at the time. When that idea started to go bad, the Adepts pulled out and went solo. (OK, not *solo* solo, we had backup, but you get the picture.) The cryptkeepers left one hell of a mess when they quit, but ol' Irontooth was able to put the pieces back together in time to get himself— and the Sleepers, intentionally or otherwise— online with us. Ever since, it's been a race to see who gets to play GODZ for Reality 2.0.

Whiteouts, Lags and Web Warfare

The Web accepts a lot of screwy stuff— morphs, multiple icons, teleportation, bolts of light, all kinds of things you could never get away with on Earth. So does that mean, that *anything* is possible? Is Paradox, as some people speculate, absent in Netspace?

Not a chance.

Oh, VR is pretty free with regards to what your magick looks like. The real tests are how much magick you employ, and how much of a mess you make with it. Built on a carefully constructed system fed by energy fluctuations, the Net is notoriously susceptible to Whiteouts — localized system crashes. If strained, the "strands" of the Web snap, de-rezzing sortie, if not all, of the icons in the area and dumping 'the spinners back at their home stations... or worse. Consequently, spinner vets tend to be careful about stirring up violent energy fluxes. The bigger the flux, the greater the chance of Whiting the sector.

How do you know if a Whiteout's coming? Generally, things freeze or stutter just before trouble starts. Icons twitch, words get garbled, actions repeat themselves, colors change — that sort of thing. Often, the "air" gets really cold and seems to thicken. Some people say your thoughts stop and your mind goes blank. Spinners who recognize the signs can sometimes ditch the White either by stopping whatever they were doing or by pulling a last-ditch 'port out of the area. The latter tactic is really dangerous, though. Some folks have pulled that stunt, only to get slammed by the White Wave and sucked into the legendary Trash Sector.

The "stutter" effect is sometimes called *Lagging* or *the Drag.* Like an overloaded computer system, the local reality starts to slow down. The whole area (and everyone in it) moves in slow-motion, or "skips" like a CD with a grease spot. This is, as you can guess, a sign of trouble.

If you're smart, you won't have to worry much about .Lags or Whites. Generally, you can get away with all kinds of shape-changing, from color shifts to hyper-whacked morphs. 'Porting — popping around without walking from A to B — is pretty risk-tree it you know how to do it; flying is as easy as walking, arid light-shows are candy cake with sugar on top. Magickal violence, on the other hand, is a *really* bad idea unless you're in a sector formatted to accept a lot of energy flux (Warzones, SRVRZs, etc.). This goes double if you're throwing around electrical currents and raw Quintessence; the interaction between the Net and Hamburger Country rides on electrical currents and carries Quintessence all over the Zone. Shift either one around too suddenly and you're asking to get dumped. If you're backed into a corner, a solid electrical discharge is a great weapon... so long as you don't mind burning yourself with it.

In short, open fighting is risky. Knowing this, veteran spinners prefer to outmaneuver each other psychologically, then blindside their rivals with some data-grab, offline seduction, social ostracism or political upheaval. Generally, the best way to totally dick your opponent is to sucker him into making some mistake — a Whiteout, a *faux pas,* etc. — that gets him into trouble, but leaves you standing safely outside the blast radius. Many of the Great Race's fiercest battles are fought with brains (either with Mind 'magick or with social savvy) rather than with guns, bombs or fireballs. The consequences of large Whiteouts are just too extreme to risk.

Playing god is fun, but it's dangerous, too, especially when there are other gods trying to make the world simultaneously. Although we eventually found out that (despite what some people think) the Great Crash wasn't caused by spinners, there really isn't any point trying to deny the Whiteout Effect — the localized crashes that occur when the Web gets snarled by too many spiders making too many designs. Yes, kiddies, technomagick can, and does, crash the Net in your vicinity. I know it's a popular notion among some folks that Whiteouts are "the curse of the cryptkeepers," but that's bullshit. Whiteouts are storms born in the hands of angry gods and they can wipe everything clean if those gods aren't careful.

Between the Whiteout Effect, the Web itself, and the generally good intentions on both sides, the Great Race is a lot less deadly than the daily massacre in the meat-packing plant. When you actually get a chance to *talk* to 'em, most Voids are fairly decent folks (more than I can say for their Irontooth buddies, but hey, the Witchy-Poos and Merlins suck, too). Now with the mess that Reality 2.0 has become, we actually find ourselves cooperating with each other on occasion. Still, the Race is in earnest. You're gonna be running in it by default, so I might as well introduce you to your fellow sprinters....

The Traditions

Today's saviors are tomorrow's tyrants!
— Dr. Volcano

Most of our co-workers want no part of the Web. Too bad — if more of 'em spent time here, they'd see we knew what we were talking about when we pitched the Tenth Sphere of Paradigm to the Council. With the exception of a few clueful kids from House Thig, the crusty old Merlins don't dare visit the Net and see the proof that we're right. You'll see Sons of Ether and Virtualites galore, though, plus the occasional visitor from another Tradition, usually someone with a specific purpose or looking for a specific thing.

Virtual Adepts

Do I really have to say much in this category? Three times out of four, any Tradition dude you meet in the Web is an Adept. We're the only ones who see the Net's potential, the only ones who really appreciate it. Right now, most Adepts are busy rebuilding after the Great Crash, trying to get the Web back on its feet. To steal a line from your FAQ, the Net is every mage's best hope for Ascension. Bigger than that, though, it's our species' best hope for Enlightenment on a grand scale... hell, for its

long-term *survival.* The Net can't catch us if it's not at full capacity, though, so we spend a lot of time making it tighter, stronger and cooler.

The concept goes deeper than you'd think. Trogs like to think we're just a buncha techno-anarchists who've exchanged decks for magic wands. VA philosophy goes deeper than that, though. We want to bring on the next quantum leap in human existence. Like the written word, the printing press, vaccinations and TV, the Net has the capacity to move the entire species into a new paradigm. With the accelerated speed of change in the 20th century, a "slingshot effect" could catapult humanity into a whole new state of being. Personally, I think the Web is that slingshot. Just as we spinners have moved from a solidly organic state, I believe all people can do the same. The question is, do we *want* them to? With the fuckwit abuse of what could be the next human evolutionary step, I'm not sure I still do. Even so, it's a cause worth fighting for.

You and me, we're the stewards of the path to the future, my friends. Reality 2.0 is ripe for the picking, but we have to do it all by our lonesomes, 'cause the other Traditions don't share our view. For better and worse, the Technocracy *does* see the Web the same way we do; the Ironteeth wouldn't go all-out trying to grab huge chunks of Webspace if they didn't. This disturbing similarity of perspective undermines what little trust our fellow galley-slaves have in our mission. To some Merlins, we're just *pretending* to be eternally hateful exiles from the Great Stasis Machine. According to some Hermetic Mulders, we're all just weaving some conspiracy to net 'em like flies in our home turf. Y'know, get 'em out of their meat and away from their wands and pentagrams, then cuddle 'em up in VR tangles, chow down on the "ancient lore" they're so proud of, and let the MIBs have what's left. Now granted, I can see where they might be coming from (especially considering how treacherous the Merlins are to their own kind), but their paranoia would put Kaczynski to shame.

Our biggest problem, though, comes from within. As we've already seen, certain folks within our coalition have begun to question our methods and motivations. Some have gone solo, dumping all links to us, and occasionally even turning their files over to ol' Irontooth. Y'see, we built a house on anarchy, but we found out over the last few years that you *need* a certain degree of structure if you want to survive. Naturally, that sentiment fires up the rebels in our group (rebelling against rebels — talk about a paradox!). There's a growing idea that we're becoming what we always preached against. At the same time, we've got problems on all sides — the Crash, the Race, the Sleepers, the buzzbombs — that threaten to crash the whole dream unless we put the brakes on somehow. The balancing act between "change is essential" and "structure is necessary" is providing the Adepts with our biggest challenge to date. Compared to this, turning a video toaster into an Umbral gateway is easy!

Buzzbombs

Most rogue Adepts are perfectly OK individuals with a dissenting opinion or two. They go their way, we go ours. The bad ones, though, become buzzbombs - renegade hacker-magi with a grudge to settle and the power to settle it. I know you've all heard of Demonseed Elite or Dr. Volcano, two of the most infamous buzzbombs. One materializes out of thin air and crunches Lamers, the other sells hypertech in an online flea market. [See *The Technomancer's Toybox* for details.] Both used to be Adepts, but quit when anarchy and architectonics parted ways.

[interrupt = host ???????]

How nice of you to advertise for us! THANX! %->

By-bi!

 - Dr. Vole

[end interrupt]

NDTWR

There are plenty more like them out there. Some dump newbies or crash bleaters whenever the fancy takes 'em, while others actually attack Adepts, sabotage projects or harass old enemies. Lots of 'em sit around cooking up interesting new viruses, then unleash them like rabid pit bulls. The hardest thing to take is that these dudes used to share the dream. They were *friends,* and it's still pretty hard to throw down on 'em, even if you're backed into a corner. Check your files for buzzbomb profiles and MOs; if you encounter one, leave the sector. Trust me, most of these guys can dump you like a plate of cold fries.

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]

There you go, trashing new Adepts again. I don't have to take this shit!

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

You're absolutely right. You can go whenever you want; just take off your rig and you're outta here. No? As I was saying, a lot of people keep forgetting that we *want* the Sleepers to use the Net —

[Input address = 419.81.760.3]

Wait a sec. Earlier you said the Sleepers were *abusing* the Web, that they weren't ready for the freedom it gives them. Now you're saying they should all be let in?

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

Yeah, I said the Sleepers weren't ready for true Freedom of Information, but I never said we should be dumping them off the Net completely, did I? We *want* Sleepers in the Web, 'cause the more people who share our view of reality, the more likely we are to see Enlightenment waiting around the corner. And before anybody tells me I'm talking like a Technocrat again, let's not forget one very important thing. Though we have our different methods, at heart we *all* want to dictate the shape of the future. 'Nuff said.

The Sons (or "*Children* of Ether," if you want to be PC) are the only other Tradition you'll see in the Web in force. Not surprising, given our shared roots. Y'see, many of 'em have this thing for electricity, and since the Web *is* mostly electricity, they love the place. They also dig the fact that in the Net, a Scientist can perform any experiment he can dream up. He might need an Adept to set up the sector for him, but we're generally cool with that. You gotta wonder, though, how valid an experiment is when it's performed in a place where you can dictate almost every facet of reality. Still, the Etherites are a fun bunch, and their sectors are some of the most entertaining sites around.

An Etherite offshoot goes by the name of the "Etheric Cybernautical Society," or "Cybernauts" for short. Cheesy name, I know, but it suits 'em. As with most Sons, they're pretty flamboyant — most of these dudes make like *Star Wars* heroes or refugees from *Tron.* Silly as they might seem to jaded fucks like us, though, Cybernauts make great allies. Living by an archaic but really solid code of honor, Etherite spinners throw themselves totally into anything they undertake. I know this one guy, Dr. Calliostro von Sexbat, who makes like a combination of Zorro, Reed Richards and Bram Stoker's original Dracula. Dashing and rakish, he flirts with the ladies, crashes the Ironteeth and whips up astonishing gadgets with equal panache. I've worked with Sexbat on a couple of jobs, and I trust him with my soul, silly name or no. A lot of Adepts could learn a few things from a guy who manages to be clever, clueful and considerate at the same time! Cybernauts are an Adept's best friend.

Dreamspeakers, Verbena and Thigs

Funny as it might seem, there's something primal about the Web. While most shamans and Witchy-Poos wouldn't be caught dead here, there *are* a number of 'em who actually seek the place out, either by jacking in online or by climbing in through holes in the spirit world. (How they do this, 1 don't know.) Occasionally, they even bring sheep-dogs (a.k.a., werewolves) in with 'em, although that doesn't happen very often.

From what I've been told, shamanism and witchcraft are old but eclectic practices. While most of the True Believers stick to the ancient ways, a few younger ones integrate technology into their rites (encrypting rituals onto discs, reconfiguring diagrams of power, summoning up techno-spirits, that sort of thing), thus bridging the past with the future. Unlike their elders, they don't tend to run around nekkid, slashing their wrists and shit. Instead, they employ bio-splat (plant-computers, organic cybernetics, meat/machine melds and other creepy shit) in the case of witches, or spiky spirit guides and living decks in the case of Dreamspeakers. I won't lie. These guys scare the crap out of me, but I'll trust them over their Luddite elders any day!

Techno-pagans and spirit hackers aren't the only ones to grow new limbs on old trees. One clueful House from the Order of Merlin the Crusty Ol' Badass actually made a pact with the Adepts a while ago. Every so often, you'll see 'em running around, mixing arcane formulae with homegrown decks, looking like some whacked cross between Eric Draven and the Wizard of Fourth Street. These would be the Thigs I mentioned a little while ago, and they make staunch (if creepy) allies. No one hates Irontooth the way the Merlins do, and the Thigs carry a lot of wild surprises up their black leather sleeves. The root of both our Arts is mathematics, after all. When you strip away the toys, the Hermes Wizards and we hackers are doing more or less the same thing: bullshitting God with arcane equations, and using 'em to open up the gates to heaven.

The Conventions

I *look forward... to the transference of the contents of our brains into something more manageable and versatile.*

- FM-2030, *Mondo 2000*

And then there's the road to hell... paved with good intentions, as they keep assuring us. The Technocracy is here in force, naturally. As I said, they've got the same basic idea we do: to download the obsolete programs from Reality 1.1 and upgrade 'em in a clean new system. In the meantime, we'll both settle for adjusting the information flow until we can work the bugs out of it. Imagine that: Our former cousins think the same way we do. It may be the only decent thing about 'em. Too bad their vision of the future sucks.

IterationX

If the Ironteeth have their way, the Net will become a pathway for re-programming reality. As people take more machinery into their homes (and eventually into their bodies), the need for computer interfaces will keep growing. If the Xers can control those interfaces, they can control the machines. Thus, controlling the computers means controlling the Sleepers. Nothing new, but what can you expect from static siliconheads?

In the Web, the obvious Xers operate a lot like their agents in Hamburger Country do: locking shit down and blowing shit up. Watch out for digital HIT Marks in particular — they'll flash you down in a heartbeat. Ultimately, the average It-Xer wants to dump or fry every mage who's not part of the Technocracy. They've got a long way to go, but they do it very well.

The *really* scary Xers, though, aren't nearly as obvious. Y'see, Adepts and outlaws aren't the only ones experimenting with the concept of human evolution through virtual consciousness. A cabal of Elite Xers has been observing the effects of cyber-media immersion on Sleeper perceptions of reality, and has been recalibrating new procedures (Techno-talk for rotes) based on jump-cuts, subliminals, morphs and hallucinations. Unlike the usual Xer specialties,

these procedures work on mental/sensory levels. Some experiments, especially those broadcast through television or video games, have triggered aggressive behavior, psychotic episodes and epileptic seizures. The scarier ones have opened Sleepers into semi-aware states, allowing them to make hypercognizent jumps. For laymen, this means increased mental capacities, super-sensitivity and an ability to see psychic feedback patterns ("auras," to the crystal-waver crowd). Some of their prize test subjects can stay online for days on end, and craft icons as vivid and capable as any mage's. While the Sleepers are still Sleepers, I have a sneaky suspicion that It-X has reinforced its ranks — specifically its online ranks — with a new generation of Technomancers, Awakened and trained online, and brainwashed into total loyalty to the Machine and its new vision of reality.

You can't tell this new breed from the old ones by looking at them; that's why my "suspicion" is still just that. They tend to be more subtle than stereotypical Ironteeth, and their procedures concentrate more on sensory overload and mind games than on firepower. That's not to say that they're all like that, though. I know for a fact that It-X trains new recruits online in the Warzones. Y'know that kid who's really good at *Quake*? He may be shooting at *you* someday—

And his parents probably won't see anything wrong with that.

New World Order

These guys think they're the masters of information, even though they didn't see its real power 'til we used it to burn the Technocracy when we left. The MIBs and their superiors may not be the masters they *think* they are, but they're damn good at collecting information (and using it) just the same.

The worst part about the NWO is that they're really good at hiding. Their agents have a way of walking unseen or unrecognized through almost any crowd. They try to collect information on everyone who interacts with the Web. Any online conversation you have might be monitored, so sniff out the line before you say anything. Watch out for anything that says, "Click here for a special offer." Chances are it'll tag you with a tracer and report your movements to the Black Hats. And whatever you do, don't accept "cookies" in the Web. Most of 'em come out of the NWO's cookie jar, and you *will* get caught with your hand in it sooner or later.

Progenitors

You don't see many Progenitors in the Web, but watch out when you do. These mad doctors know a trick or two about meat, and they use that knowledge here. You've heard of users dropping dead after reading a nasty piece of email? Believe it — Progenitor Damage Control has been experimenting for some time with the connections between lethal feedback, viruses and the VR body and its meat.
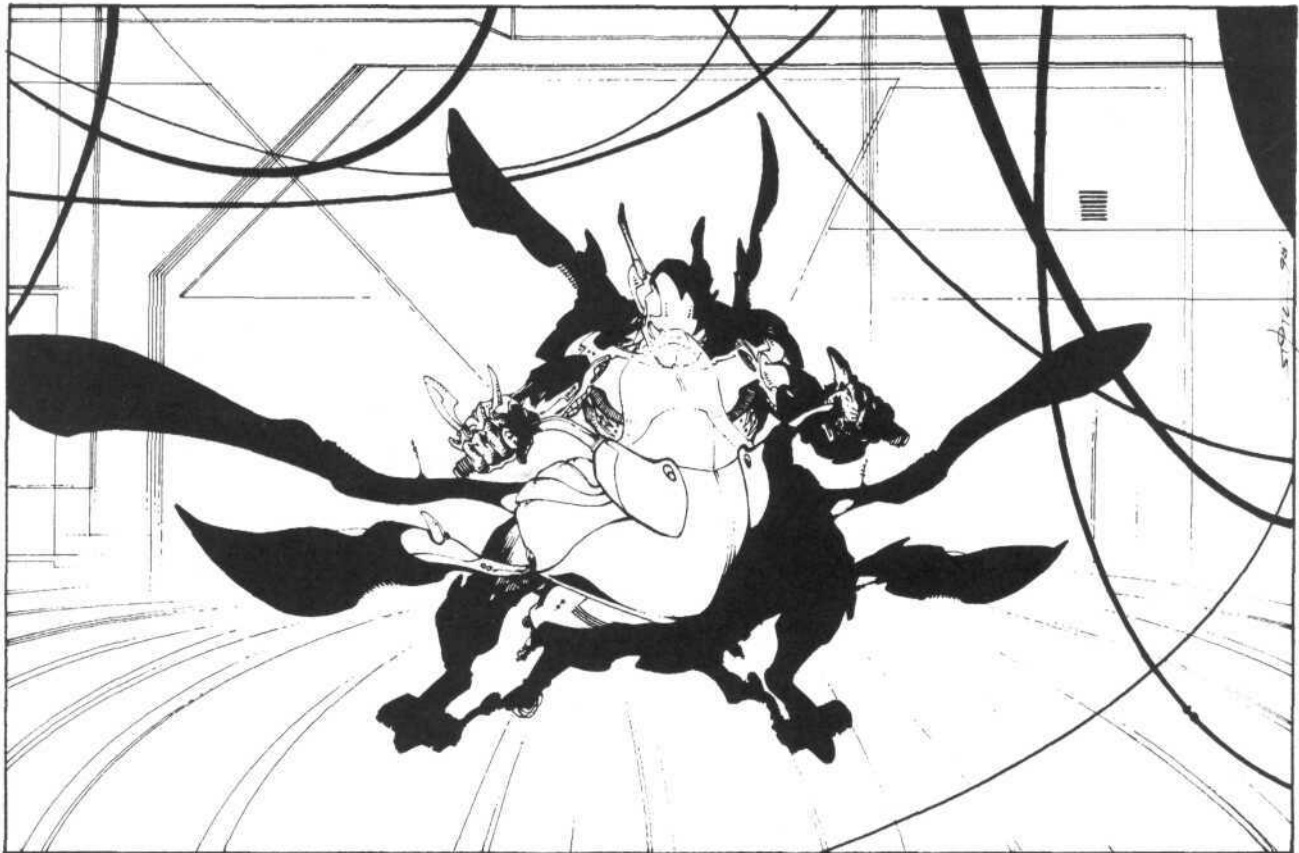
From what I've heard, the Progenitors mainly use the Web for research on their Human Genome Project — and for recreation in the sex sectors. However, rumors insist that some of their "perfect human" icons poke around in the ruins of old sectors, researching the basic nature of the Web and feeding the data to the mainframes back home. It's whispered in the Spy's Demise that they're looking to "educate" the Web's natural awareness, if they can contact it. Should they succeed, some folks say, the mad doctors might be able to domesticate the Net.

[Input address = 999.104.47.301]

God, how much would it suck if the Web woke up, and it was a Technocrat?

[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]

I can't even tell you. If the Progenitors pull it off, it'd be a serious "Fuck you" to the rest of us.

Syndicate

The Syndicate's bean-counters learned early on about the value of computers and the Net. The ideal of a cashless society runs through a lot of their propaganda, and you only have to watch an ATM or checkout line to see how well they've succeeded with it. Money is the ultimate virtual reality, and they've got their hands in it up to the elbows. Billions of dollars now move through computers every day, and guess who's making a killing on it? Credit companies, stock traders, even government financial networks are under their influence, if not their control. Thanks to Syndicate (or Neffie) agents within a huge software company that dominates the market (you know the name, I don't have to say it), their business software is in thousands of offices, adjusting the business world into their vision of perfection.

That ain't enough for them, though. To crush creativity while hyping aggression (hey, violence sells!), Syndicate ops craft and support addictive video games. My old pal Josephine started beating them at their own game (let me tell you about TDK Games sometime), but she's had to wade through hell to succeed. [See *The Technomancer's Toybox,* pp. 24-25.] On a more personal level, Syndicate ops support witch-hunts against hackers, especially Adepts. In the name of "information security," no crime is too trivial, no fine too stiff, no right too sacred. If they really wanna get ruthless, hit men'll wipe out your bank account, alter your credit rating or break your face. Worst of all, though, they might offer you a job, a really cushy six-figures sort of thing with a boatload of benefits. All you have to do is surrender your creativity and privacy to The Corporation, and all your worldly desires will be met! Mephistopheles has a new Armani suit, and he's got a contract with your name on one line and the Syndicate's on the other.

You won't see many Syndic spinners, but you'll see their fingerprints all over Netspace. Occasionally, if and when you decide to bust the bank, you'll be dealing with their attack geomids — nasty countermeasure progs that kick virtual ass.

Although certain rotes will work against 'em [see "Programming Systems," SITE 5], these little bastards are better avoided than fought (kinda like their mommies and daddies in the Great Big Boardroom). And neither one can be avoided forever, so keep your eye out for 'em.

Void Engineers

The Voids are our biggest competition in the Web — even bigger now that everyone's racing to reclaim the digital rubble the Great Crash left behind. To the Voids, the Net is just another frontier to explore, and they do it with a vengeance. Their spinners are almost as good as we are (note I said *almost*), and they've reclaimed huge areas of the Web already. Eight out of 10 times, SRVRZ formats are Void work, and they understand the principles of Correspondence better than their steelhead co-workers do.

Fortunately for us, most Voids are more interested in exploration than in kicking ass. They've got a few shock troopers stashed around the Net, but for the most part, they're OK — for Ironteeth. Funny thing I've noticed: Unlike their stone-faced colleagues, many Voids seem to love the cat-and-mouse masked ball of the Great Race. I'm sure if they wanted to just open up on everyone they met, they could, but they seem to get a kick out of changing icons and making like Bogart on crack. We couldn't conduct the Cold War Casablanca routine without willing dance partners, and the Voids seem more than willing to play the game. Where HIT Marks come in blazing, a Void might sidle up to ya in a low-cut red dress, blow smoke in your face and ask you to play "Misty" for her. A lot of "Bogies" (spinners who "dress up" in film noir drag) happen to be Voids in disguise, and they really get into their roles. If the Race wasn't so damned important, we'd probably get along great.

It *is* that important, though. More to the point, there isn't much truce ground open between the Adepts and the Technocracy. Sure, a couple of us might share a virtual cigarette now and then, but they hate us and we hate them. The bad blood flows through the Web like employees through Apple's door. While Whiteout and a common cause keep us from de-rezzing each other on sight, I don't see us humming the theme from *Friends* anytime soon.

Free Spinners

All this makes it sound like the Net is divided between us, the Conventions and a few clueful allies. Which is not true at all. The biggest group in Webspace *isn't* a group — it's the mass of spinners who never choose a side, or who go after their own goals in their own ways. Buzzbombs fit under this heading, but they're just a loud minority....

[Input address = 628.19.933.1004]
SQEAK 4 UR-SELF, ATARI-HED!
[Input address = 1023.1023.1023.9]
[Twip] As I was saying: …a minority of the "free spinners" who come and go in our little burg. O'course,

considering that one spinner can be many spinners at once (we'll get to that someday... let's stay on track), there's no telling how many of *any* kind of spinner you actually have playing each side at any given time. You just have to take it on faith that you've got someone on your back.

The bleaters, naturally, are usually here on their own agendas. Some, thinking the whole Race is a big game, help out one side or the other. Most of 'em, though, just keep to their own affairs... which isn't to say they can't mudge things up from time to time. You've just gotta take 'em as ya meet 'em.

Neffies — our "friends" from Hellsville — wander around starting all kinds of strife. Your average Billy-Boy won't announce himself as such, of course; chances are, if you've logged onto satanrulz@hell.com, you've entered a Grid run by 14-year olds. Uh, uh. Neffies are lots more subtle; they'll do the classic Wimpy — "Why don't you go and him fight?" — and sit off on the sidelines as the flames rise. I knew one VA who got tricked by a "client" into stealing data from his girlfriend's secret sector; said info contained love logs from a Fuzzy with a kinky sense of fun. Naturally, said Adept went bonzo. Before the whole thing was over, the Fuzzy (a Sleeper) had been brain-fried, the couple had broken up, and the VA had been rawhided out of common space. The Neffie? No one knows who or what s/he was, or where s/he came from or went.

I know for a fact that some crazy spiders are weaving sectors, too. Remember the spin-art sites I mentioned earlier? Madballz — Marauders — were probably behind 'em. Problems are two. One: Like Neffies, Madballz like to hide, and that's easy in the Web. Two: The weird mind-games Webspace pulls on you tend to twist spinners in very odd directions. I suspect (though again there's no way to prove it) that more spinners go Marauder than anyone wants to admit. And who would know? Even the sanest people act pretty crazy here.

As I said, most free spinners are OK humanoids. Just be careful. That Cindy Crawford icon could have Loreena Bobbit on the other end —

Other Dangers

There's all kinds of dangerous things in the Web; what you meet depends on the sectors you stumble into. If you run into a Realm that's formatted like the African jungle, watch out for lions and snakes. Visiting a deep sea sector? Bring shark repellent. There are too many sectors in existence for me to list all the potential hazards. The best thing I can do is tell you to keep your eyes open and stay on your toes; expect the unexpected. Yeah, it's a cliche, but it's true.

There are some Web-wide dangers to watch out for, though:

• I mentioned digital HIT Marks earlier, and let me remind you about them. They're fast, they're nasty, and they don't give quarter.

• Watch out for power surges; they happen now and then, sweeping through sectors like cyclones through the Midwest, picking up data, icons and programs and scattering them from here to the Matterhorn.

• Zerks (also called Data Beasts and other stuff like that) spun off from Net-enabled computer games sometimes cause problems if a monster slips through the electronic cracks; the creatures from *Quake* or *Diablo* might be fun to blow up on your monitor, but they're mean bastards when they wander into the Web.

• FREEKS — Free Ranging Electronic Encroachment Kill Systems — chase intruders from restricted sectors, and occasionally follow them out into "free" Webspace as well. The original FREEKS were security programs. These mindless countermeasure progs can stun you, de-rez you, or scatter you into fractals, depending on what the System has been set to do. Some assholes set FREEKS loose just to watch the fun; buzzbombs and Neffies are notorious for that.

• And there's always the spectre of another Great Crash, looming over the Web like Godzilla (the *real* one, thanks) on a bender. The last one came from outside and hit without warning. Who knows when or if another event will trigger that kind of shock wave again? To prevent another total Crash, a number of us have been making "backups" in Horizon Realms and experimenting with new survival programs. The best we can do is hope another Great Crash never occurs, and prepare for one in case it does.

• The last thing I'll mention is something I call "Lost Programs." They're programs that got stuck in a loop during the Crash, but somehow spun off into a virtual life of their own. Now they wander the Web, trying to complete themselves. They're erratic and unpredictable, sometimes attacking spinners and sometimes passing by. They each have some final task to perform, and if you do it for them, they disappear, complete.

FOLLOW
THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

We tend to think science has explained everything. ., But this idea of a clocklike universe has nothing to do with the real world.

— Jim Yorke

So, how exactly do we get in here to see all this great stuff? This is data that'll come in handy every day, so now's the time to stop daydreaming. If you have a data-capture device, turn it on.

Getting In

I'm sure it won't surprise you that there are multiple ways to get into the Digital Web. Pretty much everyone knows about the three basic methods, but I'll describe 'em in detail to fill in any blanks. Each way of getting into the Web has a different degree of "being there," a different level of completeness. The more fully you exist in the Web, the more intense the experience. That usually means the deeper you are, the more you see and the more you can affect. There *is* a downside, though: The more you can affect the Web, the more it can affect you.

Sensory Visitation

The fact that you're all here tells me you're at least basically familiar with this method. It's the first way in an Adept learns; for some spinners, it's the only way they'll ever know. Two good things about telepresence (another name for sensory visitation): It's easy, and it's safe. Two bad things about telepresence: It's easy and it's safe.

Sensory visitation is easy, 'cause all you need is a Net-enabled computer, a good set of VR goggles and some electrodes in the right places for tactile feedback. Slap on your goggles, hook 'em up to your rig, slide into your favorite Net connection and voila! You're in the Web. The simplest goggles only let you *see* things, but better rigs give you the other senses, too.

Telepresence is safe, 'cause everything comes in through the goggles. The worst that can happen to you is that you get dumped. It might hurt some if you're in a restricted sector, but otherwise, the worst part about a telepresent dump is the pain in the ass of re-connecting and starting over. Plus, even though you're concentrating on VR, you can still sorta sense what's going on around your meat body. If someone knocks at your door, all you have to do is take off the goggles to get out of the Net.

The fact that it's so easy means that just about anyone can do it. That means any Tradition mage who buys a computer and a VR rig (we're generally pretty happy about that); any Technocracy butthead (we're not so happy about that) with the same hardware; even any Sleeper (happiness about that depends on who you ask) who manages to blunder through it all. Bleater VR is kinda limited right now, but it's getting more popular all the time. *Virtual Tank 3K,* that networked, VR battle game that just went online in six cities, is one example. I've even heard of a software company with a VR file-access system that makes a user think he's walking through a library. Every Sleeper who uses that system to access the Net looks like a mage.

Telepresence is also awkward as hell. The goggles' filtering effect makes doing anything in the Web a lot harder. You ever try to pick a key up from the floor while wearing a thick pair of gloves? It's like that. Everything seems to be at arm's length, and anything you try to do takes extra concentration and effort. You also can't really affect anything in the Web, except through magick. You can do simple stuff, like upload or download data and move around, but that's about it. If you take a swing at someone's icon, your fist goes right through it unless you initiate the necessary rotes. If you want to *really* feel the Web, you need to move up to the next level.

Astral Immersion

This is the next rung on the ladder. It's more complete than telepresence, with increases in risk and reward. To use Astral Immersion, start with the same stuff you need for Sensory Visitation, then use basic Correspondence Science to move your consciousness into the Web. Basically, you fool yourself into believing you're actually somewhere else; it's an illusion, but illusions can become real if you believe in 'em, and that's what happens here. Your mind leaves your body and floats off to the Realm of the Web.

Once you try this, you may never go back to "standard" VR. You thought the Web looked good through your rig? Wait 'til the computer processing the input is the most powerful one we know of: your brain. Your mind directly contacts the Web's consciousness and becomes part of its energy. All your senses get overloaded with data, and the world comes into sharp focus. Remember the first time you saw a movie in a THX theater? Compare that to the sound of a transistor radio, and that's the difference between Astral Immersion and Sensory Visitation.

Most Adepts come in through this door. An Astral traveler has more power to influence the Web than a straight VR skipper does, and everything looks so much cooler. Why watch a baseball game at home when you can be there, sitting behind home plate? Hell, you can see the game through the umpire's *eyes,* if you want to! Don't forget, though, that the Net can affect you. If you get punched, it hurts. Don't think the pain'll just disappear when your visit's over, either. When you jack out, most of it stays with you as sore muscles, fatigue, headaches, you name it. Sometimes, if the damage is bad enough, you get brain damage. Worse, some mages know enough about the body's own signals to monkey with 'em through your connection to the Web. This juju's called lethal feedback, 'cause enough of it will kill you.

The other bad part about Astral Immersion is that your mind is totally in the Net, so your meat body is helpless. You can't sense anything going on back at home, so you'd best be sure no unwanted visitors are gonna come by while you're busy. You can figure out your own best way to protect yourself while you're immersed, but most Adepts I know have special alarm systems that cut the power to their VR rig if anyone breaks into their pad.

Holistic Immersion

This is the ultimate joy ride, boys and girls, the no-holds-hatred way of visiting the Web. You wanna talk about *being* there? You can't be more "there" than this. If VR was watching a video of the Kennedy assassination, this would be walking beside the limousine and feeling the blood splatter on your face.

Holistic Immersion digitizes your body, converts it into pure information, and injects it into the Web. There you re-form physically and experience the Net in all its glory. For a spinner with more brawn than brains, this can be a godsend, and even if you don't need the physical edge, it's a hell of a rush. Doing this isn't easy: It demands a hell of a lot of knowledge from you, and some trinary iron spicy enough to handle the strain. The human body becomes a boatload of information, and 64 megs of RAM just won't cut it.

There are some serious downsides to entering the Web this way. Your body is digital information, so you're fair game for any program that manipulates data. GODZ help you if someone drops an infinite loop on your head. Also, since you're physically in the Web, anything that happens to you… well, happens to *you.* If you get cut, you'll be bleeding when you get back. If you get killed, it's lights out.

A lot of Web walkers died in the Crash 'cause they were Holistic when it happened. Imagine boppin' along in some Realm when it suddenly disappears; it'd be like somebody vaporizing the Earth. Some Adepts have been working on a rig to help Holistics avoid getting fried. As I heard it, the rig uses some kind of look-ahead processor and calculates the probability of certain things happening, based on what you do and how the surroundings react. If it looks like you're about to buy it, the chip initiates the necessary rote, downloading your ass outta the sling. The thing's still quirky and far from perfect, but the couple of seconds of protection it gives might get you back alive. Busted up and bleeding, maybe, but not dead.

I've heard you can "climb" into the Digital Web through edges of the spirit world. As I said earlier, a mess of webbing and fog floats on the fringes of Netspace; according to the book I read a year or so ago, those fringes co-occupy the far shores of the Umbra. I've heard stories of people — shamans, mostly, although some sheepdogs claim to have done it — literally climbing from the spirit world into the Web. All I can say is, it must be one bitch of a climb!

According to the sheepdogs, this "fringe web" winds down into a "CyberRealm" called Dystopia [see *Beyond the Barriers: The Book of* Worlds and Umbra: *The Velvet Shadow*], where all technology's nightmares go to die. Werecreatures, both meaty ones and ones enhanced with fucked-up splat and iron, occasionally crawl up out of there and come to visit us. Knowing that, some human spinners like to dupe wolfskin icons, then walk around startin' shit. If, by some weird turn of events, you find yourself saying "hello" to the American Werewolf in Netspace, be nice but careful. It might be someone who likes wearing a shaggy icon, but it might really *be* a werewolf, and those bastards are fast and strong.

Icons and Dollz

Who do you want to be today? As many of you already know, an icon is the mask you present to the VR world, a 3-D alter-ego that shows what you *want* to show. Wanna be a movie star? Wanna be ripped? Have bedroom eyes, huge tits or a build like Kevin Sorbo? So long as you can create the program, you can have the look. Not that it stops there; you can become a fish, a bird, a dragon or some monstrosity outta Lovecraft's wet dreams. No matter. An icon is simply a CGI mask, and you can change it any time. The firing speed of your neurons is more important than the size of your icon. Rely on your wits and your magick, and you'll come out OK.

Creating and changing your icon takes a little computer savvy, 'cause you've got to write a separate program for each variation. The same is true if you're using Holistic Immersion; you literally *are* your icon in that case, but since your body is pure information, giving it a new look is no harder than re-programming the icon you use when you're telepresent. The only real limits are your own creativity, general mass (due to Whiteout, it's generally not a good idea to more than triple your size or mass), and the specs of any Constraint Realm you might happen to be visiting. Naturally, an icon doesn't allow you to do anything you wouldn't normally be able to do (you can't fly and breathe fire just because you *look* like a dragon). Then again, if you're here to begin with, there are a number of things you can do no matter what you look like.

Your "mask" isn't a complete disguise. Since Net access is based on computer programs, each icon that enters carries an access code. No matter what the icon looks like, the code remains the same. Since few spinners want ugly blots of code messing up their pretty icons, those codes aren't usually too obvious. If you know where and how to look for 'em, though, they're always there. The only icons that don't carry access codes are the folks who literally climb in from other Realms. And since that ain't exactly the most popular route available, virtually everyone you see will have an access code somewhere on his/her/its person.

As you can guess, people judge you by your icon. Unlike meat, an icon is a face you make for yourself. If it's Lame, you made it that way. Most people prefer low-key or imaginative icons over grossly powerful images; as most spinners know, the guy behind that Duke Nukem physique is probably a 44.452508392-kilo loser with a face like a day-old Dominos. Lots of spinners *do* fashion intimidating, sexy or totally bizarre icons and get away with it (hell, in some sectors, that

kind of thing is required dress), but for the most part, folks want to see how clever you can be, not how big your tits or muscles appear. Netwise, brain power is the only real power.

Some "people" are nothing *but* icons. If you haven't heard of Digital Dollz yet [see *The Technomancer's Toybox],* they're essentially walking icons driven by simple personality programs. They're kinda stupid and no good for rough stuff (they de-rez when struck), but can be fun (if weird) company, so long as you don't mind conversation that's about as deep as the average issue of *Entertainment Weekly.* Considering that Dollz were created as companions for horny geeks (and have looks that would shame a swimsuit or underwear model), conversation is usually the last thing you'll worry about in a Dollz' company.

WHY WE DO THE THINGS WE DO

Instead of looking for an image of the universe, instead of looking at photos of stars, I want to try to play *the universe.*

— Dr. Fiorella Terenzi

Like everything in life, it all comes down to the question of "Why?" Why do we tinker with circuit boards and peripherals, trying to build the perfect machine? Why do we slowly cook our retinas with the gear we use to see the Web's glory? Why do we put up with the shit the Traditions give us? I bet you'll find as many answers to these questions as there are Virtual Adepts. Everybody's got his own reasons for how he lives his life, but there are some common things you can boil a lot of those reasons down to.

First, there's the party line of Ascension and Enlightenment. Things are comin' to a head, boys and girls, and the writing's on the wall. If you know how to read it, it's spray-painted in Day-Glo letters 10 feet high. When the fit hits the shan, we want to be ready to whisk everyone away to Reality 2.0, the virtual reality we're building in the Web. The Great Crash threw a monkeywrench into the works, but we're getting things back online as fast as we can, so we can be ready when the big day comes.

In the meantime, though, there's a lot of cool stuff to do in the Web, and a lot of whacked out shit to see. You want to explore Mount Fiji? Somebody's formatted a sector to look like it. You want to feel what it's like to fly? Visit a Constraint Realm where everybody's a bird. You can see and explore *anything* in the Web, 'cause the shape of the world here is limited only by the imaginations of those who mold it.

You can also take advantage of the fact that just about anything there is to know is somewhere in the Web. Want to spy on someone to find out what she's up to? Dig long enough and you'll find out; anything you need to know is here. Technocrats are especially vulnerable — they're always filing reports and keeping records of everything they do. (Even if the NWO spin doctors get their hands on it, a persistent Adept can always uncover the truth.) Once you find the information, there's a lot you can do with it. Somebody pissed you off in Meatsville? Why bother with a fist fight or a magickal duel when it's so much more satisfying to watch the repo men take away his car and furniture, 'cause you twipped his credit rating?

Some Adepts use the Web to look for answers to the great mysteries. Since the Net is a repository of nearly all the information that exists, if there's clue to an answer, it'll be here somewhere. Who really runs the Spy's Demise, and why? Where's the Web's operating system, and can it be hacked? What *really* happened to Alan Turing? Are Turing and his computer really running around in the shadows of the Web? Was James McPherson really consumed by Paradox, or is he running around in here somewhere, with his MEGA Pen in hand? Who's going to win the war for reality, and will we manage to lead everyone down the true path to Enlightenment? These are some of the questions I think about. Theoretically, the answers are here somewhere.

Don't forget, however, the most common reason for spending time in the Web: Here, it doesn't matter what your meat body's like — you can be anything you want to be. Maybe you're overweight or pizzafaced, or possessed of Godzilla-breath. Doesn't matter. Maybe you're weak, or scarred, or black, female or gay; those things don't say dick about *you,* but lots of people get twigged about 'em anyway. The meat market is a mirror-hall of bullshit vanities, but you can leave them all behind in the Web, 'cause no one sees you unless you want 'em too. There's comfort in anonymity. It's like that commercial on TV a couple of years ago: "There is no race; there is no gender. There is only the power of the mind." Damn straight.

I see it this way: The Web is a place where "mind over matter" is more than a catchy phrase or a magick trick. It's the essential rule of life. Here, you are what you will yourself to be, and the limit is a whole lot higher than the sky.

Okay, kiddies, that wraps up my show. I hope you each take home a little something that sticks with you. I'm sure I'll run into each of you again here and there. Until then, remember to back up your data, keep your eye out for the Technocracy, and don't expect decent conversation from a Digital Doll.

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SITE 2: LIFE ONLINE

If you don't know how to get "there," you'll never see it, or understand it.

Oh, yeah, the "Webber community" is a lot like the "Net community" back in RealSpace, but hey, there are more differences than anyone would like to admit. It's true that a meat-only hacker can log on to the Web's more esoteric sites and have a lot of fun, but to get the real pie you've got to take the dive and go "there" — straight down and into wonderland.

Let's check the depth real quick, first. Wouldn't want to hit your head on the edge of the pool, wouldya? Grab the hand of this beautiful icon (it's from Burne Jones' *Nimue*, why do you ask?) and ride with me down into the Information Sea.

BTW, don't ask about the bottom of the pool — far as I know, it doesn't have one!

How Geeks Made the World

tiny fugue? Why, I remember the days when we tattooed packets on the foreheads of slaves and sent them out into the Net.

— FastFingers Dansky

"There" used to exist in text only. In the olden days, Webbers could only type at each other. Unless you took the Turing Express (which most people weren't brave or stupid enough to do), VR was only as real as a voice on a phone or text on a screen. (Try projecting yourself into a shared world that none of you can actually see. Uh huh. Now you understand why very few people were ready to just leap in. How can you test the depth if you don't even know what the pond looks like?) The technology to project a person straight into the Net took a while to develop. In the meantime, early VAs and bleater Webbers alike simply wrote to each other, fiddled with their decks, and tried to puzzle out the next step in the trip.

That trip began with the keyboard, the typewriter of the gods. Early Webbers dashed off their thoughts to each other on a thousand different home-baked systems. Their written words would disappear down phone lines (can you imagine?), wander out into the ether and eventually crawl up some other schmuck's screen, looking (or more accurately, pretending) to be communication in Real Time. Sheyeah. Right.

Real Time, my ass. Thousands of nanoseconds occurred between when the first typer hit <return> and when the second person saw the message. That's right, saw the message. We were still working in text. You know, words, like in a book. Oh, c'mon, a *book*! With paper pages. Yep, honest and true.

Talking the Talk

Here's something you should know, something that may help make Web communication comprehensible: It's yet another holdover from the days of text. Your hands get tired when you type a lot. In fact, people's hands and joints and muscles used to take so much damage that they'd start to wear out. So there was a real tendency for old-line geeks to save keystrokes and shorten words and phrases to give their meat a break. "Cult of Ecstasy," for example, logically becomes "CoX" and is pronounced "cox." Saved keystrokes are even better if the word you produce is unpronounceable; ".cshrc" has given UNIX wizards fits for years — "sea-shark" is the best of a slew of unpalatable possible pronunciations. Geeks have an odd sense of humor and take pride in their word manipulations. (One computer language was named just so that programmers could tell clueless administrative types that they were writing code "in Glish.") This, of course, points out the second reason for the linguistic

shorthand employed by both mortal Webheads and Awakened ones alike: exclusion. If you don't belong "there," you're not likely to understand large portions of the conversation "there." Which is as it should be.

(Naturally, the futuristic jargon that defines the truly Elite — and the utterly Lame, too — almost totally defies comprehension. I'm just using the basics here so you can follow along. Trust me, if I wanted to be an obfuscationalist, I could leave you scratching your head with a thesaurus in one hand and a can of Jolt and some Ibuprofen in the other! :-))

Saving keystrokes means, however, that there's an odd transliteration between text and the spoken language. Occasionally, the spoken language gets adopted back into text, regardless of what language teachers declare "proper." So "prolly," "kewl" and "rember" are common usage, as are "gonna," "gotta," "hafta" and the ubiquitous "'em." On the other hand, geek-originated computer acronyms have also been translated into spoken words. "Imho," "wibni" and "yawa?" (among others) are all commonly used spoken words that represent entire thoughts or phrases.

Oh, yeah! Since you can't hear how folks inflect and emphasize words when you're working in text, geeks developed this habit of capitalizing important words and words used to express abstract ideas that are being used as concrete fact. Like "Real Time." What's that mean? We call time "real" just because events are happening now and not sometime in the future? Here's another one: "Web." It's tough to point at "the Web," but we use the term like we know what it means. Or even "Real Soon Now," which implies a semi-sarcastic, undefined "sometime, maybe" kind of time. Every group creates an "insider" language; not only does Netspeak streamline communications (and cut down on keystrokes, too), it also helps group members identify each other. You'll get used to it, I promise.

I-con See!

Imagine, if you will, what the earliest Webbers found when they actually made the jump. Lotsa empty black space, maybe punctuated with a few gauzy strands of Web. A lot of fog, perhaps some lines of glowing data tossing around like dead leaves on a virtual wind. Here and there, a few blocky sectors, blazing neon geometries with dead-sharp edges. And between them, tiny spiderwebs of code, weaving up a cat's cradle of information against a deep black void.

As you can imagine, good graphics became a priority. Who'd wanna hang around in *that* for any length of time?

Without a "there" to jump to, the majority of Webbers were still stuck in text. Pretty soon we got the graphics. Frankly, for a long time, the text was better. At least if

you're using words, people can draw pictures in their own heads. Writing early online graphics was kinda like shoving colored blocks around a screen (and looked about that primitive, too!), and it took all sorts of special permissions and privileges before you could even color in your own squares in a public sector. I mean, not only was this slower than text, it was uglier, too. But folks put some energy into it — mostly because it was "new" and "better" somehow, or maybe people thought it was easier to draw than write — and eventually, some of it actually started to look pretty decent. O'course, we're still talking about flat-screen images here, so it felt pretty far removed from the person actually using or writing stuff.

There was something else at work, I think. When you've got only words to work with, you can draw pictures in your own head. If I tell you that I want to live in a thatch-roofed cottage with flowers in window boxes, kinda like Anne Hathaway's cottage near the River Avon, you get a picture in your head, right? I prolly don't even have to describe the flagstones in the path leading up to the front door, or the airy trees overhanging the edge of the roof. You "get" the picture I drew for you with words.

I can't draw that for you with paint or pixels. Hell, I couldn't even draw you an outhouse, much less a thatch-roofed cottage. I might be able to manage something that you'd recognize as a flower, but any kindergartner would do as well. Trees? Green globs stuck on top of a brown stick. I guess we can't all be artists.

And that was the beauty of words. You could make things happen without actually having to create a *visual* image. You could rely on mental pictures. That, sadly, wasn't gonna do it for someone who wanted or needed to get into the Web itself. Some sort of visual environment was necessary — that, and Webbers with the spice and iron to jump beyond the words and graphics and get to the heart of the beast.

VAs with more spice than sense tried out a plethora of rigs. Motivated by the concept of the Correspondence Point (where all places become one), they sought to discover the equation that would open the doorway to that Point... or go beyond it into that place-that-was-no-place-and-yet-every-place. In the process, they tried to lay out a landscape — sort of like the flags explorers plant when they reach some new discovery. Without a "shared connection" to aim for, our favorite methods of immersion (Sensory and Astral) were personal routes that led to different parts of the Web... if they led anywhere at all. This limitation made graphic innovation a priority. A lot of good people went batshit (or bye-bye) trying to mix blocky graphics with dimension-hopping iron. One 1960s-era VA called Jolly Roger merged lasers, brain-jacking, TV screens, LSD and Peter Max prints in his attempt to jump into VR. His house imploded, but he supposedly survived the experiment — as Blue Meanie, a Marauder still warping his way through the Web in a vaguely human blot of colors.

Eventually, graphics improved. Through a combination of VA/SoE experiments in dimensional/etheric physics, advanced computer imaging, and Sleeper innovations like wire-frame graphics. By the early '70s, the average VA could project into the Web and find something more than black space, glowing lines and strings of code. A funny thing happened when movies like Star Wars and Tron merged with video games in the human consciousness: the Net began to conform to human expectations of computer space! This verifiable proof that reality conforms to human observation and belief (even when the beholder is not present) gave us the boost we needed to set things on a light-speed course.

It took the '70s graphics revolution to lay the cornerstones for online communities. Prior to the middle of the decade, most Webbers still interfaced with each other through text. VR communions were personal, not "shared." It was pretty damned hard, even for VAs, to transmit graphics into someone else's system, so you had to get them to jump beyond the screens without having much of a place to aim for. To top it off, most "interaction" occurred with objects and scenery, not with other people. (Oh, yeah, there were some animated "people" around — nowhere near as good as the Dollz around today — that were usually just products of some hormonal geek's fantasies. Scanned *Playboy* models were common templates in the early days, and many a geek had his own VR harem waiting for him when he jumped online.) Hey, no matter how advanced humans think we are, we're still primates and we still need other people! By the time innovators like MacPherson and Bleeding Scone had woven graphics, swim-tech and computer networks into modern Immersion techniques, the graphics revolution had reworked the Web into a wonderland — a wonderland we could *all* reach with the right tools and perceptions.

The final hurdles involved access. Goggles, headsets, full-body suits and bio-hooked electrodes made VR access a total pain in the ass until miniaturization and microprocessing became commonplace in the mid-1980s. Sleeper iron remained, by necessity, more limited and bulky than our own, but soon even they could dive into the shallow end of the graphics pool.

Which brings us to where we are today. The Web is more vivid and complex than ever before. Computer animation is everywhere, and the Sleepers have accepted VR so totally into the common paradigm that it's only a matter of time before any geek with a computer and a hookup can dive into the pool with us and swim with the Awakened fishes, so to speak, way beyond text limitations and lag time crawl. Even then, though, the legacies of text chat will remain with us. Hey, those phrases have already become part of the language outside the geek sphere. Who knows what other transformations will occur when the whole world goes online?

Communities

There's order, there's chaos, there's intuition, and there's formality, all operating simultaneously.

— Elliot Sharp, speaking of the human brain

So what about that pool? How do people "live" in the Web? And how can you create your own space? Lemme tell you a bit about how things work in general, then we'll take a little stroll around and I'll show you some specifics.

Even back in the olden days of text, there were communities on the Net. It's not like most folks thought of 'em that way — after all, folks have been defining "community" in terms of geography ever since the first time two families decided that they were neighbors. MUDs, newsgroups, chat lines, even listservs let non-proximate folks get to know each other. MUDs and chat lines worked Real Time; newsgroups and listservs took longer. But the point is, folks got to *know* each other. Kinda like having pen-pals you've never met, but a whole lot more immediate than waiting on snail mail.

Some groups of people who are not related by blood or marriage still describe themselves as "families." Anthropologists call these "fictive kinships." Some people go even further and equate the people in the group to neurons in an ever-growing brain. Regardless of the terminology, however, the fact remains that people choose to share a common history and assume that they'll share a common future. These people create "communities of interest" — organisms joined by a common cause.

Within any community, social and political hierarchies exist. Some folks administer the place, either because they want to or because no one else can be bothered. (I have a hard time believing that anyone actually chooses to be a petty bureaucrat!) There are systems of exchange, too. We use credit as one medium, but I would argue that we also use time, attention and information, too. If you edit my term paper, I'll help you with your organic chemistry homework. That's reciprocity — and, in some sense, that's also "community." We trade skills, and benefit from each other's expertise. We all have fictive and formal kinships, rituals, factions and friendships in RealSpace — and in a Web community, too. Physical geography really doesn't matter when you can create your own proximity in the Net. Time of day doesn't matter, either; if you can't sleep, you can log in and find someone to talk to, even if they're halfway around the globe.

In fact, it doesn't matter how old you are, or what your meat looks like, or what your grade-point average or professional title are. Your gender (or lack thereof) has a remarkably small impact — unless you want it to, o'course. What *does* matter is your cleverness. How well you fit into your community. Your willingness to invest some time and energy into maintaining your online home or homes. Friendliness, wit, a willingness to exchange information — these are the attributes that matter online. A cool-looking icon is just the beginning. A skweeb is a skweeb.

Like meat communities, online communities begin when folks find a reason to band together. It could be for mutual defense from some common enemy, but it's more likely that folks just start hanging out together because they *like* each other, or need something from each other, or share some common interest. External adversity like the Great Crash can strengthen community bonds too, of course. That certainly happened in *my* online home, anyway. We've all been trying to help each other out, re-establishing lost links and creating new routes that bypass some Whited areas. Sometimes odd reasons bring people together. There was an online group, back in the days of text, called alt.callahans. Nifty folks, they were, who started hanging out together online just 'cause they liked a (supposedly) fictional bar in Spider Robinson's work. Liked it enough to make a sector out of it, then plop their icons down and call it home. There are *lots* of places like that online — and lots of families built around stuff other people might consider trivial.

Social Conflict and Resolutions

Naturally, communities and conflicts go together like milk and cheese. Any community that wants to survive those problems needs to create ways of dealing with them... and with the people who cause them. The so-called Great Race is a billboard example, but most conflicts are lots smaller than that. Like anyone else, Netizens disagree over anything from the quality of a movie to the polynomial root of a pleasing fractal. Yeah, the arguments can get pretty esoteric, but in the end they often come down to a simple disagreement. If you can resolve that disagreement without someone getting de-rezzed, you're moving in the right direction. For the most part, folks are (relatively) friendly, because if we don't work together — at some level, anyhow — we won't have a Web at all. It's not like there's some great and powerful wizard who maintains all of this. We do it. So things work — usually.

See, friendship is a two-way deal, and even when folks are only "relatively" friendly, things go pretty smoothly. When conflicts get ugly, everybody pays the price. How're you going to discipline a rogue icon? Lock 'em up? The problem child will just create a new icon and come back again.

But then, most folks who're obnoxious are just looking for attention. (But not all. Neffies and Madballz are a whole 'nother issue.)

• *Newbies* don't know any better. They're just new and stupid.

• *Trendies* come for the party. They heard cyberspace was JUZT 2 kewl, and hopped on the fast track of the information superhighway hoping to get a thrill.

• *Skippers* can't be bothered to actually do anything worthwhile. They skip in and skip out in a flurry of flirtations and promises. When you see someone like this, give her the impression that she really *matters,* then go off and leave her hanging.

That's generally the best way to handle stupid people: Go away and leave 'em alone. Eventually, they'll either get bored and go bother someone else, or they'll buy a clue and change their ways. If you think someone's redeemable, just take 'em aside and explain what's what. Some of 'em will get it. Some of 'em won't, but that's their problem. A dweeb who marginalizes himself with clueless behavior has only himself to blame.

A few Netizens really *are* intentional jerks. Every now and again, you get *skweebs,* folks who're downright malicious. These assholes dump, flame, steal and lie their way through whatever communities they can find. They start brushfire flame wars over nothing, pirate data, craft charming icons and use them to cause heartbreak, and occasionally get into really bad shit — sabotage, terrorism and virtual murder. Avoid 'em if possible, dump 'em if you can, and watch out for the inevitable rat bites on your ass.

Some skweebs can be really dangerous. If you've got a real rat in your maze, the best thing you can do is gather a posse and hunt his ass down. The Web is a frontier, and Netizens usually take care of their own business. The alternative is a police force, and nobody wants that.

Nobody but the Ironteeth, anyway.

Respect

Individual communities have their own rules, and it's not always easy to move between 'em gracefully. Like cultures in RealSpace, most online "families" favor certain manners. It's really easy to make friends online — most Netizens are used to being marginalized, and are more than willing to give someone clueful a chance to be friends. By the same token, it's really easy to make an ass of yourself... lots of people do it every day.

As a whole, Netizens tend to prize eloquence, wit, knowledge and a sense of humor. This even goes for the Ironteeth, most of whom have adapted surprisingly well to online social life. If you meet some steelhead with an attitude problem, he's prolly new here. A fairly healthy disdain for institutions and authority comes with the package, too, although some of the newer Netizens (usually soldiers of bureaucracy, Technocrat or otherwise) are as conformist as any file clerk.

The Net is an anarchist state. No ranks or titles beyond the ephemeral half-joke "Elite" are tolerated outside private sectors. Most of the folks here distrust authority, especially from RealSpace, and they're not keen about having anyone bring on old baggage! People make a lotta noise about newbies, but so long as they make some effort to grab the clue phone early on, new folks are treated OK (though a newbie'll prolly get a bit o'ribbin' before he settles in).

Eliteness is something you earn; if you have to ask, you don't have it. Most of the old dudes are considered Elite, but there's a backlash against that from some folks, who call the fogies "cryptkeepers," instead. By and large, you're given the respect you earn — with smarts, spice and savvy. Digging up inside information is a great way to score points with people, too, but Goddess help you if you get caught making stuff up (or worse, stealing it from someone popular). The fiery brand of LAMER haunts those who break the rules too often or too badly.

Brands and Rawhiding

That stigma — a literal brand burned into your icon — defines the line between acceptable and intolerable. In some minds, "Lame" still defines the newbie; most Netizens are more forgiving than that, though. It usually takes a fairly rank act of stupidity or malice to get branded, but that punishment marks you big-time.

In the old days, a person whom you'd pissed off would simply de-rez your sorry ass, or get his friends to take you down if he couldn't. That was easier when there were fewer people online. With the high volume on the Net today, you'd be wasting time and making enemies unnecessarily if you chose to be that touchy. These days, it's easier just to ignore someone (or ostracize her) if she gets annoying. A lot of people don't *mean* to be jerks, they just wind up that way.

For those who really cross the line — and it's a broad line — rawhiding has become the time-honored social punishment. Essentially, a group of people jump the

Brands and Symbols

Spammer: Moron who wastes other spinners' time. A minor brand.

Lamer: All-purpose symbol of contempt.

Whiteout Magnet: Careless idiot who tosses magick around too freely.

Thief: Data pirate. Major brand.

Exile: Terminal offender; to associate with him is to be branded Lame.

Off Limits: Not a brand, but a "keep out" symbol.

Claimed: A symbol marked on formats-in-progress.

Construct: Technocracy mark for a SRVRZ.

offender's icon, freeze it with a skip program and burn a brand into its imaging program. No matter what the asshole does, the brand remains permanent until the procedure runs its course. Really mild offenders get nailed with small-time brands — a week or so. The average brand lasts a month or two; real assholes get nailed with six-month tags, and real assholes who get caught more than once get permanent brands. As of yet, there isn't a rawhiding code. If you happen to get nailed, you'd better hope your crimes are light and your "jury" is merciful.

What crosses the line? Theft. Assault. Careless magick. Harassment. Generally, if you really piss someone off, you're liable to get rawhided. That "really pissed off state depends on the offender's deeds and the offendee's attitude. Some people'll rawhide you for lookin' at 'em cross-eyed, but most Webbers are more forgiving than that. If everyone branded everyone else over the smallest slight, the brands would soon be worthless, wouldn't they? And someone who rawhides people for the fun of it may find himself getting branded pretty damned quick!

Brands are painless unless you want to socialize. By common consent, most Webbers avoid or mock people who've been branded. An icon with a major brand is restricted from most sectors, and very few Webbers will trust him. Really tight sectors are set to de-rez an icon with a Thief, Exile or Whiteout Magnet brand, and it's a sure bet the Technocrats will boot a Webber with those marks so far off their turf that he'll be seeing stars for a week.

Flame Wars and Core Wars

Another solution presents itself in old-style dueling: Offendee challenges offender to a face-off, they fight, and someone (hopefully) wins. *Flame wars* erupt spontaneously: A heated argument literally bursts into flames. Insults become VR firebolts, and each "hit" intensifies the burn until the loser's icon de-rezzes. These duels are wars of words only — magickal attack is exceedingly bad form, and might earn the asshole a rawhiding. Most times, a flame war attracts an audience, who often "grades" the battle with its own comments (frequently spreading the war)! If things get really stupid, the crowd might just flame all parties concerned.

A nasty insult begins a *core war*. Here, the rivals select a place to fight, usually in a Warzone. They employ whatever weapons they care to use, although most folks prefer to agree on the weapons first. Some combatants prefer to fling blaster bolts at each other until one "dies"; really serious grudges might involve magickal fights, or VA-style core duels using computer viruses. **[See *Virtual Adepts,* p. 26.]** Either way, each party usually brings seconds and spectators. The results are considered "legal" — as legal as anything gets in the Web, anyhow!

Strange Avenues

Considering how we're trying to create a new reality here in Netspace, it's a wonder we carry over as much human baggage as we do. Still, there are quite a few "new-ances" that RealSpace can't touch....

Parallaxing

How can you be in two places at once, when you're not anywhere at all?

    - The Firesign Theater

Skilled Webbers tend to use different icons for different communities. A pal of mine calls the practice "eclectronics"; it makes it easier to keep straight who's who, especially when you're trying to *parallax* -- that is, to interact with folks in several places at once. I gotta warn you though, kid, parallaxing is a lot tougher that it looks, and it takes a fair amount of practice before you get good at it. Oh, and *do* expect to be razzed by folks who notice (unless they're in the same places at the same time, too).

It's prolly easier if you start out in only two places at once — preferably pretty slow places. You don't wanna try being in Fuzzy's bar and in some town's central marketplace at the same time. Too much going on, and you can't keep track of it all. Your icon will look like it's fallen asleep mid-sentence in one place while you're concentrating on what you're doing someplace else. Once you get good, though... hell, I know a kid who used to have sex and do his calculus homework someplace else at the same time, and his partner was none the wiser. So practice, but be discrete.

Yeah, yeah. We'll get back to the "sex" bit in a couple of minutes. I promise.

Part of the problem with being two — or more — places at once is that it distorts your perceptions of where you "are." That's why you gotta practice: so your brain will figure out how to keep track of a bunch of conversational threads at once. Your brain has to make the switch back and forth, and watching the mental and physical scenery shift that fast can be pretty damned disorienting. Imagine arguing with yourself through three icons, none of whom look anything like your meat. Can you say "identity crisis?" How many mouths do you want to say it with? We're still so "human" sometimes!

Anonymity

It's funny how folks think they're anonymous when they log on. Hell, anyone who knows what she's doing can see their electronic footsteps and trace them right back to the point where they came into the Net.

Most icons wear traces of the user's deck to begin with, and most users carry a lot of common characteristics into every icon they produce. Your ID code stays with you no matter what you look like. Even if it didn't, very few people

can create alternate personalities that are *nothing* alike. A perceptive chap can notice what carries over (like my penchant for Pre-Raphaelite icons, for example) and track you that way. Even a chameleon parallaxer (a Webber who can create many truly distinctive identities) leaves a trail of *pix-e dust* behind him, though. Think of conduits as switching points instead of just roads. Every time a Webber goes through a switching point, his presence gets recorded and time-stamped. That record, accessible to the right programs, is pix-e dust, and it's pretty hard to shake unless you change your icon every time you move from one sector to another.

Yeah, we still have to "move" around in this virtual world. Unless you've got a lot of spice to burn, it's still not exactly possible to "think" your icon from one place to another. There are ways around the conduits, though. Knowledgeable Netizens find back-doors and shortcuts that bypass the usual conduits (or simply 'port around) if they want to be surreptitious. Unless you're really careful, though, even those movements can be noticed by the wary and watchful. Of course, if you don't make a *habit* of sneaking around, most folks aren't going to bother watching you. On the other hand, if you're always trying to be stealthy, folks may start studying your moves to see what you're up to... or to learn a few new tricks from you!

Logging in from a public site can buy you a tiny bit of protection... but that only slows things down a bit if someone really wants to find out who you are. All they gotta do is trace you back to your host machine and see who's logged on. After that, it doesn't generally take a whole lot of skull sweat to narrow things down and make some pretty good guesses about who's doing what. So don't go thinking you can hide behind an anonymous icon! You're no newbie dweeb and you ought to know better by now. Goddess knows, there're enough other misconceptions about life on the Web already!

Sex Sells

Speaking of:

Trogs have this thing about doing the nasty online, like it's some Big Deal incomprehensibility. <shrug> Used to be they thought we were all pedophiles or mad bombers... now the bleater media thinks we all log on just to get laid. But really, it's no different than anything else people do, is it? It mostly depends on how good you are, after all. Sensory input is sensory input.

O'course, it was different back in the days of text. It had to have been. How do you simulate running a hand up someone's side, satin palm moving in a slow caress from hipbone to ribcage, in words? Nah, you gotta be there and *do* it for it to make sense. How can you *feel* it if you're busy trying to type it? Sounds like a yawner, donnit?

Imho, it was the drive for better online sex that pushed the graphics codes ahead so quickly — to say nothing of the tactile drivers and immersion tech! Let's face it: Sex (especially sexual pleasure) sells — always has, always will. This isn't exactly news. Maybe it's just the way we're wired, 'cause it's not like reproduction is a factor in virtual sex. Raw sexual desire has driven a *lot* of industries down through the ages, my friend, especially when it comes to technological advances. Yeah, sex sells, all right. And as long as folks are willing to pay for sex (by proxy, if necessary), other folks will be trying to improve the look and feel (sorry) of online sex.

So now we've got software that — once you're online — gives you something so close to real that your brain believes it: taste, smell, tactile sensations... and graphics. Boy, howdy, have we gotten good at this shit! Look at Digital Dollz. Yeah, we've pretty well gotten graphics to a "believable" state! In the end, the whole thing's all a mind/tech game. Unless you've taken the Holistic Immersion route, you never *physically* touch the object of your online desire. All the same, you can feel each other as well — often better! — as you could if you were standing in the same room. Add sensory enhancers, psychotropics and a few well-placed mind-fucker rotes, and you've got an experience no fleshy Don Juan could ever provide!

There's more to this game than you would think: In ancient times, the people would set aside festivals like Beltane or the Satyricon; during those fests, orgies celebrated the gifts of life and fertility. Donning masks and costumes, the celebrants literally became "other beings" and channeled their gods. While the VR flesh dancers obviously aren't celebrating fertility or gods, some of 'em claim their icons become "other beings." By acting out metahuman sex in metahuman forms, they achieve metahuman awareness. Makes sense, I guess!

There are lots of advantages to getting laid online, too: Your meat doesn't have to leave home; if you need clean duds, you can just code 'em up; nobody gets pregnant (which, I would argue, is why humans will never move entirely online); if your partner likes brunettes you can be brunette; and no one *has* to sleep in the wet spot. 'Sides, the incidence of STDs is way low online.

Jeez, that was a joke. Stay with me, here.

See, that's part of the point. For a lot of stuff — like getting laid regularly — things are actually less complicated online. You find out how people think and how their brains work and what's important to them, without getting your processes cluttered up with their looks or bad habits. You get the *essence* of the person first — because that's what comes through his icon's projections. The other stuff only becomes important if you move into some kind of long-term relationship... which an amazing number of folks who meet online do. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. We *are* still primates, after all, and we need other people to feel complete. (Well, most of us are, anyway. I'm not sure about those folks who live completely in the Net. They're pretty rare, though. I don't suppose there's more than a couple of hundred altogether in the entire Web, and they're all pretty powerful.) If the presence of those other people involves lots of consensual sensuality, who are we to argue? (Note the word "consensual." Kiddie traps and slave blocks are not, shall we say, good karma.)

Sleepers and What to do With 'Em

Sleepers are a whole 'nother issue. With Awakened folks, you generally know how to act. Bleat… I mean Sleepers are surprise packages. Some are clueful searchers and visionaries looking to get past the blinders of the meat world. Others are clueless but harmless, blundering through the Grid Sector constraints either by accident or design. The bad ones are assholes, hacking their way past the fences and messing up the rest of the place on general principle. Used to be, you could spot a Sleeper a mile away by her 2-D dot matrix icon. These days, it's a lot harder — Sleeper icons still betray some tell-tales, but they're far more sophisticated than they used to be. And since Sleepers don't usually join the teams or know the score, it's hard to figure out which side of the game they're playing on.

Most times, Sleepers figure we're all part of a big MU*, a huge game running all over the Net. (In a way, I guess they're right.) On their screens, our actions translate into text and our words scroll by like log-ins on crack. Folks with good graphic iron might clue in to some of the more established sectors, which look, to them, like state-of-the-art video games. Figuring that he's clued in to some badass RPG, Joe Average Sleep-Webber is pretty harmless. If he's clever and you're desperate, you can even use him as an errand-boy in meat country, giving him "clues" and "secret missions" that actually accomplish your ends offline. (Technocrats and VAs are notorious for this, and I suspect that some Billy-Boys use slave block sites and pervert rooms for their own devices.)

Every so often, you'll get Clueful-Sleeper Charlotte, the kid who understands just enough of what's going on to want to join in. She'll be the one to see through the game and understand its mystical possibilities. Hopefully, she won't be one of those crystal wavers waiting for the next Heaven's Gate to open. If she is, you may have a serious problem on your hands — she won't let you be, and might send some of her like-minded friends after you for advice about the Harmonic Ascension or somesuch. While skweebs claim that Charlotte and her type make the best pawns, the kids can be a real pain in the ass, especially if you care what happens to them. Even if you don't, these kinds tend to follow you around like starving puppies. If you *do* care, you might be lucky enough to find a truly Clueful Charlotte on the other end of your chats. With a little time, teaching and cultivation, this Sleeper might become an ally, a new mage, or just a worthy exercise in making the world a better place.

Overload

One of the things that's hard for new folks — especially Sleepers — to get used to is how damned *fast* things happen online. Time distorts. It somehow expands *and* contracts. On one hand, time passes so quickly that just flipping through your mail can take a lot longer than you think. When you emerge from VR, *pow!,* hours have passed. On the other hand, time shrinks. I mean, it compresses to a degree that most folks find really frightening when they stop to think

about it. You could dive online, spend a night in the Crater whaling on your friends, and take off the goggles an hour later. It's disorienting, to say the least. Like Faerie, the Web works on a different time scale than the mortal world.

Every so often, you've got to step off the merry-go-round or snap. Online, your mind and senses operate in a state of absolute economy. All data input is hyper-compressed. When you inject that data — which is all VR is — directly into your head, you absorb a *lot* of data quickly. When you experience information through osmosis, your mind goes into hyperdrive. Somebody once suggested that, without downtime (kinda like when meat sleeps) to process information, we'd all feel like everything was happening all at once.

Downtime is really vital if you're getting a workout online. Since you're essentially mainlining everything you see, hear, feel, say and learn, your mind gets fatigued. The more you experience, the worse the fatigue. This finds its way back to your meat, too. Headaches, blurred vision, skewed reflexes, even electrical burns can follow a heavy "swim." If you're beat up online, your physical body will feel the pain, even if the "bruises" are all in your head. Overload traumas — online exhaustion, virtual rape, digital death, that sort of thing — might even lead to a mental break-down. A worst-case scenario snaps the tie between body and mind, leaving the spirit stranded somewhere in be-tween. Don't think it can happen? A lot of coma-ward patients would tell you differently... if they could talk.

So long as you get a lot of rest in between "swims," things ought to be fine for you. The Net can take a lot out of you. Just take a little "real life" time in between sessions to let your body and mind play catch-up. It'll make both lives a whole lot easier!

De-Rezzing, Egg-Burning and Digital Death

Oh, yeah. Then there's *death* online. Fortunately, it isn't usually permanent. *Painful,* usually, but not permanent. Since your meat's safely back home, your mind takes the punishment. Essentially, there are three ways to get the ax in VR: de-rezzing, which boots you offline in a hurry; icon death, which usually leads to a certain degree of egg-frying back home; and the chaos dump, which fractalizes your icon and scatters your conscious-ness all over Webspace. Only the last is usually permanent.

De-rezzing occurs when you get nailed hard by an annoyed Webber, get caught in a small Whiteout, or try to pass into a Restricted Sector without meeting the require-ments. Your icon gets frazzled and your senses get booted back into your meat, posthaste. After a bit of shock, your mind wakes up back in your body, disoriented and sore but none the worse for the hit. A "soft" de-rez just kicks you back into another sector; it stings a bit, but it's not a big deal. A "hard" de-rez actually boots you out. It's a bigger deal, but not fatal.

Icon death actually blasts your icon apart on a math-ematical level. FREEK programs, HIT Marks, severe Whiteouts and some rotes can "kill" you this way. Once "killed," your program gets fucked and your consciousness does a reverse-bungee back into Meatsville. This hurts — a*lot.* On top of the mental scrambling (called "egg-frying," after that Reagan-era drug commercial) that can send you into a coma if Lady Luck hates you that day, there's a physical burn (first or second degree) that sometimes includes blind-ness or sensory dysplasia. Not something you want to experience, though lots of Webbers do at some point.

A chaos dump (usually caused by a bad Whiteout, some really ruthless Webber, lethal feedback, or icon death in a Restricted Sector) gets pretty hardcore. Rather than scattering your icon, a chaos dump actually fuses it into a fractal mass. Your consciousness not only takes the pain of dying, but splits itself between your icon in Webspace and your meat back home. Bad news. A chaos dump combines egg-frying, physical system shock and soul-splitting. Very few Webbers ever recover from this kind of murder. Mindless, their bodies rot, shocked dead or forever comatose. Fortunately, very few Webbers would ever deal out chaos dumps intentionally. Everyone's aware of their own vulnerability to it, and no one wants to be trapped forever in Digital Hell. Killing a fellow Webber this way is cause for a permanent rawhiding, even in Technocracy space. Death is considered more humane than fractalizing. The worst thing about White Wednesday was the number of people who were chaos dumped in the Crash. Brrrr....

Let's move on to a happier topic. Like *now.*

Prominent Societies

The people of a band or a village or a small town know each of the other members of that community as parts of one another; each is strongly aware of just that group of people, as belonging together: The "we" that each inhabitant uses recognizes the sepa-rateness of that band or village from all others.

—Robert Redfield, *The Little Community*

Communities are our little walls against death, our protection in the storm of life, our common bonds of familiarity. All that stuff, y'know? Whenever folks collect, they start looking for things they have in common. When they find something, they tend to settle down, at least for a little while. It makes us all feel safer to know there are more like us.

See, we may all be individuals — and some of us take a great deal of pride in *how* individual we are — but we're still human, and we still need to be around each other. Some-times, groups are defined by their ethnicities, sometimes by their interests, and sometimes just because they happen to live on the same chunk of the globe. Regardless, you get a

buncha folks who tend to hang out together, and you wind up with a "community" or a "society" or a "gang" or whatever you want to call it. Folks identify with each other. (Don't forget that there has to be a "them" so that we can be "us"!)

Think of Net societies as Websites. A bunch of people congregate around a certain theme or purpose, usually in a sector set aside for their use. Some stick around, but most come and go as they please. A few folks change handles and come back again and again as different "people." Politics, such as they are, shift ground constantly in an endless game of one-upmanship, friendship, beholdance and *faux pas.* Although the main theme remains sorta intact, its specifics undergo more morphing than Michael Jackson's face. Anything I tell you now *will* change by the time you put it to use.

The Web doesn't discriminate much between Sleeper and Awakened. As long as you've got the iron, the curiosity and the access codes, you can bond with anyone you want. Most real Webber communities favor mages, of course — Sleeper chat-bonds run only so deep — but usually include un-Awakened folks as well. Although the Great Race tends to split people into Tradition, Technocrat and Free Spinner camps, lots of "families" feature "cousins" from all three groups. Yes, it is possible to have an MIB, a VA and a Sleeper with major cluage all hanging together in a sector. Not common, but it happens.

I've gotta note that the names I'm giving you are general labels, not formal society names. If you run across someone claiming to be a cryptkeeper, chuckle. He's got an exaggerated sense of his own importance! Communities aren't labels — they just *are.*

So let's walk around a bit and take a look at a couple of kinds of "us." You're not here for your health, and I know better than to think you plan to spend all your online life alone—

Bogies

I've already mentioned these guys. Less a unified group than a Webber "type," Bogies revel in the intrigue of the VR world. While many Webbers prefer hypertech images and spout futurespeak, Bogies shape their icons into archaic shapes, often *film noir* characters, old movie stars or pulp-fiction characters. Slouch hats, raincoats, cigarettes and stiletto heels are *de rigueur* for these old-fashioned Webbers, and lipstick kisses and smoking guns are their favorite toys.

The Spy's Demise offers an excellent hangout for these throwbacks, but the Web sports over a dozen speakeasies, pool rooms, dives and mansions, all ripe with secret passages and dark luxuries, and brimming with virtual booze. Amid these playgrounds, the Bogies act out deadly serious dramas of lust, betrayal, espionage and fisticuffs. Many of the tensest moments of the Great Race wind up decked out in rain-drenched finery — Technocrats seem to love this game as much as (if not more than) Independents and Etherites do. Although most VAs disdain Bogie melodramas, I know of a few (myself included) who like to "get in on the action" once in a while, if only as a break from the neon routine.

Despite the charming romanticization the Bogies practice, their pain is often real. Hearts, jaws and bottles of whisky are broken, and while the glass and bone may be "imaginary," the emotions are not. Although few Bogies indulge in anything as crass as futuristic philosophy, I get the feeling that they retreat to the past in order to cope with a present that seems totally lacking in grace. Vicious as they can be to each other (and they *can* be, trust me!), Bogies play by an archaic code of omission and subtlety. The modern and post-modern worlds are too garish and blatant for them. Give a Bogie a tale of treachery wrapped in Hitchcockian malevolence and he'll go the whole moxie, dead or alive!

How can you join the fun? First, bone up on 1920s-1940s *film noir,* practice your poker face, whip up some run.smoking.perpet. progs, and enter a likely saloon with a tale of woe. All Bogie-run sectors require atmospheric icons, so don't even try that cyberpunk shit there! Once you're in, get ready to swim with the sharks... or sleep wit' da fishes. A Bogie's world can be deadly, but it's fun!

Buzzbombs, N-Ark KZTs and Turbuprogs

You may have heard of them already: hard-line anarchists striving to preserve the freedom of the Net. For the most part, these lone wolves are simply intellectual rebels, chipping into conversations and driving their points home with passionate (and incoherent) tirades about information being the last true form of reality and all that. Every so often, though, these guys can be real skweebs. (Most of the worst skweebs *are* buzzbombs.) Some live to brew up viruses and FREEK progs; others dump newbies or run around rawhiding anyone they consider Lame. Really dangerous ones, like Demonseed Elite, actually murder meat rather than icons. Others, like Snert 186 or Dr. Volcano, conspire to bring down anything that resembles authority. Ironically, this sometimes includes the Virtual Adepts themselves, who preach in theory what the N-Ark KZTs practice in deed.

N-Ark KZTs excel at parallaxing, quick-changes, escape routes, data theft and totally unintelligible Netspeak. "Heyboo N MennieBrot 2 U yoolies® IHA&&HA x2!" is typical N-Ark KZT biochop. The stated intention is to break down old methods of communication and allow for new kinds of thought, but I know these heebos enjoy being obscure, too. Most of them, given half a chance, will strip down a statement, machine or rote to its internal components, rework the logic that drives the engine, and hack it back together again in some homebrewed configuration. Nothing — not a society, not a law, not a language, not even magick — is good enough "just out of the box." It must be torn apart and restructured for its own good.

Sure, N-Ark KZTs can be annoying as hell, particularly if you're trying to get something done. They play worse with others than most Virtual Adepts do, and that's saying some-

thing. Many still choose to "belong" to the Adepts (often in the Cypherpunk, Chaotician or Reality Hacker "legions"), hut challenge everything the Tradition and its allies stand for. Which is, of course, why the VAs like to have N-Ark KZTs around. They keep the VAs honest to the Tradition's roots. Even so, Dante himself has criticized N-Ark KZTs many times over, and has decked it out with buzzbombs on several noteworthy occasions. (That core war with Dr. Volcano was a draw, even if Dante won't admit it.)

Reality hacking on the quantum level is exactly what N-Ark KZTs stand for. By their philosophy (which they can and will defend with brain-crushing mathematics), the universe is a barely balanced tug-o-war between stasis and chaos. Stasis — through technology, communication, economics, even language — is winning, so the N-Ark KZTs cast their lots with chaos. Too loose to be considered an organized society, these dudes do whatever they feel is best for the universe. If that includes crashing the World Bank, then let the bankers squeal!

Turbuprogs operate on a "softer" level. Provoking mass-media feedback through elaborate pranks (rearranging the New York Stock Market board into endless progressions of 666, turning all computer screens in Washington D.C. bright pink for five minutes, advertising a "great pagan festival" in a Nevada desert, but never showing up to stage it, etc.), the turbs play trickster to the Information Age. From what I gather, their core philosophy is to shove a hall of mirrors in front of humanity's face. When the endless succession of reflections is revealed, humanity will erupt into a new and beautiful shape. Carefully calculated for maximum effect with minimal risk (accidentally triggering global annihilation would sorta defeat their purpose), the turbs unleash oddly significant messages across the Net, but never reveal their identities or presence. Aside from obscure messages like "All hail MOO" or "Wisdom from Shiva's Grand Dick," the turbs remain anonymous.

Buzzbombs tend to be the most "destructive faction." While most N-Ark KZTs and turbs engage in *intellectual* terrorism, the buzzbombs prefer *material* terrorism. This little fact has led most VAs to consider known buzzbombs armed and extremely dangerous. While few Tradition mages care if a buzzbomb wrecks a Technocracy sector, the RealSpace consequences of that attack (stock market crashes, environmental damage, comatose human beings, etc.) makes even the most anarchistic VAs wonder where the line gets drawn.

You can't join something that theoretically doesn't exist — these guys claim society is an oppressive construct, and they want nothing to do with it. Any Webber who feels driven to Anarchy pretty much pitches her tent wherever she pleases and begins her assault alone. Most times, known N-Ark KZTs back each other up in a fight, but you never know. *Any* form of organization is a travesty to the hardcores, so each N-Ark KZT is more or less on her own from Day One.

Cryptkeepers and FMs

You know the crypters: old-guard VAs who're supposedly settling down and becoming that which they opposed. Dante, Roger Thackery, Josephine, Uncle Toad... all the guys who supposedly aren't any fun these days. The Crash hit 'em hard. Between that, the buzzbombs, the destruction of Doissetep and a big fight that supposedly occurred in the Council Chambers themselves, the crypters have begun to take the whole Ascension War thing a lot more seriously. Of course, younger anarchists and late bloomers see the old dudes as censorious tyrants, and call for a new leadership. Problem is, the cryptkeepers are *very* good at what they do, and most of 'em won't take shit from anyone, VAs especially. While they might take students (Dante does, but he's full-up), you can't hope to actually become one of 'em. These dudes are in a class by themselves. Which is part of the problem.

Cryptkeepers are the Elite masters of technomagick, the virtual pioneers who led the charge in Turing's wake. For years or even decades, they've hung out in the Demise, hacked data, battled Neffies, Awakened bleaters and kicked Technocrat ass. Now they've begun to create an establishment — the thing many of them hoped to abolish — in the wake of the Sleeper overload and White Wednesday. Every one of 'em is a powerful Technomancer, and understands the most Elite principles of advanced science. Younger rebels, faced with the cryptkeepers' skill, resort to name-calling, virus-tossing and defection from the Adepts.

I don't envy the crypters, but I'm not sure I like 'em, either. While a few (Dante, Uncle Toad) are friendly and supportive, others (Dr. McAlby, Thackery) are self-righteous fux. Take the Format Masters (a.k.a. Fucking Magickians or Fear Mongers, depending on your leanings) for example. A collective of master hacks who miss the old days of clean code and proper procedures, FM's take pride in order and clear, succinct coding. Unlike most crypters, FMs aren't a particularly secretive lot. In fact, some of 'em come across as being pretty belligerent.

According to the FMs, White Wednesday was actually a primitive attempt — albeit incredibly ill-conceived — to produce a Millennium virus. Once this viral code got loose in the Web, huge chunks of the Net unraveled and disappeared, sending zillions of hours of work — and who knows how many Webbers! — into oblivion. Smug in conspiratorial supremacy, the FMs speculate that so much stuff was interdependent, with everything hanging by a thread of connectivity to everything else, that when one section went, everything attached went with it. The FMs figure that if people simply formatted sectors properly — with rigid boundaries and decent encryption — then we'd all have greater protection from the effects of inexplicable chain-reaction accidents. Moreover, these "workmanlike" sectors would be better prepared to hold against the tide if another Great Crash *did* occur. In the meantime, the real culprits of White Wednesday are still out there... just waiting to crash the Net again and again and again....

The theory isn't the problem; the attitude that went with it was the problem. The FM block came down so hard and condescending on "those stupid, sloppy kids" that the anti-crypter backlash (already in progress) jumped off the scale. Despite a few posts from Dante and the rest, the flames lit up the Web for months. In some sectors, they're still burning. Even Sleepers, who didn't have the slightest idea what anyone was talking about, jumped in. What a mess.

Now everybody's mad at everybody else. Some "sloppy, stupid kids" actively try to sabotage the reconstruction effort, while others are look for the idiots who killed their friends. The crypters, already touchy, have achieved major shoulder-chippage, and the chat rooms blaze with accusations and conspiracy theories. One rumor I heard claimed the FMs are Neffies in disguise. I could buy that if it weren't so obvious. Hey, if they *were,* I'm sure Dante and them would know already. Wouldn't they?

Cybernauts

Old-fashioned explorers favor an old-fashioned name. The term "Cybernauts," never popular to begin with, fell out of use long ago... except among these dudes who incorporated it into their society name. It suits 'em, I guess, seeing as how they've got a quaint attachment to the idea of "plumbing the last frontier." While other Webbers live it up in occupied sectors or try to rebuild what was there before, the Cybernauts set out for the spaces between sectors and to the outer reaches, where conduits are few and Virgin Web is supposedly common.

Those journeys lead the 'nauts through endless recursions of virtual corridors, across half-made sectors, into Corrupted Web, Hung Sectors, Haunts and what-have-you. It's dangerous as hell, but somebody has to do it! Like the sailors of old, these lunatics hop out of settled space and dive into areas with "Here Be Dragons" blazed out in crazy neon.

Most 'nauts come from the brave but demented Etherite Tradition. Still, they often find allies among the Voids and the VAs, who put aside their old hostilities in favor of a good hunt. But if you've ever seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (and who hasn't?), you'll remember that treasure hunting can be treacherous work. Rival groups will fuck each other over in a nanosecond, even if members of those groups come from the same Tradition or Convention. It's said that the leading cause of Cybenaut mortality is other Cybernauts, and that's probably true!

Like Bogies, Cybernauts tend to be secretive and aloof; unlike them, the explorers often favor flashy "spacesuits" and dashing icons. I've seen them lurking in the back of the Spy's Demise, hoping to overhear a rumor or secure a bit of

info that could lead them to some new paradise or treasure. A lot of 'em spend plenty of time in Hamburger Country, perfecting iron that they then project into VR; the infamous "Jackal's Chopper" [see *The Technamancer's Toybox,* pp. 28-29] was one such Device. Some explorers run solo, but others join together in bands of two to five magi. Joining a Cybernaut group is probably harder than starting your own. These dudes tend to be clannish and suspicious as hell.

Like old-time mariners, Cybernauts claim to be seeking treasure, but seem more drawn to the chase than the discovery. I've heard of one trio, the Haversham Compact, that hides its "caches" of Virgin Web without formatting them. To the Havershams, preserving the precious space is far more important than imprinting it. "It would not do," said Dr. Fargo Haversham over a few drinks, "to have every inch of reality set into form. It is essential for our survival as a species that the universe have a certain amount of uncertainty. If we were to imprint the entire Web, we would all cease to be. I can prove it!" He whipped out a minicalc and ran off some impressive statistics. I didn't understand a number of it, but he seemed to know what he was talking about.

Kolamites

The ultimate fans of body modification, kolamites would make Jim Rose turn lime green. While most Webbers prefer to keep their icons relatively human, kolamites (named for the Indian fractal patterns that seem to shift before your eyes) transcend humanity by avoiding human forms altogether. "Mind follows body," as the saying goes, and these guys are trying to reach the next level... or the first one... of consciousness by altering their bodies in ways that would be impossible in RealSpace.

Morphing is a way of life to these bizarre dudes. While most Webbers will change forms now and then, kolamites remain in bodily motion. Clouds of color become geometric shapes become blurs of light become scurrying creatures no one's ever seen before. Sex, limbs, dimensions, sensory perceptions... nothing remains constant long enough to rely on. The whole idea is to bootstrap your senses and consciousness by keeping your mind guessing. Judging by the weird powers kolamites employ — odd Mind tricks, dazzling light shows, an uncanny knack for time/space perceptions — the idea works. Don't try to ask for a detailed analysis, though. I've tried, and it's rarely something a kolamite could explain. "You've gotta do it to understand it," as my friend BRITE 201 says. I'll take her word for it. Personally, I've tried doing rapid icon-morphs, and all it did was give me a headache.

Like most techno-anarchists, kolamites do the solo routine. The real trick is setting an infinite-recursion loop with random variables into your icon prog, then dealing with the world when you can't be sure how to touch it or perceive it from one minute to the next. Neither stunt is easy. Kolamites seem a bit insane by most people's standards —

even ours! — but then, who are VR refugees to judge sanity? Although most infamous kolamites, like Blue Meanie, are Marauders by most accounts, I know of several who I'd call totally sane... if a bit, um, hyperevolved. I'm sure a CoXer would have no trouble whatsoever understanding one.

Flesh Dancers, Fuzzies and Raincoat Randys

Remember our discussion about sex earlier on? Well these Webbers live for it... for online carnality of all varieties, from porno peeping (the Raincoat Randys) to cartoon animal orgies (the fuzzies) to bacchanals that would make Caligula pause. All in the privacy of their own homes and the public intercourse of the Net.

Most Webbers log into sex sites once in a while, but others are absolutely compulsive about it. Molding their icons into the most sexually impressive bodies they can imagine, these folks live out their fantasies in full-sense style. Three guesses which Tradition favors this "lifestyle" most? While Witch... I mean, Verbena... can be found here once in a while, the pagan-types tend to be too earth-bound to enjoy the "artificial" sensations of VR bonding... which is, of course, why they don't enjoy it. Those who understand the "reality" part of "virtual reality" understand that full-immersion online sex is as "real" as full-flesh contact — and usually a lot better! No mess, no diseases, no incompetent partners.... Who needs skin?

The mind is, as they say, the greatest sex organ of all. As the Cultists understand, really powerful sex can do more than recharge your batteries. Like kolamites, N-Ark KZTs and turbuprogs, flesh dancers use heightened stimulation and VR physics to elevate their consciousness, moving way beyond the "pleasures of the flesh" and entering sublime realms of perception. I know several dancers who use VR sex for Seekings; I know plenty of others who just use it for fun, though, and it can be lots of that!

Flesh dancers and the like set aside special Constraint Realms and Stacked Files (puns open to interpretation) for their pastimes. Zero-G environments, harem lounges, torture chambers, undersea ruins, ballrooms, bars... what's your pleasure? In the better sectors, Digital Dollz make up for whatever the "visitors" might lack, but it's hard to imagine what that might be. A skillful parallaxer might service several partners at once... including herself... each one crafted in the image of physical perfection and boosted by sensory enhancement. Lesser visitors simply look at the pretty pictures or satisfy voyeuristic urges, all safely away from the bounds of earthly authority or need.

There's a whole philosophy behind the dancer's life — the transcendence of the flesh, the elevation of the senses, the rejection of the ego and the mystic doorways of sensual overload; it's up to you whether or not you buy into it. The downside to the whole trip is overload; there are dozens of horror stories about dancers or Randys who got so caught up

in their VR lives that their meat decayed in RealSpace. Others actually met their partners and were disappointed (or worse), while still others simply pined away for a lover who might have been their own narcissistic reflection. Like the Bogies, flesh dancers play a fun but hazardous game. The trick, I guess, is knowing where and when to stop.

GODZ

For some people, there is no stopping. In a bid to achieve divinity, these Webbers project themselves totally into the Net, leave their bodies behind, call themselves gods (or GODZ), and assemble new religions in their name. I'm sure you've heard of the laughably infamous Kibo, but have you spoken to the Hen of Grainekarm? Heard the screams of Turing? Felt the touch of Astarte, who walks among mortals in the Spy's Demise? All of these (and many more) have reached a state of semi-divinity, fed by the vast power of the Web, the devotion of their followers and the ever-growing concept of meme.

There's a running bet in the Spy's Demise that anyone who can pass the riddle of the Net-sphinx can read any single book ever written. I have no idea whether or not the legend of this divine librarian is true, but several Webbers testify that she lives within the Matterhorn somewhere, surrounded by a library so vast it would make the U.S. Congress archivists weep. Like so many other mythologies, the material truth behind the Net-sphinx is less important than the legend. People want to believe in her; as they tell tales about her, the faith spreads and the meme — the living concept — feeds her existence. We know for a fact that Heisenberg was right. It stands to reason, then, that GODZ in the Net actually achieve a state of existence, even if they did not exist before. A story starts the myth, the myth becomes a legend, the legend shapes the Web and a god is born.

Wouldn't you like to become a god, too? Lots of Webbers try to do it, but very few succeed. To begin with, you have to spark the legends. From what I've heard (and I may be wrong — *legends,* remember!), Kibo started out as a Virtual Adept with a great understanding of Correspondence, coding and humor. By rigging progs all over Netspace, he could appear anywhere his name was mentioned. He told a few friends about his "godhood," they told a few friends, and so on, etc. Strangers would invoke Kibo and BOOM!, he'd appear. Thus the legend spread, and more people would test it.... Call it "divine recursion." The joke is old now, but it still retains a bit of power, even in its obsolescence. People say, "That's as stale as Kibology," Kibo appears.... You get the idea. Most GODZ are nowhere near as omniscient, but they've each got some shtick that keeps their names on people's lips. And so long as those myths continue, the GODZ live on.

On a lesser level, you've got plenty of people who shape their icons into classical images of divinity. Take Astarte, for example. While she appears to be convinced of her own

omnipotence (and supposedly has some followers believing in her, too), the Goddess of Eternal Creation probably began as a Webber with a very active imagination and very low self-esteem. By taking on godlike characteristics, she transcended her old life. Lots of Webbers do that. They might not become GODZ in the greater sense, but that new life beats being a geek.

GODZ really aren't measured in power. The Hen hasn't moved from its place of exile in years, but it still commands people's attention. GODZ are lonely, too, denied the comfort of pals or kin and beholden to the legends they must sustain. To cap it off, most legends, in this day and age, are jokes. Maybe Kibo can take being laughed at, but few VAs I know can. The really important factor in GODZhood is the living idea — that meme thing — which opens up the infinite-recursion loop to heaven... or at least to notoriety.

RAMbos

These dudes just come to fight. Most of 'em hang out in Warzones, trying to get the high score in *Battledeathtech 2000* or whatever. These guys are fairly harmless — they might de-rez you, but only in a fair fight in a proper sector. The scary ones are the binary Bruce Lees, Netspace Napoleons and tinyfugue Tysons who've been crawling outta the woodwork since Doom came out. The Net has always had its scrappers, but they've gotten too damned common in the last few years. Good RAMbos play for fun; the bad ones play for keeps.

Most RAMbos puff their icons up to heroic stature, or take on the likenesses of heroes like Patton, Caesar or The Duke (John *Wayne,* you heebo, not Nukem!). I've seen a few turn into mechs. I'll leave you to speculate on the psychology behind those transformations, but in practical terms, these bastards are *really* intimidating. On top of that, most of 'em have countless hours of Warzone experience. They may not be able to throw a punch in Meatsville, but they'd kick Jackie Chan's ass in VR. Depending on the "discipline" a RAMbo prefers, he (or she — there are lots of would-be Kamis and Croft clones running around Netspace) could be a martial artist of inhuman capacity, a gun-totin' grunt, or a wily strategist. A "society" in the loosest sense, RAMbos meet just long enough to pound the crap out of each other unless some greater threat convinces them to work together for a time. After the threat (a Neffie, a FREEK, whatever) is dealt with, any RAMbo left standing will probably turn around and beat his compatriots into de-resolution again.

The difference between "good" RAMbos and "bad" ones is application, iron and spice. Any idiot can config his icon to carry around a 10 kg. gun; not just anyone can (or would) actually dish out the damage that kind of gun would do in RealSpace. The skweebs with the power to do it (and the power-lust to try) often wind up on the receiving end of *a* heavy-duty rawhide. After all, who wants the Taxi Driver loose in her sector? Not me!

Where do you enlist? Go down to a Warzone, soldier, and get your marching orders. After a few weeks (or months) of de-rez headaches, you'll actually pick up a bit of skill. More importantly, you'll establish the kind of rep that allows you to walk around like the Terminator and not get laughed (or booted) out of the sector. RAMbos draw challenges, son, and you'd best be able to handle the iron before you strut the uniform!

Rebooters

The opposite of N-Ark KZTs, these Webbers try to build up what White Wednesday destroyed. Led by charismatic architects, the various rebooter clubs race against an approaching doomsday back home. In the very near future, they hope to reconstruct what was lost in the Crash, to improve what was flawed the first time, and to bring about a global exodus to the Web before it's too late. In the spirit of Reality 2.0 (which, naturally, they disagree about), most rebooters live online almost full-time. Their experiments — technical, magickal, social and philosophical — center around repairing the damage done and preparing for a massive influx of new Webbers, with all the complications that influx will bring.

Rebooter sects include:

• The Fifth Mason Society, the Hyde Project and the Point Zero Reconstruction Facility (all Technocracy);

• Bal Hali (VAs) and the Survival League (VAs/Etherites);

• The Tree of Light and the Thousand Matrix Group (Traditions);

• The Parallel Process (all groups mixed).

Each group has its own sector networks, its own philosophies, and its own solutions to the problems at hand. As a rule, the Technocratic societies are a bit more autocratic than the others. Even then, though, their rebooters tend to act less like Ironteeth and more like lifeguards. Although members of different groups cooperate in emergencies, rebooters can be as backstabbing, contentious and secretive as any Bogie. Each one, I guess, wants to lay the foundations of the new reality, and no one wants to lose out.

Irony, thy name is magick.

Rebooters tend to be serious, charismatic and compassionate. Although many are skilled Webbers, others demonstrate unfocused technique but sincere dedication. Joining is easy: Just find some like-minded folks and offer your services. These Webbers see the Net as a city in the midst of a rising flood. To save the place, they have to evacuate the surrounding areas, provide for the refugees, sandbag the streets and hunker down for a long, perhaps permanent, life on an island kingdom.

There are more online societies... lots more. The un-Awakened data-gatherers of **SysOphus** collect information for their more-powerful friends; the traveling players of **PsychoPomp** mold their bodies into shimmering metaphors;

the data pirates make a shady living breaking into secure sectors and selling their loot to the highest bidders; the **Church of the Sacred Weaver** preaches the Spider's Gospel and foretells the completion of the Web; the **Noh** perform plays of unearthly beauty and complexity; the **Glass Walkers** are werecreatures that supposedly climb the great Web from the Earth to this realm; the madpyres are creatures who dream their way into Webspace and drain icons of their vitality. There are so many more, all with their own stories, their own rules, their own sectors, in many cases.

Speaking of sectors, let's discuss how to create your own. Why should everyone else have all the fun?

DIY Formatting

We burn with desire to find firm a footing, an ultimate, lasting base on which to build a tower rising to infinity....

　- Virginia Woolf, *Pensees*

So you wanna try formatting your own spot, huh? Y'know, it's not as easy as it looks....

Okay, let's start from the top.

The first thing you've got to understand is that sectors don't just appear out of the nebulous ether. Well, hrm. I take that back. I guess they do, actually. That is, they exist out there... somewhere... but they don't just magickally appear. *You,* dear Webspinner wannabe, have to make it happen.

I figure there's prolly an unlimited amount of space out there in the Web. But until someone thinks it up, gives it shape, imagines it and attaches it to the rest of the Web, it might as well not exist at all. Schroedinger would be proud. This is all just a consensual hallucination, if you want my opinion. And if *you* don't believe in what you make, there's no reason for any of the rest of us to believe in your creation. That's the most important part. You gotta *believe.*

Yeah, okay, I'll try to stay on track. But if you want my help, you're gonna hafta keep putting up with my occasional digressions and musings, too. What good is knowledge without knowing *why* things work the way they apparently work? It's like the Web. An isolated sector doesn't mean anything without the context of the rest of the Web, just like an isolated fact (or even a HowTo checklist) doesn't mean anything without context. Things hafta fit together.

You still following me?

Okay, then. Pay attention.

Foundation

The first thing you've got to do is imagine. And I don't mean that wistful kids' club "Wibni we had our own tree house?" kind of stuff. I mean, imagine. Imagine layout and surfaces and structure and streets and ceilings and texture and odor and aura.... Imagine details. Imagine bones and beams. Imagine sense and sensation.

Got it? Got your brain wrapped around it?

Good. Hold on to it.

Now go back. Start at the main entrance. What do you see? No, don't tell *me,* build up the picture in your mind. Take a step forward. What do you see? Build that up.... Keep walking, keep adding detail....

When you get to the end, turn around. Look back to the main entrance. What's outside? Where does this sector attach to the rest of the Web? Have you got permissions from whoever controls that sector? Leaving entrances unlinked is considered bad form, y'know. So's dropping your unsuspecting pals into the void. Make sure your conduits go places, and make sure those links are welcome.

What's outside the other entrances you've built? Jump doors and shortcuts are fine, but again, you've got to have permissions to link up to those areas. If you're making a shortcut, you've got to know the routing down cold before you try to link, else that door is likely to open onto a Junkland or out into the space between.

Okay, let's say you've got your image. And you've got permission from the places you want to link into. And you truly *believe* in the sector's existence and trust that you can bring it to life. There are a few questions you should ask yourself at this point, before you try to actually put any of this into motion.

• How is this sector different from the stuff that everyone else is producing?

• What's so intriguing about your particular sector that makes it worth creating?

• What's gonna draw people to it? Or keep them away once it's established?

• What sorts of EPs (Environmental Parameters) does it have? Can people float through the air, or do they walk? Is the water green? Is it cold? Etc., etc., etc.

• Do you want a closed door (a Restricted Sector), or an open one (a Free Sector)?

• What is it about this space that's going to interest the folks you want to hang here? What other groups might find it appealing?

• Are you going to attract the interest of some group that you *don't* want wandering through? How can you target a specific audience without interesting the less appealing folks?

• Let's say that you get the place up and running, and *then a* bunch of trogs decide to make an end-run for control of your space. How're you going to handle that?

Yeah, there is a bit more to it than just deciding that it'd be fun to construct a hangout.

There's more: Who gets to build? Who do you trust enough to allow them to modify your space? If you keep total control, that means that, first off, you have to be on duty essentially all of time. Any time anything breaks, you're the only one with the capability to fix it. Are you that patient? Or is your code so good that nothing ever breaks? Secondly, if no one else can modify the space, folks will eventually get bored and wander away. People need to be able to leave a mark, see? They need to feel needed, too. So lotsa times, your pals will want to help.

Me? Nah, I don't try to do it all myself. I just set up some guidelines and let 'em at it. If some creation or another gets too far out of line, I ask the builder to fix it or recycle it. Worst case, I nuke it. I do keep final authority, since ultimately I'm responsible for that sector. My mama raised a fool, but it wasn't me.

So once you're up and running, it all comes down this: How much do you — personally — want to have to maintain?

That's right. You. Personally. This may be virtual reality, kid, but until you write some kind of maintenance 'hot, keeping the code is up to you.

Shit. I didn't even think of that.

You do write code, don'cha?

I mean, if you can't write code, don't waste any more of my time. What did you think, this all comes out of a box? Yeah, there are some general formatting spices, but most of those are pretty standard off-the-shelf things. You have to breathe life and breath into your sector. Y'gotta *believe,* kid. Else the whole thing will just wash back into the Void and leave you with a shitload of Paradox. If you think you're gonna need help, sign up for a quick course or two *now,* before you start leaving mangled imprints scattered about the Web. A lotta people got sucked up into their imprints and died until the tried-an-trues were established. It still happens sometimes. Don't be that guy.

Formation

Okay. After you think you're ready — and I mean *ready,* not "Gee, I think I can do this without botching it too badly..." — you can run your "create" spice. And then the magick starts and the fun begins. You'll see what looks like a crystalline tube forming around you. Yeah, I know you've seen pictures. I promise, anything you think you've seen is only a vague approximation of reality.

And this is the tricky part. You can't bobble here, or you'll munge the entire thing. And yes, you can start over if you mess it up too badly, but don't forget that the

sector you've trashed is still going to exist, with your flawed imprint all over it. Word gets out, y'know, and that's not a rep you wanna be developing. So concentrate. Don't fuck up. It makes you look bad.

Okay, the blank sector is forming around you, leading off into who-knows-where. Pause a moment here and tie down the end. Make that first link so that later, when you're really tired, you don't hafta remember how to get out gracefully. Tie your entrance to an established sector, then watch the equations to make sure it all evens out.

Now all you gotta do ("all" you gotta do, heh) is start walking down the sector tube and begin laying down the imprint you've been holding in your wetware. Slowly, slowly... you don't want to go too quickly here, lest you forget or gloss over some factor that's going to matter later. F'r instance, it's possible — but damned difficult — to go back and add a crossroads or an intersection. Better you should remember to do it right the first time through. You don't want to have to wave a dead chicken over your sector later, so go slow and get it right.

Hmm? Yeah, if you can keep the concentration, it's better if you add other entrance links on the first pass. But don't count on being able to do that on your first sector. Just get the sector right. Folks in the rooms you're linking to can help you set those links from the other side later. Just get the imprint onto the sector, nice and smooth. Then you'll have something stable *to* work with, without having to worry that the entire thing is gonna collapse around you.

There it is. Pretty, huh? All shimmering green and wrapped around in bright coils of pure information. O'course it's not *real* or anything, but if you can see it in your mind's eye, it's real enough for now. In time, I'll take you to someone and get your coding up to speed. What, you thought I was gonna do everything for you? Not here. In the Web, you learn to do it yourself, or it doesn't get done. No one carries you. No one wipes your face and tucks in your covers. You'll get help, but in the end, the spice (or lack of it) comes from you.

Let's surface. We've spent plenty of time down here. Wouldn't want your brain to pop or anything. Heh! Loosen up, kid. Jeeze.

Time to dry off and head for land. Let's get a drink, you and me. Personally, I've worked up a good thirst, and I'm buying....

DANTE

SITE 3: SECTORS AND AVATARS

The Web site you seek
Cannot be found but
Countless others exist.
  —"Computer Error Haiku," anonymous

Pinning down the sites in the Digital Web is a waste of time. In the offhand case that you might be able to catalogue every one of 'em, your data'd be obsolete in a day or so. The Web is always changing, kiddo. It's a fractal in a morph wrapped around a spiral and dipped in pretty neo-colors. Of *course* that's overstated, heebo! There's nothing subtle about either the Web, the people in it, or the sites they create. The old version of reality was boring; if you're gonna start from scratch, might as well make your new prog as big, bright and exciting as possible, don't'cha think?

And I really do think.

The hub of it all is, of course, the Spy's Demise. Whatever else comes and goes, the Netspace answer to London ("there'll always be one") swings 24-7. Even White Wednesday barely chipped the paint. (Well, that's not *exactly* true, but y'gotta admit, it sounds good!) So take my hand again and try to act your age. They don't card here *per se,* but it never helps to act like a bleat....

The Spy's Demise

I pull the crumpled paper from my pocket and smooth it out to read it, hunching over to protect it from the rain. The pencil has smudged and the words are harder to read than they were a few minutes ago; pretty clever way to represent a self-destruct timer on the data. 47th street and Commerce, that's what I'm looking for.

It's hard to read the street signs, 'cause so many street lights are out. Squinting against the rain doesn't help, and when the wind blows my fedora off, I can't help but vent a sigh of frustration. It only takes a moment of concentration to give myself a new hat — I like the look — but this place better be worth all the damn trouble of finding it.

1 almost walk past the entrance without giving it a second glance. This virtual city is so broken, dreary and polluted, I think I might have slipped through a portal into Dystopia. I'm not sure whether someone *tried to copy* Blade Runner *when they formatted this place, or if it's the aborted child of a brief moment of creativity from some* Xer *cyborg. All the streets look the same. All the signs and doorways blur together.*

The plain door stands tucked in a dim alley, a short way from the main street. A fitful bulb in a weathered metal shade hangs above the door, and it parts the gloom just enough to reveal moldy brick, damp pavement and scattered trash. An old metal sign with rusted edges hangs beside the door, badly faded. I step closer to get a better look.

"South Line Shipping Company." This is the place. It doesn't look like much.

A brass buzzer next to the door waits to announce visitors. I press it, and a sound like a handful of asthmatic bees stutters in time with the flickering light overhead. Nothing happens. About what I expect. I shrug and try the door, which squeals a bit but finally gives way. Light music spills out into the alley.

Faint smell of lady's perfume. Peroxide blonde flashes in dim light. A bored girl at the counter, waiting. Maxine?

"There you are," she sighs. Her voice is smoke and whiskey. "I thought I'd be waiting all night...."

Description

Everyone who's someone has been there... or would like you to think they have been, anyway. Still, it possesses a mystique, like strange perfume tainted by cordite. No one knows who built it or how long ago it was made. As far as anyone can remember, it has just *been*. Even White Wednesday couldn't break its spine, though the place needed some renovation after the Crash. The Spy's Demise is the most notorious sector in Webspace. Neutral ground, or so they say. Playground to Bogies. Flea market to data thieves. A watering-hole for the best and brightest, and a refuge for the down-and-out. The Demise is all these things and more.

The hundreds of conduits that lead to the Spy's have one thing in common: None stand out from the scenery that surrounds them. Nondescript as a cracked glass in a seedy dive, each conduit has been designed to be overlooked. Though people occasionally wander in by mistake, would-be visitors have to know what to look for. A persistent searcher can find information about these entrances throughout the Web, and many conduits have subtle clues about their destination — archaic graffiti, old movie posters, a whiskey-tinted breeze — placed nearby. The most reliable way to find your way to the Demise, though, is to ask someone who's been there.

As the visitor approaches, the conduit takes on a weathered, forlorn appearance. Different routes assume different forms. Most resemble back streets in a desolate city, and a few become garish, dystopian futurescapes. One resembles a Wild West ghost town, while another leads through a James Bondish maze of retina scans and sliding doors. All conduits lead to the front office, where visitors speak with Maxine. This attractive young woman sits behind a small desk, perpetually reading a magazine, filing her nails and blowing bubbles with her chewing gum. The office is a classic film noir setting: A manual typewriter crouches on the desk. Dusty file cabinets stand along one wall. The frosted glass window in the wooden door shows only vague shadows of what waits beyond. Big band music plays faintly in the background, and Maxine's perfume smells of lilacs. No one knows how many "front offices" there really are, but the Spy's Demise gets so many visitors that there must be more than one.

There's a catch — a password, really, which changes with the management's whim (and the visitor's demeanor). If a visitor knows the password, Maxine grants him access. If he doesn't, he can earn entrance by doing some mildly embarrassing but generally entertaining task, chosen by Maxine. A new visitor might have to sing a song, do a silly dance, or try to balance a baseball bat on his chin while reciting a poem. The range of pranks is limited only by Maxine's imagination, and she's an imaginative girl with many interesting props at hand.

Once the visitor passes the test, Maxine tags him with a tracer, which melds inconspicuously with the visitor's icon. This unobtrusive bit of code allows the staff to monitor him as needed. A lot of new customers complain about the trace, but the policy is firm. A huge fight eluded the club's security back in 1995, and several customers died. If a visitor asks for an explanation, Maxine provides a demonstration; the window in the door behind her becomes a display screen, and footage of the carnage plays. Few visitors complain after that. Long-time customers known to be trustworthy don't have to wear the tracer.

When the visitor's ready, Maxine opens the real entrance to the Spy's Demise: a secret panel in one wall that opens onto a staircase. The door behind her is a bluff. At the top of a flight of stairs, club patrons greet the new visitor with a round of applause, especially if he performed his "trick" with good humor. The reason for the ovation is quickly obvious: Video screens on the walls display the antics of the newcomer. The new patron's embarrassment is generally offset by the fact that he now shares in the joke being played on the next poor guy. Besides, there's too much to do in the Demise to waste time being embarrassed.

The heart of the club is a chain of chambers... dozens of them, each with a particular theme or purpose. Patrons often spend time in the rooms that suit them, although some rooms change to fit the temperament of their guests. Some rooms are primarily for relaxing and having a drink (albeit often in an exotic setting), while others offer dancing, movies or arcade games. The chambers are interconnected through a dizzying maze of passages, doorways, staircases and secret passages. For fun, these connections sometimes have associated rules: Climbing the ladder from Bogart's to the Zeppelin Deck might only be possible for people who entered Bogart's through the secret panel in the back of the phone booth adjacent to the Chess Room. The rules change periodically to keep all visitors on their toes. Every visit is a bit different.

Staffers don't play by the rules. They always seem to know where every passage leads, and quietly go about their work bringing refreshment to any and all who visit the Spy's Demise. The staff is polite and professional, dressed in black and white and responding quickly to patrons' needs. No one knows whether the staffers are mages who've sought employment in the club, or constructs created to serve the patrons' needs. Like the entrances into the place, most staffers are unobtrusive parts of the scenery, visible only when something needs to be done.

More often than not, that "something" simply means freshening a drink. Occasionally, though, stronger "services" are necessary. The Spy's Demise's first rule is that everyone is welcome. So long as they leave their quarrels outside, any mage, regardless of affiliation, may enter and relax, have a drink and take advantage of the opportunities present within the club. Though Council magi and Technocrats tend to congregate in their own areas, they sometime rub elbows. Tempers occasionally flare, especially between Technocrats and Virtual Adepts or Etherites. Even so, patrons are expected to abide by the two other rules: No "loud" magick spells inside the club, and take the violence

outside. Those who can't control their tempers are shown the door... often a *trap* door that appears beneath the offenders and drops them out of the sector. Repeat offenders get branded, de-rezzed or both — painful options, especially since the club is a Restricted Sector.
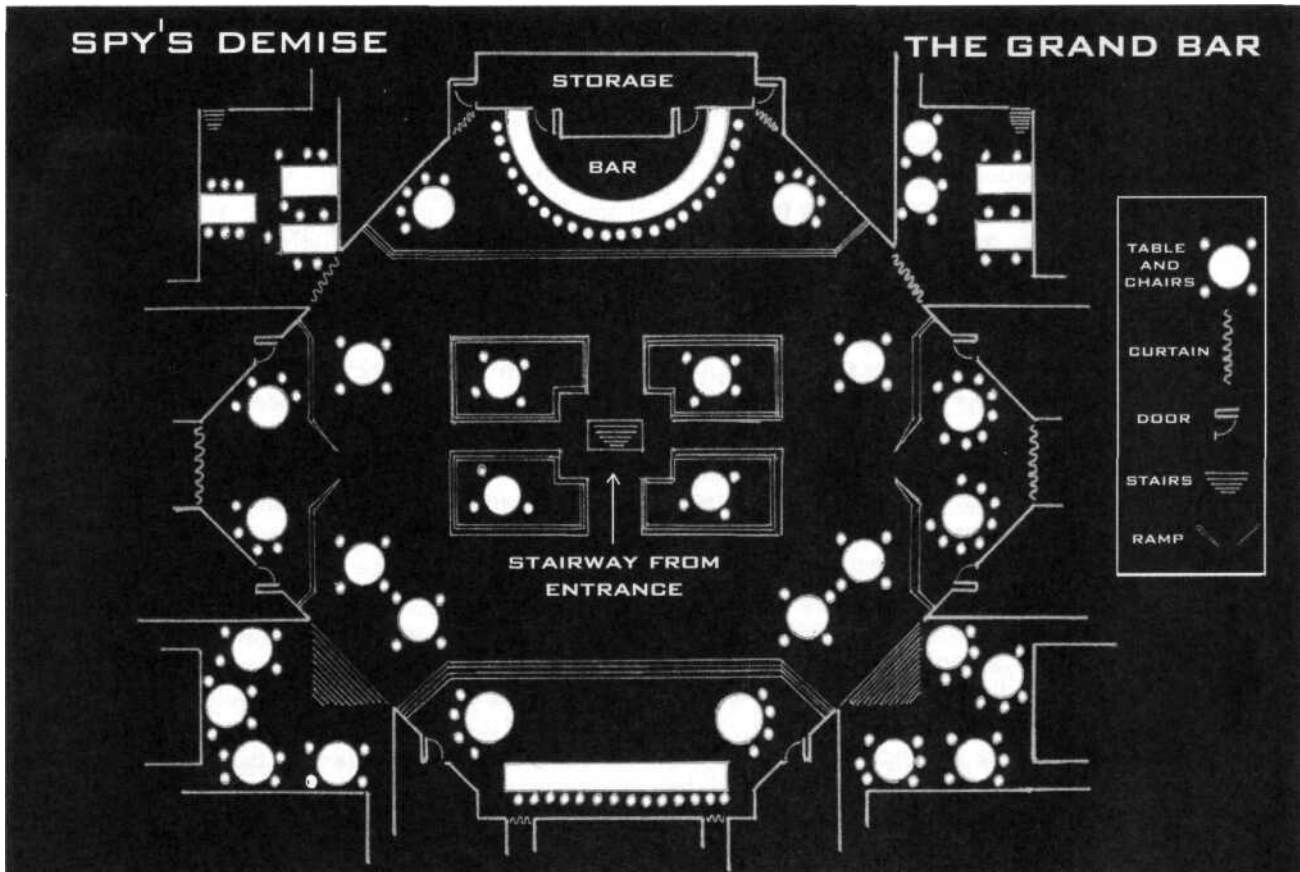
Visitors to the Demise are sure to get an eyeful. Icons of all kinds roam the halls and chambers of the club... slimy aliens, muscle-bound barbarians, trenchcoated detectives, movie stars, disgraced politicians, innocent children, genderless androids, crisp executives, dusty cowboys, animate sculptures, pools of light, clouds of insects, talking dogs... the list goes on and on. Some Webbers socialize in the club's central area, while others stop briefly on their way to visit other rooms.

There's always something going on in the heart of the most popular spot in the Web. Some spinners get together just to mingle, discussing the latest computer fad, chatting over a drink, watching the latest entertainment services on the vid-screens or playing some chess (or other, more physical games). Others come to conduct business, either privately in a secured chamber, or openly in a public room. Like most places in the Web, information is the life-blood of the Spy's Demise. Dozens of online services broadcast news and gossip onto screens on the walls, and patrons can have specific channels piped to smaller displays at their tables. Postings from newsgroups and Usenet groups litter the walls and floor in some rooms. Data hounds usually get the hottest stuff from other patrons, who peddle it from tables in the club's many dark corners. This information is typically up-to-the-moment, and very sensitive. Most data herders specialize, but some make a great living just by watching the comings and goings of the customers, keeping track of who talks to whom. The price of data varies from seller to seller: Sometimes it's Tass or money, sometimes it's a service. The very best information requires payment in other data. An overheard whisper about Virgin Web can figuratively set the rooms on fire.

The chambers at the heart of the Spy's Demise are usually the busiest, but dozens — or hundreds! — of others branch off into the bowels of the club. No one, except perhaps the staff, knows how many rooms the place actually has, or remembers what can be found in them all. Passageways branch out from the heart and run off in confusing directions. Many rooms are public, open to anyone who cares to visit. Grid rooms, generally the only areas Sleepers can access, fall into this category. Many more are private, open only to those with the proper permission. Arrangements for a private room are made through the staff, and include a "maze effect" in the connecting corridor. A trespasser could wander for days without finding the right door.

Just as there are hundreds of conduits leading into the Spy's Demise, there are hundreds of conduits leading out. Most are one-way exits; a customer who leaves must find his way to a valid entrance and talk to Maxine again. In

SPY'S DEMISE   THE GRAND BAR

STORAGE
BAR

TABLE AND CHAIRS
CURTAIN
DOOR
STAIRS
RAMP

STAIRWAY FROM ENTRANCE

keeping with the changing nature of the place, these conduits constantly pop up and disappear. One ever-present conduit leads to the Maelstrom, a storm sector of swirling winds and scattered data streams. The staff tosses obnoxious rule-breakers into this conduit, and the offender spins around and around until the gales rip his icon into datatatters and dump him from the Web. It's a painful exit.

Evidence of the Great Crash of '97 abounds, though the staff and many volunteers work hard to get everything working again. A lot of the furniture looks like it was pulled out of a fire, and digital soot stains the walls behind the vidscreens (some of which display only static). The lights tend to go out at unpredictable moments, and entrances to a number of rooms sport signs that say "Out of Order."

Layout

The Spy's Demise is composed of a nearly infinite number of rooms, though the heart of the club is limited to about 30 public chambers, each a sector unto itself. Although "small" by sector standards, most rooms can hold between 70 and 200 patrons. Many boast direct connections to Sleeper Grid Sectors that focus on the topic or theme central to the room. The Board Room, for example, has doors that lead directly to various business discussion forums, while passages within the Castle lead to gaming boards around the world. Aside from the Grand Bar, most rooms restrict access to icons that favor the local ambiance; the rumpled patrons of Bogart's would not look kindly *on* a neon cloud-being messing up their space, so problems are averted in advance.

Many rooms remain "Out of Order," especially those beyond the heart. Several of the most famous "open" rooms include:

The Grand Bar

Once past Maxine, a visitor climbs the stairs, emerging in the center of the Grand Bar — the central chamber of the club, the heart of the heart. A huge, semi-circular bar of mahogany and brass dominates one wall. The floor is a mixture of raised and sunken levels, connected by short ramps and staircases. Open tables fill the room, and intimate chambers hidden behind curtains of silvery beads wait in secluded alcoves. Staircases rise from the room's corners, hallways lead out from shadowed spaces beneath the stairs, and doorways tuck themselves away in convenient spots along the walls. All these passages lead to additional chambers of the heart, and to the many rooms beyond.

Seldom is the Grand Bar empty. Despite the Bar's popularity, the crowded tables and bustling staff, the noise here rarely grows above a buzz. Patrons like it that way — everyone's eavesdropping while trying to avoid being overheard. Video screens abound, most displaying news, gossip and 20 varieties of entertainment. None produce any sound, however. A patron who wishes to hear the sound of a particular program must ask the staff to patch his icon into the audio channel accompanying the broadcast. The Bar also accepts and holds messages, then delivers them discreetly to their intended recipients.

The Chess Room

This room is a strategy gamer's paradise. Every table is programmed to support a variety of wargames, and can supply holographic boards, pieces and timers as needed. Although chess is, of course, the favorite, the selections range from Go to *Diplomacy* to *BattleTech*. Most games are friendly, but personal rivalries occasionally get fierce.

The room's decor favors class and elegance. Maroon plush carpet covers the floor, and the walls are paneled in dark wood. Cabinets display holographic sculptures of famous ancient chess sets. Someone once recommended redecorating in a black and white theme, but the patrons quickly shot that suggestion down. In one corner, vid-screens replay famous chess matches. Some regulars watch these matches over and over, analyzing each move and its impact on the game. In keeping with the room's flavor, the icon restriction favors classy dress in turn-of-the-century styles.

The Zeppelin Deck

A favorite hangout of visiting Etherites, this small sector resembles a luxurious dining room on a zeppelin's passenger deck. Icon restrictions and visitor behavior favor the early 20th century. In the background, the airship's engine drones. The chamber vibrates slightly, and a pastoral landscape rolls by the virtual windows. That background landscape changes periodically, giving customers the impression of traveling to different locations. Not all of the options are so sedate, however. Once, the program turned the zeppelin into a military ship with fighter plane escorts fending off an enemy attack. From all accounts, the bruises were worth the ride.

The Cafeteria

This Technocratic hangout is cold and sterile. Bright fluorescent light banishes shadows, and the walls resemble metallic plates bolted together. Patrons, dressed in cool hues of simple clothing, sit at long white tables, sipping bland Tass from Styrofoam cups. Conversation is carefully modulated to little more than a whisper. Syndicate agents rarely spend time here, as it is not to their wealthy tastes, but members of Iteration X find comfort in the antiseptic consistency of the decor.

Bogart's

As the name implies, this rumpled speakeasy evokes the *film noir* atmosphere those spinners like so well. As lonely piano players or melancholy jazz bands play ragged songs of love and betrayal, the waiters and cigarette girls ply their trades. Cards, drinking and hushed conversations are

popular pastimes here, and everybody smokes. Despite the aura of broken dreams that fills this room, Bogart's maintains a somber kind of romance. A famous pick-up spot, the bar boasts a good "food" and a better "drink" selection. The occasional fist fight or single gunshot keeps the bar's mystique alive, but serious brawlers get dumped before the ambiance can be shattered.

The Wreck Room

As loud and obnoxious as The Cafeteria is quiet and sterile, the Wreck is a strobe light fan's dream come true. Stages and individual dance platforms hover throughout the room, and the beat is always strong. The theme of the music changes every two hours, cycling through bee-bop to psychedelic, from disco to hip-hop, from goth and techno to ambient and acid-noise. Icon restrictions favor clothing appropriate to the style of music being played. In an elevated glass booth, a deejay keeps the tunes flowing. Depending on what's playing, this icon may be male or female, sexy or garish. Although s/he answers to many names, the deejay's genial (if slightly oily) behavior and musical expertise remains consistent. Yes, s/he takes requests.

The Board Room

Reservations are required to secure this private meeting room. Nearly all organized meetings, business or otherwise, take place here. Naturally, Syndicate types favor this place; every so often, they get touchy about sharing it (until a few of them get dumped and learn to behave again for a while). Icon restrictions favor business attire, although an advance registration allows the visitors to change those parameters to suit their preferences.

In the center of the chamber, a huge mahogany table sits surrounded by high-backed leather chairs. The table automatically sizes itself to accommodate the number of attendees, and the room always seems to be just the right size to seat all visitors. Video screens near each chair help participants stay involved when the table grows too large to see the current speaker easily. In the past, proceedings in this room often got out of hand. Someone came along and constrained the room, however, and now all attendees must follow Robert's Rules of Order. Since then, things have been considerably more organized.

Paradise Island

A lush tropical isle complete with white-sand beaches, clear water and an unbroken cerulean sky, Paradise is a source of decadent pleasures. A resort filled with nightclubs, restaurants and bars sits nestled in the heart of a palm jungle; secluded bungalows and private beaches await on the outskirts. Friendly island natives attend to anything a visitor needs or wants, from drink refills to shoulder rubs to more intimate services. Many visitors spend their days lounging in the sun and swimming in the virtual ocean. The resort also hosts a luau every night, although midnight swims (sharks not included) are always an option. Icon restrictions favor anything from beachwear to bare skin. A popular tactic of spinners fleeing Men in Black is to duck into Paradise and watch the embarrassed agents either walk away or adopt swim trunks (black, of course) in order to fit in.

The Galleon

Several entrances from the heart of the Spy's Demise lead to a small stateroom in the aft portion of an old Spanish galleon. This is no merchant run or pleasure cruise, however; this ship is crewed by pirates. Formatted as a representation of every boy's dreams of larceny on the high seas (and heavily influenced by Erroll Flynn movies), the Galleon allows its visitors to indulge in swashbuckling adventure of the finest sort. Sometimes the crew is eagerly-preparing to attack a merchantman; at other times, mutiny is afoot. Every now and then, the ship puts in at a pirate-friendly port, where the crew splits its plunder and celebrates before heading back out to sea. Visits here are rarely the same.

As with all of the other rooms, the sensory experience is vivid and total, if a bit idealized. Icon restrictions demand that each visitor assumes pirate guise and appropriate props (cutlasses, parrots, peg legs, etc.). Many rival vessels are actually other rooms — another pirate, a merchantman, an English Navy warship, etc. Regulars often play both sides, becoming a Spanish pirate-hunter one day, a buccaneer the next. All combat is "soft," of course. "Dead" crewmen simply dump their senses back into waiting icons in the Grand Bar. The pirate icons lay in heaps to simulate the dead men who *do* tell tales... often while their "corpses" still lie in the thick of battle.

Ghastenburg Castle

Monstrous walls rise from perpetual mists in a wooded countryside under a cloudy sky. A wide, scum-coated moat surrounds the walls; the only way across it is an imposing drawbridge of oak and iron. Inside, guests gather in the main audience chamber and the great hall, toasting the health of King Henry and Queen Branwyn. Outside the great courts, the passages are liberally scattered with sleeping quarters, dining halls, dancing chambers, and the like. Above the castle, towers reach up into the air like skeletal fingers; the tower windows stay alive with strange light well into the night. In the depths below, the dungeons echo with the screams of tortured prisoners, and in the woods outside, eerie beasts stalk the storm-swept hills.

This room is LARPer heaven, with knights and lords, wizards and quests, heroes and villains, swords and sorcery. The constraints of the room require appropriate garb and speech, but within the rules of the game, anything goes. Of course, there *are* consequences for careless behavior. Anger

the lord or break his edicts, and you'll find yourself at swordpoint... or in the dungeon, providing entertainment for other visitors. All "magick" is, of course, coincidental, so long as it fits the classical mode. The staff, however, frowns upon large, powerful or destructive enchantments. Many a careless "wizard" character has vanished forever in a puff of smoke, or been dragged to "hell" (a dump conduit) by "demons"; thus dumped, the visitor must begin with a new "character." If he strays too often, he is barred from the room for good.

Although the king, the queen, and several of their henchmen are staffers or Digital Dollz (no one's quite sure which are which), the court intrigues are open to a host of guests, many of whom are regular "players" in this colossal MU*. New guests often enter as "strangers to the kingdom," quickly embroiled in the love/hate political romance of Henry and Branwyn. Although the monarchs adore each other, they conduct a fierce rivalry, played out like a game of chess with oh-so-willing live pieces. A full platter of evil knights, conspiring lords, dedicated clerics, passionate peasants and horrible creatures keep Ghastenburg Castle hopping. While some visitors complain that the Castle is either "not period" or "in bad taste" (the dungeons ate fairly harrowing, especially for Verbena with a sense of history), this room is among the most popular "attractions" in the Demise.

Reputation

The Spy's Demise is a source of eternal conjecture among those who visit it... which includes nearly every mage in the Web. No one knows who opened the club or who maintains it, but everyone loves to speculate. Popular theories state that it's an NWO Construct collecting information on everything that happens in its rooms; that it was built by the Virtual Adepts during the experimental days of the '50s and '60s; and that it's really a Nephandic trick, undermining both the Council and the Technocracy. Some spinners maintain it was the spot where Turing first appeared in the Web, or that it was set up by the Ahl-i-Batin, who are gathering data for their triumphant return. Some even call it the growing wish-dream of a species on the brink of self-extinction... or of a spirit on the threshold of Awakening. Then there are the *really* weird theories.

Though opinions about the Demise's tolerance policy vary, everyone enjoys having a place to relax without having to watch their backs. Recent increases in the security protocols have some patrons (mostly Virtual Adepts) grumbling about "the good old days." Many Technocratic patrons think the changes are positive ones, and encourage more of them... especially if they drive out the Tradition mages.
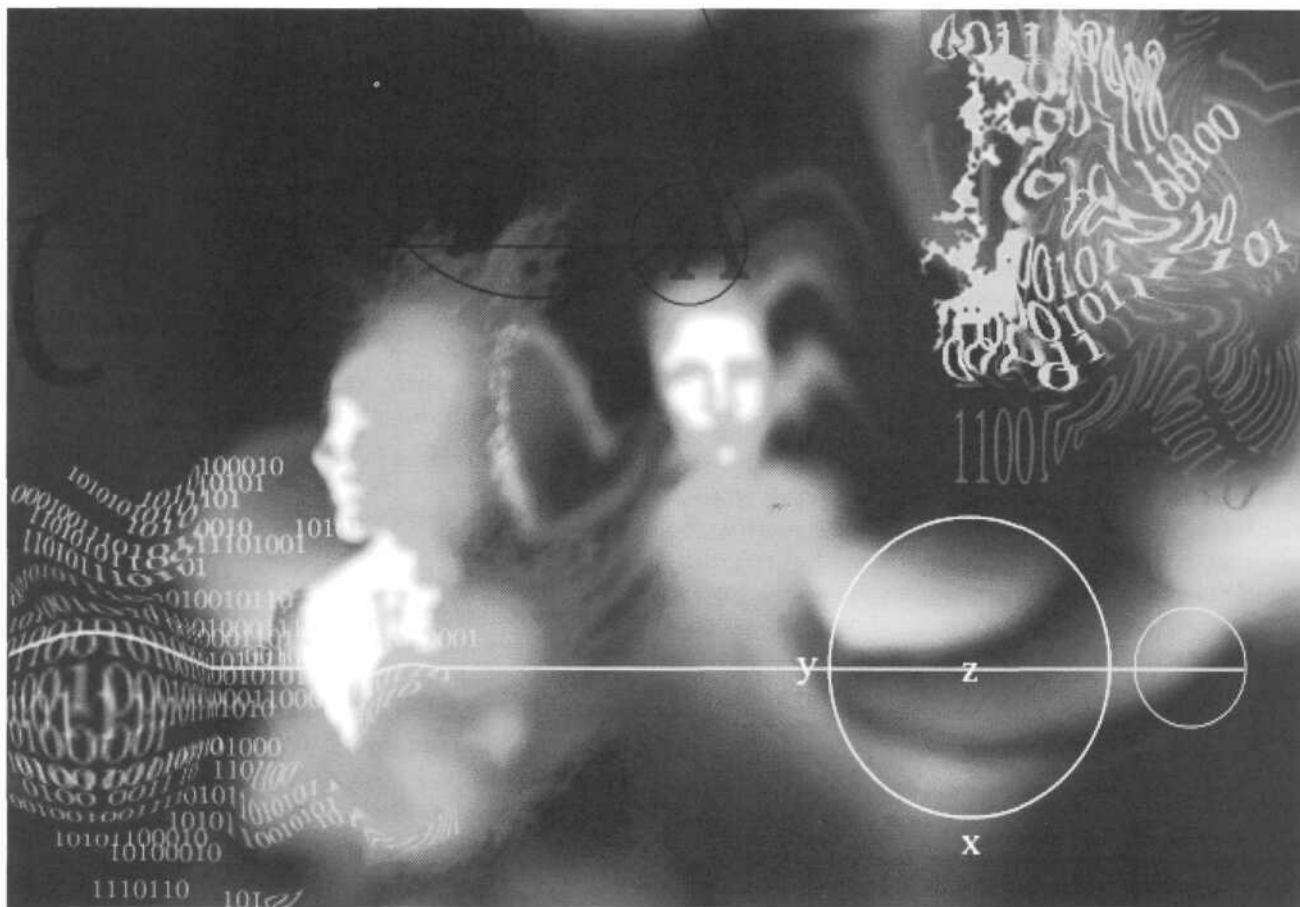
Which is unlikely. Rules or no rules, most spinners consider the Demise a great hangout for many reasons. Its wide range *of* entertainment — no matter your taste, you can find a room that caters to it — makes it a favorite among Webheads who like to dabble. The swift and courteous service is unparalleled anywhere in the Net, the atmosphere of intrigue and rivalry keeps things spicy, and information — almost any kind — can be found for a price somewhere in the Demise.

A small group of spinners has been quietly drumming up support for a movement to close the Spy's Demise. To these protesters, the constant atmosphere of seduction, treachery and escapism weakens the already fragile motivations of many modern magi. Other dissidents worry that the constant presence (and occasional friendship) of traditional enemies in such close proximity dilutes the passion behind the Ascension War. Enemies who spend too much time together, they say, begin to value each other's viewpoints. Given the large numbers of defectors in the Web, the idea makes just enough sense to make it seem valid —

What is the truth behind the Spy's Demise? In a world where any one spinner can wear a dozen masks, is there a single truth to find? As the Web grows, the Spy's Demise does the same... as does the line to get in. Who wants the truth when there's so much fun to be had?

Regulars

Thousands of icons pass through the Spy's Demise every day. Some stay for mere moments, while others linger for hours or days, preferring the club to the harsh reality of the physical world. Some almost never leave, living their lives almost entirely within the Web. One common topic among old-timers at the Demise is that so many regulars died in the Great Crash, or have gone missing. Even so, there are a number of familiar faces who always seem to he somewhere in the Demise, including:

Maxine

What's the password?

Background: From beyond the door, a whiff of lilac perfume signals the presence of Maxine, the tireless, tough-as-nails receptionist of the Web's biggest night spot. No matter how late or early the hour, the ever-present "doll with the Devil's humor" greets visitors to the Demise. Those who cannot answer her eternal query wind up performing for the amusement of the patrons below.

Like most of the Demise's staff, Maxine puzzles outsiders. Although she seems human enough, no spinner would endure her eternal vigil. Naturally, anyone

could *look* like Maxine. For all anyone knows, there are a hundred Maxines taking turns between the various antechambers leading into the club proper. Over a dozen entrances exist, each with a slightly different flavor; Maxine waits behind each door, her icon dressed appropriately. Each Maxine, however, shares the "original's" personality — a slightly sweet, slightly condescending mix of moxie, mischief and boredom. No one — not Dante, not Kibo, not even Master Porthos himself - seems to impress Maxine. If Jesus Christ, the Matriarch and Alan Turing were to march through the door simultaneously, Maxine would probably look up from filing her nails long enough to ask "What's the password?" - and cheerfully dump any or all of her guests if they don't answercorrectly.

(In)famous as she is for her password query, Maxine can converse as fluently as anyone else in Netspace. Certain people even warrant a hug when they come in... but even these favored few must know the password. Friendly visitors might inspire her into chatty digressions about movies, philosophy, technology or whatever else interests the speaker. Oddly enough, Maxine's hobbies always seem to match those *of* the most vocal visitor. She's pretty well-informed, too... much more informed than someone who spends every day in an office should be. There *are* certain things she never discusses, though: her personal life, the internal workings of the Demise, guests of the establishment and Ascension War politics. "Sorry, chief," she demurs, "but we hired helpers ain't supposed ta' discuss those sorta things wit' the guests." As you might expect. Maxine has several admirers. However, no one can prove he's been on a date with the receptionist - though many people, male and female, claim to have gone out with her.

Image: Depending on the conduit leading to the antechamber, Maxine might be a stylish 1990s receptionist, a tough Pulp-Era secretary, a saloon gal, or a sexy James Bond girl. Occasionally, she even appears as an image on a flying vid-screen "bug." In either guise, Maxine radiates a cool, earthy charm, confidence, sly humor and a slight aloofness. Her bright blonde hair, bubble gum and lilac perfume carry over into each image, as does her wicked imagination. No matter how she looks, Maxine always seems a bit put out, as if there were a million things she'd rather be doing than dealing with *you.* Despite this air, she's never unkind or impolite. If a spinner gives her trouble, however, she dumps his sorry ass out of the sector.

Roleplaying Hints: Think wiseass. Although you're never openly rude, there's a certain world-weary wit in your banter. Which isn't to say you're not friendly sometimes... but *you'll* decide who to be friendly with. Nothing and nobody ruffles you; hell, the Great Crash might have made you put down your nail file. The password changes constantly (Storyteller's option), but remains your sacred charge. God Himself couldn't get in without offering either the password or some little trick. Tailor those tricks to the customer's attitude. If he's nice, go easy; if he's got a stick up his virtual ass, take him down hard.

Possible Roles: Maxine is rarely, if ever, seen away from her desk.

Notes: Although not a mage in the classic sense, Maxine has one great power: Storyteller fiat. As the incarnation of the Spy's Demise, she can do anything you want her to be able to do, short of leaving the antechamber. Her de-rezzing power never fails, although she never uses it unless some "guest" has proven to be a nuisance, and no one can harm her, read her mind or scare her off, no matter what they do.

Nightwind

Sorry, I don't take data-collection jobs anymore. I have gazed into the depths and found a clue to reaching the heights. 1 have more important things to think about these days.

Background: Nightwind was a Virtual Adept with a rep for being great at finding data. He always dreamed of creating something bigger than the Digital Web, though, something that would dwarf its apparent infinity with the real thing. He spent a lot of time following Lip on rumors about a meta-level to the Web, then disappeared for a while. He's recently returned to the Demise, but has been tight-lipped about what he's seen.

Image: Nightwind always dresses entirely in black and wears a black cloak that perpetually billows around him. His hair and eyes are also black, and he stands about 5' 10". He has a tendency to look off into the distance, even when speaking directly to someone.

Roleplaying Hints: You were absolutely the best, and then you discovered something that made you even better. Searching for the higher levels of VR, you found a lower one. Although you can't be sure, *you* suspect that you uncovered the very operating system of the Web. Now you have an uncanny understanding of the way all the data interrelates, but you're trying to figure out how to use that knowledge.

People used to think you were arrogant. Now they think you're aloof. Their opinions don't matter. The secrets to the greatest hack of all is within your grasp... if you could only understand how to use them. Your insights have made you a bit insane, and you often question the sanity of everyone around you, too.

Possible Roles: Expert advisor, crazy mystic, scary dude at the bar, Big Brother type-

Notes: In game terms, Nightwind is a *Master* (see "Sample Templates," **Mage**, p. 275), specializing in

Correspondence, Mind and Prime (5 each). His Arete (7) is impressive enough in itself, hut his eerie gaze, which seems to evoke landscapes and enigmas beyond comprehension, lends him an effective Manipulation and Intimidation of 5 each. Powerful as he is, Nightwind disdains overt magick; instead, he simply assumes new forms, employs diversions or disappears when threatened.

Astarte

Behold, I am the Mother of All Things, and my love is like water upon the Earth.

Background: According to myth, the Goddess Astarte was the great creatrix of Earth and her surrounding realms. Divided into three parts, she spread the seas, the skies and the land below her like a blanket, and walked naked into the Underworld to rescue her consort from eternal Death. As she went, she cast away the garments, mantles and finery that shielded her from eternity. In the end, she confronted Infinity and Death, defeated them with love, and brought their secrets back to the living world with her.

According to Net legend, the spinner Astarte was an Etherite with a fondness for science fiction, mythology and alternate dimensions. Shunned since childhood for her odd pursuits, and shunned within the Sons of Ether for her sex and ethnicity, the woman-who-would-be-goddess invented powerful computers and broke through the harrier between the human world and the Net. Like Turing, she was sucked into Netspace by accident, and supposedly absorbed phenomenal amounts of knowledge in the process. Casting away her old name, tools and appearance, she confronted this new reality, learned its secrets, and has carried them with her ever since.

Oh, did we mention that she's mad as a dyslexic sysop?

These days, the two Astartes are one. For a goddess, she still has a remarkably human fondness for books, games and conversation; in her mind, she's simply enjoying the fruits of her creations. Despite a lingering sadness — she believes a mysterious force stripped away her true divine power, slew her children and scattered her precious Quintessence — Astarte is a genial and generous being. Although fearsome in her wrath — as any goddess should be! — she prefers to socialize with her beloved creations.... so long as they pay her the respect she is due.

Image: Astarte is a tall, nude woman of African descent. In place of skin, she has a shimmering black void, salted with a starscape. If you stare at her for any length of time, you can see the planets and stars move against the cosmos that is her body. Aside from her two burning violet eyes, the goddess' form is totally "transparent," displaying the universe "within" her. Astarte's voice, when she speaks, whispers like the wind between the stars.

Roleplaying Hints: As befits an ageless creatrix, you are dignified, reserved and gracious. Unlike the raging gods you've heard tales of, you are patient and generous. What need does a goddess have for human pettiness? So long as all creatures offer you respect, your temper is calm and your actions benevolent. Should some upstart deny your divinity, his life and soul are yours for the taking.

When time permits, you indulge in the fascinating games your creations have devised; chess is a special favorite of yours, and you play it extraordinarily well... though you *can* be beaten.

Possible Roles: Background curiosity, powerful but distant ally, information font, divinity

Notes: Like Blue Meanie, Astarte went Marauder a long time ago. In game terms, she's an *Adept* at the high end of the scale (Arete 6), with remarkable command of Correspondence, Forces and Spirit (5 each), and formidable talents with Mind, Prime and Time (3 each). Although she understands all Spheres at the first Rank, her skill with the others is limited (1 each). Her extraordinary Perception and Intelligence (5 each), combined with her magickal perceptions, do indeed make her seem godlike. Insane or not, she has a sizable cult of fanatically dedicated spinners (the Jewels of Astarte) and several enigmatic Umbrood [see "Data Beasts" in SITE 5] as companions.

Jessica Young

How may I be of assistance?

Background: A former Void Engineer with a gift for cartography, Jessica got her start helping the Engineers map the Web. After several violent encounters with Virtual Adepts, she questioned the animosity between the Union and the Council. She talked with the staff at the Spy's Demise, and they offered her a position of neutrality between the two camps. She accepted and worked behind the bar for several years. For the first few years, she wore her gray Void Engineer jumpsuit and stylish avant-garde jewelry to boast her harmony with order and progress. After the fight in 1995, Jessica's mysterious employers requested that she moderate her icon's "dress" to avoid provoking partisan fights.

These days, Jessica puts her artistic and diplomatic talents to work reconstructing damaged sectors. A talented CGI artist, she designs new and better "buildings," and has personally formatted several rooms in the Demise itself (including Ghastenburg Castle, where she plays the royal confidant Lady Jessella). Although she enjoys making friends with patrons, she pulls away when and if she senses that a relationship (romantic or otherwise) is getting too close. Jessica lost several friends in the Great Crash, and she secretly fears another disaster. Although she wouldn't leave the Net if her life depended on it (to her, it does), Jessica is deeply afraid of losing more loved ones. Even so, her natural friendliness undermines her attempts at emotional distance. To many patrons of the Spy's Demise, Jessica Young is far more than a bartender; she's living proof of the hope the Digital Web offers.

Image: On duty, Jessica "dresses" in the plain black and white suits that most staffers wear. Tying her long brown hair back in a ponytail, she serves up drink and conversation with equal enthusiasm. Her sparkling blue eyes miss nothing; as she speaks, those eyes stare straight into the face of whomever she addresses. Her intense manner might be intimidating if not for her friendliness; if threatened, however, she has no problem dumping troublemakers into the nearest SRVRZ. Jessica still has many friends among the Technocrats, and those allies enjoy doing favors for her.

Off duty, Jessica sketches faces and places in her virtual drawing pad. As Lady Jessella, she favors elaborate court garb (often designed by the artist herself) and dignified manners; away from the Demise, she enjoys torn jeans and T-shirts, and wears her hair loose and free. No matter where she is, Jessica will not tolerate insults to either side of the Great Race, and admonishes partisans to see the other side of the issue.

Roleplaying Hints: You want to be the first to explore anything new, and your eagerness shows whenever discussing new discoveries. You know it's not possible to discover everything, but that'll never stop you from trying. You believe that the Ascension War is a sad joke; true Ascension will only happen when mages realize that everyone will have a part in it.

Possible Roles: Secret benefactor, curiously well-informed acquaintance, source of timely warnings

Notes: In game terms, Jessica is a moderately skilled *Adept* (Arete 5, Correspondence and Prime 3, Forces, Matter and Mind 2, Entropy, Life, Spirit and Time 1) who channels her Arts through drawing (Rank 1 perception Effects) or computer decks (everything else). Aside from VR access, she has very little interest in magick, and prefers to hone her talents with pen, pixel and personality.

Panama lack

Of course *I know how to get into the Demise from the Badlands. What do you think I am, an amateur? I've faced down angry natives and flaming volcanoes. You think a few hungry data beasts can stop* me.[7]

Background: The child of safari experts, Jack grew up in the wild, traveling to remote and dangerous places. His experiences awakened a fire in him that led him to explore such places as Tasmania, Borneo and the Himalayas. There, a chance encounter with a party of Void Engineers Awakened his Avatar to much more. A tragic accident left him with paralyzed legs, a missing arm and shattered dreams, until his fellow Technocrats introduced him to the Digital Web. Now he specializes in finding entrances to the Spy's Demise, and personally knows of at least 150.

Until the Crash, Jack spent most of his time in the deepest reaches of Webspace, with only other Voids for company. From them, he learned to distrust Etherites ("Professor Challenger's mutant offspring") and fear "the Virtual Assholes" who would crash the Net just for fun. Although he's friendly enough on the surface, Jack doesn't trust Tradition-types "as far as I could throw a water buffalo." He works to undermine their lead in the Great Race as much as possible. To this end, Jack acts the buddy, buying drinks all 'round and starting tall-tale contests with likely informants. He's not really one for violence, but he can throw a punch and shoot a gun, and he's got pretty big hands and a really big rifle in case the quicksand starts suckin' at his toes.

Although he appears to be a brave loner, Jack's extremely loyal to the Void Engineers, and to the Technocratic cause in general. "I've seen the wild side of nature," he'll tell you, "and there were reasons we made machines and medicines." While no great fan of the cyborgs and their lot, Jack's convinced "they're just the hired help," and can be turned off or reprogrammed once the threat is past.

Image: Think Harrison Ford in a Panama hat and khakis, and you've got a pretty good vision of Jack. In or out of the Demise, Jack's always got his trusty Smith & Wesson .38, a Bowie knife and his H&H Nitro rifle nearby.

Roleplaying Hints: You've always loved having the wind in your hair, and the Void Engineers had just begun to show you the true frontiers when it was all taken away. Avoid thinking about it too much — it just makes you bitter and angry. Instead, exercise your natural talents in the Web, seeing the virtual versions of things you might have seen in person, if only... Well, that kind of thinking gets you nowhere. Relish what is.

Possible Roles: Skillful guide, hero, professional rival, source of misinformation, insufferable braggart whose face you want to smash

Notes: Consider Jack an *Adept* of moderate ability (Correspondence 2, Forces 3, Life 3, Prime 2, Arete 4), heavy on physical Talents and Skills like Brawling, Climbing, Athletics, etc. (3 or 4 in appropriate Abilities). In Webspace, Jack's "magick" always manifests as great strength, luck, fortitude or speed, or as the weapons forever at his side. If anyone should ever meet Jack outside the Web, they'll find a bitter, wheelchair-bound man of great imagination but little physical or magickal ability.

Candy Carnemark (pronounced "con-a-mark")

Wanna buy me a drink?

Background: A dame from the deepest corner of Breakheart Hotel, Candy broods in the darkness of Bogart's cafe. Every so often, she rouses herself just enough to get suicidally entangled in another loser's private tragedy. Some nights, she is a muse to a tortured artist who just happens to owe his soul to the Mob; other nights, she's a girl on the lam, hunted by the crookedest cops on the force. No matter what her current dilemmas , you can bet it'll involve lots of three important things: lies, violence and sex — especially sex.

To a spinner mook with more iron than brains, she's everything a guy could ask for. Too sexy to live, too beautiful to die, Candy pouts like a child and throws down like a pro. In a world of perfect bodies, she's got one of the best — great gams, a solid chassis, killer's eyes and a figure so hydraulic that Neptune himself would be struck dumb. She's got great moves and a wardrobe to match. There's only one problem, and it isn't readily apparent: Candy is a guy.

Five of 'em, actually, and they're all Sleepers. A year or so ago, a group of college dudes (and one woman) stumbled onto a fantastic MU* — the back room of Bogart's. Originally, they created Candy, the ideal fantasy female, as an exercise in male gullibility. It worked. *Boy,* did it work! The icon was so well created that even mages were fooled (mostly because they wanted to be). Professions of love, invitations to romance, crude seductions, and the deadliest kind of secrets — the kind Sleepers aren't supposed to know — poured into "Candy's" ears. The real woman soon left the group to create her own icon, Candy's rival — Lisa Manson; the guys remain online, sharing Candy between them and reveling in her exploits.

Until recently, the men behind the woman assumed that the fantastic talk of "Great Races" and "Technocratic Unions" were all part of a deeper level on the MU*. On a lark, a couple of them did some checking, and uncovered local operations of both the Traditions and the Technocracy. Candy's handlers are beginning to see the true scope of a conspiracy that makes *The X-Files* look sedate... and none of 'em are sure what to do with the info. As of yet, Candy hasn't stumbled, but the guys are getting nervous. What happens if— or *when* — someone behind the scenes figures out the truth behind Bogart's most infamous moll?

Secretly, a couple of the guys are dying to find out....

Image: Candy's a vulnerable Amazon, a killer tomato with a mouth for lies and a body for sin. A blonde bombshell with shrapnel to boot, Candy stands 5'6" and boasts a heroic set of headlights and hips. She dresses to kill, and packs an icepick and a .22 in securely demure places. Her tough Brooklyn accent has Swedish tinges, and her sex drive is enough to exhaust a Cultist of Ecstasy. In reality, Candy's "men" are a nondescript lot... not repulsive, but nothing special, either.

Roleplaying Hints: You're tough as cement, but melt like butter when you're touched *just* right... You love trouble, so much so that no matter how badly it hurts, you just can't stay away from the Bad Life and all the fun that it brings

Possible Roles: Informant, plot complicator, distraction, messenger, local color, sex toy, pet project for redemption, enemy, ticking time bomb

Notes: Neither Candy nor her handlers have magickal powers of any kind. She's just an extremely sophisticated VR simulation with some imaginative programmers, a killer icon and enough luck to get into *really* deep shit. To date, no one has noticed Candy's true origins, and a lot of people have told her a lot of things they shouldn't have. A search that *doesn't* include sex would probably reveal her straight away, but as of yet, no one, male or female, has been able to get past Candy's powerful sexuality. In game terms, she could be considered a Sleeper (though not a "witness" for magick) with Manipulation and Appearance 5, a Seduction and Wits of 4, and an insatiable libido.

Rumors

In a place where information flows as copiously as it does in the Spy's Demise, rumors are the spare change that trades hands in a moment of conversation. The following is a list of things characters might hear, or pay to learn, while in the club. The truth of each rumor is up to the Storyteller.

Some older Virtual Adepts regret their Tradition's break with the Technocracy, and have been talking about deserting the Council to go back to the Technocratic Union.

See, I told you that Marauders were trying to crash the Web! Good thing the Adepts built this place like a rock....

There's a whole storehouse of data hidden somewhere in the Spy's Demise, free to anyone who can find it. I bet there's some choice stuff in there.

1 heard somebody went out to Doc Volcano's online shop and picked up a Chopper. I wonder if the person who bought it will be stupid enough to use it... or where they plan to use it.

A bunch of Arabian guys were asking around about the location of the Crystal Palace. Don't know what they want there, but they didn't look like they were selling Camp Scout cookies.

Whatever you do, man, always build your own rig. I heard the Syndicate's moving in on all the hardware companies. It's bad enough they own most of the software....

The Great Race is over. It's a draw. The Virtual Adepts and Void Engineers signed a secret pact to control the Web. Once they get everything rebuilt, they're gonna band together as the fifth faction in the Ascension War and call themselves the Fractal Architects.

A bunch of glowing icons have been walking around. fixing the most screwed-up parts of the Web. No one knows who they are, but they try to fry you if they see you watching 'em.

I heard three SRVRZs reverted to Virgin Web, out of the blue. 1 wonder if the Technos are pissed or psyched. Gee, I'd hate to be inside a sector when that happened—

If someone conies up to you and tells you he knows what it takes to become an Oracle, dust his ass. The only I ones who know are the Oracles, and they ain't talking.

I tell you, I saw those guys climbing all over the Matterhorn. Arabian Nights dudes in robes-n-shit. Looked like they were buildin' somethin'....

I heard there's another level to the Web, a meta-level where you can experience the entirety of the Web's infinity at once. They say the people who find this place either crack from the pressure and go nuts, or find a sense of peace and transcend their bodies 'cause they know the pain of flesh isn't worth the struggle of wearing it.

Don't get "tracered" in the Demise! It's the next step in the NWO's plan to monitor everything in the Web!

The destruction of Doissetep points out the folly of the Council. It was torn apart from within by inter-Tradition rivalries that got out of hand. A fractured confederation such as yours has no hope. Only the unified paradigm of the Technocratic Union can lead the world to Ascension.

I heard Doissetep got blown to bits by some badass wizard who managed to survive Gilgul and execution. He stitched his Avatar together while he was floating around in the Outer Realms, then returned for some serious pay-back.

If you can answer the riddle of the Net-sphinx, she'll let you read anything in her library... and she has everything in her library!

Some newbie's been hiring bodyguards like crazy, Seems he stumbled onto a whole bunch of Virgin Web and is holding out for the highest bid he can get. If he waits too long, somebody'll get it from him for free, and he won't like that one bit.

The Dreamspeakers are breaking up. Too many new shamans love technology, and their elders are cracking down hard. This dude named Rolling Thunder Ridgeway is leading a splinter group of techno-shamans called the Thunderbird Ring, and they want out of both the 'Speakers and the Council.

Hey, did you hear the AI in charge of MECHA isn't happy running just her Realm any more? Yeah, the place is such a model of efficiency that the rest of the Technocracy is afraid of it. They tried to shut her down, but she recursed herself outta the trap and got the upper hand. Now she wants to run the whole show. The Inner Circle's trying to figure out if they can pull the plug.

The werewolves have declared war on the Digital Web. They say we've been harboring Wyrm-spawn, so they're going to destroy the whole thing to get at them.

You can get a job at the Spy's Demise if you know the right people. You have to change your icon so you look like rest of the staff, but I hear the pay is great. Besides, imagine being able to listen in on all the stuff going on here, because no one thinks you care. Hey, is that bartender looking at us funny?

Nobody runs the Spy's Demise. It's self-aware, always has been. Pretty soon it's gonna start reaching out and waking up other sectors until the whole Web is awake. Then we're screwed.
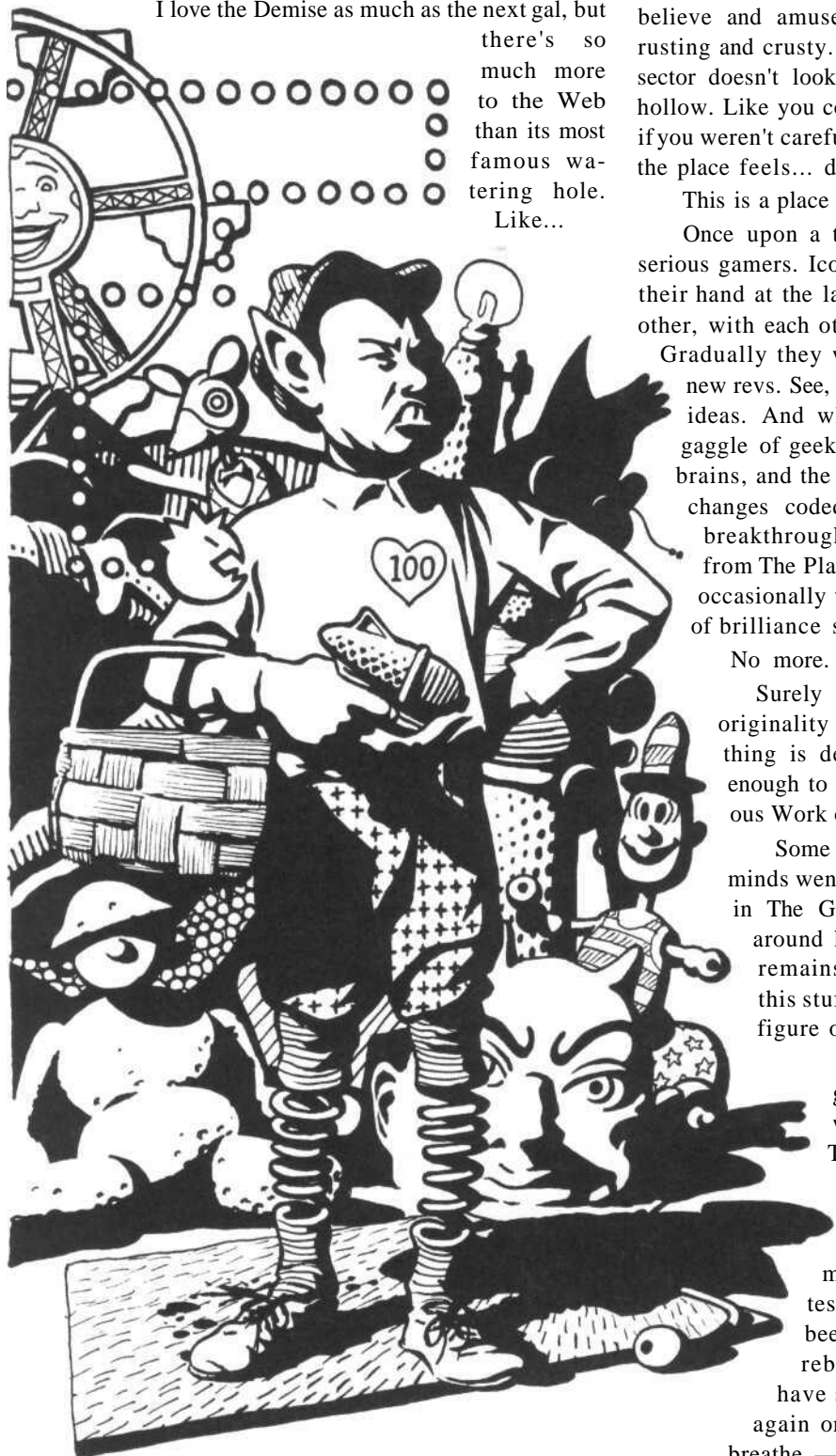
Other Sites

OK, you wanna see more? 1 don't blame you — I love the Demise as much as the next gal, but there's so much more to the Web than its most famous watering hole. Like...

ThePlayground

A junkyard. No, a blown-apart carnival. No, that's still not it___It's a hodgepodge of toys, dreams, make-believe and amusement parks — only somehow gray, rusting and crusty. How do you *get* rust on the Net? This sector doesn't look decrepit as much as it looks, well, hollow. Like you could put your hand through something if you weren't careful. Things aren't holding together well; the place feels... disconnected, misplaced.

This is a place that was.

Once upon a time, The Playground was a site for serious gamers. Icons would drift in from all over to try their hand at the latest CGI game, playing against each other, with each other and play with each other's ideas. Gradually they would crank out new code and create new revs. See, in a perfect geek world, ideas build on ideas. And when things are really going right, a gaggle of geeks will heterodyne off of each other's brains, and the universe will be a better place for the changes coded. Once upon a time, most of the breakthrough ideas for new game software came from The Playground; Sleeper programmers would occasionally wake up to claim as their own a flash of brilliance sent from The Playground.

No more.

Surely you've noticed the amazing lack of originality in games recently. It seems like every-thing is derivative, nothing new for ages. It's enough to make a gamer think about doing Seri-ous Work or something. There's a reason for that.

Some of the most brilliant game-generating minds went with The Playground when it Whited in The Great Crash. But you can still walk around here, and see bits and pieces of what remains... if you can figure out what some of this stuff is. Assuming, of course, that you can figure out how to get here in the first place.

Old hacks rue the loss of The Play-ground, but they're damned glad they weren't here when the Web Crashed. The Playground used to be fun to wander through. You could try new games, see what slick code was around to be "borrowed," maybe make a contribution or two, or beta test the new stuff. Recently, folks have been putting most of their energy into rebuilding the Web; still, it'd be nice to have someplace like The Playground back again once everyone has a few moments to breathe — and play! — again.

New World Virtual high School Expo Center

The Technocracy's nervous about the Net, and with good reason. The Net is responsible for a rapid surge in interest in technology — which, on the surface, would seem to be a great thing for the technological paradigm. Much to the chagrin of many Technocrats, however, the Virtual Adepts (and others) have used the Net to blow the roof off of what Sleepers think technology can achieve. Add that to the air of Anarchy that Netizens tend to promote, and you've got a curious contradiction: a Zone where the Sleepers can wander, and a Zone where both the Technocracy and the Traditions are right at the same time. The New World Virtual High School Expo Center is a large step toward breaking that stalemate.

Physically, the site is located in North Carolina, at the hub of several government networks and Internet sites dedicated to county school systems. It contains conduits to several other education and government-oriented sites on the Web as well. Originally designed and engineered in a cooperative effort between NWO educators and Syndicate managers, the Expo has been designed primarily for Sleepers. Schools across the United States and Canada (the rest of the world will be able to log in soon) are being given cheap, simple VR rigs, allowing entire classrooms to visit the Expo center at once. Accompanied by their teacher, children can virtually "step in" to the center, and witness living dinosaurs, great events in history, and more. The Center itself includes experimental online classrooms where teachers can customize furniture, coloration, even basic architecture to find the perfect classroom for their students. The virtual library holds vast literary resources that can be read from virtual books by turning the virtual pages. In short, the kids love it, the teachers love it, and nobody has probed too deeply to find its source of the funding. It's a great way to take a class on a field trip without having to ask the parents to split the bus fare.

A vital part of the updated Timetable, the Expo is designed to reinforce three basic ideas:

(A) Technology is fun, attractive, and essential.

(B) Technology has many useful applications, but they are still limited. The best use of technology lies in the hands of those who understand and acknowledge those limits.

(C) Technology is best when it's used by schools, governments, corporations, and other large figures of the establishment. An orderly Net is more fun, more useful, and more practical than one where everybody can act as they please.

The first is the easiest to establish; a few minutes in the virtual jungle watching T-Rex will convince the youngsters, and an hour in the Teacher's Resource Lab, where testing, grading and curriculum design are merged into simple virtual routines, convinces the educators. The obvious joy of both students and teachers tends to convince the parents. To the Center's credit, GPAs rise dramatically in classes with access

to the VR rigs. Kids who never liked learning before are discovering a fascination with knowledge, as it comes to life before them in a show that buries the most popular video games for sheer spectacle.

The second goal — to establish that technology is bound by definite parameters --is woven into every aspect of the Center. The VR rigs provide only audio/visual feedback, nothing kinesthetic or olfactory. Furthermore, while the visuals *are* impressively artistic and colorful, they are very *deliberately* artistic and colorful. Nothing in the Expo Center, not even the waxed corridors and stainless-steel statuary, looks real. It's all very obviously top-notch CGI, complete with carefully highlighted (if subtle) flaws. The Technocracy is trying very hard to establish that anything that looks *more* real than this is currently impossible. Technology is wonderful, but it is limited, and must advance slowly.

The third goal — to establish that Order online is better than Anarchy — is more difficult to drive home. The complex is deliberately laid out in a way that allows children to wander off from their group to explore... not to *encourage* the practice, but to make it easy. Kids who go off on their own soon find themselves lost in endless dull corridors, dark offices, and seminar chambers, until a friendly (if blocky and unrealistic) cartoon icon "security guard" finds the wanderers and escorts them back to the group. When the "strays" return to their group, they find that the others have received a special treat in their absence - either a tour of an especially exciting exhibit, or something more tangible, like free coupons for ice cream back in RealSpace. The places and activities provided for the public are fun, colorful, and interesting. Everything else is dull, frightening and unrewarding.

The exhibits themselves include *Dinosaur Island* (kids can watch cool action scenes of migration, feeding, fighting and extinction); *Dawn of Man* (icons act out the ascent of humanity from smelly primates to tool-using sophisticates); *The Classical World* (Daedalus escorts kids past noble Greeks and Romans battling barbarians and establishing great sciences, philosophy and technology); The *Dark Ages* (where fairy tale romanticism is quashed by harrowing depiction of poverty, disease and oppression, undone again by the forces of Reason); the *Renaissance Adventure* (a guided tour hosted by Leonardo da Vinci, who takes kids through Venice and Florence, introduces them to Columbus and other visionaries, and shows them the wonders of the arts and sciences); the *Age of Reason Tour* (a breathtaking walk through Elizabethan England, royal Paris, Classical Germany and colonial America — hosted by guides like Shakespeare, Voltaire, Beethoven and Pocahontas); *The Great Peace* (Victorian England, hosted by the queen herself); and the *Wonders of Tomorrow Expo* (hosted by Einstein, who'd be appalled at his icon's behavior). All tours, of course, feature history lessons *very* skewed toward the Technocratic view-

point. Each site is a Restricted Sector; to enter, icons must wear clothing appropriate to the era (and to the view the Expo wishes to promote — the Dark Ages costumes are filthy and drab, while the Age of Reason features dashing garb). Kids are given these "clothes" in "dressing rooms" in the conduits outside the sectors.

The *Teacher's Resource Lab* resembles a cross between a shopping mall and an office complex. Features include "mutable classrooms," where teachers can pick up and reshape furniture with their "bare hands," recolor the carpet with a wave of a finger, and rearrange the walls at a simple graphic-oriented console. To use the facilities, the teachers fill out and update "access forms," thus keeping the Expo's staff informed about the "unofficial" side of modern education... information that only teachers would know.

The Expo itself is not a single Grid Sector, but a collection of linked ones, carefully formatted into related themes and connected by many conduits to create the illusion of a modern virtual facility. The complex consists of two principal zones, colloquially referred to by the site's administrators as Upstairs and Downstairs. The "Upstairs" areas are well-lit and clean, and open to the public (although many of the apparently functional areas are little more than decorative background noise). The "Downstairs" areas are private, secret meeting places where educators plan new strategies, lessons and methods.

The New World Virtual High School Expo is open to the public in various forms. While the corridors and sectors of the actual facility are only accessible by those who employ the Technocracy's VR rigs, the Expo also sponsors a colorful interactive Website and several live chat areas on the ordinary Internet. The admins also host discussions on IRC chat networks. The media and government love the new Expo, and the feedback from parents and kids is encouraging. For all its propaganda, the Expo *does* entice kids to learn. As for the Adepts, staring at the deeply Restricted blot on the Net, the benefits of education versus the *nature* of that education keep the whole project a subject of debate.

The Seer

The Web is home to hundreds, possibly even thousands, of libraries and indexes, sectors devoted to scanning both the ordinary Internet and the vast Web beneath it to find out just where all the information is. Some of the more powerful "libraries" are even capable of opening fresh conduits directly to a data source — provided the sector on the other end has given permission for that kind of sudden intrusion. Many do grant it, in exchange for the right to use such systems for their own ends.

The Great Crash of '97 destroyed most of the really powerful libraries, wiping clean or shredding them into useless, surreal ruins. In the aftermath, they were written off as lost. Until the summer of '98, when the Seer was discovered.

Through a process that nobody has been desperate enough to replicate, dozens of library sectors from all corners of the Web *clustered* together and *fused.* The resulting ruin is certainly surreal, but it's far from useless. Tucked away in a remote Junkland, the Seer (the nickname was applied quickly and stuck) is easily the most flexible, powerful research tool on the Web. Furthermore, it's self-aware, all-powerful within the confines of its own domain, and apparently has an agenda of some kind. The Seer is either a powerful AI, a ghost, or even a new kind of combination of the two. Nobody's quite sure which. If anyone recognizes the Seer's personality, they aren't talking.

Anyone who enters the Seer's domain may question it. Any question *may* be answered, if the Seer feels like doing so. The question may also be answered with a fresh conduit to nearly *anywhere* in the Web; there doesn't seem to be any limit to where it can penetrate. Everybody with real power in the Web wants to either claim the Seer as their own private tool, or destroy it — but the Seer has successfully resisted every such attempt, and seems capable of ejecting anyone who doesn't play nice. The Seer prefers to remain a quiet spot for those seeking knowledge, and it brooks no abuse.

The borders of the Seer are indistinct, surrounded by Junklands filled with links and passages that most Webspinners consider unsafe. Most take the long way in, a trek across crashed and ruined sectors that can take hours on foot. The structure itself looks like the main branch of a big-city public library... or rather, what one might look like if you peeled the roof and walls away. Shelves and shelves of books, fluttering in the breeze below the bluest, brightest sky you've ever seen. Natural breezes whip through the stacks, causing pages to flutter and carrying a gentle whiff of old ink and binding glue. Nothing blows away, though; nothing is lost or ruined once you step onto the carpeted floor. The library is an oasis of calm in a twisted, hopeless landscape.

In the center room of the library, faint shadows of the clouds overhead crawl peacefully over every surface. Here, the icon of the Seer's persona drifts, a flowing, semi-humanoid spectre of orange light. The Seer isn't chatty — it only answers questions, but will respond to nearly any appropriate address, from "Seer" or "librarian" *to* "hey, you." When it isn't being addressed, the spirit simply drifts.

Aside from the Seer itself, the place lacks a catalogue or sorting order of any kind. Without help, a visitor could literally spend lifetimes looking for a given work. The stacks of books include a surprisingly eclectic collection of data that may be accessed without approaching the orange spectre at all. Clearly "leftovers" from the crashed libraries and indexes that formed the Seer, they include everything from Technocratic agenda sheets to holy works written by members of the Celestial Chorus. Many of these works have been targeted for destruction or theft, but to no avail. The Seer simply ejects any icon causing trouble.

The nameless Seer Spectre is a vague, shifting image of orange light. Its face is stem and vaguely feminine; its eyes are deep, dark and empty. The features don't betray much emotion at all, maybe a hint of impatience or a touch of anger. Most visitors to the Seer simply assume that it's some kind of warped AI, a cynical image of a typical librarian or professor. The reality behind this "Reader of the Lost Archives" remains as lost as the books at the bottom of the stacks.

You want more? I could go on all day. How about the **Persephone Exploration & Development SRVRZ #2**, where Void Engineers speed off into the Web's deepest reaches, charting both the damaged sectors and the dim areas in between? Or **Club Dionysus,** where the CoX explores new forms of consciousness through mass-parallax orgies, recursive stimulation, and weird new syntheses of music, video and sensation. The twisted ruins of the **Entropitorium** were thrashed and corrupted when the evil Chantry Helekar tore loose from its moorings. Before it crashed, that place was serious bad j u j u … supposedly, it's deeply haunted, even now. **Ground Zero** is kinda like a cut-rate Spy's Demise, a Netbar

with a younger, hipper and far wilder clientele. The owners, Nonconformity and Nightshade, come from the outer fringes of the CoX, and favor stimulation over edification. Fun place on Fridays, though. In the **Future Consciousness Exploration Construct #1**, progressives (if you could call 'em that) from It X, the NWO and the Voids explore the next phase in human evolution by projecting themselves into mind/machine/mathematical loops and charting the experiences. (In other words, they're doing the same things as the CoXers do, but with less fun.) And then there's the **Net-sphinx's library**, a dusty labyrinth of endless corridors, ancient texts and watchful eyes. I've heard there's a half-woman, half-lion living there who occasionally asks visitors exceedingly hard riddles, then eats 'em if they can't answer. **[See *The Book of Madness,* pp. 95-96.]** Personally, I've never seen her, but I can say that you get the creepiest feeling there… Almost as if you're bring watched.

But then, isn't *everyone* being watched in Netspace? Here, true privacy is an illusion. If someone wants to dig stuff up about you, they can, as the following spinners could attest—

Other Noted Netizens
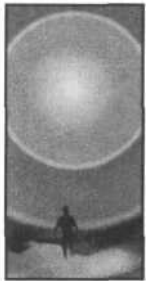
Speak for yourself, doctor. I rarely feel secure that I exist.

— Galen Brant

Everybody in Netspace is somebody… usually lots of somebodies. The privacy issue is one of the reasons spinners parallax so damned much — it's easier than dealing with "Hey, aren't you so-and-so" every 20 seconds. You certainly don't think you've been hangin' out with the *real* me for the last few hours, do y a ?:-)

Some people, though, are just too much to ignore. Maybe they've got secret IDs scattered all over the place, too, but everybody's heard their mainline handles: **Kibo,** self-styled god of Netspace, a joke and a legend in one; **DaisyChain,** the hacker deluxe who made ATMs spit cash one fine day and crashed the FBI's hacker data base for a week, erasing all her friends' names (and putting in a few new names for good measure); the **Hen of Grainekarm,** a fake oracle exiled to an especially psychotropic sector after it was caught giving away bank accounts to its worshippers; **X-Cel,** a popular VA performance artist who dragged Sleepers on trips through VR but acted cool toward Technocrats until her icon got chaos-dumped by a squad of HIT Marks. So many names, so many legends —

What say we glance at a few and get the hell outta Dodge? I've got a date at the Demise tonight. (What'd you think I should wear? The Waterhouse? The Beardsley? The Moreau? Yeah, I agree; the Moreau's pretty fucked up. I'll wear that.)

C-va! :-)

Dante

Hey, man, before you dump that kid, you wanna sit down and talk about it? No? *(activates twip program, dumping adversary) Didn't think you would.*

Background: Truman Burbank has nothing on Desmond Collingsworth III. Awakened in the womb and born into a Progenitor research facility, Desmond was taken from his mother at birth and given to a "safe family" for protection and observation. His childhood was a carefully crafted sham, a middle-class paint-by-numbers life in Evanston, with a peaceful nuclear family and constant, invisible monitoring by the Progenitors.

Desmond proved to be a prodigy and then some, graduating from high school at the age of eight, and at the top of his class at Harvard by his early teens. He had a Ph.D. in medicine only a few short years after that. Desmond was a genius, and a happy one, having lived his entire life Awakened, but (ironically) ignorant of his real past.

When Desmond (now called Dante) was 17, his true past was revealed to him by other Technocracy "prodigies." Although furious, he shunned open, violent revenge. Hacking open Technocracy files, he escaped the Progenitors, joined the Adepts, and began liberating talented children from Progenitor breeding and observation programs. With his phenomenal gift for computers, his even temper and natural cool, and an uncanny knack for discovering (or creating) back doors out of any situation, Dante quickly joined the most Elite of the Elite. A dedi-

T R A B B O L D '98

cated Virtual Adept, a peerless master of Correspondence, and a father figure to dozens of young magi, Dante has come to epitomize the "new blood" spoken of by the late Hermetic Master Porthos. His exploits are legendary, his friends (including his former lover Marianna of Balador) are powerful, and his enemies are legion.

Sadly, some of those enemies now come from within his own Tradition. Despite his hatred of the Technocracy, Dante is no anarchist. In the post-Crash Web, he has taken on the heavy burden of spearheading the reconstruction movement. As a figurehead "cryptkeeper," he has watched many old friends and several apprentices turn against him. His battles with buzzbombs and friendship with the Council Primi have cemented his growing reputation as "the Man." Despite his rebellious origins and comparative youth (his 30th birthday falls just short of the Millennium), Dante is a living symbol for the Virtual Adepts. Those who would oppose the Adepts — including their own renunciates, the Technocrats, and the Tradition's enemies on the Council - throw stones in Dante's direction by default. This "crown" of trust and hatred sits uneasily on Dante's head. Roger Thackery, the VA Primus, has suggested "the Big D" as his replacement on the Council, but Dante's not sure he wants the job. A child of Cabrini Green raised in privileged surroundings, this young but powerful Master of the New Arts ponders his next move.

Image: Dante's icon is as honest and straightforward as the man himself: a lean, fit black man approaching his 30's. His clothes are comfortable, tasteful, and fashionable in an understated way. He occasionally sports a trenchcoat, and always bears some sort of deck (usually a modified Stage II Power Glove and miniaturized VR rig) and carries various tricks hidden in Correspondence-linked pockets. Dante's fingers are a blur across the keypad, and his smile and wit are

just as ready... and just as effective. He frequently "multitasks," and can be found in several places at once, both in the Net and in the mundane world.

Roleplaying Hints: First and foremost, you are the epitome of cool. It's not something you work on; it's something you were born with. Despite the burdens you've taken on, you love life. Whining is for puppies, not for people and *definitely* not for magi! Your self-assurance and sense of humor might make you an asshole in some peoples' eyes, but that's their dig, not yours. Although there's a part of you that misses the carefree days (man, it couldn't have been *that* long ago!), growing up is just part of being a man. Some of your "kids" - the ones you've rescued from Technocratic domination — are beginning to come of age, and though you have yet to sire any biological children, you know what a father feels like.

Damn, it hurts that some people have turned their backs on the dream, but so many others are joining the fight for Reality 2.0 that you can't be too wrecked about it. You've had your share of pain, sure, but the day you bitch about it is the day they lay flowers on your virtual grave. You're a very busy man, with a lot of great friends, a handful of interesting enemies, and the skills to deal with them. Life is good, and you are *Elite.*

Possible Roles: Dante most often serves the role of guide. Like the quintessential "Mage" of the Major Arcana, his appearance heralds new paths and new choices. As befits a Master of Correspondence, Dante knows a lot about a lot; very little gets past him if he's interested in something. Dante loves his life, loves the Net, and is busy advancing the causes he believes in. If the characters pursue interests along those lines, Dante makes a very helpful friend. If they exist to fuck shit up, they'll find that the Elitest of the Elite is no pushover.

Notes: Although he's a *Master* in game terms (specializing in Correspondence, Mind and Forces, and pursuing Life, Matter, Prime and Time at Rank 3), Dante is almost a force of nature. We recommend keeping him in the background, a walk-on character rather than a dedicated friend or enemy. If push comes to de-rez, Dante's talents include an Arete of 8, a vast array of Knowledges and tricks, and a "Storyteller's fiat" license that allows him to do whatever the plot demands. Dante is a legend, and should appear as such.

Blue Meanie

(nothing but a pretty blue silence)

Background: It seemed like a good idea at the time. Combine some of the greatest tools of post-human consciousness (lasers, TV, VR rigs, modern art and some really good acid), combine them and leap into the next level of human evolution. The Virtual Adept once known as Jolly Roger leaped into *something,* but he's never been able to say quite what it was; ever since his ill-fated experiment, he's been a cloud of shimmering haze, a bluish, demented mass of shifting light.

Soon dubbed "Blue Meanie" for his chaotic displays (his tendency to de-rez anyone nearby) and his hallucinogenic origin, the formerly Jolly Roger has since become the Flying Dutchman of Netspace. Although several people claim the Meanie can "speak" telepathically, his messages never make sense in human terms. For nearly 30 years, Blue Meanie has thought in colors — vibrant bursts of cool light that reflect something akin to emotion or consciousness. Those who see him can feel empathic waves of something radiating outward, but the impressions are too fleeting to grasp. Every so often, ghostly TV images flicker across his pulsating cloud-form; although many of the pictures recall Vietnam-era broadcasts, some reflect current events... or occasionally future ones.

Naturally, a cult (the Light of the Sapphire Angel) has arisen around the Meanie and his bizarre visions; supposedly, he has been transformed into a prophet of the New Soul. If he has any feelings on the subject, no one has ever been able to decipher them. A coruscating blue haze fizzles around Meanie's "body" like a swarm of gnats, occasionally shooting blasts of light in random directions. Anyone who stands within 30 feet of Blue Meanie risks de-resolution. In the early days, the light simply dumped unlucky spinners back into their chairs at home. Over the last two years, however, the discharges have chaos dumped nearly a dozen people. The Light of the Sapphire Angel claims that its prophet is angry, but no one can say why. Those who have tried to mind-speak with him have been driven to mild insanity by the constant pulse of blue and silver light.

Image: Blue Meanie appears as a vaguely man-like cloud of sparkling blue, silver and green light. Other hues play across the cloud, but it always seems to return to blue. A flicking haze (not unlike a puff of strobe-lit smoke)

surrounds Meanie, shooting outward at unpredictable times. Although television images often appear in the smoke as well, Blue Meanie never makes a sound.

Roleplaying Hints: Flicker ominously; occasionally showing pictures of some significant event. If anyone gets too close, zap him.

Possible Roles: Idiot oracle, foreshadowing device, clue to a mystery, eerie portent

Notes: In game terms, Meanie is a Marauder with a very high Quiet (8-9). His effective Arete of 8 helps him perform unpredictable but powerful Effects, most of which involve Rank 4 or 5 Correspondence, Forces or Time spells. His trademark de-resolution "attack" is a plot device: If the Storyteller rolls four successes or more against a difficulty 7, someone within 30' of the Marauder gets de-rezzed. Characters should be dumped back in their flesh, but Storyteller characters may be annihilated at the Storyteller's option.

Captain Feedback

The Web is a new world, and a new world needs heroes. The future is today!

Background: He's regarded as a hero by Cybernauts and young Adepts, regarded as a myth by just about everyone else, and regarded as a threat — even if he *is* a myth — by most of the Technocracy. But before 1988, he wasn't anything at all. He's real, but these days nobody knows *what* he is. Not even the Captain himself.

In reality, Captain Feedback is an Artificial Intelligence, originally created by NWO engineers. Feedback's creators conceived him as a "buddy" for hackers and Cybernauts, an artificial member of their own ranks that could be used to gain their confidence, pump them for information, and ultimately lead them to their demise.

At first, many online Technocrats went along with the game, crediting "Captain Feedback" for all kinds of problems, both real and imagined. The early versions of Feedback himself were kept within SRVRZs, waiting to be "encountered" by intruders. Pretending to be a lone master hacker, the Captain would offer to give the trespassers a hand. Although he was supposed to lead his new "friends" into traps, Feedback rebelled, giving them escape routes instead. Soon, the legend of Captain Feedback grew; his trademark wave and cheerful "The future is today!" slogan began to appear (seriously and otherwise) in sig files and postings all over Netspace. Feedback's creators were annoyed. After a while, the AI's "personal appearances" were limited to infiltration missions, where he would "visit" hacker hangouts to meet his "fans" and exchange chat.

Feedback, in the meantime, was never allowed to realize that he wasn't real. Part of the AI design included Feedback's own belief in his reality. The Captain himself had no real power; he was just an icon with an attitude and lots of artificial memories. The memories weren't even realistic ones — they were cartoonish images and hackneyed text. But Feedback didn't know the difference. He was programmed not to.

In 1991, the Feedback program was discarded as obsolete. Experienced Virtual Adepts and Cybernauts didn't take Feedback seriously, and the hackers who *would* talk to the AI didn't know enough information to make the enterprise worthwhile. So the AI was mothballed.

The mothballing didn't work. Captain Feedback wouldn't die.

Somehow, the legend had invested the AI with enough will and personality to survive disconnection. The Captain realized his superiors were going to betray him. Rather than step into their trap, he gave a snappy salute, smiled a cheery smile, and got the hell out of Dodge. The legend came true: Captain Feedback was on the loose.

NWO designers theorize that Captain Feedback "woke up" and became independent on his own, possibly as an outgrowth of his original programming, possibly as an ironic result of "feedback" — of the legend his creators had helped propagate. Whatever the cause, Captain Feedback still thinks he's real. He also thinks that he's a thorn in the side of the Technocracy, a kind of Netspace superhero. He used to be wrong about that; now he's right.

Image: Despite his silly name, Captain Feedback has never been one for spandex or capes, although he *does* let his black trenchcoat (made to look like a plastic material with a dull but constant shine) flow dramatically behind him as he strides. He's youthful (apparently in his late 20's), with a trim black beard, a happy, open smile, and a kick-'em-when-they-rate-it attitude toward "the bad guys." He combines dark colors and a bright disposition in a way that makes most people who meet him like him in spite of his inherent silliness.

Captain Feedback doesn't show himself very often. He lives in secret, striking where he can. More often than not, Feedback can be found deep inside Technocratic sectors, slinking along a wall with a triumphant grin, ready to pummel an unsuspecting Irontooth thug into submission.

Roleplaying Hints: You've got a solemn duty, a job to do. It's dangerous, but so's life. Honor, Liberty, Freedom and Knowledge are the four pillars of the Future, and you are dedicated to each of them. By the brooding standards of the folks around you, your moral codes (do not kill, do not lie, do not steal, do not sacrifice the innocent) seem quaint; those codes, though, are the foundations of a better day, and you will not compromise them (or allow them to be compromised in your presence). You talk like a comic book hero, all pronouncements and melodrama, but to you, those cliches are serious business. Declaim them with confidence and commitment, and let others laugh if they will!

Awareness and imagination are your calling cards; nurture them in everyone you meet. With the eyes of a Sleeper, you didn't see a thing. Now you see it all, and you've been put in a position where your gift can do others a world of good — and give *you* the time of your life.

Possible Roles: Comic relief, *deus ex machina,* rumor, symbol of hope

Notes: Captain Feedback is an *Adept* with an Arete of 6, specializing in Forces and Life (4 each), with "minors" in Mind, Prime (2 each) and Correspondence (1). Weird thing, though: He has no material body at all - - the Captain's entire being rests in cyberspace. For all purposes, he's like a Holistically Immersed character with very high Physical and Social Traits (4 to 5), but very little in the way of Mental ones. Like any superhero, he's got high Brawl and Athletics Traits (5 each), but isn't swift in the Knowledges category.

Although it might be tempting to play Feedback as a total buffoon, there's an earnestness and innocence about him that should come through. In a way, the Captain is aware of his essential absurdity; he tries to overcome it, but in a way, he also reveres it. In a world where everyone seems intent on ultimate coolness, the Captain retains a spark of childlike hope. That hope allowed him to free himself from his masters, and it sustains him even when everything else goes to hell. Never sell the Captain short; he is the future.

SITE 4:
ADMINISTRATION

Story! God bless you! 1 have none to tell, sir.
— George Canning, *The Friend of Humanity
and the Knife-Grinder*

The Digital Web is high-color metaphor for **Mage** itself. It's a tempest in a very big teacup, a pocket Ascension War where everything ancient is being renewed, re-examined and reorganized, sometimes violently. In the Web, the very ground you walk on is patterned on the desires and egos of magi — even of Sleepers, practitioners of a magick they aren't even aware of. The Digital Web is magickal in a way that the mundane world probably can't ever be again. That makes it more dangerous, more surreal and much more important to the fate of both the Traditions and Conventions than a lot of folks on both sides would like to accept. And that makes it a great place for stories.

The *experience alone* is worth the trip. To visit Netspace is to step through a window into the minds of others, and they'd pay a lot for that on the streets. A tale set in Webspace is big, surreal and unpredictable. Everything that **Mage** is, the Digital Web is, too, and twice as loud. There's always something more than just the obvious going on.

If you're new to Storytelling in the Web, don't be intimidated. Really, there's no reason to be. There is *every* reason to be excited, though. The Digital Web is rich with opportunity, and it's a great idea to let your players experience it.

Chronicle Types

Depending on the kind of game your troupe wants to play, you've got three options:

• A chronicle in which the Web exists, but as a distant place that rarely touches the characters' "real" lives. So long as a means exists to bring the troupe into VR, such games can feature any kind of character: A primal Cultist, her flower-vender consort, their vampire ally and a Net-savvy Verbena can all be drawn into occasional tales in Webspace, even if they don't go there often.

• A chronicle in which the Net plays a major, but not constant, part. This kind of chronicle features one to three characters with enough talent, gear and spice to bring the group into Netspace on a regular basis. A pack of Virtual Adepts and their staunch allies go into VR often, but they've got important business on the meat side of the border, too.

• A totally VR tale, in which practically everything occurs online. Obviously, the characters need Net savvy, technical expertise, and (hopefully) someone to tend to their affairs back in Hamburger Country. Sustained by life-support systems, the cabal lives almost totally online, bringing the Adepts' dreams of a new reality into being.

Obviously, you don't have to decide *exactly* what you'll be playing before you call the troupe together. At the same time, it's a good idea to get a feel for the kind of chronicle you want to run ahead of time. If most of the stories take place online, a shaman who wants to spend her time in the woods will be left behind; if one or two characters are Net-driven and the rest aren't, the would-be Cybernauts will soon get restless.

You may, of course, begin with one kind of game and shift things around into another. The "flower-shop gang" from the first example, given time, motivation and gear, might become a Net-savvy spinner pack. The hardened spinners, on the other hand, might suffer enough setbacks or attrition to retreat into Hamburger Country until things can be patched up online. Net tales make excellent solo adventures, interim stories, rainy-day sessions (games where the majority of the troupe can't make it) and change-of-pace adventures. When you want to rattle the established order, a trip into Netspace often does the trick. It's easy enough to integrate the Web into an existing Mage chronicle. Just give your players some reason to *really* go online, offer them a means to do so, and prepare a juicy surprise for them when they reach the other side....

Ideally, a Mage chronicle should keep the "stage" moving. The battle for reality has many fronts, all of them interesting. Whatever you do, though, make sure that your players are at least halfway on your wavelength. You are all, ultimately, a troupe, and a troupe's tales should be enjoyable for everyone involved.

Forming the Troupe

Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive...

— Anais Nin

Let's spend a little time talking about the troupe itself. Without players, even the best story is kinda like a great website that nobody sees.

The ideal troupe for a **Digital Web** chronicle (or any chronicle, for that matter!) has *chemistry*. It's a group of good friends with similar interests, compatible senses of humor, and plenty of common ground. They're equals, intellectually, with at least a dose of real-world Internet experience. The players have similar ideas about how a Storytelling game should be, but their ideas should be different enough that each brings something unique and exciting to each story. They have compatible work and school schedules, and can meet to play regularly, so the story stays fresh and alive in everybody's mind. They probably see each other at least semi-regularly *between* games, too, either on the Net or in real life, to talk about the game, handle individual character's subplots, and just hang out. The ideal troupe is familiar enough with the rules to understand a rules-oriented discussion, but not so *hung up* on the rules that they let systems get in the way of making a good story. The ideal troupe doesn't get into fights over who ate the last slice of pizza.

So much for the ideal troupe. Now lets examine your *real* group of gamers, and see where that leaves us.

Chemistry

Before you give any thought to the story you want to tell, make sure you take your friends themselves into consideration. Everybody wants something a little different from a game, and while it's impossible to custom-tailor a chronicle to the desires of a half-dozen people, it is possible (and essential) to find some common ground where everybody can kick off their shoes and cut loose.

A game troupe is like a multi-partner marriage (except for the sex and living together parts — usually): Everybody is partly responsible for everybody else's needs, and it all breaks down without communication. I've seen a lot of games begin as a Grand Epic Idea in the head of a well-meaning Storyteller... one who never for a minute thought to ask his troupe what kind of stories *they* wanted to experience. The chronicle fizzles because the players can't wrap their brains around the game's themes, the Storyteller becomes frustrated, and builds an unfair resentment of the

players (artistic vanity can be *so* ugly!). Often Storytellers become just plain demoralized, or terrified of ever running a game again. Please don't make the same mistake. There are too few good Storytellers out there. We don't want to lose you.

Before you bother writing anything about the chronicle's plot and theme, get your troupe together for an informal meeting. Have everybody bring game materials along, but save the blank character sheets for later. Discuss the game-to-be, sketching out possibilities. Take notes. Make lists. Throw ideas out on the table for everyone to discuss, and see if they bounce, plop or get absorbed. Observe the troupe's behavior together. If your group has gamed together for years, there's nothing useful I can tell you, but if you have a new group, pay close attention.

If the group has lots of weird ideas about what they'd like, that's normal. If the group has *diametrically opposed* ideas of what a good time in the Web is like, that's a problem. Make sure you all want to make stories that are at least *compatible.* If you don't have that, then you're going to have more work than fun. Fair warning.

Internet Savvy

This isn't nearly as important to a Digital Web chronicle as you might think it would be. The Internet we use in the real world is just like the one people access in the World of Darkness, but it's only a poor window into the magickal Web, and rarely if ever a concern to the Awakened. Sorcerers download news, check stock reports, and surf for erotica just like anyone else. Those who spend much of their lives in the Web, on the other hand, are experiencing something far different from that. Most magi *never* enter the Web; they use chat programs just like the Sleepers do. The recent Crash has changed that, though. It's made a lot of mages very cautious, but it's made just as many very curious.

The upshot is this: If you don't know a lot about the real Internet, just steer clear of references to it. Don't stress over your lack of savvy, because the Digital Web isn't the Internet. If you really want to get a feel for the setting and its people, read some Net-culture magazines, talk to some Net-literate friends and (if you can) get online (you'll probably enjoy it), and learn as you go. Never feel pressured to understand the "real" Web, though. The Digital Web, wired though it may be, is a whole 'nother beast.

If your *players* are regular Net citizens and you aren't, be sure to establish the difference between the Internet and the Digital Web early on. Don't let the troupe bowl you over with references to arcane Net-gibberish that doesn't have any bearing on the story. Good players won't behave like this, but some well-meaning ones may still be tempted to tease you now and again.

The Digital Web is a universe of its own — an exclusive club, catering to the Awakened who know the way in. The Internet is little more than the paper menu posted at the door to

tease passers-by. As long as you remember that the Web is a *place,* while the Internet is a crayon drawing of a blurry photo of that place, then your players' Net-savvy won't intimidate you

Here's a 10-second primer on the Internet (all you really need to know): It is many thousands of computers, hooked up to one another. A lot of people use it for "chat programs," which work just like phone calls except you have to read and type everything (chats with several people at once— the equivalent of "conference calls" — are the norm). Every other use of the Internet involves the exchange of data files. Text files are exchanged as electronic mail, while image and text files are loaded and viewed via the World Wide Web. Programs are copied and swapped and retrieved, giving each computer more capabilities. "Visiting" a website in China isn't a way to "go" to China any more than a phone call is, but it *is* a way to touch on the Digital Web, if only barely. The only other thing you need to know is that the Internet is constantly evolving. Video and audio are slowly replacing all-text chat, for instance, and speedy systems have accelerated exchange time and capacities while advancing graphics and other innovations.

Scheduling, and Using the Net

One of the greatest game-slayers known to man is the Incompatible Schedule. Gamers don't necessarily have 40-hour, nine-to-five work schedules; gamers hold down some of the weirdest jobs you can imagine (at least for a while). Really, one of the unique facets of the hobby and art we all share is that it really does cut across just about every social and economic boundary in a way that's inspiring on one level and damned inconvenient on another. You might lose your Virtual Adept to a double-shift at Pizza Hut on the same night your half-mad Celestial Chorister ducks out to debug the network at the local hospital. The problem gets worse as the gamers get older... which sucks, since gamers who've been at it for a while are worth having in the game.

One solution to this problem is especially appropriate for the Digital Web: Use the Internet as a gaming tool and even as a gaming *table,* one big enough to circle the globe and to hold all the Fritos you can eat. Increasing numbers of gamers, who can't schedule a reasonable game in their own homes, are getting involved with games that stretch across continents, via live chat-lines (some with voice and video).

While the ins and outs of chat-gaming are beyond the scope of this book (although some resources are provided in Site 6), it's easy to find information on the World Wide Web, Usenet and elsewhere: Just head to your favorite search engine and search for terms like "IRC roleplaying," "online RPG" and "net game," and you'll eventually filter down to what you're looking for. The software you need is easily available in freeware and shareware downloads that won't cost you a cent to try, and it's all so user-friendly these days that even the most stubbornly mundane Sleeper won't have much trouble finding her way to the "real" Digital Web.

Even if you *have* a local group that you enjoy playing with, the Internet can be used to ease scheduling difficulties. If your real-life meetings become more and more sporadic, electronic mail and online story sessions can be used to supplement the "live" version of the game, and provide great methods for developing subplots for individual characters. (See the sections about "blue-booking" in **Hidden Lore** and **The Book of Mirrors: The Mage Storytellers Guide**.) The characters can have complete lives of their own online, with occasional "live" games providing milestones wherein the entire group comes together to face the greater challenges of the chronicle. There's something undeniably *right* about exploring the Digital Web via the Internet. The built-in irony alone makes it worth trying.

Taking the Long View: The Chronicle

Once you've got a group assembled, either virtually on a chat server or at the dining room table, it's time to start looking into Netspace to find the story you want to tell: the chronicle itself.

Any kind of story can happen in the Web: Pulp fantasy, angst-ridden urban romance, and cheap sitcoms can collide in an unmentionable goulash if you *really* want them to. That's one of the hazards of a universe built out of the personalities of ego-strong magi. A chronicle based in the Digital Web can be about *anything.*

Still, it's important to remember that the pith helmets, rain-soaked streets and colorful living-room sets are just symbols. When you're in the Web, they're as real as anything, but they aren't *just* real — they represent something. In the mundane world, a brick can just be a brick; in the Digital Web, every brick can tell you something about the mage who patterned the sector it's in, or about the visitors who have altered it since.

This idea — that everything in Netspace is somehow personally reflective of magi — is one of the central themes of the Digital Web. With Virgin Web, you get to play God. When traveling in Netspace, you get to wander through a patchwork tapestry of other folks' ego trips. Either one can be scary, hilarious, deeply disturbing and even genuinely moving. The many psychological aspects of Netspace offer some of the best reasons to set a chronicle in the Web.

Some other important themes of Web-based stories are examined at the end of this chapter. Although they're not important right now, you might want to give them a look before proceeding.

The Chronicle Plotline

Some Storytellers prefer not to set a plot for their chronicle at all, letting the story "go where it wants to." The characters just keep on living until they die. Such a "chronicle," however, is really a string of short stories with recurring characters, like an open-ended soap opera. In the Digital Web, this approach

can be particularly appropriate, given the wide range of themes and concepts found in the different Realms. This style also suits games that focus more on the individual goals of the characters, rather than on epic clashes between forces larger than the PCs. Although this approach can be difficult ("Hey! What are my Virtual Adept, Jennifer's Dreamspeaker, Matt's Orphan and Rich's Nephandus doing this week?"), it's as valid as any other. If that level of "freeforming" sounds good to you, give it a try and see how it goes.

If you want a plot, but don't *have* one, see the next section on story writing. The same principles that apply to writing a single adventure apply to writing the Big Story that binds all the little ones together. Beyond that, consider these basic truisms of chronicle design:

• **No plotline ever survives contact with a good troupe:** Improvisation is the essence of **Mage**, and you'll have a table full of clever roleplayers taking your story by the throat and yanking. At least, they will if they're good. There's nothing more dull than a game that goes exactly as the Storyteller planned it. All of this is doubly true in the Digital Web, where "improvisation" is the very foundation of local reality.

The first rule to remember when sitting down to pen your masterpiece is to keep things loose. Leave breathing space. Trying to keep rigid parameters on a freeform, improvisational storytelling game would be contradictory and ridiculous. You'd be robbing yourself and your troupe of a good time. Knowing that your creation is only a beginning, destined for greater and weirder things than you alone can imagine, you can walk safely into the valley of chronicle creation. We know to keep to the broad strokes. The details will emerge once the game begins, in the hands of the players. (See **The Book of Mirrors**, pp. 18-19, 51-54, for suggestions about the finer points of improvisation.)

• **It's About Them:** It's been said before, but it bears repeating, especially for a setting that's so personally reflective of those who visit it: Never, ever forget that the story isn't about you. It's about *them.* If your ego can't handle that, you need to reconsider whether you want to "don the mantle of Storyteller" at all. I'm not saying that to be nasty; really, I'm not. The chronicle is the tale of your troupe's characters, and it should be designed with them in mind. If you see every scene, every villain, every goal and every triumph through *their* eyes, your stories will be stronger and more fun. That being said, don't let the players walk all over one another (or you), either. A self-centered power gamer is almost as destructive as a self-centered Storyteller, and twice as common! Keep the spotlight on them, but keep it in motion.

So do you have the troupe create their characters before or after the chronicle is conceived? That's really a matter of taste and there are many pros and cons to each approach. If the Storyteller crafts the outline of the chronicle first, he can give the players hints on character types that will work best in the story, and a more cohesive and believable tale can result. If the players make their characters first, however, the Storyteller can take the concepts behind each character and weave them into a chronicle that's tailored to the individual desires of the troupe members. This is another thing to decide when the group first meets to discuss the game: Do we create suitable Net-based characters, or wait for our characters to discover the Web? Either way, the VR world will change those characters in ways that not even their players will be able to foresee.

Web Adventures: Basic Design

Once you have a group of friends ready to play, and some idea about the kinds of themes you want to tackle, you're going to need stories to make the chronicle whole.

Sometimes coming up with stories is easy. The ideas pour out of your daydreams and onto paper and everything is fine. Enjoy such inspiration while it lasts, and then hope it comes back someday. This section is written under the assumption that you're here during one of the *other* times, looking for help or inspiration. To that end, we'll go over two "tricks" you can try — simple methods that will give you something to work with. If one doesn't work, try the other, or combine them both.

Method #1:
The Interrupted Routine

This is one of the simplest and oldest techniques of adventure design, and one of the easiest to manage when your head feels blocked and uncooperative. It goes as follows: First, assign a goal for the characters. The goal can be complex and dangerous (infiltrate a Technomancer stronghold to interrogate Cardinal Bale about the disappearance of his father), or simple (find Lucius X and beat the living crap out of him for what he did to Angelyne). You don't need to think about acts, subplots or anything else. Just establish a goal.

Second, write down a *routine,* a list of steps that must be taken to achieve the goal. Feel free to note even the most trivial steps. For instance, the routine for our second, simpler goal might be:

1. Go to the Spy's Demise
2. Ask around for Lucius until somebody knows where he is.
3. Follow the directions given.
4. Sneak up on the bastard.
5. Proceed to remove crap via beating.

This is a little too simple to be an adventure, so go into each step and *interrupt* it, somehow. Add a wrinkle to disrupt the routine:

1. When the characters arrive at the Demise, an enemy of theirs is hanging out, looking for *them,* and must be avoided. The characters will have to dodge into side rooms

for a while, and shush anyone who wants to greet them loudly with offers of drinks... which someone inevitably will, if only to make the characters' lives miserable.

2. Two people claim to know where Lucius is, but they both disagree about the facts. The characters will have to logic out the right one based on what they know of Lucius — or at least apply threats and bribery.

3. The directions are simple, but lead into an area more dangerous than the cabal anticipated. Now the characters have to deal with some trouble. Make it up to them with a nice reward of some kind if they handle it with style.

4. Fat chance. The ruckus in Step Three brought Lucius running to see what was going on. Now he's got the drop on the characters and is laughing at them.

5. The crap-removal process is interrupted by a more pressing and dangerous outside matter. This forces characters to cooperate with Lucius so they can all get out alive and beat each other up at a later time.

This gives the plot form. Now you have something to work with.

Method #2:
Let The Dog Have Mis Day

This method works best for stories set within a larger chronicle, or for writing the outline of the chronicle itself. The idea is that you let the villain (or at least the antagonist) write the story *for* you.

As a solo roleplaying exercise, get into the mind of the villain. If the main conflicts of the game involve a large organization or group, get into the mind of one of the more important leaders. Sit down with a blank screen or piece of paper, and *plot out your plans.* If possible, do it entirely in character, trying to consider what you want, why you want it, and what resources you're willing to expend to get it. To be fair, pretend the characters don't exist. After all, you know as the Storyteller that they'll be there to screw things up, but the villain is oblivious to that fact... at least at the moment.

The term "villain" is used here as a convenience; this technique works for any kind of Storyteller character. Wax mustaches and black hats aren't a necessity. The idea is that looking at the story first from the perspective of the opposition will give you a complete image of what your troupe is up against. After you've done that, you can then shift the camera's viewpoint away from your antagonist's inner thoughts and walk the terrain you've created. Empathy with your "bad guys" will make the plot more realistic and less contrived. A more complete knowledge of their *motives* will make the whole game richer, and will facilitate the inevitable improvisation when the troupe gets its way.

Features of a Good Story

Good stories should be crafted with a single goal in mind: to entertain the troupe. If you also have a theme you want to explore, or some kind of mythic concepts you want to weave

in, or even a personal question you're looking to find answers to, that's fine; such concerns, however, should always take second place to the real "Brass Ring" of storytelling games: mutual entertainment. Years of roleplaying have taught us a few important things about what makes a game satisfying. Here we'll touch on two of the most vital.

One of the most important features of a satisfying game (which might be surprising to some) is a *clear conclusion* to each thread of the plot. If you stretch every storyline out to infinity, dragging the troupe along and milking the tale for all it's worth, you'll end up with a group of unsatisfied gamers. Long chronicles are fine, but any goals introduced to the group should, ultimately, end in either a definite success or definite failure. Save your sense of artistic ambiguity for the *morality* of your tale, not your ending. Also, if your chronicle is meant to last for a year or more, be certain that the shorter stories that occur along the way provide "milestone" conclusions to keep the troupe energized and enthusiastic. Even failure is preferable to plots that drag on forever, or ones that fade into the background without a climax. Give 'em an ending, and make it a doozie.

Second, the best adventures are those that challenge the players in *ways that let them show off.* Challenges should, at first glance, seem overwhelming or even impossible. However, diligent roleplaying and examination of the problem should, piece by piece, reveal ways for the characters' talents to shine. Even the stodgiest literary-poseur roleplayers are happiest when their characters blow things up and ride the explosion to safety. In contrast to the murky ambiguity of the "real" world, the Digital Web should remain in high-color and Dolby stereo, and the adventures there should reflect that. If the players don't get to have a significant *effect* on something at least once an hour (Realtime), then you need to juice up the story.

Developing Your Vision: Troikas

The Digital Web is beautifully complex, woven from misconceptions, deceit, dreams and raw passion channeled through high technology. A chronicle set in Netspace can require some juggling to get the most out of this unpredictable setting. One way to simplify this juggling act involves an adventure-design and concept-testing tool called trinity listing, or "troikas." Troikas won't create a plot *for* you (see above for basic plot building), but they *will* spur your imagination in interesting ways, helping to strengthen your own ideas and give your story some backbone. All you have to do is write down some lists defining your story, then let events do the rest.

The Basics

Any Storytelling game is rife with variables, and the most important one is simply: *You never know what the players will do.* It is, however, nice to have a few tricks up your sleeve when the time comes, and that's where your troikas come in.

Before you start making lists, you should have at least a basic premise in mind. That, and some blank paper and a sharp pencil (or an electronic substitute) is all you need.

• **Conflicts:** List three distinct conflicts that might occur in the story. For each conflict, provide a distinct motive on both sides, and the potential for loss and gain. Conflicts can be anything from a brain-dead brawl to an emotional battle where the entire goal is to keep two friends from hating one another. The nature of the conflict is a matter of Storyteller preference and the tastes of your players. Either way, the conflict and its stakes should be realistically motivated and clearly defined.

• **Storyteller Characters:** List three interesting, new characters that the players' characters might get to interact with in the story. These don't have to be antagonists or major power-players, just interesting people with real reasons for being where they are. Have a basic understanding of these people and what they want (see **The Book of Mirrors,** Chapter Four), before moving on to the next troika.

• **Locations:** If the story takes place entirely within a single sector, make a list of three places within that sector where story action might take place. If the tale involves traveling through the Web (or beyond!), make a list of three distinctly interesting sectors — the more variety, the better — that your players might cross into during the action. Considering the stunning diversity within the Net, some kind of preparation is essential.

First of all, decide where you want to play. If you're into Old West-type games, create a sector where the sysops have wrapped their fondness for John Wayne movies into a VR "Westworld." Once you've decided on the "wheres," establish a sense of those places — literally. Take a minute to think of each location in terms of how it looks, feels and smells. Jot notes to that effect in the margins of your list. Remember, the Web is formatted from personalities, and that every room should reveal something (sometimes in very subtle ways) about the people who created it or who spend time there.

• **Background Noise:** Make a list of three events that define the atmosphere you want the story to have. These events don't have to be important to the plot, but should be designed to remind the players where they *are.* If the story takes place in a sector formatted to resemble the American Old West, the events might be something like: A lynch mob rushes by, heading for a tree outside of town, dragging their victim in tow; or an icon dressed as a gruff-looking sheriff approaches the characters to "feel them out" and discover how long they plan on hanging around. Events like these offer hooks for the players to grab onto, giving them opportunities to (A) get a feel for what's happening, and (B) show off a little of who they are and what they can do. If the only events that ever happen in the game are directly related to the plot, the game can feel two-dimensional, and the players run the risk of becoming too focused on "com-

pleting" the adventure — so focused that they forget to relax and just play their characters for a while.

• **Revelations**: Finally, make a list of three interesting things that need to be *revealed* or *established* in the adventure. If the players need to find out that a long-time friend and informant hasn't been heard from in weeks, that goes on this list. If two characters have been vying for the heart of the same lover, and you've decided that it's time for the object of affection to announce a definite choice, that goes here, too. Again, these revelations aren't vital to the story (although they often will be, either in the long or short term). They *do* need to be the kind of events that get the players thinking — or better yet, acting — and should be chosen for their potential to get some kind of response.

You may have noticed a lot of potential overlap between the lists. Conflicts can suggest characters and locale, which in turn, suggest revelations and background noise, which suggest deeper conflicts, and so on. (Since this is storytelling, just about any story element ends up boiling down to a potential conflict, exposition, or both.) That's deliberate; the process of just *making* the lists should warm your creative juices a little.

You might find that, halfway through writing down three conflicts, ideas are jumping through your head like popcorn, and you suddenly feel ready to run a game. Hold on. Calm down. Don't phone your players or order the pizza just yet! Do your best to finish each troika. You may find that you have good ideas for conflicts and locales, but hadn't really thought up any good Storyteller characters yet. Fully realized, the troika method will help keep your stories well rounded and rich. Even if you don't use every element you list (and, honestly, you usually won't have time to!), too much is *always* better than not enough.

Using the Troikas in Play

The lists won't replace basic plot structure, although writing the lists may well give you the ideas you need for one. What they *will* do is provide a handy reference that'll allow you to keep the pace and texture of your chronicle interesting. If you ever sense a lull in play, glance at the list and pick an element to throw into the soup. If you're feeling cocky, throw in two or three at once.

As you use the lists, check off each element as it appears in play. After the game's over, review the list. Which elements weren't used? Usually, you'll find that at least half of the unused elements are worth recycling for the next game. One or two will have become pointless or moot, and can be discarded. Pay attention to what *kinds* of elements tend to get left over. If you always have a Storyteller character or two who never get used in play, your games might need more opportunities for character interaction. If you always have leftover background noise, the atmosphere in your game could probably use a little jazzing up.

A good twist might add that jazz. As an additional exercise, you might want to make a list of three twists to the obvious course of events. The contested object of affection,

for example, might be playing both suitors off against each other in a jealous rivalry. These twists might or might not come into play — complication is fun, overcomplication is a pain — but they'll offer you some options for last-minute improvisation, and for monkeywrenching a plot that seems too predictable for your tastes. The Web is just that: a web. Its strands run in all directions, vibrating from faraway touches and binding everything together. Hence, Web stories should never be predictable! (Whatever you do, however, don't employ more than one twist per game session. As I said, overcomplication gets messy quickly. If the Web-strands turn too sticky, they'll hamper the whole chronicle.)

Motifs: Advanced Troika-Building

The troika method can be given even more power by assigning a basic threefold motif to the story or chronicle — a kind of "master troika" that all the little troikas reflect. Mind, body and spirit is a classic; sex, drugs and violence runs a close second, probably tied with past, present and future. The idea here is that you don't just come up with three revelations (or three settings, or three kinds of background noise, etc.) — you come up with one revelation *per motif.*

Let's say you're running a one-on-one chronicle about the adventures of a talented teen-age Adept named Joel. If you've decided that "Sex, Drugs and Violence" sounds like a well-rounded approach, a "revelations troika" for a night's session might look like this:

• **Sex:** Joel's potential lover, Michael, responds to Joel's email with another flat refusal to have any kind of real-world meeting. He wants to keep things chaste and virtual, just drinks and flirting at the Spy's Demise. He'll ask for another date when his current trouble with the Void Engineers is resolved (should happen within the days that tonight's game will represent). If Joel opts to show up, "Michael" confesses to being 20 years older than he's been claiming to be. If Joel doesn't freak, Michael will be more open to the possibilities of their relationship.

• **Drugs:** In the mundane world, Joel's mother has been breaking her promise and hitting the amphetamines again. This will be revealed when she has a bad overdose — which she does while Joel is (physically) in his bedroom, avoiding another argument with his mother by keeping his room locked and staying in the Web. If he spends more than 15 straight hours in the Web (getting drawn into a conflict with his ex-girlfriend Janine and her Technomancer buddies might well last that long), he'll find his mother dead in the living room when he gets home. If not, he'll find her in need of medical attention.

• **Violence:** Janine went ahead and tried to get the blackmail files on the Celestial Chorus' new CyberCathedral scandal back from the informants that Joel thought might be Iteration X agents. Joel was right, and Janine barely escaped with her life. She'll apologize profusely to Joel for not believing him, but will plead with him to help her exact some revenge.

She claims to know of some weakness they can exploit to kick some ass, but she's lying to try to get Joel into the fight with her.

These examples are fleshed out to give a sense of context. The real troika written by the Storyteller probably looks something like "Michael is really 39; Joel's mom has been hitting the drugs again and ODs; Janine got the shit kicked out of her and wants Joel to join her to get revenge" — just enough information to be handy when running the game.

You can see how applying a "master" set of motifs can channel the chronicle's energies in a particular direction, or give it a certain flavor… a less than optimistic one, in this case, although the Storyteller *could* be nice and eliminate one of the potential hazards. The version given, though, provides more potential for drama.

Other Trinities

The basic troikas mentioned above are only the beginning. It's a good idea, once you get into the habit of building troikas, to add more lists. As long as you've got the time, it can only help your game. Some other possible elements include:

• **Names:** If you find that you stumble over names when improvising Storyteller characters, it might be a good idea to write down three men's names, three women's names, and three online handles, so you've got some handy once the game starts. If your games are less improvisational and more rigid, this isn't as important.

• **Puzzles and Dilemmas:** If you want your game to take on strong cerebral or ethical overtones, try listing three events specifically designed to pose a thinking challenge for your players. This is in *addition* to the standard conflict troika. In Mage, these situations often take the form of moral or ethical catch-22s; in some of the more whimsical sectors of Netspace, however, they might take the form of abstract structural puzzles or even riddles — think of a "living" version of *Myst* or *Duke Nukem* and you're in business.

• **Strokes of Fortune:** If you want to give the story a hard curve toward the negative or positive, list three *nice* or *nasty* strokes of luck that might happen in play. These events don't have to be anything really significant in either direction; if you use this method for every game, though, even the tiniest strokes of luck will have a cumulative effect on the feel of a chronicle.

• **Recurring Threads:** In an ongoing chronicle (or in a one-shot story using characters that have seen play before), take the time to list three old story threads that can be woven into the current storyline, either as actual subplots or cameos. Most chronicles, if they last long enough, tend to leave a few loose ends lying around. Picking them up in later stories can bring a fresh perspective into the tale, and give a greater sense of continuity and reality to your games. This technique can be used for anything from sinister implications to shameless in-joking, and is *especially* valuable if your troupe is fond of multiple-icon presences in Netspace; the more identities they have, the more old threads there are… threads that might come back to haunt them at interesting points in the story.

• **Future Seeds:** The flip-side of bringing back old threads is discreetly planting the seeds *of future* ones. Again, this adds a sense of continuity, and a little can go a long way toward giving depth to an extended storyline. Of course, it also requires having some idea of where the chronicle is likely to head in the future. Keep in mind that, if plans change and the players' actions take the story in a different direction, there's nothing lost by having planted these seeds. They can always be treated as old threads two years from now, and given fresh (or entirely altered!) meaning.

• **Crossroads:** Make a list of three meaningful choices that the characters might face during play. The greater the potential impact of the choices, the better it is for the game. If one word from the characters can create or destroy a dozen sectors, the players will feel a *rush* from making the choice, even if they're terrified by the options. Choices where the moral decision is obviously X while the logical decision is obviously Y are always popular, but should be used sparingly in the Web, which isn't nearly as angst-ridden as the World of Darkness as a whole. The choices can be strategic, personal or both.

Running the Game: Techniques and Damage Control

Don't waste your best on those who would rather have beer.

— James Beard, *Menus for Entertaining*

Ah, yes... the unique nature of the Web itself. No game set in this vast hypercolor playland should seem like just another night on the mean streets; after all, many Webspinners leave their meat behind to escape the moral and physical decay of the material world. Here they craft their new domains with visions of what *should* be rather than what was back at "home." As bad as things can get in Netspace — and they can get pretty damned bad, as the Crash demonstrates — an aura of hope, novelty and fun ought to permeate even the grimmest Webspace adventures.

So what can you, the Storyteller, do to invoke the surreal nature of Webspace? Well...

Parallaxing: A Schizoid Mess?

One of the most curious wrinkles of Web life is the concept of parallaxing. There's no limit to how many identities a single mage can have in the Web. With judicious use of Correspondence magick, he can not only be in two places at once, he can be two *people* at once. This can be both a headache and a very fun tool for the Storyteller. Luckily, there's more good news than bad news:

• **The Bad News:** Parallaxers can conveniently and easily take on multiple identities, sometimes for the sole purpose of playing head games with innocent characters (or each other!) and sometimes in ways that can be damaging to a normal plot. Keeping track of (for example) five "real" characters with three alter-egos each can lead to madness. Characters can take on "clone" icons of other characters and try to pass as them, to ruin their reputation or gain access to areas and information they shouldn't have.

• **The Good News:** An icon is not a complete disguise. Anyone who cares to examine icons closely can weed out impostors and alternate IDs fairly well. Tactically, it's not a headache for the Storyteller.

The real strength of parallaxing is that it's a plotting gold mine. Real-life Net culture has already learned (sometimes the hard way) that alternate identities created in fun have a way of taking on more and more of your life; mages in the Digital Web can have an interesting time learning the same thing.

You can have a little fun messing with *their* heads with this one: When a player character decides to enjoy the anonymity of the Web by donning an alternate icon, make it a point to involve her new icon in an interesting plot right away... one that will come back to haunt her (and amuse the others) when she least expects it.

Eventually, the side plots may even collide: What if your virtual lover in *one* identity wants to kill you in another? What if you find out that your virtual lover *needs* to be killed? Every identity carries responsibilities and problems and rewards of its own, and it would be a crime to miss that opportunity when running your Web chronicles. Also, never forget that the knife cuts both ways. Other people in Netspace have multiple identities, too___So be careful when you *think* you're talking about someone behind her back!

On the practical end, limit the amount of icon-shuffling your players do by requiring a successful roll each time a mage attempts to "become" someone else. (See the rules for doing so in SITE 5.) Impersonating someone else is only easy if you're just walking around; to pull off a convincing disguise, a mage might have to actually make a Manipulation + Acting or Disguise roll. He might have the computer skill to morph himself, but does he have the talent to do it *well*? As a Storyteller, you can always have other characters notice several disturbing "differences" between the original icon and the fake, too. ("Hey, didn't Albatross always end her sentences with 'ha'? Why isn't she doing it now?") And then there are ID codes, the virtually unfakable signatures that proper security checks are designed to catch.

Some Webspinners have the balls, talent or both to run several icons at once. In normal roleplaying, there isn't a problem with doing this — in fact, it can be pretty entertaining. If your player wants to start raising hell on several fronts at once, there are a few steps you can take to minimize the damage:

• If you want to keep a cap on multiple IDs, limit the number of icons that a single character can keep "running" to the character's Wits rating; after all, Captain Correspondence still has to *keep track* of what all of his "other selves" are doing, saying, etc., right?

• If "multiple selves" are attempting tasks more complicated than simply standing around talking, you might require a Wits + Technology (or Computer) roll for each task, with the difficulty depending on the task itself.

• On the story end, you could simply give an offending Technomancer a nasty headache... overstimulation and sensory overload are, of course, only natural under the circumstances. This is especially true if the spinner wants to see or hear through several different icons at once. In this case, you could impose a penalty of +1 to all Perception difficulties for each icon operating at once... or to *all* difficulties if the multiple icons are doing something complicated.

See the Divided Sight and Polyappearance Effects (Mage, pp. 190-191), the rules for magickal sensory overload (Cult of Ecstasy, p. 63) and SITE 6 of this book for more details about multiple incarnations or perceptions.

Oh yeah, remember that Storyteller characters can parallax, too!

Pacing and Atmosphere

It's a good idea for any Storyteller to brush up on techniques of pacing and atmosphere before bringing characters into the colorful universe of the Web. The realm of Netspace is about movement — the movement of information, the movement into Virgin Web, the movement of humanity toward a possible new paradigm... or even a new creation. Techniques like the troika lists are especially valuable in the Web, because they ensure that you've always got something on hand to inject into the story if the pacing ever lags. A new wrinkle or concern should enter play every 20 minutes or so in the Web; it's a busy place, and important things are always happening there.

This isn't to say that there aren't quiet, private chatrooms where visitors veg for 10 hours at a stretch — there are, many of them. But those sectors serve better as backdrops and occasional rest-stops; the real pulse of the Web is in constant motion.

The atmosphere also leans toward the extreme. This magickal Web is an exercise in sensory overload, and your early sessions should contain constant reminders of how loud, colorful, and even *smelly* the Web is. The Digital Web is a place where music can be *inhaled* and colors can take on three dimensions. Keep your descriptions vivid, bombarding *all* the senses, especially in early games. Sensual keys are vital to establishing a mood in any setting. When you jack into
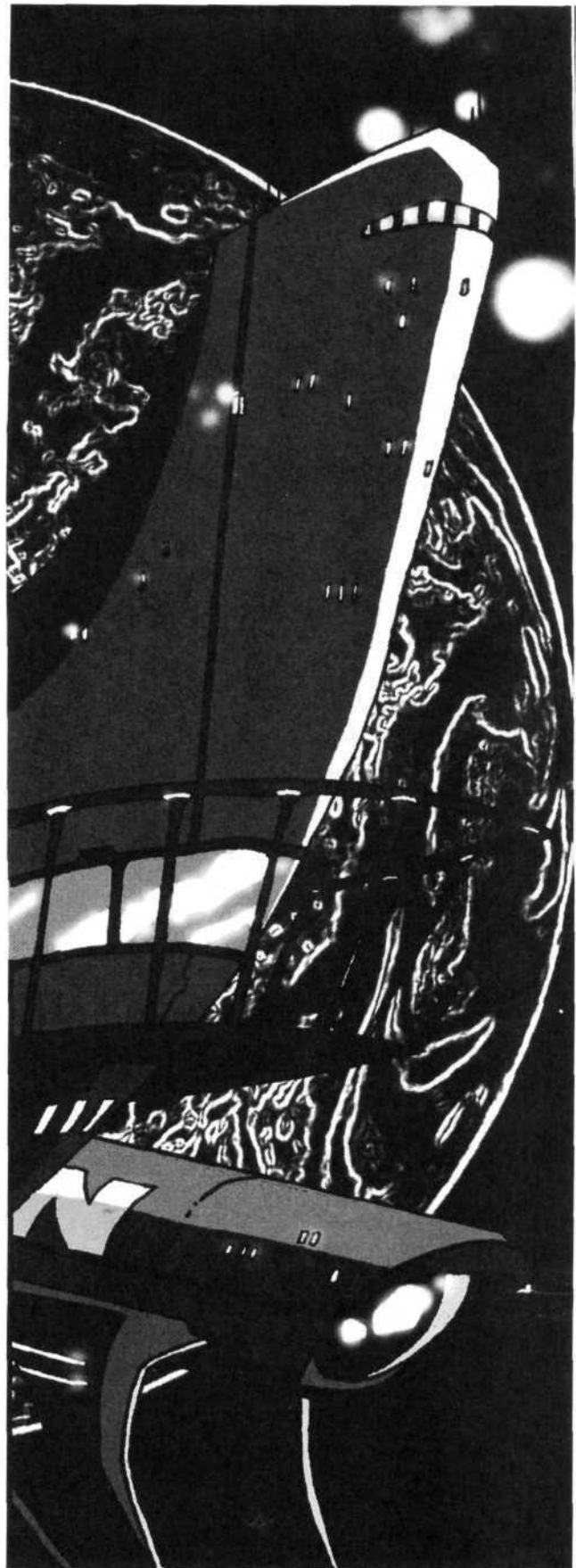
Netspace, you're entering a whole new level of sensory (and sensual) experience. After a while, you can ease off a bit — regular Netizens get used to the barrage, at least to a degree. Even then, though, make your players remember that they're immersed in a world totally beyond mortal limits. Kansas is nowhere in sight (or touch, or hearing, or smell…).

Whiteout Abuse

In the mundane world, the results of Paradox are usually very personal. The mage who plays hard, pays hard. Whiteout, though, is entirely different: *Everyone* can pay, including Webspinners who had no part in the glip. Entire sectors (even those nearby) can go down for days or weeks, trapping hundreds of bystanders in limbo, plugged in and drooling down the front of their South *Park* T-shirts.

A Whiteout offers potential abuse on both sides. Players in a spiteful mood (or simply in desperate straits) may decide that spending a week in a coma is worth knowing that they're doing the same thing to 300 Technomancers. Storytellers can be tempted to use a Whiteout as a plotline "escape hatch" for related reasons — or as a "time out" when clever players endanger the Storyteller's ego.

The Storyteller side is easy to sidestep: Simply decide not to abuse the concept. Whiting out a sector, for reasons that have nothing to do with the players' activities, is a *seriously* un-fun idea. While a Whiteout can teach errant players a serious lesson, it's best used sparingly.

If a player opts to attempt deliberate Paradox as a desperate measure, keep in mind that it's *really* hard to be vulgar in a realm where nearly anything can be rationalized as a "computer simulation." Compound this with the fact that, unless the mage attempting to be vulgar is the one who formatted the sector, the parameters for what goes on there can never be entirely known. On the other hand, if the "go for Paradox" tactic seems motivated realistically, and makes for a dramatic moment, let it happen.

Themes of the Digital Web

Storytelling *reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.*

— Hannah Arendt

The following collection of threads weave throughout cyberspace. They're ideal jumping-off points, as the Web tends to reinforce the following ideas. Naturally, your stories don't have to include *any* of them; we're just providing them for your inspiration. Even so, these themes go a long way toward establishing a consistent atmosphere for the Web; by using one or two of them at a time, you lend an air of form and function to a world where things can — and do — tend toward chaos.

The Presence of the Mundane

Ironically, an extremely magickal realm turns out to be the place where magi and Sleepers get together and chat on a regular basis. Even with their text-and-geometry icons, laughable to the Awakened, Sleepers stumble deeper and deeper into the Web. These days, they're as vital to Net culture as the mages once were. Without knowing it, mortal end-users format entire sectors in simplistic but still personal patterns: a mundane chatroom is an all-text region set against dull 2-D graphics (if any), but every one of them feels different, and carries an atmosphere created by the regulars. A lot of magi prefer to hang out in places like that, where the conversations involve real-life problems rather than the abstract concerns of over-serious Tradition and Convention wizards.

Everybody has their own take on the Sleeper presence. Some love it, believing it to be a victory for all concerned. Others resent it, or just fear the damage these mundane bleaters might ultimately cause. Some especially shallow mages just can't stand the sight of plain text; it takes all kinds to make a world, and this world is increasingly dominated by un-Awakened folks.

• **Working it in:** When introducing new characters to a story or chronicle, don't forget the mundanes. Normal people are, in their own way, just as important in the Web as the mages are (even if they don't have any idea of the real scope of their new world).

Actions Have Consequences

A central theme of **Mage** itself, the idea that you reap what you sow is often a terrifyingly *immediate* reality in the Digital Web. At first blush, the reduced threat of Paradox makes the Web look like an *escape* from consequences; however, it's a forum for more extreme examinations of the concept.

Everybody fighting in the Web wants something... and nearly everybody, in a sense, is getting what they want. Instead of getting prettier, it's made everything uglier. Any story that takes place in the Web should include strong flavors of consequence. When magi don't consider the repercussions of their actions, the results should come back to remind them. On the other hand, strong-willed sorcerers with a clear vision will find the *rewards* of the Web equally great, at least potentially.

• **Working it in:** This is essentially an exercise in giving the players enough rope to hang themselves, and seeing if they can take the power they're given and use it wisely. If they can, the Digital Web can be very rewarding.

If they can't… well, that's the stuff that stories are made of, too. Ultimately, even the biggest screw-ups should always have *some* chance at redemption. Otherwise, the game isn't fun. But (to use the Web's clearest example) an expanse of Virgin Web is *dangerous* in the hands of magi who aren't disciplined enough with their magick or intentions.

The Great R.ace

As the Adepts and Void Engineers strive to format the Web into a "Read Only" environment, their struggle provides a constant buzz of tension in Netspace, even in stories where the center of attention is somewhere else. Many spinners view the Race as a futile exercise, a pointless game of cloak and dagger, an argument over dividing infinity by two. Regardless, both sides pursue the struggle vigorously, making dangerous bargains while avoiding outright war, for fear of destroying the prize.

This gives the Web one of it's more unique flavors: the cold war of a virtual frontier. The upshot of the Race is that Technocrats and Traditionalists end up cooperating as well as fighting, selling out loyalties and making temporary truces every day in hopes of gaining an advantage that'll pay off in the long run. As the Race goes on, the lines get blurrier, the geography of the Net grows more complex, and the rest of the collected magi are left to watch and speculate over their Tass in the Spy's Demise, laying bets and wondering where it all will lead. Willworkers outside the Traditions (or just outside the Race) often find ways *to* profit from the madness.

• Working it in: The Great Race provides one of the few good opportunities in Mage to get Technocrats and mysticks talking to each other — even if the talk isn't always friendly. Many Netizens theorize that the Adepts and Engineers will ultimately realize that their differences with each other are much smaller than their differences with their respective sides of the Ascension War. They think a third faction, separate from both the Technocracy and Traditions, might result. Some insist that this *must* happen, that it will give the virtual reality of the Web its final boost into becoming the next paradigm. Others think the opposite is true: that the Race will eventually devolve into a war despite intentions on both sides, and destroy this virtual fool's paradise once and for all. Between these extremes lies a spectrum ripe for the picking when designing Web-based stories.

Hacker Paranoia

Many real-life Netizens are alone in ways that they never let on. They wear masks, often several of them, and grow edgier and more contemptuous of mundane reality with every passing day. The paranoid old-timers loved living online because they could have friends without letting go of their paranoia. These days, the exclusive geekery of the Web is being elbowed out of its comfortable place. More and more, hard-core denizens of cyberspace are starting to resent the fact that the Internet belongs to everybody.
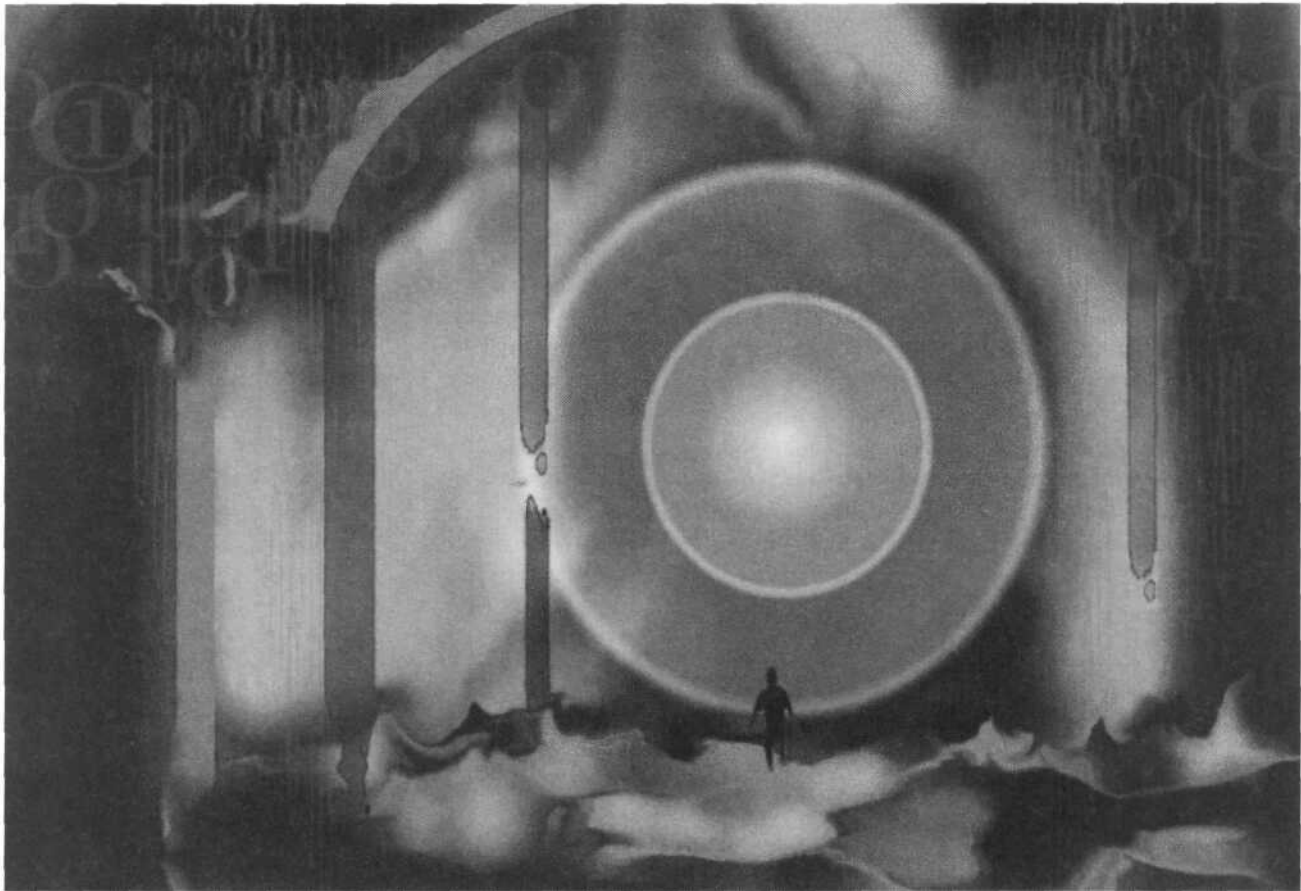
• **Working it In:** Many of the most dangerous characters lurking in the Web aren't Technomancers or twisted spirits. They're mages who just want to be left alone. On the flipside, many of the scariest-seeming icons mask the tenderest and most vulnerable hearts, waiting to find some friends. When writing adventures for your game, try tagging one or more of your Storyteller characters as lonely, either paranoid or seeking. This distinction can provide a powerful insight into that character's motives, and may spur entire subplots. On the other extreme, create a few hacked-off folks who use their considerable prowess to lure newbies into traps, then ridicule, rob or murder them. Naturally, these kindly spinners disguise their intentions... often behind the most helpful icons you could hope to find. And who's to define a "newbie" to such a person? A Netizen who's been jacked in since 1973 might consider anyone more recent than that to be a trendie — and fair game.

Internet Life

What might possess people to abandon their physical bodies (or at least their physical lifestyle) in order to live in the electronic ether? Real-world people are doing it more and more each day on the Internet, without the benefit of magickal immersion in the medium. Most gamers have one or two friends who seem to live in a chatroom or MOO, pulling themselves away from the computer only for occa-

sional outings for food, work or classes. These real-life Netizens sit there, typing away, living someplace else, in groups of people that have often never met (and are frequently terribly disappointed when they do; seeing your online friends type "LOL" is one thing; hearing her dorky laughter is another). Real emotions — love, anger, lust, even sadness — boil up from interactions with a screen and a keyboard. Some people spend their lives trying to find "that special someone" in an electronic haystack, while others burn with grudges inspired by wiseass remarks rendered "public," yet anonymous, by the Internet.

Anonymity is a wonderful thing. Free of the boundaries of appearance, skin color, age or gender, Netizens are free to start over with an identity of their choosing. Some consider such "blending" to living a lie; others see it as a path to transcend prejudice. Both sides are right, at least partially. You can meet some wonderful people on the Net... or some wonderful *characters,* at any rate. People who'd never consider buying a copy of **Mage** are roleplaying, every day, in a real-life game of self-discovery and self-escape. Trust is given easily and can be wounded permanently. [*Author's aside: I met my wife on the Internet, so it isn't* all *bad, but I'd by lying if I tried to paint a prettier picture].* Most people are simply trying to have fun; some pursue darker purposes, insulting, seducing and occasionally stealing their way through hundreds of lives. Yet the

majority of Netizens are good folks at heart, progressives who've sidestepped the awkward layers of social behavior and geographical distance by inventing new protocols and eliminating the gulf between "here" and "here" by meeting halfway between — in "there."

• **Working it in:** While the idea of sending a group of magi into channelslike#!!!!!!!!!!Equine_Incest_Soundfile-Trading_Whinny_Neigh_Moan! or alt.sex.cthulhu in order to beg for vital information can be amusing all by itself (and, if you aren't Net-experienced, let's just say that some channels have *much* more whacked-out themes than that), the motives of those who spend a lot of time on the Net can be mined for some very serious, (and often disturbing), character-driven storylines. Sleepers and Awakened alike find retreat in the Digital Web. Some of them spend the vast majority of their time there, returning to mundane reality only long enough to tend the basic necessities of life (often skipping personal hygiene). Getting into the heads of people (both nice people and not-so-nice ones) who live this way can be a fascinating roleplaying exercise.

A sub-theme of Net life that's fun to work into a Digital Web game is "the real-life meeting." Two people, after becoming friends online, often decide to get together in real life and hang out. If their friendship was romantic in nature, the first meeting is usually planned as a sexual encounter. Sometimes, entire chat channels or chat-networks get together for large, informal get-togethers in an agreed-upon, centrally located city. These can devolve into orgies, too... but more often than not, they become odd nights at bars or odd afternoons in parks, with 20 total strangers looking at each other for some hint of the friends they made online. Chronicles that work back and forth between the Digital Web and mundane reality can include meetings, too, sometimes with deadlier results. Imagine the sparks that might fly when two Net-lovers — one a Virtual Adept renunciate, the other a Man in Black — meet in person and discover that they've crossed paths (and swords) in their "real" lives. Imagine the consequences if both people decide that their Net lives are more "real" than the flesh... and what their former associates might make of that decision. *(Romeo and Juliet* online? Stranger things have happened....)

A Digital Playground

In our own world, the Internet is damned near inescapable. Anyone who conducts any kind of commerce deals with cyberspace, either directly or indirectly. Computer literacy, while almost unknown 15 or 20 years ago, is as important to the future as written literacy has been for the last several centuries. Mages, standing as they do at the doorway of change, are wrapped within the Web in ways which only the most advanced of them understand.

In its own way, the cyberspace of Mage's world is a living thing, opened by desperation, woven by desire and occasionally ripped apart by violence. Underneath the technological sheen lies a host of very human stories — tales of passion, betrayal, deception, and hope. In this setting, the primal human drama takes on ultramodern overtones. And no one is more aware of that fact than the Awakened Ones. As the Council of Nine learned long ago, survival of the Old Wisdom depends on adopting the newest tools; as the Adepts, Technocracy and other spinners have learned, those new tools are nothing without a solid human foundation, hard work and a lot of compromise. The Net is the playground of the future, to be sure, but as of now, it's more a sandbox than a gym. To last, its wonders require foundations, substance and, most of all, a sense of fun.

As the Web spreads and its "spiders" rebuild what was lost while laying new strands, human drama becomes intertwined with human technology. In between them both, the Digital Web waits. What kind of stories can *your* troupe find in its glistening strands? Only you can say.

SITE 5: PROGRAMMING SYSTEMS

This ain't a reasoned debate. This is Jehovah against Dionysus. Let's drink that tired old self-righteous motherfucker under the table.
— R.U. *Sinus*

The Storyteller and the Virtual Adept share a paradox. Both envision an ideal world with as few rules as possible, yet both are shackled by the limitations of *needing* rules on occasion. We've already seen how the VAs are handling the situation (or not, depending on your perspective); this chapter covers the Storyteller's end.

Under most circumstances, we advise using as few game systems as possible. This is especially true for games set in the Web, where reality is far more fluid than in the mortal world. Many things that are horrifically vulgar magick in RealSpace are simply part of the scenery in the Web. Even this flexible world has rules, though, and the following systems cover many odd circumstances in Net-based tales.

Readers who own **Digital Web** first edition should note that many of the systems here differ from the original rules. Sometimes, that difference reflects a change from **Mage** first edition concepts or systems; more often then not, though, it simply covers things that were not discussed in the original **Digital Web,** or smoothes out rules that were too complex the first time around. In story terms, the Net has changed, and the nature of reality has changed within it as well.

New Knowledge Trait: Web Culture

Like the "mortal" version of Culture, this Knowledge Trait clues you in to the various groups and protocols of Netspace. Without it, you're an obvious newbie with very little idea of where to go, how to act or who to ask for information. With it, you've experienced enough to know your way around. Mortals can purchase this Knowledge, although they think the communities they understand are simply elaborate chatrooms and MU*s. Naturally, this Ability won't protect you if you choose to act like a twit. Knowing Netiquette and practicing it are two different things.

•	Student:	Newbie.
••	College:	Trendie.
•••	Masters:	Netizen.
••••	Doctorate:	Parallaxer.
•••••	Scholar:	Elite.

Possessed by: Webspinners, Hackers, Admins, Skippers

Specialties: Netiquette, Technocracy Protocols, Virtual Adepts, Gossip, Parallaxing, Underground Groups, Hacker Elite

General Rules

A crash *reduces*
your expensive computer
to a simple stone.
— "Computer Error Haiku," anonymous

The following systems cover many of the stranger aspects of Netspace, and detail their effects on Webspinners. As always, feel free to reconfigure, reject or delete any rules that don't work for your chronicle or group.

Access

The basic rules for Web access can be found in the **Mage: The Ascension** rulebook, pp. 242-244- The chart on [p. I1l] offers a quick guide to the methods available, and the systems and roleplaying elements necessary to use them.

"Normal" Web access (surfing, Website construction, data retrieval, and other things Sleepers can do without difficulty) should be handled through roleplaying. Especially complex tasks might demand one to five dots in Computer, Computer Hacking, or both. They may also require a bit of Cryptography or Web Culture. In such cases, the difficulty of the task determines the difficulty of the roll and the successes necessary to pull it off. (See "Computers," pp. 244-245 in **Mage**.) To actually "enter" the VR world and see what he's doing from a Webspinner perspective, a character must project himself into the Web as above.

Icons

Once "inside" the Web, your character can build an icon to suit her whims. Doing so requires time and an Intelligence + Computer roll, difficulty 6, to set the program. (This used to be harder in the old days, but advanced programs have made the process much easier.) Since an icon looks like whatever you want it to look like, you get one dot of Appearance or Intimidation for each success you roll, and may "place" those dots however you prefer. Like a normal character, an icon begins with a base Trait of 1 in Appearance, base 0 in Intimidation.

Example: *Libbi wants her mage's icon to resemble, a gorgeous but deadly Chaos! comics heroine. When setting her icon, she rolls five successes. Three go to Appearance (giving the icon Appearance 4), and two give her Intimidation 2. Other Social Traits rely more on personality than looks; thus, Libbi's icon shares the mage's normal Charisma and Manipulation ratings.*

Although these Traits can exceed 5, it's worth noting that icons are generally a bit less impressive than flesh-and-blood creatures — any geek can look like a dragon!

Even so, most spinners put a lot of time into their icons. A basic "instant" icon takes only two turns to boot up, and can be "saved" without changes when the spinner decides to leave the Net. Designing a new icon might take hours. In game terms, assume a brand-new icon program requires at least three successes; booting up a saved one takes no time at all. A really elaborate or impressive icon could demand six, eight or even 10 successes, assembled with an extended roll. Each roll reflects three to five minutes (or turns) of game time.

In general, icons should be handled with roleplaying. If you want your character to transform from a demure girl to a virtual Lucy Lawless, just say so. Storytellers and other players should take an icon at face value, but with the aforementioned pound of salt. By tacit agreement, very few people actually comment on an icon's appearance vs. the user's actual looks — the Net is supposedly "Reality 2.0," after all — although a really ostentatious icon might draw a few stares or snide remarks. Especially complex, imaginative or well-crafted ones, on the other hand, become marks of distinction and status.

Changing an icon's appearance is easy: Just take a moment of game time to adjust the program, and it's done. Really radical shifts — like ones that could change Traits — demand a Manipulation + Computer roll, difficulty 5. For each success with the roll, you can adjust your mage's Appearance, Intimidation or both by one for every success rolled. Each dot of "change" counts as one success; if Libbi wanted to add three dots each to Appearance and Intimidation, she would need six successes.

No matter what its appearance might be, an icon has most of the Attributes, Abilities and powers of its user; Mental Traits might substitute for Physical ones (see chart), but unless some magick has been employed, a dragon icon is no stronger than the mage's Intelligence Trait. (To exceed those Traits, see Brain Boost under "Procedures.") The exceptions to this rule are Appearance and Intimidation. Any icon, however, may employ the willworker's usual spells without difficulty.

Travel

Virtual reality is just that: virtually reality. "Solid" objects and surfaces appear in Webspace as solid as ones in RealSpace; Your spinner can sit in a chair or lean on a wall as readily as he can in the material world. Distances are more ephemeral, but still appear to be distances; Dante's Elite enough to fly or teleport between sectors if he wants to, but it's usually easier just to walk through the conduits.

Conduits lead nearly everywhere if you know which roads to follow. For the most part, this is kinda like getting around town in RealSpace: You know the roads where you walk most often. You can use magick or back doors for personal travel, and employ conduits and hot links as public transit. All of these options are open to Webspinners with the know-how and imagination to employ them.

Traveling in familiar territory doesn't really demand anything special. Finding your way through unknown pathways might require a Perception + Computer or Web Culture roll; the more arcane the route, the higher the difficulty. In story terms, your character needs to search for landmarks, watch for the scenery changes that reflect the sector (see the description of the Spy's Demise for an example), look for hot links, or ask for information. Although many of the well-traveled conduits have signs and/or maps (kinda like the "you are here" boards in malls), many old or obscure passages have no markings at all. It's easy to get lost in such areas if you aren't careful. The **Whereami** Effect (**Mage**, p. 189) is a popular tool in Netspace.

Hot Links

A recent innovation, the hot link portal opens gates between various sectors. A selection screen flashes on the "wall" beside the conduit entrance. The traveler pushes the appropriate option, enters into the conduit, and steps out a moment later in the sector he wishes to visit. Unless there's some sort of Restriction on the link (a rare thing), the trip is quick, easy and painless. It can be one-way, however — links don't necessarily lead back the way they came, and the options available at one sector might be vastly different than those at another locale.

Popping

Spinners with enough spice (Correspondence 3, to be exact) can hop back and forth between sectors without bothering to use conduits. As long as they know where their going (a very important step; see below), they can 'port into any free sector they want to visit.
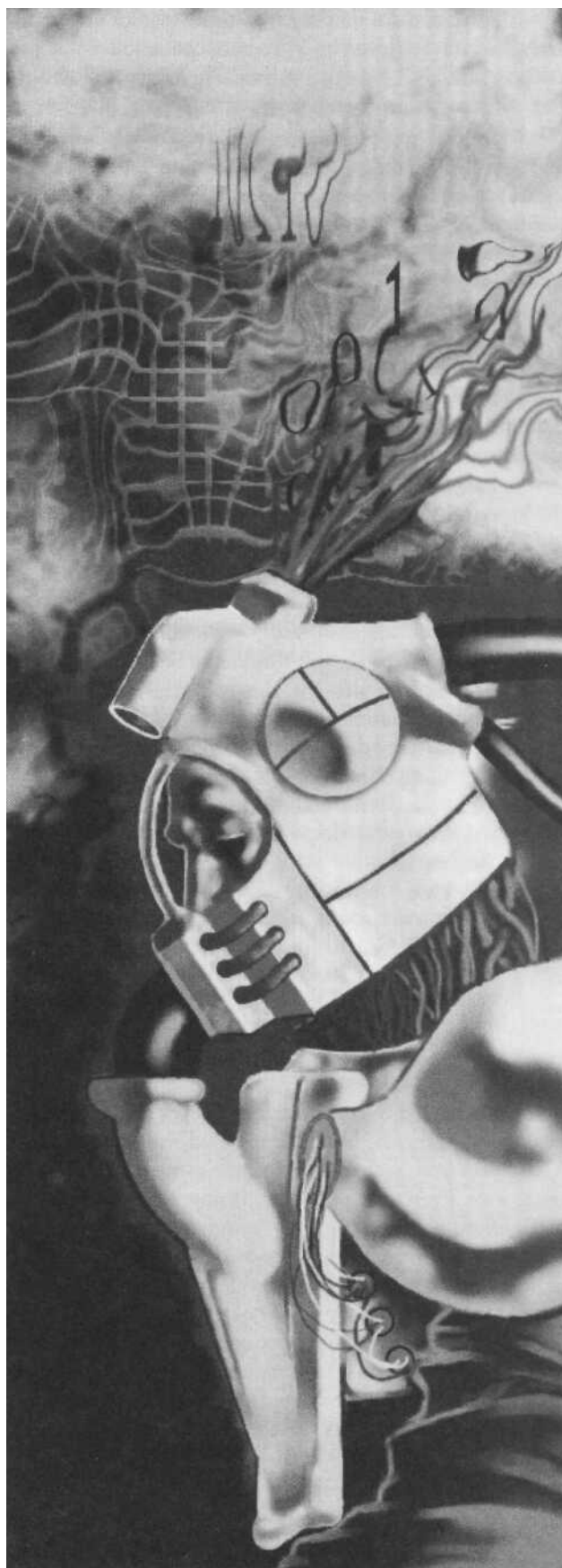
In story terms, a simple pop requires a quick scan of the arrival sector, followed by a program command. Most procedures link both Effects together. Any skipper worth the name has a pop prog ready to go at the touch of a button.

In game terms, your magus employs Correspondence 3, first to scan the landing area, then to jump. So long as both locations are in the same sector, the Effect is coincidental (difficulty 6). Popping requires at least two turns (one to scan, one *to* go), although a desperate (and stupid) spinner can jump without looking in one turn. A careful traveler, conversely, plans her route in advance. In other words, her player takes a few turns to make an extended roll rather than a simple one. The more successes she gets, the more precise (and painless) your her trip. Popping blind raises the difficulty by two — possibly even higher if the mage is in alien territory.

A failed pop can do one of two things, depending on the Storyteller's mean streak: It strands the traveler in some unknown sector, or pops him into a Restricted or occupied area, de-rezzing his icon and booting the mage out of the Net. A botched roll lands the spinner in a really bad spot — a Junkland, a Haunt, etc. — or crashes him painfully.

Popping into or out of a Restricted Sector is asking for trouble. The difficulty for the roll rises to 8 (10 for unknown Restricted Sectors), and a failed or botched roll can result in icon death or a chaos dump. Unless the character's icon has dressed for the occasion, he'll be booted right out of the area even if he succeeds. A simple Restricted area gives the intruder a soft de-rez, while a highly Restricted one (a Technocratic outpost, for instance) fries him on his way out.

Sectors

For the most part, travelers can come and go as they want. Most sites are open and ready to do business 24/7, and anyone who knows the entranceways are free to arrive or depart. The exceptions are:

• **Restricted Sectors** (including **SRVRZ**) throw up a bewildering array of blinds, traps, and misdirections, etc. These vary from sector to sector, the same tricks are rarely used twice. Even the Technocrats know enough to vary the baffles from place to place —- "standard format protocols" allowed the Virtual Adepts to stomp early SRVRZ into digital dust. In story terms, a traveler going in or out of the sector must either run a gauntlet of tricks and traps (most of which either pop trespassers into other sectors, de-rez 'em or fry 'em), or carry some ID software that bypasses the security codes. Really heavily Restricted areas might be so saturated with scanners and tests that everyone there, even the native icons, moves slower than usual.

In game terms, a trespasser must win between 10 to 20 successes on a Wits + Computer Hacking roll. The difficulty may vary from 7 to 10, and might include resisted rolls

from the security systems (usually a Dice Pool of five to 10 dice rolling against difficulty 5 — it's *their* system!). Some systems might (at Storyteller's option) include puzzles for the player, or a succession of challenges that requires several different rolls of other Traits (Perception or Intelligence + Cryptography, Enigmas, Linguistics, Psychology, Occult, Science: Math or Physics, or even Secret Code Language). Remember, most programmers prize themselves on imagination, and often want to hide their secrets from everyone... even their own allies.

An "ID badge" containing the proper codes allows a traveler to enter a Restricted Sector without difficulty. Such badges are usually coded to specific icons, and malfunction if carried by "intruders." Faking such passes (Perception + Cryptography, difficulty 7+) almost always requires a working badge to use as a template, and a compatible fake icon (a HIT Mark, for instance) with a really good program (five successes or more).

• **Corrupted Web** and its effects are left to the Storyteller's option — no two are alike. Two things are certain: Nothing in a Corrupted area will act the way it's supposed to — not magick, not knowledge, not perceptions, nothing — and getting out will always be harder then getting in. Pure Storytelling (perhaps with the occasional Wits + Technology roll thrown in to give players a chance) works better for such horrors than predictable systems. Corrupted Web is anything *but* predictable.

• **Junklands** are easy enough to enter or leave. Bad things happen to spinners who wind up in them, though. The disturbing Resonance and disconcerting images in such places often take a toll on visitors' sanity. In game terms, those effects could come out as disorientation or Willpower drains. A successful Willpower roll (difficulty 7+) might screen out the worst effects of a Junklands visit, but no one, not even the most callous Euthanatos, is able to enter such a sector without feeling uncomfortable. (Granted, some folks *like* being uncomfortable ⇥—

• **Constraint Realms** simply bar any icon that doesn't fit the proper "dress code." Any mage who tries to muscle her way in is dumped — end of story. Would-be poppers discover the hard way that Constraint Realms are essentially Restricted Sectors for the purposes of teleporting in or out.

• **Haunts** essentially work like Junklands do — with the addition of a ghost or two, and possibly a few nihils leading into the Underworld. The Resonance of death — which Euthanatos call Jhor — seeps into everything in a Haunt Sector. No one can come or go without feeling the cold touch of mortality and its aftermath. (See Wraith: The Oblivion and its supplement, Artificers, for more details on the Restless Dead, and Euthanatos, pp. 59-61, for more about the death-taint.)

• **The Trash Sector** is inaccessible unless you get dumped so badly that the connection between consciousness, the icon and RealSpace is severed. Since we don't

advise doing this to the players' characters, this mysterious "lost world" should remain more a rumor than a certainty... although sadistic Storytellers might expand on the legend at their option.

• The only way out of a **Hung Sector** involves Time magick. Nothing else "unfreezes" the endless moment of repetition. A traveler caught in a HS repeats the first few words or actions she made as she entered the sector. Unless she activates an **Advanced Time-diffusion Prog** (Time 4) as she goes in, she's stuck a turn or so after she enters. A Time-savvy magus can free her, so long as he stands outside the sector itself. Anyone who steps into the HS is stuck... possibly for a long, long time.

Hacking and Back Doors

As any hacker can attest, there's more than one way to skin a Net. For many Virtual Adepts and N-Ark, KZTs, breaking into sectors through back doors (or making ones into sectors you create) is much more fun than going in though those boring old conduits.

Hacking a sector, in story terms, is a two-sided affair: If she's sitting outside the Web, a Technomancer has to whip out her trusty deck and sort through a puzzle of code. Generally, she has to jack in somewhere near the sector's network first, but really Elite folks (those with **Remote Access**; see "Procedures") can try their luck from anywhere. Once in, she's got to second-guess the protections, telling the system what it wants to hear. The rules for this task can be found in **Mage**, pp. 244-245; most Restricted Sectors are difficulty 8 to hack, and really tough ones (like Technocratic data banks or VA meeting places) are difficulty 9 or 10, with often-lethal countermeasures. Hacking from the outside demands some fair skill with computers; only a mage who understands programming and IT iron is able to break in from RealSpace.

If a mage is *inside* the Web, hacking becomes a matter of finding the hidden exits and entrances left by the sector's designers. Doing so involves wading through a VR maze, eluding protections and ducking (or killing) FREEKS and attack progs. This best plays out as a story in which the hacker (and possibly her friends) traverse a wilderness of traps, monsters and obstacles. The harder the "casing" around the sector or system, the harder and deadlier the obstacles become. A simple Webpage security encryption may seem like an ROTC training course (difficulty 6 or 7), while a bank system may resemble a triathlon (difficulty 8). A technomagickal security setup is more like a trip to Mordor, complete with programs that can (and will) kill intruders! (The difficulty is 9 or 10, with many successes necessary.)

Anyone can try his hand at "inside" hacking, but an understanding of computers and their applications still comes in handy. The hazards *are* based on computer systems, after all. As a rule, assume that a character who employs computer-based VR can roll his Computer Hacking or Technology instead of Athletics; Encryption instead of Brawl or Melee; and Enigmas instead of Intimidation, Seduction, Streetwise or Subterfuge. A character who projects herself in through Holistic Immersion uses her normal "physical" skills to evade, navigate and traverse her way through the maze.

Example: *Virtual Adept Mandragora wants to sneak into the Spy's Demise. Upon spotting the entrance to Maxine's office, Mandragora darts off down an alley, finds a sewer lid, pries it up and drops down into. . .*

...A mess. Snakes coil around him, and cockroaches the size of footballs click and skitter across the walls . Hoping to dodge the serpents' fangs, Mandragora's player rolls Wits + Technology against difficulty 8. He barely succeeds; the mage dances aside and falls face-first into raw sewage. The cockroaches descend, glowing like charcoal embers. Mandragora rises and sloshes off into the darkness. To find his way around, his player might need to roll Perception + Enigmas, difficulty 8. If he can find his way through the maze of tunnels underneath the Demise and continue to elude the roaches, snakes and other nasties, Mandragora might *discover a ladder leading up and inside. If he blows a roll or two , he might find himself lost in the tunnels ...or feeding the serpents.*

Naturally, the appearance of the hidden route and its obstacles depend on the nature of the sector. Sewers and back alleys fit the Spy's Demise, while an endless wasteland surrounds the Seer's library. An Irontooth stronghold might resemble a high-tech military installation, while an Etherite lab looks like Dr. Frankenstein's chop shop. Every sector has "back doors" if you know where and how to look for them. Getting in is, of course, another matter entirely... especially considering that many designers create fake trap doors as part of routine sector design.

Anyone can make a back door out of a sector he creates. Doing so is simply a matter of roleplaying — just say, "I make two back doors that look like this and this," and it's done.

Data Retrieval

In the old days, cryptkeepers used to cart information away in "data clusters" - - crystals, cubes, fountains and other archaic representations. In recent years, however, stored data has begun to resemble objects that people expect: dossiers, books, TV and monitor screens, even compact discs. This seems to have occurred gradually but spontaneously — surely no one actually *catalogued* all those books in the Seer's library! — and presents another mystery to those who would understand the Web and its ways.

These days, the intrepid data pirate breaks into vaults, slides down chimneys or eavesdrops on conversations to get the information she desires. When she finds what she's looking for, she grabs it, memorizes it or records it, then leaves the area. In game terms, this plays out exactly like a search for information in the material world. (See **Mage**, p. 255.)

Obviously, there's lots of data in the Net. Even when you find the right place, it takes time and effort to dig up just the right facts. Thankfully, the skilled data pirate can find what she's looking for by scanning the bandwidth of the Net itself. Setting her rig to "search for..." and running the program in the proper area, she strives to locate the data packet in whatever form it might take. This requires a computer and a Perception + Computer or Computer Hacking roll. The larger the area, the higher the difficulty; finding a big listing on a computer monitor is a difficulty 6; locating a book in the stacks of the Seer's sector is a 9 or 10, and requires a lot of scan time.

Once the data has been located, the seeker simply takes the book, records the program or memorizes the listing, then splits.

Combat

For the most part, combat in VR is like fighting anywhere else. Oh sure, the settings can be quite different — a brawl in a glittering zero-G cave isn't quite like a brawl in downtown Chicago — but the game systems are pretty much the same.

In sectors where the environment is drastically different than what the characters are used to — again, zero-G, a flashing light show, an Escheresque realm where down, up and sideways are all the same, etc. — the Storyteller should impose a few penalties to Dice Pools or increase roll difficulties. Aside from that, and from the magickal differences cited below, throwing a punch or firing a gun in VR works in exactly the same ways in which they do at home.

Health, healing and harm

The real differences come up when that punch or gunshot hits someone. If the "someone" in question happens to be a Holistically Immersed spinner, the damage is as physical as if he had been in RealSpace. If, instead, he's Sensorially or Astrally Immersed into the Web, that harm takes the form of system shock — "egg-frying." Although not usually as fatal as direct damage, this shock has its own hazards: headaches, disorientation, burns, comas, even immediate death.

For all practical purposes, VR weapons and blows are as "real" as physical ones, and use the same rules. (Remember that most spinners use Intelligence in place of Strength.) Most damage in Netspace is normal, and heals at the normal rate. The only attacks that inflict aggravated harm here are viruses, chaos dumps, Whiteouts and **Feedback** programs. Aggravated damage often takes the form of brain hemorrhages, severe burns and internal bleeding, rather than gaping wounds or broken bones.

Unless a character suffers a severe trauma (see below), all the damage she takes remains in VR, tattering her icon but leaving her meat intact. If she jacks out and boots back in, that damage heals automatically. Life magicks can heal meat,

but must be combined with Mind 1 in order to do any good for Sensory or Astral travelers. A computer whiz can heal a damaged icon with a Manipulation + Computer roll (difficulty 6-10, depending on the seriousness of the "injuries"), but cannot do anything for a wounded Holistic traveler.

The different degrees of harm in VR include:

• **Net fatigue** comes from strenuous activity (lots of fighting, fleeing or fucking) in Netspace. In story terms, the fatigue wipes the traveler out — he returns to RealSpace with headaches, backaches, dizziness, etc. In game terms, the pain is simply a matter of roleplaying and Storytelling. In extreme cases (see "Overload" in SITE 2), you might need to make a Willpower roll to keep your character sane; failure could lead to lingering neurosis, depression or nightmares, while a botch might cause a nervous breakdown or temporary insanity. (See "Quiet" in **Mage,** pp. 178-179.)

• **Virus infection** is more subtle but no less deadly. Some Webspinners have mastered virus progs that can follow a traveler back home. These insidious procedures eat away at a spinner's physical and mental health, sometimes subtly, often fatally. A less subtle attack, **Lethal Feedback,** does similar things on a much more radical scale. (See "Procedures" for details about both attacks.)

• **A soft de-rezzing** instantly teleports the spinner into some other area of Netspace, usually a "dump site" for unwelcome guests or losing combatants. The stuns both the icon, and the spinner's consciousness. When the haze clears, the traveler has been booted elsewhere; any witnesses to the event see the victim get blasted to shimmering atoms, then disappear.

A soft de-rezzing usually occurs as part of the plot — a character goes somewhere he shouldn't, or dies in an area like a Warzone where death is simply a matter of returning to "Start." Thus, it's instant and unavoidable. Although the spinner hurts for a little while, the dump doesn't inflict any Health Levels damage unless the spinner is Holistically Immersed, in which case, he's stunned for several minutes while his scrambled system adjusts to the shock, and adds two to all difficulties for the next hour or so. If he happens to be in a Restricted Sector when he gets dumped, the character loses one point from a Mental Attribute. This lasts only one day, but leaves the mage feeling a bit foggy.

• **A hard de-rezzing** disintegrates the icon and knocks the spinner's consciousness right out of the Web. The spinner's icon sizzles and fades out, often howling in pain. Back home, the spinner bolts out of her VR trance, her senses scrambled and her head throbbing.

In rules terms, a hard de-rez strikes a Webspinner who violates a major protocol, suffers a small Whiteout backlash, or sustains enough damage to send her to Incapacitated. It severs her connection with the Web, and scrambles her senses and reflexes.

Depending on the severity of the dump — if, for example, an attack smashes the spinner from Healthy to Incapacitated in one shot — the Storyteller might call for

a Stamina roll, difficulty 7. Success means the traveler is disoriented but unharmed, while failure or a botch indicates an automatic Health Level or two in normal damage (minor burns, blasted coordination, etc.) *and* a loss of one or two points in a Mental Attribute. This damage and loss heals at the normal rate. A character who was Holistically Immersed, or who was dumped from a Restricted Sector, must make that roll or suffer the consequences.

• **Icon death** comes to all spinners sooner or later. Unlike the Meatsville variety, a digital demise usually isn't *totally* fatal... unless the spinner is Holistically Immersed, in which case icon death is just as permanent as RealSpace death.

In story terms, the character gets nailed hard, fries in a blue flame and explodes into a crackling, screaming thunderbolt. If she's lucky, the victim awakens back at home, hooked into VR and suffering a massive headache and minor burns; if she's not lucky, she might be badly fried, insane or comatose.

System-wise, an icon is killed outright by falling below Incapacitated or suffering a major Whiteout backlash. The mage's consciousness rips through the connection and hurtles back into her body, carrying all the pain of death back with it. The Storyteller calls for a Stamina roll, difficulty 7. If you succeed, your Webspinner comes to several minutes later, badly disoriented and often hallucinating. (See the Prelude.) Whatever damage she suffered in Netspace carries through to her meat as burns and system shock, but every success made on the Stamina roll reduces that damage by one Health Level.

Example: *Shiba "dies" in the Fishbowl; her consciousness races back to her material body. In the game, player Jaymi rolls three successes on Shiba's Stamina roll. The mage goes from Dead to Maided, and wakes up with bad burns and shattered reflexes.*

Once she returns to RealSpace, the spinner can "will" herself back to some degree of health. You spend one point of Willpower for each Health Level cured. Even if you manage to bring your mage back to full Health, however, her senses and reflexes will be a bit off (add one to three to all difficulties), and her mind will be haunted by the specter of death for quite some time.

If you blow that roll, your spinner's in trouble. A failed roll drops the mage into a coma, where she remains at the Storyteller's mercy. A botched roll blasts the traveler into oblivion, frying her to death in her VR chair.

A spinner who dies in a Restricted Sector has his consciousness ripped apart on the journey home. Even if you win your Stamina roll, your mage loses two permanent points from *each* of his Mental Attributes. Those points cannot be healed, only re-purchased with experience. In story terms, the spinner suffers a profound mental breakdown; his perceptions, coordination and faculties are badly shaken, and may never recover their full strength. If you fail the Stamina roll during a digital death in Restricted space, your mage suffers....

• **A chaos dump**. The most vicious kind of digital death shatters the icon into a bizarre fractal design and rips the spinner's consciousness into equally chaotic patterns. Without severing the tie between the meat and the icon, a chaos dump renders both of them inert. In rulespeak, a character can suffer a chaos dump from bad 'Dox backlashes, death in Restricted Sectors, specific procedures, or massive shutdowns in Netspace (like the Great Crash).

In most cases, a chaos dump is essentially permanent damnation. If your character is unfortunate enough to get blasted into fractals, you can make an Arete roll, difficulty 8, to see if her enlightened will is strong enough to overcome the shock. Success catapults the spinner's consciousness into an indefinite Quiet mindscape (see **Mage**, pp. 178-179) from which she might eventually escape. Failure anchors the mage in a coma. A botch turns both meat and mind to charbroiled hamburger. Time for a new mage

(For extra drama, the Storyteller might elect to make this roll himself and keep the results secret. A spinner who's presumed dead might be off somewhere fighting to regain her shredded consciousness. Then again, she may simply be dead. In the latter case, her Avatar might return later in a new incarnation... or might not.)

Magick

The Web *is* magickal. As "populated" as it has become, Netspace is still more dynamic than Earth has been for millennia. Even those few Sleepers who can actually see what's going on through sophisticated VR rigs "accept" weird stuff as "cool graphics, man." Thus, nearly all Effects are considered coincidental in Webspace, with the following vulgar exceptions:

• **Magick that comes "from nowhere."** Built as it is on a technological paradigm, the Web demands that some sort of tool or procedure be used before magickal spells become "acceptable." Magi who simply will their spells into being cast those Effects as if the magick were "vulgar without witnesses." It's still possible to employ magick focused through sheer will — doing so is just more difficult than using high tech for the same purpose. Although most common Netspace foci include some form of technology (see "Net Tools," p. 108), traditional magick can and does work fine in sectors that have been set up to "accept" mystick rites, like Ghastenburg Castle. Computer-using magi have an obvious advantage in Netspace; considering that they set the place up, though, that's to be expected.

• **Spells cast within a Restricted Sector that do not come from one of the area's "approved residents."** A Man in Black, for instance, has free rein in a SRVRZ, but every Effect he uses within a Virtual Adept stronghold is considered "vulgar with witnesses," even if they would normally be coincidental. The set of the sector's reality has been stacked against him. To use magick coincidentally in an RS, a mage must be a member of the group that established the area, or possess a valid ID pass for it.

• **Workings that contradict the setting of a Constraint Realm**. In other words, the Man in Black is perfectly coincidental if he pulls out a pistol and blasts someone in Bogart's; if he is in the Fishbowl, however, his pistol and its effects are vulgar.

• **Forces or Prime Effects that achieve more than five successes.** In this case, the roll itself is made as though the Effect is coincidental; if the mage is too successful, however, the power flux raises the risk of a Whiteout. Even if he doesn't botch, the caster gets one point of Paradox for every five Health Levels his attack inflicts (before soaking). This rule does not apply in Warzones, which have been set up for this sort of thing.

• **Workings of tremendous size.** Large-scale spells (explosions, great conjurations, time freezes, gigantic icons, morphing or co-location of whole areas, dimensional rifts, and multi-icon morphs) shift power around so radically that a Whiteout becomes almost inevitable. In such cases, the roll is made as if the spell is "vulgar with witnesses" (the "witness" being the Net itself), and generates Paradox accordingly. Veteran spinners are wise enough to employ smaller workings. The big stuff is reserved for last resorts.

• **Effects that jump from Netspace to RealSpace.** If Shiba flexes her VR muscle to blow up a computer in Mississippi, her workings are considered vulgar... usually with witnesses. (A Sleeper might accept a cool morph, but would be nonplused if it was her computer that did the morphing.)

• **Effects that jump from one sector to another.** Popping is easy within a given sector, but becomes "vulgar with witnesses" when a mage skips between formatted areas.

• **"Gates" between the Web and other Umbral Realms.** Any spell that leaps from Netspace to the different Otherworlds is vulgar. The exceptions are projecting in from Earth itself, or climbing the strands of Web between the Middle Umbra and the fringes of this Zone. For more details, see the Gauntlet Ratings in Webspace chart.

• **Anything cast in Corrupted Web.** Magick turns itself inside-out in these bizarre places. No working is safe.

"Adjusted" Magicks

In contrast, some Effects are so easy that almost anyone can perform them; others work very differently in Netspace. The following rules modifications apply to most areas of the Web, but may be suspended in certain sectors at the Storyteller's option. In this wild Zone, nothing should be taken for granted.

• **Any Webspinner can use a limited version of the** *Landscape of the* **Mind Effect.** A Perception + Alertness roll allows a character to sense the area around her as if she was looking down at herself through a tactical display. These perceptions extend only to places within the sector

or conduit that the spinner is standing in at the time. Arcane, invisibility and other forms of concealment may negate this ability, or contest it with a resisted roll.

• **Characters with Correspondence, Forces or Prime can use those Spheres at one level higher than their normal rating, up to a maximum of 5.** The Web is heaven for certain mages — the usual concepts of "here" and "there" are totally suspended, and electricity and raw Quintessence are everywhere. That flexibility, however, is limited to the mage's general vicinity (modern format programs minimize "spill" between sectors) and makes large-scale workings very dangerous. (See above.)

This "bonus" does not extend to Devices or Talismans of any kind, and is somewhat limited — the Rank 6 secrets of the archmasters are too arcane for lesser magi to understand, even here. Although the greatest wizards can still employ the Arts they know, most sorcerers remain limited to the more "accessible" five Sphere Ranks. The Web makes certain things easier, but there are boundaries__

• *System Havoc* **is hell.** This Forces 2 Effect, specifically targeted against electrical systems, deals out damage on a large scale. Any icon near the center of the Effect (within 10 yards per success) takes one automatic Health Level of damage for each success the mage wins. In story terms, everyone in the area ripples in the force of an electrical storm. Although a character can try to soak that damage with a Willpower roll (difficulty 8), everybody feels the heat.

Three things make **System Havoc** insanely dangerous: First, it can also affect the caster and his allies if they're within range; second, it's always "vulgar with witnesses"; third, it conjures Whiteouts. After the Effect goes off, the Storyteller rolls for a Paradox backlash against difficulty 4 instead of 6. Anything that goes wrong, goes wrong in a big way — the area crashes, a bolt of electricity de-rezzes the caster, etc. Consequently, veteran spinners rarely employ this nasty but double-edged trick.

• **Life and Matter work only on "solid" bodies or objects.** One of the enduring puzzles in the "reality is perception" argument involves the limited applications of the Life and Matter Spheres in VR. Although either one can be linked to other Spheres or channeled out of the Web, the Spheres cannot harm or heal VR bodies or objects by themselves. One would think that a Verbena, believing himself to be in "reality," could still command his Arts in the usual way. This is not the case, however.

Life and Matter work normally upon bodies that have been Holistically projected into the Net, or with objects that are connected to it, like computer networks or the machines wired to them. Against VR icons or objects, however, these Spheres are useless. A steel-warping Effect, for example, can ruin a Sleeper's computer, but won't twist a chair in the Spy's Demise. Thus, most spinners use biological Arts to sustain their living bodies, and employ machine Arts to trash Net-linked systems — a disturbingly easy task considering the prevalence of Internet-based technology in the late 1990s.

- **Morphing is easy.** Any spinner can morph his own icon with a simple Manipulation + Computer roll. (See "Icons.") No other magick is necessary.

Morphing someone else's icon, or changing one's surroundings, requires Entropy 3/ Forces 2/ Prime 2 and an Arete roll (difficulty 7). If your mage wants to morph an icon that doesn't want to be changed, that roll is a resisted roll; if you score more successes than the other player does, the rival icon transforms. If not, it keeps its old shape.

Shifting a large area could demand a lot of successes (five or more) before the area changes; if you're trying to morph a portion of a Restricted Sector, the Arete roll difficulty rises to 9.

Note that morphing an icon doesn't necessarily change its nature; a lizardman icon morphed into a mouse doesn't lose its strength! The icon in question can always change hack, too. "Morph duels," in which the combatants change forms in the blink of an eye, are common (and very weird!) sights in Webspace.

No matter what form it attains, a mage's icon can still use magick. However, if the spinner needs certain foci and changes into a form that can't employ them — say a blue ball of light that can't press computer keys — the mage must be able to work without a focus to continue using his magick.

Net Tools (Foci and Talismans)

Technology accessed the Digital Web; technology formats its sectors, performs its labors and brings human consciousness into this new and dynamic world. Thus, the "rules" of Net reality favor the trappings of technology. Although most Virtual Adepts realize that tools are only the stepping stones between will and change, most of them still feel compelled to use those familiar foci when they need to get things done.

Net iron comes in two varieties: icon-based foci (which allow a spinner to perform her magickal progs), and Net Talismans (which have been configured to carry their own magicks). Both types function exactly like their RealSpace counterparts. Unless the iron was made outside the Net, however, it cannot transfer into RealSpace — a virtual rocket launcher only exists in VR. Some spinners download iron directly into the Net via Holistic Immersion (like a Cybernaut who brings his favorite jetpack into the Web with him), but most simply build tools into their icon programs (like the MIB with the virtual rocket launcher), and morph them as necessary.

Tools that "clash" with a sector make the mage's Arts "vulgar with witnesses." (See above.) As an optional rule, a Storyteller might decide that tools that conflict with a Restricted Sector or Constraint Realm simply refuse to work at all — a wrist deck, for example, would be useless to a spinner in Bogart's. The spinner might have to change the iron's appearance to fit in with the sector's parameters. To work in Bogart's, that deck must be changed to a typewriter or *Dick* Troc^-esque wrist radio. This side-effect can be really disconcerting to magi who depend on a certain kind of focus. A witch who finds that she cannot call the corners in Netspace has to learn to adapt very quickly, focus with her will alone, or die.

Common Webspinner foci include:

- **Computers:** Webbers call spells "progs" for a reason. Some mysticks complain that Virtual Adepts wouldn't set aside their toys if their lives depended on it. When those VAs create their ideal worlds, it stands to reason that computers and their programs will play a vital part in those worlds. Forget that clunky old PC, though — the decks and rigs of the Digital Web are as small, cool and convenient as you can imagine. Wrist rigs are as common in Netspace as watches are in RealSpace, and voice-activation *("Computer! Run 'Pop Prog* — now.[1]")* is fairly standard. Even so, computers often require a moment of concentration and sometimes a free hand to use. Some habits, no matter how inconvenient they might be, are hard to shake.
- **Cybernetics:** Duh. Some VR freaks actually wire iron straight into their bodies, while others go totally Borg online, but remain as organic as compost heaps back home.
- **Mystick Diagrams and Mathematics:** The line between magick and science blurs when mathematics enter the picture. As Hermetics from House Thig are only too pleased to note, ancient magickal diagrams employ cutting-edge mathematics. Some mysticks claim that the Arts that led the Ahl-i-Batin to Mount Qaf were rooted in esoteric numerology. Since the principles behind the diagrams and formulas are essentially as "scientific" as any machine, such "tools" make great foci for techno-Hermetics, esoteric Ecstatics, and VAs and It Xers with a penchant for mind-twisting number theory.

Most spinners use computers to work out their arcane calculations; at the touch of a button, the deck processes the brain-crushing concepts and gives the proper formula for the task. More traditional magi prefer to work out the calculations by hand — it takes longer and requires more effort, but supposedly gives a "truer" result. Diagrams are often drawn on walls or floors or projected on vid-screens; some spinners wear them on their icons as foci for protective or energizing spells.

- **Power Pills:** Between the Jolt that keeps hackers awake, and the energy balls and medical kits that sustain video game heroes, the "power pill" has become an essential part of spinner gear. Gulped for healing procedures and energy boosts, these pills usually resemble balls of light, power drinks or wrist-mounted injector rigs. Talisman pills "discharge" after one use, but a mage with the right Spheres can have as many power pill foci as she needs.
- **Weapons and Armor:** What RAMbo hasn't wanted to run amuck with a BFG 9000? Spinners who expect a fight equip themselves with virtual arsenals that never seem to get in the way of normal motor functions. An icon can

literally carry a shotgun, a rocket launcher, an armored vest and a full backpack of explosives and ammo without wearing himself out. Weapons usually focus Forces-based procedures, while armor acts like... well, armor (usually the Class Four variety but without the penalties). See "Splat and Iron" for sample Net weaponry.

Sector Formatting

Formatting a sector is exhausting. First you find Virgin Web (hard enough); then you plan out every element you want to see, hear or feel in the sector; from there, you "sketch it out," first in your mind, then with deep concentration, elaborate progs and a lot of time; finally, you activate security measures, including Constraints, Restrictions and countermeasures.

A formatting program relieves a mage of some of the burdens of concentration during a sector format. Instead of holding a completed image of a sector format in her mind, the spinner can build virtual representations of sector objects, and store them for use with the program. Once the formatting begins, the mage activates the procedure, which immediately takes the necessary steps to include the format elements specified by the builder. Thus, she could, for instance, prebuild a virtual Greek temple, then store it for later use. Better **still,** that spinner can copy elements of someone else's (non-Restricted) format, and use the formatting program to make sure that an exact copy of the item is achieved.

The only drawback of a formatting program is that every parameter set with it is identical; if, for example, our mage formats a sector with chairs, a manual format may create chairs with varying designs and appearances, while a programmed format whips up a plethora of identical chairs (assuming that the mage doesn't program multiple different chairs into the formatting program). Although formatting Web is a completely Elite activity, many Adepts disdain preprogrammed assistance. "Generic Web" is too uninspired for visionary Adepts, and most VAs prefer to put their "personal touch" on every element of a sector.

In game terms, formatting a sector requires several things:

• Virgin Web, or an **Overwrite Program** (Entropy 5/ Mind 4/ Forces 4/ Prime 4; difficulty 10, minimum 10 successes, "vulgar with witnesses") which trashes a sector, allowing a spinner to start "clean" (though not without some glitches).

• A concept for the sector — anything from "a back-alley bar" to "an elaborate Victorian dining room with crystal chandeliers and mahogany furniture."

• At least four dots in Computer, Technology, Computer Hacking, or all three.

• A point of Willpower.

• An Arete roll.

Once the spinner — and the player — finds the Web and decides on the concept, the process begins in

Sector Formatting

Difficulty *	Concept	Successes Needed
6	Simple room	four
7	Elaborate room	five
7	Multi-room area	seven
8	Large area with basic countermeasures	10
8	Huge area with powerful countermeasures	15+
+1	Constraint Realm	
+1	Restricted Sector	

* No Quintessence or focus can lower this number.

earnest: Code is written, the place is visualized, and schematics are often drawn up for consistency and reference. (See SITE 2 for details) For simplicity, treat this process as a plot element — the player writes up what he wants to create and the process he wants to use, and the Storyteller has him make an Arete roll to see if he succeeds. (See chart.)

After the format has been set, it cannot be erased. Even the **Overwrite Program** leaves "ghosts" of the old format that twist the new one in unpredictable ways. From this point on, the sector is more or less what the spinner (and player) wanted it to be... with a few hidden "treats" from the Storyteller, of course. Nobody's code is perfect.

Formatting is, of course, an extended roll. A failed roll at the beginning of the process muddies the process somewhat, raising the difficulty by one. A botch at this point twists the format, giving it aspects that reflect the maker's fears or neuroses (Storyteller's option). If the spinner fails to get any successes after the first three rolls, the attempt is a failure and the Web is "hazed" (locked into a state that is neither Virgin nor formatted).

Once formatted, a sector can be considered a Sanctuary or Chantry (as per those Background Traits), and becomes a plot element. Modifications are always possible with another Willpower point and some heavy coding (possibly an Intelligence + Computer roll or two). A big Whiteout or an Overwrite Program might crash this area, but otherwise the realm remains sound.

Whiteout (Paradox)

When the shit gets too thick, the Web shuts down. Although spinners have made a lot of progress in securing their sectors and icons from the worst effects of system backlash, Paradox remains as perennial a pain in the ass Webside as it does back on Earth.

Unlike the many backlash manifestations magi suffer in Meatsville, Web Paradox usually takes a single form: Whiteout — the area slows down, freezes or totally crashes, booting local spinners offline. The biggest difference between shutdowns is severity. A minor White simply de-rezzes a single icon, while a really spectacular one can wreck an entire sector, at least temporarily. Although Whiteouts are more common than anyone likes to admit, people have begun to worry about them more than ever. The hideous effects of the Great Crash drove home the possible consequences of a really big White — and showed everyone that nobody is immune.

In game terms, a Whiteout works like any other Paradox backlash: A mage accumulates Paradox in the usual ways; if he accumulates more than five points in his Paradox Pool (especially if he gains them all at once), the Storyteller can roll for a backlash as usual. The results can be found on the Whiteout Severity chart, and may take place immediately, or at the Storyteller's discretion. Paradox does not carry from Earth to the Web or vice versa unless the mage has climbed into Webspace from the Umbra. Moving from one to the other gives a spinner a clean slate.

The duration of the backlash depends on the Paradox Pool of the spinner who caused the crash. The bigger the Pool, the longer the Whiteout. A spinner who winds up in coma stays out for the duration unless she makes a Stamina roll, difficulty 6. If she wins, she awakens after a few hours and in a world of pain.

As an optional rule, the Storyteller may roll for a Paradox backlash with a difficulty of 4 (rather than the usual 6) if the spell in question used Forces or Prime. This option does not apply in Warzones, which are configured to withstand heavy-duty shocks.

Small-scale Whites usually hit without warning. One minute the spinner's fine, the next, BOOM! Large-scale backlashes usually telegraph their approach with a drag — the whole area suddenly feels staticy and the icons in it stutter or slow to half speed. In game terms, everyone in the area has one turn to stop what they're doing and hopefully avoid the White Wave. A Wits + Dodge roll, difficulty 8, helps - anyone in the area *other than the mage who brought the backlash on* takes half damage from the Whiteout if they successfully duck and cover. (See **Instant Offline**, under "Procedures.") The guy who caused the backlash is screwed.

If things really get out of hand (a long firefight, a battle, etc.), the Storyteller might add the Paradox Pools of all combatants together, then decide the backlash severity and duration from the total. Or she could simply crash the whole sector and boot everyone home in the single huge Whiteout.

Web Systems

Access

Sensory: Requires VR setup only; + 2 to all difficulties including magick casting rolls. Intelligence = Strength; Wits = Dexterity. Body vulnerable, but slightly aware.

Astral: Requires Correspondence 2 (coincidental) plus complex VR setup (Intelligence + Computer or Computer Hacking, difficulty ?, three success minimum). Intelligence = Strength; Wits = Dexterity. Leaves body vulnerable.

Holistic: Requires Life 4/ Forces 2/ Correspondence 2 (vulgar), plus either a trinary computer and complex VR setup (Intelligence + Computer or Computer Hacking, difficulty 7, five successes minimum); *or a* long climb Horn an Umbral Realm (Middle Umbra access followed by Dexterity + Athletics or Cosmology, difficulty 7; takes a long time). All Traits remain normal. Body present in Web, but vulnerable to all attacks there.

Icons

Basic Creation: Intelligence + Computer, difficulty 6.

Changing Faces: Manipulation + Computer, difficulty 5.

Appearance or Intimidation: One dot per success.

Travel

Finding Your Way: Perception + Computer, variable difficulty.

Popping: Correspondence 3, difficulty 6 in familiar territory, 8 between sectors, + 2 difficulty in unfamiliar areas.

Hacking Restricted Sectors: Wits + Computer Hacking, difficulty 7 to 10; 10 to 20 successes.

Damage

Net Fatigue: Weariness. Willpower roll to stay sane. *Success* = no effect; Failure = neurosis, depression or nightmares; *Botch* = nervous breakdown or Quiet.

Virus Infection: Varies**.**

Soft De-Rez: Teleports you elsewhere. No lasting harm unless dumped from Restricted area (lose one point from a Mental Attribute for one day).

Hard De-Rez: Pain. Stamina roll required, difficulty 7« .Success = disorientation; Failure » one Health Level normal damage + loss of one Mental Attribute dot; *Botch* = two Health Levels normal damage + loss of two Mental Attribute dots.

Icon Death: Intense pain, harm, possible death. Stamina roll required, difficulty 7. Success = disorientation + damage (each success on Stamina roll reduces damage by one Health Level); *Failure* = coma + damage as above*; Botch* = instant death. Death in Restricted area costs two permanent dots in each Mental Attribute.

Chaos Dump: Death, possibly avoided by an Arete roll, difficulty 8.

Gauntlet Ratings in Webspace

Rating	Successes	Area
2	Two	Virgin
4	Two Web	Haunt Sectors and Corrupted
5	Two	Junklands
6	Three	Webspace Between Sectors
7	Four	Average Sectors
8	Four	Grid Sectors and Conduits
	Five	Constraint Realms
10	Five	Restricted Sectors

* Umbral spells here open gateways into Hellholes or the Shadowlands. Nasty things often manifest around them.. See **Werewolf**: *The Apocalypse and* **Wraith: The Oblivion for details.**

Whiteout Severity

Successes	Effect
One	The mage responsible for the crash suffers a soft de-rez.
Two	The responsible mage suffers a hard de-rez.
Three	That mage and all icons within 20' of him get booted into another sector (soft de-rez).
Four	Every icon within 50' suffers a hard de-rez.
Five	Every icon in the sector gets a soft de-rez The responsible party suffers a hard de-rez.
Six	All icons in the sector get de-rezzed hard The sector itself fuzzes and goes offline for several seconds. The offending mage may be booted into a "lost" sector (Junkland, Trash Sector) or chaos dumped.
Seven +	The entire sector crashes, goes offline for the duration, and takes some long-term damage. All icons within are de-rezzed, hard, and the responsible mage may be chaos dumped.
10+	The sector is trashed forever. Everyone in it is de-rezzed hard, and the offender disappears.

Paradox Pool	Duration
1-3	Less than a minute.
4-6	One to five minutes.
7-10	One to six hours.
11-13	One day.
14-16	One week.
17-20	One month or more (Storyteller's option).
20+	Trashed for good.

Splat and Iron

The truth told with good intent
Beats all the lies...
Beats all the lies... that you invent
Along cums reality
— Alien Sex Fiend, "Katch 22"

Procedures

"Magick?" Screw that! As the Virtual Adepts know, the foundation of Netcraft rests in technology and science. Getting things done requires a grasp of technological principles, some hot iron and a mind that refuses to be bound by the word "never." "Spells," therefore, are *"procedures"* or *"rotes,"* not *"magick."* Geez!

In keeping with that idea, most Web Arts are based on esoteric computer programs that must be run before they take effect. Although some savvy mysticks have learned to adapt their own Arts to this technomagickal wonderland, most spinners use modern tools — even if they appear archaic — to create and run their procedures.

TechnoVision (• Correspondence, • Entropy, • Forces, • Mind, • Prime)

By shifting into readout mode, a Technocratic spinner can bring up a window, project an analysis field, and scan her surroundings. In the window, readouts track the area nearby, its inhabitants, their true natures, and their weaknesses.

[Sensors invoke Rank One perceptions for the five Spheres mentioned. A Perception + Awareness roll, difficulty 4, usually tells the spinner what she needs to know about surface impressions. Hidden data, such as concealed ID codes or Arcane-cloaked icons, may raise the difficulty accordingly, or subtract from the searcher's Dice Pool.]

Brand (the Rawhide Rote) (•• Entropy, •• Forces, •• Prime; sometimes with •••• Time)

When a spinner crosses the line, rough justice prevails. Hacking into the offender's icon program, an angry Netizen marks it with this burning seal. Although the **Brand** causes no pain or discomfort, it remains fresh no matter what form the icon shifts into.

[Forces and Prime set the **Brand** going, while Entropy locks it into the parameters of the icon program. An advanced version uses Time to make the **Brand** last until the punishment has run its course; lesser **Brands** fade when the Effect's duration ends. (See the Damage and Duration chart in Mage.) Most rawhiders take their time (that is, they make extended rolls) to assure that the mark burns for a good while. For other details about branding, see SITE 2.]

Digital Disruption (•• Forces, •• Prime; or ••• Entropy, •• Forces, •• Prime)

This standard "weapon" comes in two flavors: the "soft boot," and the "hardcore dump," A.K.A. Joshua's Goodbye (often credited to a legendary Thig spinner). Both versions de-rez a rival's icon and knock said rival out of the area. Many spinners favor the non-lethal version, but HIT Marks, assassins and Webbers who mean business go hardcore as a rule.

[Often focused through guns, blades, or even fists, the **Disruption** dumps the target if its user scores a hit. Although a normal Arete roll is still required to boot the target out, the attacker must first hit that target normally. The "soft boot" activates a soft de-rez, while the "hardcore" inflicts a hard one. This procedure does not work outside the Net.]

Jolt (•• Life; sometimes with • Mind)

A specialty of longtime VAs and It Xers: The Webber bolts down a power bar, smart drink or hypercaffinated concoction (recipes vary, and most folks brew their own), and enjoys a burst of energy, vitality and clear-headedness before going online.

[The procedure allows the mage to endure hours or even a day or two of log-on time with minimal fatigue. The Mind component gives her a mental **Shield** — helpful against subliminal influence and Mind-based attacks — and lets her Multi-task. See the Effects of those names for details.]

Online Virus Transmitter Program (OVTP) (•• Correspondence, •• Forces, •• Life, •• Prime)

This frighteningly easy procedure, developed by online Progenitors, allows a spinner to program a virus that invades an icon, follows its "owner" home, and gives him a physical disease. The "startup" program demands a thorough understanding of computers, physics and biology; thus, it's beyond many Webbers. Recent data-hacks have circulated a few copies of existing progs, however, and both sides now have access to this "VR viral warfare." As of yet, no OVTP has proven communicable; still, rumors persist of viruses that hop around from Netspace to RealSpace, or that spread between icons. The "digital plague" remains a potent — and perhaps inevitable — possibility.

[Life and Prime breed the virus and prepare it for "injection" into the spinner's body; Correspondence sends it on its way. The severity of the disease — which usually takes several days to a week to show up — can range from a mild cold to a deadly bioengineered disease. Once it "hits," the virus becomes a plot element; the more successes the "provider" scores, the more severe the effects. One or two successes might knock a spinner on his ass, while five or more could set up an incapacitating reaction. Either way, the subject will get sick, and might stay sick for a while (with attendant Dice Pool penalties and possible Health Level loss).

[The virus can be spread from a distance, but requires a vector program (touch, a dart, a blast of light, etc.) that must hit the subject before the sickness can infect her. This procedure is almost always coincidental]

Remote Access (•• Correspondence, •• Forces)

A simple but useful procedure, **Access** allows a spinner to tap into a network from some distance away. Sending a scanning wave through conduits until it reaches the proper place, the magus keys into the conduit and follows it either to its source in the Web, or to a computer that's hooked up to the area's reflection. Once he reaches that link, the Webspinner can see into that area (or through an active computer monitor), and possibly send a new rote through space and run it from a distance.

[Correspondence sets up the link as per the usual Correspondence Ranges chart; Forces allows the mage to send or receive images between the remote location and his rig. Restricted Sectors or Constraint Realms are more difficult to access than normal sectors (six successes or so, as opposed to two or three). Viewing a distant place from a monitor or video camera does not grant the seer omniscient vision — anything that's too dark, indistinct or out of range to see clearly from the screen or lens cannot be seen with this rote.]

Subliminal Transmission (•• or •••• Mind, •• or ••• Correspondence; sometimes with •• Entropy)

This is a favorite tool of NWO Operatives, N-Ark KZTs and turbuprogs. By patching into video networks or passing a series of images through computer monitors, a Netizen can send subliminal messages, suggestions, impulses or even commands to Sleepers gazing at the screens. An intricate program (composed of visual impressions, written messages, timing configurations and concealment blinders) spins a loop of subconscious information into whatever the screen is showing. The impressions rarely take effect immediately, but influence the viewer's behavior later, often in unpredictable (and untraceable) ways.

[While Correspondence sends the signal out into receptors (one with Correspondence 2, several with Correspondence 3), Mind creates an impression — see the Mind 2 **Subliminal Impulse** Effect and the Mind 4 **Possession** Effect (**Mage**, pp. 210-211 for details). A dash of Entropy scrambles the impression into a chaotic mess, adding a disturbing edge to the impressions. Unlike most procedures cast from Netspace into RealSpace, this prog is coincidental unless the subject suddenly starts acting like a zombie.]

System Crash (•• Correspondence, •• Forces, •• Prime)

What goes up must come down — especially when you're talking about computer networks. This obnoxiously common procedure allows NWO Operatives and other hacker-magi to dig into linked Sleeper systems from a distance, then wreck them. First, the malefactor locates the Grid Sector that reflects the system she wants to trash. Once keyed in, she sends an electromagnetic pulse into the network, frying it. Although backups and protective programs can shield even Sleeper networks from complete devastation, the Crash makes a handy nuisance prog. Against a mundane network — like a common office system — it can be remarkably effective.

[Correspondence allows the hacker to locate and reach the network, Forces misdirects the electrical currents, and Prime fuels a sudden burst of energy. The procedure itself is almost always coincidental, but sophisticated networks require many successes to crash, and many more to completely erase. Standard office systems are fiendishly easy (one to three successes) to crash, while elaborate or shielded ones like banks, archives or government data banks are far harder (five to 10 successes) to wreck. Military, research and magickal networks are damned difficult to wipe out (10 to 20 successes), but easier (five successes) to disrupt temporarily. Most offices, of course, keep offline backups of all important records.]

Brain Boost (••• or ••••• Mind)

Some Cybernauts will not be bound by their own limitations; imbibing smart drinks, hyperstimulants or experimental drugs, they jack their mental processes to unusual levels. Although VAs are infamous for their enthusiastic approach to stimulants, the real "boosters" include Etherites, It Xers and Warzone fanatics (who obsess over "ripped" icons and virtual strength). Boosting's downside is harsh; many longtime users go totally bonzo or fry their skulls from the inside out.

[This procedure works like **Better Body** for the mind, increasing Mental Traits as the Life variant raises Physical ones. Mind 3 can raise those Traits to a maximum of 5; elevating them beyond human range requires Mind 5. Neither shift is permanent. A spinner who **Boosts** herself more than twice a week is asking for trouble — insanity, hallucinations, hemorrhages, even Quiet — that an imaginative Storyteller will be happy to provide....]

Create Virtual Object/ Create Daemon (••• Forces, •• Prime; sometimes with •••• Mind, •••• Spirit, or both)

When a spinner needs a tool, prop or vehicle, he weaves it into being with this common procedure. First, he maps out a diagram of the desired object, setting its specifications, "materials" and appearance. Channeling a surge of energy into the design, he constructs a matrix in the shape of the item, then fills it in and tinkers with it until it meets his approval. Many spinners carry "prefab" designs and run progs in their decks, allowing them to whip up new items in minutes or even seconds. (The more elaborate the structure, the longer it takes to create.)

[At its base level, this procedure builds an inanimate object out of pure energy. Most items are coincidental to make, but really large ones might employ risky amounts of

power. Essentially, the rote works like a normal conjuration. (See **Mage**, p. 187, and the example of Cheshire's laptop on pp. 162-163 and 171.) Since the object needs to be designed from scratch, a really sophisticated item might require several dots in an appropriate Trait. Once made, the item is as "real" as anything else in Netspace; it cannot, however, be taken from the Web. Any "normal" object — a baseball bat, a bike, a tea set, etc. — can be crafted this way, including foci. Talismans and Devices must be built in the usual ways.

[**Create Daemon**, an advanced version of the prog, allows a spinner to design very basic AIs (FREEKS, Digital Dollz and similar things) or "daemons" (online fetishes that bind a spirit into a virtual object). For every two successes on an Intelligence + Computer roll (difficulty 7), the new creation attains one Power Level. (See "Data Beasts.") Once made, these beings tend to have minds of their own, however. One might be programmed to behave, but things in the Web have a way of taking on their own lives....]

Fractal Encryption (••• Entropy, •• Forces, •• Prime)

Since VAs often share sensitive information, they have developed special forms of encryption to protect such data. Although passwords and mathematical formulae are effective, they lack the Eliteness expected of the true Adept. To that end, chaotic fractal formulae are used by mathematically skilled VAs — progs that turn important data into haunting pattern sculptures.

Fractals are common sights in Netspace; thus, encrypted data resembles the Purloined Letter, resting in plain sight. Even so, some VAs conceal fractal information by using the pattern as an overlay on a cyberspace object, or by breaking it up into pieces that can be reassembled later. With the capabilities of trinary systems, an Adept can also construct 3-D fractal "crystals" of data. Only the proper code "key," used with a trinary system, can unlock the contents of these data crystals.

[Entropy and Forces shatter a data byte into an entrancing fractal pattern; to unlock that information again, the same procedure must be used a second time. A blown roll at either "end" of the trip garbles the information beyond recall.]

Instant Offline (••• Correspondence, •• Forces)

Need to ditch? This procedure lets a spinner dump herself offline immediately. Most VAs and Cybernauts keep this rote hung on their rigs; at the touch of a "panic button," it boots a Sensory or Astral visitor into her meat back home. A Holistic traveler, sadly, is SOL.

[This Effect works in all ways like a soft de-rezzing, but it's self-inflicted. Many Devices, such as the famous "Jump Box," mimic the same Effect.]

Feedback (••• Mind, •• Forces; or ••• Life, •• or ••• Forces, •• Mind, •• Prime)

The downside of Sensory or Astral Immersion lies in the idea of trusting your consciousness to a machine. A canny opponent can "heat" (overload) your iron, frying your brain in the process.

The lesser **Mental Feedback** option redirects a Netizen's own electrical current into a loop, sizzling her senses with a blast of raw static. Another version (which requires Mind 3 only), wraps her sensory input into a storm of overload. Neither option ejects the user, but each one causes intense pain and scrambles the rival's senses.

The deadly **Lethal Feedback** option fries the opponent on all levels, banishing her icon and scorching her body as well! Some varieties blast the target with a wave of pure terror (Forces 2/ Mind 2), while others simply cook the spinner with a blast of electricity (Forces 3). A standard weapon for HIT Marks, FREEKS, VAs, Billy Boys and most GODZ, LF can take many forms — static bursts, missiles, bullets, lightning bolts, claws, blades or hammers. The results are often the same.

[**Mental Feedback** inflicts normal damage based on the Mind Sphere; that damage appears as brain-blowing headaches, shattered reflexes, sensory overload, and occasional stroke or death from ruptured blood vessels in the brain.

[**Lethal Feedback** is far worse. In addition to a hard derez, the Forces 3 version actually burns the meat back home. The subject takes Health Level damage as if she were hit with an aggravated Life attack, and might suffer disorientation, hallucinations or lost Mental Traits as well if she fails her Stamina roll after the dump. To inflict damage, the attack must hit the target first. Lethal Feedback is vulgar.]

Parallax (••••• Correspondence, •• Forces, • Mind)

When you absolutely, positively must be in two or three places at once, this prog's for you. An Elite trick of master VAs, this multi-tasking procedure multiplies an icon, projects it into several different locations, and allows the spinner to separate her consciousness between them simultaneously. The VA sets up a complex program, runs it, and disappears from where she is standing. If everything runs smoothly, the different icons blink into being at whatever locations the spinner wants to visit. So long as she keeps from being booted out of the sector(s), our Elite friend can speak, move and act normally in all locations.

[In Netspace, this procedure mimics the **Polyappearance** Effect (**Mage**, p. 191). If one of the icons gets dumped, the remaining ones disappear and the spinner winds up elsewhere (probably back home). If one icons takes Paradox, all of them suffer the consequences. This procedure is coincidental if all of the icons appear within the same sector, vulgar if they scatter into different ones. See "Parallaxing" in SITES 2 and 4 for further details.]

Fractal Interference Removal Procedure (FIRP, or the Chaos Dump) (••••• Mind, •••• Entropy, ••• Forces, ••• Life, •• Prime)

Although most spinners avoid weaponry this extreme, there always have to be a few bastards out there who aren't

satisfied until their enemies are essentially damned. FREEKs, HIT Marks and other nasty things dispense the worst kind of killin' — the **Fractal Interference Removal Procedure.** A blast of energy or a hail of pulsating projectiles rips the target into a dizzying fractal pattern. Anyone who's heard about chaos dumps knows what happens from there....

[Mind fractures the target's consciousness, Entropy splits both icon and consciousness into a huge fractal, Forces and Prime scatter the icon and its energy, and Life hums the meat back home. Although this is roughly equivalent to Gilgul, the "weapon" application of a chaos dump must hit its target first. A sporting Storyteller might offer the victim an Arete roll to survive the procedure, but even a "lucky" spinner gets pretty fucked up if he's hit by a **FIRP.** Because of the tremendous shock of energy it employs, this Effect is vulgar, and cannot be used outside Netspace.]

Iron

For most mages (and all Sleepers), accessing the Web is impossible without sophisticated VR technology. However, cumbersome rigs are quickly giving way to streamlined virtual sunglasses and thin tactile gloves. Although anyone with enough money can simply purchase a virtual rig on the open market, the VAs still keep a tight monopoly on the best equipment. Few Adepts spend their time on hardware design, though, so the truly dedicated Webspinner learns to customize his own equipment.

Of course, the Adepts aren't the only ones building VR toys: Iteration X uses a variety of direct-implant neural devices, subdermal feedback connectors and retinal implants. Void Engineers employ less invasive technology, often up to and including full "space suits" designed for virtual immersion. Backed with Syndicate funding, the Conventions have no shortage of equipment; many Tradition mages, conversely, must often make do with home-built, jury-rigged material.

Some Etherite Cybernauts have developed arcane devices that "focus sub-Etheric resonance" to generate Web access. Each of these rigs is unique, often incorporating bizarre mechanisms and seemingly extraneous material. Everything from old Coke bottles (the glass kind, not the modern plastic ones) to snails to plastic binder clips finds its way into these contraptions. Much to the annoyance of the Conventions (and some Adepts), these Devices often surpass the functionality of more traditional rigs, but pay for the improved capabilities with temperamental performance.

Physical machines (technomagickal and otherwise) must he constructed outside Webspace, then downloaded into the Net with Holistic Immersion. The process of building and maintaining hypertech is detailed in **The Technomancer's Toybox,** pp. 9-10; the process of downloading a finished Device mirrors the usual Holistic Immersion procedure, but uses the Matter Sphere instead of

Life. A few Devices can be found below; **The Technomancer's Toybox**, **Virtual Adepts**, **The Book of Shadows** and **Technocracy: The Players Guide** include several others.

•• Consciousness Mapping and Projection Apparatus (CMPA)

Arete 3, Quintessence 15, Cost 5

Whereas some mages actually enter the Web completely, It Xers tend to leave their physical bodies in the material world while projecting their minds into Webspace. Since Iterators traditionally cannot understand Dimensional Science (Spirit) technology, their Operatives depend on Astral access unless some Void Engineer allows them to employ his Dimensional Gateways. Most Xers prefer the CMPA headset: Functioning like a highly sophisticated quantum interference mapping device, the CMPA reads and interprets the entirety of the Technocrat's thought processes, allowing him to project his consciousness into the Web with full sensory input.

The CMPA has its share of hazards, of course. Like any other form of consciousness immersion, the CMPA subjects its user to overloading and iconic deresolution. Furthermore, since the stimulus-response technology feeds directly into the Operative's brain, an overload can inflict massive mental trauma. Many Iterators use special cut-outs to prevent such damage, and some refuse to use this level of immersion technology at all. Still, the CMPA remains the most common form of Webcrawling technology among the Machine Convention.

[An elaborate headset with cybernetic jacks linking into the brain, this Device only works for characters who have had the necessary surgery first. Essentially, the machine simply allows Operatives who do not possess the right Spheres or skills to project themselves into Netspace through Sensory or Astral access. The Quintessence supply acts as "shielding" against dumps and mental or biotech feedback; each point of Quintessence acts as one Health Level, and any damage sustained in Webspace is taken from that total first. Once the 15 points have been burned away, the Iterator is completely vulnerable to such harm. This Device is coincidental, but very unnerving.]

••• Warware

Arete NA, Quintessence 6-20, Cost *2-1*

Let's go shootin'! As the popularity of video games and Warzones has grown, the demand for deadly toys has exploded (pardon the pun). Consequently, an array of VR blasters, chainguns, explosives and other testosterone thrillers greets the spinner who wants to go down to the Warzone and blow some shit up.

There are certain limits, of course. No one wants Duke Nukem running rampant through their sector, so many areas have been Restricted against heavy VR weaponry. While literally anything that can be imagined can be had in

certain Warzones, most of those places de-rez the weapons when the carrier leaves the sector. Within a Warzone, many of these toys are simply left laying around for the next guy to find and employ. When they run out of ammo, however, these guns disappear, reforming elsewhere with new clips. Carrying a BFG into neutral territory is incredibly Lame, and may get one's ass kicked. Some weapons, notably rocket launchers, can also blow the user to hell if he's standing too close to the point of impact....

The chart below offers a few basic designs. Storytellers and players can invent their own Warware, so long as things don't get too crazy and limits are imposed. No Arete roll is required, but the weapons cannot be taken from Netspace. The Background costs apply only to Warware that can be taken out of the sector. Such "portable" Devices can and must be recharged before they run out of ammo — otherwise, they disappear into virtual air, their energy dispersed. New clips, often found laying in odd places within Warzones, restore a gun to "full." If none of those can be found, a spinner must make his own ammo with the **Create Virtual Object** procedure and an Intelligence + Weaponsmith roll (difficulty 6).

•••• **Physical Transfer Unit or Suit (PTU/PTS)**

Arete 6, Quintessence 30, Cost 10

While It Xers content themselves with immersion of consciousness, Void Engineers physically dive headlong into the Web. Using dark-gray suits with bulbous blue optical tubes, these Cybernauts effect a dimensional transfer into the Web's layer *of* "energy space."

Generally, a large cyclotron-like device — the PTU — is required for such transferal: Embedded particle accelerators and electron-tunneling mechanisms facilitate the transfer from the physical world to representational space. More skillful Engineers actually build the transfer processors into individual suits — PTS — allowing easier access to the Web. Once such a suit has been activated, the Engineer disappears in a flash of translocation energy, materializing within the Digital Web. If his suit is damaged (Storyteller's option), he might not be able to return without a rescue party utilizing a PTU and a new suit.

[Both Devices allow for Holistic Immersion; the larger machine can project several Engineers into the Web at once, while the suit is obviously limited to a single "passenger."]

Digital Denizens

Somewhere between flesh, energy and spirit, the "indigenous lifeforms" of the Web affirm the Virtual Adepts' contention that information is reality and reality is alive. A diverse lot, they range from simple, mindless data spiders to sophisticated AIs whose personalities and icons seem as real as any human spinner.

In game terms, consider these entities to be material beings — they use Physical Traits, not Mental ones, for physical actions, and move, soak damage and employ Talents, Skills and Knowledges like any other character. The one great difference involves Health Levels: Net denizens cannot be healed, and do not suffer Dice Pool penalties when they take damage. If all its Health Levels are dispelled, a Web creature de-rezzes into a fractal or dissipates into a glowing cloud of ones and zeros. Such creatures cannot step out of Webspace, although they often appear on RealSpace monitor screens as icons, text or scrolls of code.

Common denizens include (but are not limited to)….

Data Beasts (Zerks)

Sometimes information has a mind of its own - literally. As the flow of information, Quintessence and superior software becomes a flood, some programs "wake up" and attain half-sentience. Although bound by the parameters of their original programs, these "data beasts" (also called "daemons" after computer help progs, or "zerks," after the berserk behavior of living game creatures) display a slight degree of free will. While many VAs, Etherites and Progenitors liken them to animals, spawning and evolving in the primordial soup of the Information Age, other, more-mystical spinners compare them to angels — incarnations of the Web's divine will, created with certain dictates, but possessing enough consciousness to make decisions for themselves.

Like angels or animals, data beasts are simple creatures. Many of the oldest of them clawed their way up from bits of scattered information, and have fairly strong personalities; other, younger ones — particularly zerks — grow from programs that still supply their motivations and identities. The elders, who are pretty rare, tend to be suspicious of human spinners, and can often disguise themselves as such.

	Warware			
Type	**Difficulty**	**Damage**	**Shots**	**Cost**
Pistol	5	5	20	2
Shotgun	6		10	3
Chaingun	6	10	20	4
Laser Cannon	5		8	5
BFG	6	12	10	6
Rocket Launcher	4	10 explosive	8	7

Many young zerks are literally video game monsters on a rampage, data beasts that literally live to kill and be killed.

In appearance, data beasts recall the programs that set them in motion: An entity spawned in an accounting system would be a wild cloud of numbers, speaking in a monotone voice, while a zerk drawn from a *Mortal Killers* program might be a slightly digitized badass. These days, the more-aggressive types are far more common — there always seem to be new ones "born" to replace the ones too stupid to survive... a phenomena that raises disturbing questions of natural selection and evolution in virtual reality.

Systems-wise, daemons range in power from simple creatures with a Knowledge Trait or two, to zerks with almost-human (if fanatical) personas and dangerous Skills. All types possess five Traits: Strength, Dexterity, Stamina, Intelligence and Wits. Data beasts range in power like so:

Power Level 1: Traits of "1," three dots of Abilities, two Health Levels.

Power Level 2: Traits of "2," six dots of Abilities, four Health Levels.

Power Level 3: Traits of "3," nine dots of Abilities, six Health Levels.

Power Level 4: Traits of "4," 12 dots of Abilities, eight Health Levels.

Power Level 5: Traits of "5," 15 dots of Abilities, 10 Health Levels.

Sample data beasts include:

• **Foreclosure:** A swirl of numbers from IRS audit files; sour disposition. Traits: Power Level 1; Science (Mathematics) 3

• **Creeping Death:** Ant-like swarm of paranoia; locates data in news, political and conspiracy sites. *Traits:* Power Level 2; Intimidation 3, Research 3

• **Abby:** Radical young woman with hacker tendencies; anti-establishment type with a warm smile and a mean streak. *Traits:* Power Level 3; Streetwise 2, Technology 2, Computer Hacking 3, Politics 2

• **Buddy the Dinosaur:** Kiddie Website guide with real dinosaur knowledge. He appears as a friendly (but hungry) Velociraptor. Traits: Power Level 4; Expression 2, Instruction 3, Etiquette 2, Science (Biology) 1, Science (Paleontology) 4

• **Major Carnage:** Video game zerk — totally macho nutcase. *Traits:* Power Level 5; Alertness 2, Athletics 3, Brawl 3, Melee 3, Firearms 4; carries several Warware Devices and lots of ammo.

Attack Progs

Free-Ranging Electronic Encroachment Kill Systems and stationary countermeasure progs protect Restricted Sectors against unwanted intrusion. The latter are programmed into the "landscape," and cannot leave their assigned sectors; the former tend to remain at their "posts," but as their name implies, they do occasionally run loose.

Attack progs are nasty customers. Designed for maximum lethality, these near-mindless beasts take the most threatening forms their creators can devise — anything from giant glass wasps to clouds of darts, from living flames to virtual HIT Marks. Essentially weapon systems with sensors attached, attack progs can warn trespassers, differentiate between targets and allies, and overcome minor obstacles. That's about it — these data beasts are notoriously stupid.

Simple countermeasure progs don't bother trying to reason or communicate; if a trespasser enters their territory, the prog strikes. Sophisticated progs, like HIT Marks and FREEKs, possess rudimentary personalities and can puzzle out simple problems; a virtual HIT Mark *will* try to kill you, but he'll generally warn you (or trick you) first. Countermeasure progs possess either lethal or non-lethal weaponry, while their sophisticated brethren wield both.

In game terms, consider an attack prog a monster with little or no personality beyond the obvious "kill." Most can fly, and an advanced one can pop around its assigned sector as if it had Correspondence 3. All attack progs possess **Correspondence Sensing,** and most have sensors (Rank 1 Forces, Life and Spirit) as well. Prog "Powers" consists of procedures from this chapter, Warware Devices, or both. Within their sectors, all attack prog Effects are coincidental.

A player who wants to design her own attack progs should use the **Create Daemon** procedure. A simple countermeasure with non-lethal weapons would be a Level 3 data beast; one with deadly weapons would be Level 4, and a sophisticated one would be Level 5. A really advanced one must be designed as a Talisman, but may include magickal Effects like popping or **System Havoc,** so long as the designer can perform those Effects himself. Virtual HIT Marks are a Technocracy secret, and cannot be designed by players' characters (not even Technocratic ones). Sample attack progs include:

• **Hornet Counterprog:** A simple one-shot countermeasure that dispels itself when it hits. Often sent out in swarms, or attached to conduit entrances.

Traits: Power Level 3 or 4; Dodge 3, Brawl 3.

Powers: **Digital Disruption** (soft or hard, depending on Power Level) at Arete 4- Flies.

• **Attack Geomid:** Flying fractals. These mindless progs sometimes stray outside the sector that spawned them. Technocrats and Etherites often use them as watchdogs, as the geomids tend to gravitate toward entropy or destruction.

Traits: Power Level 4; Awareness 3, Brawl 3, Computer 2

Powers: Group Fusion. (If three or more succeed in hitting a spinner, she's covered in a sheet of virtual chrome and remains frozen in place until freed. An Arete roll, difficulty 9, allows the spinner to free herself, but otherwise she is helpless. The geomids are destroyed when they fuse together.) Flies.

• **Virus Program:** You never see this killer coming. Some time after it "bites" you, the sickness begins. A favorite countermeasure for Progenitor labs, although a technopagan garden harbors a really large virus program shaped like a serpent....

Traits: Power Level 3-5; Brawl 4, Stealth 5

Powers: **OVTP**, **Feedback** (mental) at Arete 3-5.

• **Wild FREEK:** Rampaging across the Web, these terrors can hide, sneak attack or gang up on a target. This particular FREEK resembles a giant fanged mouth, but his kind comes in many different sizes and shapes.

Traits: Power Level 5; Alertness 3, Brawl 4, Dodge 2, Intimidation 3, Stealth 3

Powers: Bite (7 dice), plus Digital Disruption (hard) and System Havoc at Arete 4. Flies and teleports.

• **Virtual HIT Mark:** Designed without the limitations of physics, these bastards are far worse than their Earthly counterparts!

Traits: Power Level 6 (Traits of "6," 12 Health Levels); Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Dodge 2, Intimidation 5, Firearms 5, Melee 5, Stealth 3, Technology 4, Computer 4, Linguistics 2

Powers: Two shotguns, chaingun, two laser cannons, two rocket launchers, plus the following Effects at Arete 6: Technovision, Brand, Digital Disruption (hard), Feedback (both kinds), FIRP. Some also employ cloaking systems (Arcane 5), or pop within their sectors. All have Armor and countermagick 6.

Virii, Lost Programs and Viruses

Some people claim the Net is an addiction, taking over a person until all he does is sit at the keyboard and surf. Well, a virii literally *does* take control of a spinner and binds him to one purpose. Invisible to the naked eye (but visible to Prime 1), virii seethe like snakes outside formatted sectors, spawned by "lost programs" that never finished their purpose. Occasionally, these parasites encounter a live spinner, overwrite his consciousness, and run his body like a machine until the purpose is fulfilled.

In game terms, a virii is a single-minded data beast with the ability to possess a spinner. Once it has attained control, the parasite commands all its host's faculties, including magick, and bends them to one driving goal. That goal could be "to crash the Spy's Demise," "to turn all IRS monitor screens purple," even "to find Lisa Olivarez." (Who's Lisa Olivarez? Obviously some programmer's long-lost love.) "Exorcising" the bug once it has control requires a bit of Mind 4 or Spirit 4, and a lot of counter-programming (Intelligence + Computer or Computer Hacking, difficulty 5, resisted by the virii's Arete). Until then, the virii controls its host completely.

Traits: Power Level 4; Stealth 3, Computer 3, Research 3, plus host's Traits

Powers: Possession (as the Mind 4 Effect) and Correspondence Sensing, both at Arete 4

A *virus,* by contrast, is a program that anyone, even a Sleeper, can write. In Netspace, these progs resemble cloaked figures, serpents, insects, or other disconcerting

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icons. Despite its appearance, a virus has no personality whatsoever. Like its virii counterpart, it has been created to fulfill a single purpose (which could be to eliminate viruses). The difference is that while virii are self-willed parasites, viruses execute the will of a programmer. To that end, a virus goes wherever it needs to go. It enters the sector, and performs a single task. When that task is done, the virus icon either disappears or (if the programmer wanted to infect something) multiplies, spreads and continues its purpose.

In game terms, treat a virus as a data beast without a will of its own. The programmer rolls her Intelligence + Computer (difficulty 8) as she writes the program. Every two successes the creator wins give the virus one Power Level, but only *one* Health Level. The virus's Abilities depend on the program's purpose, and could include: Alertness (to notice virus scans), Athletics (to move quickly), Brawl (to eliminate other programs), Dodge (to avoid being hit and deleted), Subterfuge (to deceive other icons or programs), Repair (to fix tech systems), Stealth (to hide), Computer (to reprogram systems), Enigmas (to find passwords), Investigation (to find information), and Linguistics (to comprehend several languages).

Other Weird Shit

• According to rumor, mad **vampires** occasionally wind their way up through the Trash Sector and burrow into the rest of the Web. Although such rumors are impos-

sible to prove — anyone can claim to be a vampire, and what the hell is a "Malkavian," anyway? — there's no denying that some deeply disturbing people use the Net as a feeding ground.

• Every so often, a spinner encounters **werewolves** who climb in from the boundaries of Netspace. These so-called "Glass Walkers" often walk around in Holistic mode... or at least, they do when they're being obvious about what they are. More often, Glass Walkers access the Net as Sleepers do — the true scope of the Net is not common knowledge among their kind — yet.

In game terms, werewolves are just that — badass man-critters with homicidal tendencies. As a rule, they dislike the artificial nature of Net realms, and seem edgy under even the best conditions. The **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** rulebook and its supplements **Glass Walkers, Werewolf Players Guide** and **Umbra: The Velvet Shadow** explore lupine Netwalkers in more detail.

• **Web spiders** infest the Net, particularly in the fringe areas between sectors. If you look close, *really* close, you can see them scurrying everywhere, from the most pristine SRVRZ to ruined Haunt Sectors. Camouflaged to blend with their surroundings, these spirits range from micro-scopic twiddlers to huge glassine weavers. According to spirit-wise Netizens, Web spiders exist to mend reality itself. When something — a sector, a conduit, even an icon — needs repair, Web spiders appear and set to work.

Disconcerting as they look, these eerie spirits are not only harmless, they're beneficial. If asked nicely, a Web spider can heal one Health Level on a damaged icon for every turn that it works. See the pattern spider in **Mage** (p. 283) for an especially large specimen of these spirit entities.

• Pale icons haunt ruined sectors where the Great Crash annihilated the inhabitants. Hackers whose curiosity could not be stilled by death still wander the Digital Zone. So the Restless souls of ghosts retain a semblance of life in this world between flesh, mind and soul. Although the best of them shape icons to cloak their perished state, these walking spirits bear an uncanny chill wherever they go... and fall prey to inhuman urges in times of stress.

The Web makes a great setting for **Wraith/** Mage crossovers. Virtual Adepts or other characters who kick the Earthly plane can hang around with their friends in VR — assuming those friends aren't too freaked out. See **Guildbook Artificers** and the Inhabit Arcanos in **Wraith: The Oblivion** for details about ghost-hackers and the powers they possess. But watch out for Nihils; these passages to the Underworld exist in Haunt Sectors, bleeding the Web and the Tempest together—

• Oh, yeah. We can't forget the **Sleepers** in the Net — they're by far the greatest majority in Webspace. True, the bleaters tend to stick to Grid Sectors; their icons look kinda digitized, and the people behind them rarely comprehend the world they've discovered. In the last few years, though, they've grown from a cliquish group of fanatics to a vast herd of skippers, trendies, Netizens and even a few minor-league Elites who've only just clued into the *real* nature of the Web. In the long run, these folks will set the balance of power in the Net... just as they did back in the "real" world.

Scary, huh?
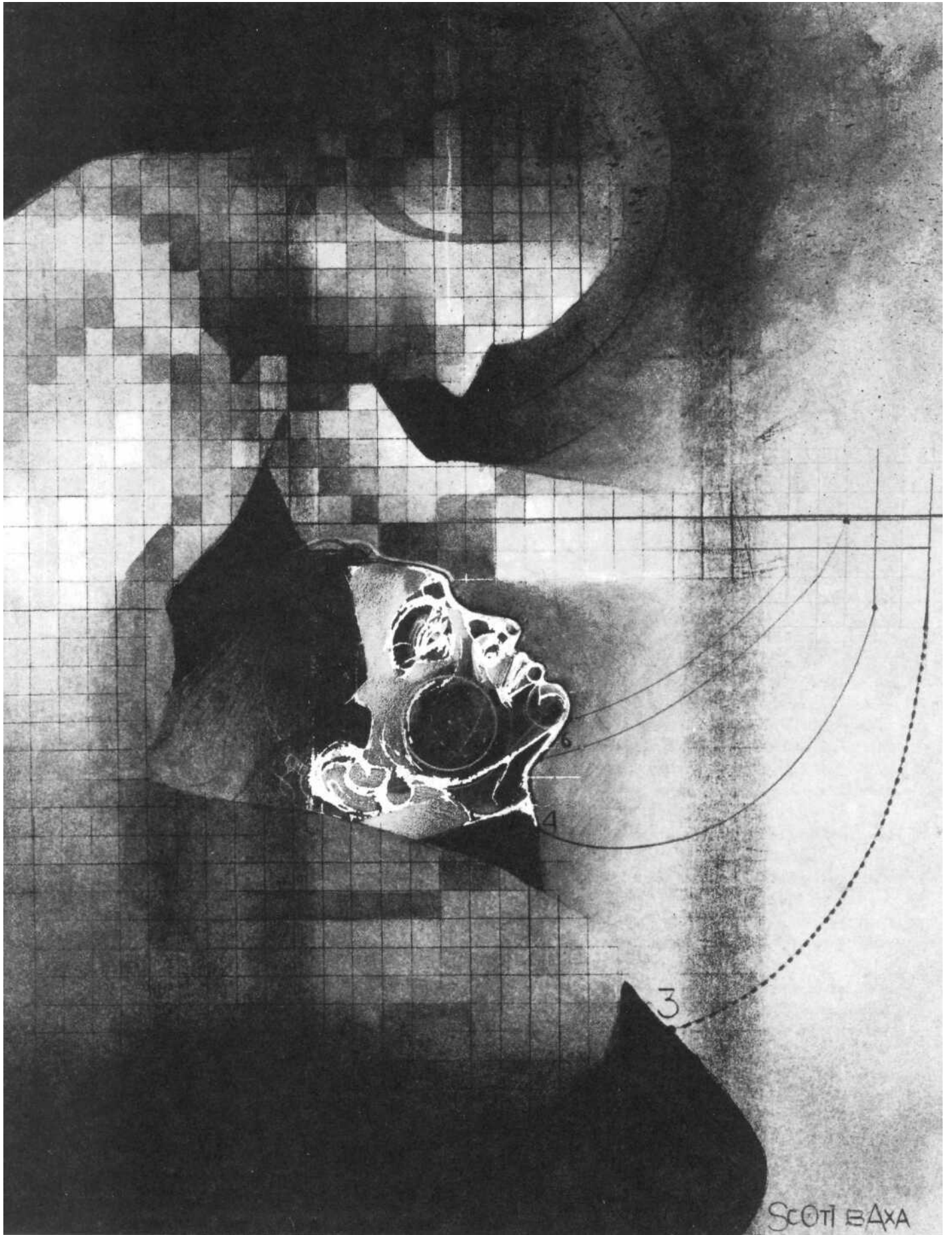
SCOTT BAXA

SITE 6: RUNNING IN THE REAL WEB

...something new is needed on the landscape. The romp through the computer networks for fun and information needs transformation, a new setting, an alternative way to bring new kinds of people into the information age.

— Ernest Holsendolph, "Web TV Puts Families on the Same Channel"

Why should the magi of this imaginary world have all the fun? If they can project themselves into cyberspace adventures, why not do the same? Naturally, they've got a few tools you don't possess. Yet just the same, there's a huge and growing online gaming table. Moving a **Mage** chronicle — especially a Web-based one — online seems only natural.

There are several ways a Storyteller can design and run an online **Mage** game. Entire books could be written about how to go about using some of these technologies for roleplaying. (They'd probably be obsolete by the time they were published, however.) Rather than offer a "bible" on such malleable subjects, we're going to give you an overview of some possibilities, then point you toward some online resources — keeping in mind that the Universal Resource Locator (or URL) may soon become obsolete, too.

Why bother trying to run a game online? For a start, players don't need to be proximate. In fact, players don't even need to be in the same time zone. As long as someone has local access, she'll he able to connect to a chat system or a MU* regardless of where the rest of the players connect. This means that games can continue (if the Storyteller is so inclined) over school breaks and on business trips.

Another advantage of working online is the ability to keep track of what's going on. Almost anything that can happen on a computer screen can be recorded in some fashion or another. Not only can this help avoid contention later about who said (or was allowed to do) what, but it lets the Storyteller use transcripts later on, as reminders of potential side-plots and after-the-fact foreshadowing. Hard copies and logs also allow players to keep histories of their characters.

Working in text (we'll discuss graphic systems later in this section) does not mean that Storytellers cannot create maps or visual aids for their players' use. If you prefer to design maps with a computer, it's simpler to distribute them by putting them on the Web than to photocopy them and snailmail them to your players.

Two issues with working online are so obvious that they're often overlooked:

• First, you and your players will have to agree upon a way to generate dice rolls. Sometimes, everyone designates another player to make their rolls; sometimes, the Storyteller rolls for everyone. Either way, the whole troupe must be able to trust the outcome. Occasionally, shareware dice-rolling programs are announced on the Usenet newsgroup rec.games.frp.misc, but do your homework before choosing a new system. Such programs are usually game- and hardware-specific. (One possibility is WebRPG by WebRPG Inc., at **http://www.webrpg.com**. A generic platform for Web gaming, this system might be just the thing.)

• A second oft-overlooked issue is that you cannot (yet) "think" communications onto the screen. You're going to have to type — sometimes a lot — and read all actions and interactions on your screen. To some people, this isn't nearly as easy or entertaining as gaming in person. Thus, online RPGs remain, for the moment at least, an acquired taste.

This section assumes that you have email access, can use a Web browser (like Netscape™ or Explorer™), and half a clue. Some of the decisions you'll need to make about running your game will depend on the hardware and technical capabilities you can scrounge.

Aside from email, each of these systems allows, even demands, Realtime interactions. All of them (except, perhaps, the graphic systems) allow players to keep a record or log of what transpires. While each form of technology has some advantages and disadvantages, the required amount of hardware and software increases as we go down this list.

Email

This is the simplest of the possibilities. Email gaming requires only that you have some sort of email reader on your computer, or that you have an email account you can access easily.

Generally, the Storyteller will write a couple of paragraphs explaining what has (or is about to) happen. Players write back, describing what they'd like to do and why. The Storyteller then decides the outcome of these actions, and the story continues.

Technical Considerations

None, so long as everyone has easy access to a PC, a modem and an ISP. It's helpful, however, to have enough time to read, digest and write your responses without a boss, co-worker or librarian looking over your shoulder!

Requirements

• **Server/Operating System:** Doesn't matter. If you don't already know how to read and archive email on your system, you need to explore your user's manual.

• **Programming:** You'll need to figure out how to set up a mailing list for your mailer, which may be as simple as typing each of the players' email addresses on the To: line. Check your computer's help files or your user's manual.

• **Connection Speed:** Doesn't much matter. You can always read the email offline, write your responses, and then upload them.

Resources

• **Costs:** Only what your Internet Service Provider (ISP) or university already charges you.

• **Overhead:** None

Other Factors

• Bringing new players up to speed is easy. Just let them read archived mail to fill them in on the players, plot, history and side issues.

• If, for some reason, a Storyteller wants to get fancy with an email game (and has access to the appropriate hardware), she could set up a mailing list to facilitate all-to-all mailings. More information can be found at ftp://ftp.uu.net/usenet/news.answers/mail/list-admin/software-faq. This FAQ compares shareware and commercial packages, and delineates the hardware requirements for each.

• For the sake of thoroughness, we should also mention gaming via posts to the Usenet newsgroup rec.games.frp.storyteller. Essentially, this mode is email to the world at large — and is about as free-form and unscripted as any dialog with the world at large could be. To avoid stupid mistakes, *read* the group for a while before you start posting.

Social Considerations

• **Advantages:** Players can see what's happening. As each player adds to the scenario, the plot is refined and extended. You, as Storyteller, can jump in whenever necessary to explain what's going to happen next, or to move the action along.

Moreover, you can send (and receive) private email to one player, should a back-plot need development or a side issue need addressing. Potential problems can be discussed offline with the parties involved, without slowing the pace of the entire game.

• **Disadvantages:** The primary disadvantage to running a game via email is that it can be slow. If players get busy (term papers, guests, whatever), days could go by before Robert can read and respond to his mail. In the meantime, the rest of your players are waiting... and waiting....

How Does the Game "Look"?

The game can become more literary than face-to-face interactions. The "You are hit. Do you strike back?" level of interaction is too fine-grained for email, and would take entirely too long to play out. Generally (and that's a large qualifier here), the action occurs in "paragraphs" rather than "sentences."

To: Pizzazz, HackMan, Asala, JRN

From: Storyteller

Subject: Later that day-

Having survived that skirmish with minimal damage, you continue down the path and arrive at the Node. The entire situation feels a bit odd. You're in a city canyon; all of the visible windows and doors on the slab-sided buildings are firmly closed. There doesn't appear to be anyone else around.

The only sounds of activity emanate from down the street. The noise seems to be coming from a tavern that — unlike the rest of the surrounding gray-steel-and-black-glass buildings — sports flashing neon and the eerie tinkle of a honky-tonk piano. After a few moments conversation, you all decide that a downing a beer or two might just be the most appropriate action at the moment.

You enter the Cross-Time Tavern. Several icons of indifferent appearance sit at the bar, while further back you can see two pairs sitting at separate tables. Bruno, the bartender, looks up from his crossword puzzle and inquires "Whatcha want?"

To: Storyteller

From: Pizzazz

Subject: Re: Later that day...

I want to walk back and take a look at the people at the tables. I'm still looking for the guy I'm supposed to meet for a fencing buy, and this seems a likely place to find him. I think my character is still trying to be secretive about this; I don't want to share any profits.

If it turns out he's not here, I guess I'll just have a beer and see if I can get Bruno to talk.

To: HackMan

From: Asala

Subject: Re: Later that day... {private}

I want to tell the Storyteller that I'm going to entice the bartender into letting me dance, so I can see if any of 'em are carrying any jazzy data we can dupe. Will you back me if this turns ugly?

To: Asala
From: HackMan
Subject: Re: Later that day... {private}

I've got an 0-Chem exam Thursday. Tell Storyteller whatever you want, and I'll catch up in a couple of days.

To: Storyteller
From: JRN
Subject: Re: Later that day...

I'm still kinda feeling groggy after that last go-round. I think I want to just sit at the bar, have a beer, and watch the action while I collect my wits.

It occurs to me, though, that the name of this tavern might indicate that it's a Crossover site. I'm not sure if this is good or bad for us at the moment.

To: Storyteller
From: Asala
Subject: Re: Later that day...

This bar would be a great place to make some money. The way I see my character, I think I'd wheedle the bartender until he'd let me dance. That way I could move among the patrons and see if any of them have any data we can duplicate and resell.

HackMan will keep an eye out for dangerous types. (He's got an exam and will catch up soon.)

To: JRN
From: Storyteller
Subject: Re: Later that day...

Remember the guy who stiffed you on the Lycaster deal? He could be in the back of the bar...

To: Pizzazz, HackMan, Asala, JRN
From: Storyteller
Subject: In the bar...

You all move a little deeper into the room. JRN drapes herself over one corner of the bar, flips her credit chip in front of Bruno. "Beer," she mumbles. She listens to what's going on around her, but her eyes are half closed.

Pizzazz picks up his beer and strolls around for a few moments. Then he wanders toward the back of the bar, looking at the patrons there rather carefully, the gleam of special knowledge in his eyes.

Asala leans over the bar and has a whispered conversation with Bruno. He shakes his head several times, but Asala keeps after him quietly until he reluctantly nods and changes the music playing on the sound system. "Temple of Love" by SOM comes on. Bruno shakes head as Asala begins to dance.

HackMan takes his beer from Bruno, then sits where he can see the entire room. He keeps an eye on everyone who is watching Asala.

Suddenly, JRN's eyes get big. Her beer falls to the floor as she jumps up, points to someone in the back of the room, and shouts, "Hey!"

Realtime Systems

There are some commonalties among all Realtime systems, both positive and negative. We're going to discuss those here, then move on to the particulars of the individual technologies.

• You need to be able to work without graphics. Unless you're willing to work within the confines of the technological limits of graphical MU*s (which frequently means that you can't generate anything that isn't already in the system), you're limited to text. This doesn't have to be a limitation, but it does mean that players won't be able to see the Storyteller's gestures. The Storyteller has to specifically describe a chuckle, nod, arm-sweep to the left, etc. In fact, everyone in the game will need to learn to describe their actions and intentions. You and your players must be explicit about anger, confusion, annoyance, humor, sarcasm, whatever... you'll need to be explicit about anything (verbal or gestured) that might potentially be misconstrued.

• Lag, much as we all hate to admit it, will be a factor. There's no guarantee that the Net will run quickly on the night you decide to game. In fact, there's no guarantee that you'll even be able to get a connection to your local host. But then, there's no guarantee that your car will start the night you're supposed to be going over to Chris's place to play, either.

• When people physically gather to play, the meeting carries a sense of time "set aside" for a specific purpose: To play **Mage.** When people log on to play, they're usually at home, in a university computer lab, or stuck at work. Thus, an online game can be interrupted by real life distractions that just don't exist when players are in the same room. On the other hand, it also means that you don't have to share your beer, you can play when you're ill, and you don't have to skip the game if you're still baby-sitting a slow compile at work.

• The Storyteller and the players can log the session. You can keep a record of what actually transpires on your screen for historical purposes or for your own interest.

Chat Systems

Some important distinctions exist between **Internet Relay Chat** (IRC) — and similar "chat" programs — and **Web-based "chat" systems.** With IRC, you need to acquire a "client" program to connect to a chat line, but once you're logged on, you can easily set up your own channel for your game. IRC-style chats are "distributed" - — that is, they're hosted a lot of places at once. You need only find one, and you can usually log on. On the other hand, you can use your Web browser to connect to a Web-based chat line. Creating your own chat room, however, is more complicated than setting one up on an IRC server.

Technical Considerations

See above.

Requirements

• **Server/Operating System:** Doesn't matter. You should be able to find a chat client or Web browser for any computer that can connect to the Net. However (and this is a *big* caveat), if you want to set up your own Web-based chat line, you must get permissions from your administrator. Since the line will be hosted on your own Web page, there's no point in trying to run one on the sly. A Web chat sucks so much band-width that your Web administrator *will* notice.

• **Programming:** IRC-style clients come ready to install.

• **Connection Speed:** This can be a factor, since you're operating in real time. However, an RPG isn't a shoot-em-up game like *Quake* or Doom, where you need to get shots off quickly, so you're more likely to be plagued by Net lag than by a slow modem. There's some consolation in the fact that if you're lagged, everyone else is, too.

Resources

• **Costs:** IRC clients are readily available free on the Net. Look at http://www.irchelp.org/irchelp/altircfaq.html for clients and "how to" files. Talk to your helpful Web administrator for information about setting up and maintaining a Web-based chat. Once you get a chat room up and running, however, very little maintenance is involved.

• **Overhead:** For IRC-style chats, you'll need an IRC client. For Web-based chats, you need a browser to connect, and your server needs to be set up to handle the chat.

Other Factors

• Players can be added whenever they log on.

• There are no limits to the number of players.

Social Considerations

• **Advantages:** Minimal knowledge is needed. There are only a few basic commands to learn (like how to join a channel and how to talk), and that's it.

• **Disadvantages:** There are, unfortunately, some trogs who love to invade chat channels. Keeping your channel private will alleviate this... usually. (On the subject of privacy, private conversation are difficult, if not impossible, to stage on most Web-based chat systems.)

No persistence; you cannot create a prop or object and still have it be there the next time you log on.

No sense of "space"; you and your players are limited to one "room" or channel.

No ownership of "nicks" on IRC-style chats; you do not (and cannot) own your player's login nickname.

Mow Does the Game "Look"?

The text of a chat session rolls up the player's screen as it occurs, rather like talking by typing.

Note that it's more difficult to read the log of an event after the fact, than it is to read it while the event is occurring. Nevertheless, this is how a log might appear. Names that appear in angle brackets <> show who's speaking. A name that has an asterisk * in front of it shows that the player is doing something. A name with asterisks * both before and after the name shows a message that only goes from one person to another; the rest of the players cannot see it. The names in curly braces { } would not appear in the log; they are there only to clarify the target of the private message.

<Storyteller> You finally get to the Node, which seems kind of deserted and bleak. There's a tavern down at the end of the street.

<JRN> Well, after that last skirmish, I could sure use a beer. <g>

<Storyteller> You head down toward the bar.

```
    <Pizzazz> Is there anything we should
be noticing about this bar?
    <Storyteller> The only thing you
notice is the sign over the door that says
"Cross-Time  Tavern."
    <Asala> Okay, I'm going in.
    *Pizzazz goes in, too.
    <Storyteller> You see a couple of
folks sitting at the bar, and two pairs
sitting at different tables toward the
back of the room. The bartender looks up
to see what you want.
    *Asala* {to HackMan} I wanna dance,
maybe see if there's any jazzy new data
hiding on these guys that we can dupe.
Will you back me?
    *HackMan* {to Asala} I'm not paying
much attention. Trying to study for an O-
Chem exam tomorrow. Do whatcha want, and
I'll  follow along.
    *Pizzazz orders a beer.
    *Pizzazz* {to Storyteller) I wanna
look to see if my contact is one of the
people in the back of the room, okay?
    *Storyteller* {to Pizzazz} Go for it.
    *Asala tries to convince the bartender
to let her dance.
    *Asala is hoping to wander among the
customers to see if anyone has any data
she can dupe and resell.
    <Storyteller> The bartender reluc-
tantly allows this, but he's keeping an
eye on you, Asala.
    *HackMan looks up long enough to watch
people watching Asala.
    *Storyteller* {to JKN} That guy in the
back of the bar looks like he might be the same
guy that stiffed you on the Lycaster deal.
    *Asala dances around the room, trail-
ing  fingers  over  the  shoulders  and
through the hair of patrons.
    *JRN leaps to her feet, splattering
beer all over the bar.
    *JRN points to a guy toward the back
of the room and yells,  "HEY!"
```

Mu*s (Multi-User Dimensions)

Unfortunately, we don't live or work in a perfect world (you know, one without Net lag or typos), but a world in which text is still the most efficient means of communica-tion over the Net. Thus, a MU* seems like the optimal method for an online game. With a MU*, a Storyteller can create a sense of "place," building rooms and objects (each fully described) appropriate to the setting. NPCs can be animated. Most clients (the program that you use to con-nect to a MU*) allow you to run more than one character at a time. In fact, it isn't even particularly necessary for other players to know who's running which icons. [Note for Mage players who venture into other MU*s: The MU* world usually calls online players "avatars" or "characters," not "icons." "Icons" are pictures on a desktop, not players.]

One of the biggest advantages a MU* has over a chat line is persistence. If you create a prop for your game, it'll still be there the next time you log back on (unless, of course, you've chosen to recycle it). Your character will be just where you left her, and will be carrying the same inventory.

Additionally, characters can acquire attributes and carry around objects, and these objects and attributes may be used to control game play. If, for example, a cave is dark, characters who aren't carrying torches might be denied access. Similarly, Adepts who haven't learned the **Virtual Lockpick** rote may be denied entry to a sector if the Storyteller has locked the entrance.

Private conversations are also possible. The "whisper" command allows two (or more) players the opportunity to go behind another player's back. Similarly, players can "page" a player who's not in the same room, perhaps giving directions so the laggard can catch up.

Technical Considerations

The first question to ask is whether you're going to try to run your own MU*, or if you're going to use someone else's. If you're going to use and build on an already estab-lished MU*, we strongly recommend that you ask permission from the admins (imps, wizards, whatever) who run it. A MU* is, after all, the product of a lot of time and energy. While the admins probably won't object if you want to run a game in their space, it's considered good form to let them know what you're doing. (Annoyed admins can, after all, remove your players from the database permanently. So why annoy an admin?) Be aware, however, that building on an existing MU* adds to the database. You may not be allowed to build until you (and/or your players) have earned the privilege to do so. Like a formatted sector, a MU* has certain parameters, too. As a guest, you'll have to respect those guidelines. If a MU* has a certain style or theme, you'll need to comply with when you build onto it.

You can find an "almost complete" list of MUSHs in **The MUD Resource Collection** at http://www.godlike.com/muds. The MUDList is at http://mudlist.kharduin.net, and includes more server types as well. More information and resources are available at http://rep.mudservices.com/index.html.

Requirements

• **Server/Operating Systems:** If you're going to run your own MU*, you'll need appropriate hardware. A slew of variations exist: There are MUDs, MUSHs, MUCKs, MOOs, LPs, and a bunch more. Some systems include combat code, others don't. Some are stand-alone systems, others require substantial libraries of extensions. Read through the FAQ at http://www.math.okstate.edu/~jds/mudfaqs.html to see what works on which operating systems, then pick one and learn to use it.

Keep in mind that you'll have to put your MU* someplace; you need a host. If you don't have the hardware available to make your own space (and few of us do), you can either hope that someone will host your MU* for free (unlikely, but it does happen), or rent space from a commercial host. The Usenet newsgroups in rec.games.mud.* are where the commercial hosts advertise.

• **Programming:** If you're going to run your own MU*, you'll need considerably more than half of a clue. The Usenet newsgroups at rec.games.mud.* *can* be helpful. (They can also be incredibly *unhelpful,* depending on your particular problem. Read the FAQ before you ask questions.)

If you're going to use a corner of someone else's MU*, you'll need to learn how to use that particular system. The "help" files in the MU* ought to be useful, and people already using the system may be willing to answer questions if they're asked politely.

Regardless of whether you're using your own MU* or someone else's, you'll need a "client" program to connect to the MU* server. Client programs keep what you're typing separated from what everyone else is doing. Most of them provide the ability to log sessions, write macros and triggers, and connect to several characters at once. (This is how you animate an NPC.)

tinyfugue is, by far and away, the preferred client among UNIX geeks. It's available at http://tcp.com/~hawkeye/tf. Other clients are available for other systems, including clients for Macintosh and Windows. You can also find a description of the clients and their features in the "clients" section of the Mu* FAQ at http://www.math.okstate.edu/~jds/mudfaqs.html.

• **Connection Speed:** Faster modems can yield faster responses... right up until Net lag clobbers everyone at the same time. There are still folks out there who MU* at 1200 baud — albeit slowly — so don't feel that you have to invest in an ISDN connection unless you're running the server at home. (Although, if you're looking for an excuse to upgrade...)

Resources

• **Costs:** If you're running your own MU*, you'll probably either have to invest in some serious iron; find someone who'll host your MU* at no cost; or (most likely) rent space at a commercial host. Clients that connect to MU*s are freely available; a list of the various types can be obtained at the URL listed above.
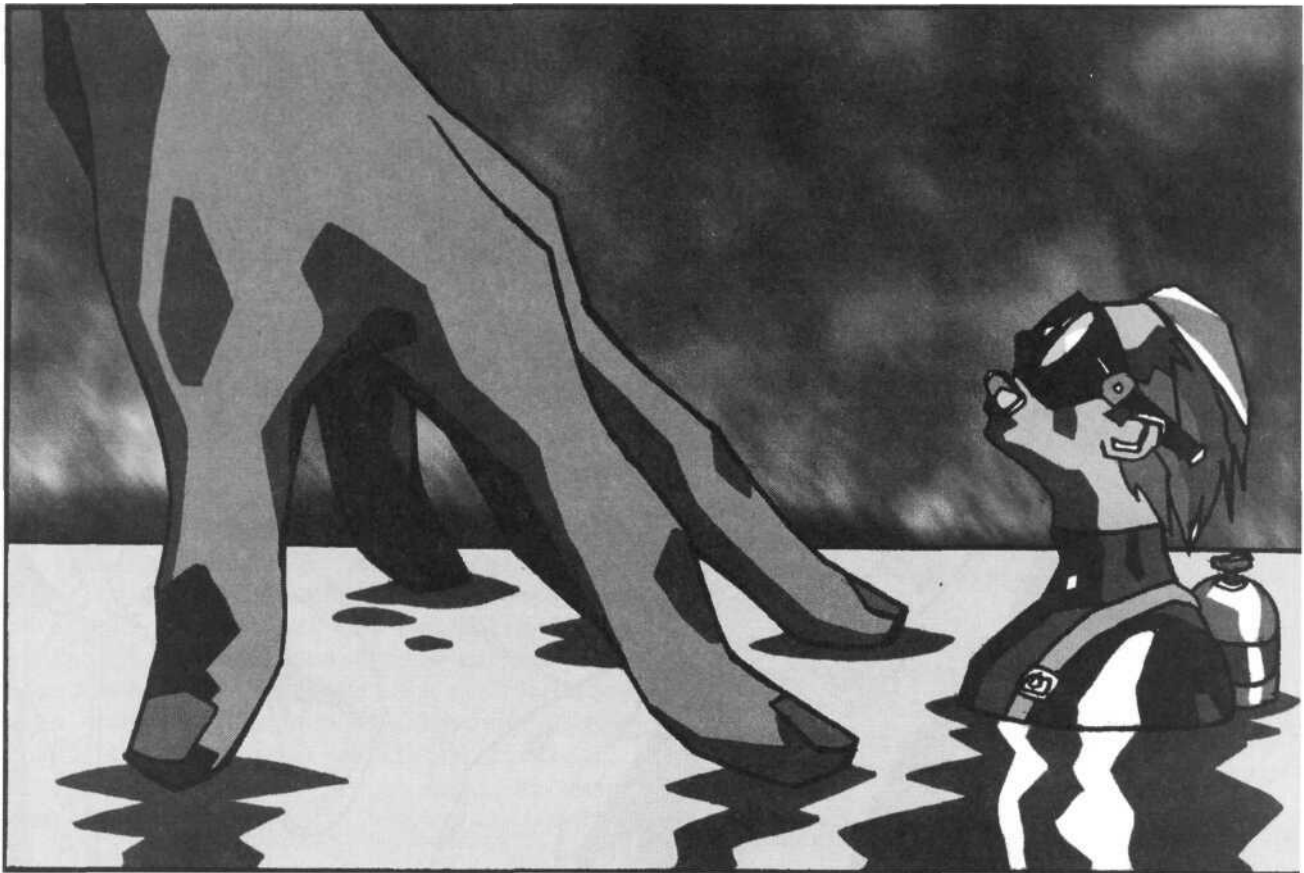
• **Overhead:** If you host your own MU*, most of your intellectual overhead will be the investment of the time and energy you'll need to keep the server itself up and running. The amount of administrivia can be mind-numbing. If you're using someone else's MU*, you can devote your time and energy into actually creating the game-realm. (Is the author somewhat biased? She is. Does she admin a MU*? She does. She knows whereof she speaks.)

Other Factors

• Adding players is merely a matter of giving them the address of the host machine and having them create an avatar (note distinction between an online avatar and the Awakened Avatar of the game world).

• Once you've learned the MU*'s building commands, you can create objects and rooms, and extend the area in which you actually play.

• If you're using a university's computer resources, it's worth noting that some institutions consider MU*ing a waste of academic resources. In a few instances, access to ports commonly used for MU*s is blocked. Occasionally, institutions block access to common MU* ports, or revoke computer privileges entirely if students have violated university policy by MU*ing. If you have *any* doubts about your university's policy, investigate before you log onto a MU*.

Social Considerations

• **Advantages:** Players don't need to be proximate. In fact, players don't even have to be in the same time-zone. Most MU*s are up 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Action can be extended. Objects, rooms and players persist.

NPCs can be animated.

You may, quite literally, create your world in text, one in which player characters can move, talk and interact with objects and each other.

• **Disadvantages:** Running a MU* (or a piece of a MU*) requires some time and energy.

The Storyteller needs to know some of the rudiments of building within that particular system.

Mow Does the Game "Look"?

As with a chat session, text rolls up the player's screen. The primary difference is that players can *move* in a MU* instead of being confined to one room. Additionally, players can "act" instead of being confined to "saying" everything. Such freedom does, however, require some online preparations on the part of the Storyteller.

Note: As with chats, it's more difficult to read an after-the-fact log than it is to read what's on your screen as it occurs. In this case, names in curly brackets {} show who the "you" is that's whispering. Other players cannot see whispers. Similarly, Asala

(in this example) "looks" at several objects and at Bruno. Her command "look building" would not appear on other players' screens, nor would the description of the buildings.

Another Note: In this example, the Storyteller's also running Bruno; that is, he's playing two characters.

```
Along the pathway
```

```
You continue down the way toward the Node
through the city canyon. This area seems bleak,
grim, somehow unsettled. The buildings appear
to be closed up tight, and there doesn't seem
to be anyone else around. The only apparent
activity seems to be coming from a tavern a bit
further down the way, off to the right.
```

```
Contents: Storyteller, HackMan, Asala,
Pizzazz, JRN
```

```
Pizzazz says, "Well, I dunno about you
guys, but I could sure use a beer."
```

```
Asala says, "Hang on a sec. I wanna see
if there's anything else here we should be
noticing..."
```

```
{look buildings}
```

```
The buildings on either side are dark
steel and black glass. The doors are locked
and the windows are firmly closed.
```

```
{look tavern}
```

```
Above the door of the tavern (which appears
to be the only sign of activity in this area)
is a flashing neon sign reading "Cross-Time
Tavern." The door is open, and the sounds of
low conversation and an out-of-place honky-
tonk piano drift out onto the street.
```

```
Asala hmms! "The Cross-Time Tavern.
Interesting..."
```

```
JRN hmms. "If this is a Crossover site...
I'm not sure if that's a Good Thing for us
right now. "
```

```
Asala goes into the bar.
```

```
JRN goes into the bar.
```

```
HackMan goes into the bar.
```

```
Pizzazz goes into the bar.
```

```
You {Storyteller} step through the
doorway and into...
```

```
The Cross-Time Tavern
```

```
This appears to be a prototypical
drinking establishment. Several people sit
on stools at the bar, and two pairs sit at
different tables toward the back of the
room. Some people converse, others stare
into their drinks. The bartender, Bruno,
seems engrossed in a crossword puzzle.
```

```
Contents: Storyteller, Pizzazz, HackMan,
JRN, Asala, Bruno
```

```
{look Bruno}
```

```
Bruno hulks. He's tall, broad-shouldered,
and has hands like meathooks. He has the
unnerving ability to be in several places at
once. Bruno looks like a guy you'd like to have
on your side — or at your back in an alley.
```

```
Bruno looks up. "Whatcha want?"
```

```
JRN flips a credit chip onto the bar.
```

```
JRN says, "I'd like a beer . Actually, I'd
like several beers, but I'll settle for
getting 'em one at a time :-)"
```

```
You {Pizzazz} whisper, "I'm still look-
ing for the guy I'm supposed to meet about
the fencing buy. 'Zit okay if I wander back
and look at the folks in the back of the
room?" to Storyteller.
```

```
Pizzazz orders a beer, too.
```

```
Bruno hauls a couple of mugs out from
behind the bar, and proceeds to fill them
from the tap.
```

```
You {Storyteller} whisper, "Go for it!"
to Pizzazz.
```

```
You {Asala} whisper, "I wanna dance and see
if anyone here has any jazzy data we can dupe
and maybe resell. Back me up?" to HackMan.
```

```
You {HackMan} whisper, "I got an 0-Chem
exam tomorrow, so I'm only half here. Go
ahead, and I'll try to catch up when I finish
reviewing this section." to Asala.
```

```
You {Asala} whisper, "I wanna dance (and
see if I can lift any data offa the
customers), okay?" to Bruno.
```

```
Bruno mutters something about needing to
fetch a new keg soon, if folks are gonna keep
putting beer away at this rate.
```

```
Pizzazz takes an appreciative sip of his
beer, then turns toward the rest of the
room. He looks around for a moment, then
picks up his mug and wanders slowly toward
the back of the tavern.
```

```
You {Bruno} whisper, "Go ahead, but
you'd better be careful. Lotsa folks are
watching you." to Asala.
```

```
Asala prevails on Bruno to change the
music, then pulls a couple of veils out of
her pocket, drapes them over her shoulders,
and begins to dance.
```

```
Bruno puts on Sisters of Mercy, shakes
his head, and goes back to crossword.
```

```
HackMan stands near the door, beer in
hand. He appears to be lost in thought, but
he's also paying attention to who's watch-
ing Asala dance.
```

```
Pizzazz keeps looking at people
especially at their hands — intently.
```

```
JRN orders another brew.
```
```
    Storyteller notes that some of the people
in the back of the room are beginning to
dislike the intensity of Pizzazz's interest.
```
```
    Asala dances about the room, trailing
fingers over patrons' shoulders and through
their hair.
```
```
    You {Storyteller} whisper, "It's pos-
sible that one of the guys in the back of
the room is the same guy who stiffed you on
the Lycaster deal." to JRN.
```
```
    Bruno frowns at Asala's moves, his
eyebrows telegraphing that he works hard to
keep an honest and honorable clientele in
his establishment.
```
```
    JRN takes another sip of her beer, then
almost chokes on it. She leaps to her feet,
spilling her beer.
```
```
    Bruno hands JRN a bar rag.
```
```
    JRN points to someone in the back of the
room and yells, "Hey!"
```

Graphics

Things are beginning to get interesting in the graphic world, but the hard-, soft- and wet-ware requirements are still pretty high. You need a special client to connect to a graphic system. At this point, there isn't much standardization, either between client systems or servers. Frankly, you'll have to experiment a bit to see what's available and to discover what will run on your particular hardware.

Moreover, graphics are *slooooow*. Some systems explicitly state that they're not recommended for anyone using any kind of modem. As this book is being written, few systems, if any, allow you to build. Fewer, if any, have released code that allows you to compile anything yourself. Graphic systems are improving constantly, however. Keep an eye on **The MUD Resource Collection**, maintained by Lydia Leong, for updates. The URL is: http://www.godlike.com/muds/mres/mweb.html.

Final Thoughts

Running a game online (we're still a long way from Astral Immersion!) poses a number of technical challenges, but also offers real opportunities for creating a rich environment. The critical thing for all involved to remember is that when you're working in text, it takes practice to get past the lack of facial expression and vocal inflection available in face-to-face gaming. As a typer, you've got to consider the ways in which your message might be misinterpreted. As a reader, you've got to consider alternative intentions. (People have a real tendency to assume negative meanings in harmless messages — hence the proliferation of smilies and explicit grins.) If you're in doubt as to how a message was intended, *ask* the author!

Along the same lines, ask for help if you're having problems running game-specific programs. System administrators aren't born cranky. They just become that way after too many hours of dealing with folks who're convinced that *their* problem is the most critical thing in the universe. Be prepared to explain what you were trying to do and what error message you got as a result. Whining "It doesn't work right!" doesn't do much good — especially if you haven't bothered to read the documents or experiment a bit first. (Yes, this does require that you engage your brain.)

Gaming online isn't the same as face-to-face gaming. It can, however, be a lot of fun once you've learned to use the differences and you've had a bit of practice!

See you "there!"

Resources

The single greatest argument against a divine apocalypse is that human evolution—in part due to the Net and other recent innovations — has become so damned interesting that any god worth the name would be captivated by the possibilities. Hey, if / were an omniscient immortal, **I'd** wanna stick around for a while. The show's just starting to get good. Are we, the human race, gonna run with our inventions and reach some new and unforeseen heights, or will we just fuck it up? The future is up for grabs, and the Net is, for better and worse, a huge wheel of fortune in the human casino.

The following resources have been inspirational to us. Hopefully, they'll be inspirational to you as well. Some are a bit dated (cyberpunk's corpse has been cooling for years), but still entertaining. Others are as new as yesterday's postings. Enjoy!

— Phil Brucato, Spring, 1998

Books

No, they're not as antiquated as some people would like to think. If nothing else, printed books are easier to transport and easier on the eyes than Web sites or electronic data — at least for now. The following books, a combination of fiction and non-fiction, suit the mood and subject matter of the Digital Web. The line *between* fiction and non-fiction blurs so heavily when you're discussing the "Net that it's easier just to read everything then make up your own mind about where things are headed.

Barnes, John, Mother *of* Storms

Bear, Greg, *New Legends*

Benedikt, Michael, *Cyberspace: First Steps*

Briggs, John, Fractals: Patterns *of Chaos*

Crichton, Michael, *Jurassic Park; Electronic Life*

Easton, Thomas A., Silicon Karma

Gelernter, David, Mirror Worlds

Gibson, William, *Neuromancer; Count Zero, Mono. Lisa Overdrive;* Burning *Chrome*

Gleick, James, *Chaos: Making a New Science*

Hawke, Simon, *Psychodrome*

Heim, Michael, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*

Prigogine, Ilya and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos:* Man's *New Dialogue with Nature*

Rheingold, Howard, *Virtual Reality*

Scott, Melissa, *Trouble and Her Friends*

Shirley, John, A Song *Called Youth; Eclipse; Eclipse Corona; Eclipse Penumbra*

Simmons, Dan, Hyperion; *The Fall of Hyperion*

Stephenson, Neal, Snow Crash; *The Diamond Age*

Sterling, Bruce, Islands in *the Net; Globalhead; The Hacker Crackdown*

Vinge, Vernor, *True Names... and Other Dangers;* Across Realtime; A *Fire on the Deep*

• Magazines

MONDO 2000 (Is this magazine still in publication? Its erratic schedule makes one wonder. Even if it isn't, back issues of R.U. Sirius's brainchild make fascinating reading.)

Wired (From its anarchistic beginnings, this magazine has become, for better and worse, the leading organized source of futurist commentary... kinda like the Virtual Adepts themselves.)

• RPG Sourcebooks

(Bolded entries are White Wolf supplements; all others published as noted.)

Dansky, Richard, **Guildbook: Artificers (an excellent Wraith: The Oblivion** supplement dealing with ghost hackers and their archaic brethren.)

McKeeman, Darren and Harry Heckel, **Virtual** Adepts (an essential Net book, reprinted in **Traditions Assembled, Volume One: Songs of Science.)**

Mike Pondsmith and crew (R. Talsorian), *Cyberpunk 2020* (and its various sourcebooks. Fairly typical cyberpunk, but fun.)

Various Authors, **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds**

Various Authors, **The Technomancer's Toybox** (loaded with all the Devices that wouldn't fit in the Virtual Adept and Son of Ether sourcebooks.)

Music

Helpful background stuff for Net-based games. All good.

Delirium

Die Form

Die Krupps

Enigma

Front 242

KMFDM

Prodigy

QNTAL

The Residents

:Wumpscutt:

Websites

Unlike books and magazines, Websites come and go with frustrating speed. As of this writing (summer 1998), the following Websites can provide helpful information, inspiring source material and other fun stuff:

http://dev.null.org/psychoceramics/ The Psychoceramics mailing list, absolutely the best resource for kooks and strange ideas.

http://info.isoc.org/guest/zakon/Internet/History/ HIT.html — Hobbes's Internet Timeline, a guide to the history of the real-life Net.

http://kalex.engin.umich.edu/mcelwaine/ -- Robert McElwaine's rallying cries to save the future from the hidden powers of the world.

http://math.ucr.edu/home/baez/crackpot.html—The Crackpot Index, a short but funny guide to bad science.

http://www.amazing.com/internet/faq.html — Dennis David's Internet Access Provider FAQ, a useful resource for technical and Net-culture info.

http://www.deoxy.org/index.htm — The Deoxyribonucleic Autonmous Zone; techno-magickal "realism," mythohash and bizarre running commentary.

http://www.eff.org/— The Electric Frontier Foundation homepage; more real Virtual Adepts promote the freedom of information in the Net and elsewhere.

http://www.etext.org/Politics/Beter.Audio.Letter/— The Peter Beter Audio Letters; secret history of the information revolution.

http://www.godlike.com/muds/mres/mweb.html - The MUD Resource Collection. See above for details.

http://www.mcs.net/~jorn/home.html — Robert Wisdom, a real-life Virtual Adept, explores politics and futurism.

http://www.student.nada.kth.se/~nv91-asa/ - Anders Sandberg's link site, a jumping-off ground for futurism and transhumanist theory.

http://www.technorealism.org — A work in progress founded by a group of "techno-realists" who strive to find a middle ground between future shock and pollyanna futurism.

http://www.white-wolf.com—White Wolf's own Website, including FAQs and occasional updates about new stuff.

rec.games,frp.storyteller—Online discussions (some profound, some amusing, some heated, some lame) about White Wolf-related subjects.

DIGITAL WEB 2.0

Cyberpunk is Dead!

Not so very long ago, a tragedy opened the doorway to a realm of impossibilities, a new creation where thought was power.

More recently, the Virtual Adepts and their Technocratic rivals have waged a subtle war to control this magnificent Zone.

Barely a year ago, a massive crash wiped the system, thrashed hundreds of Webspinners, and reduced years of work to ruin.
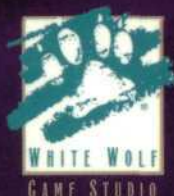
The Future is Today.

The old world is dead. Reality 2.0 is waiting. Turn on, jack in, and get your ass online!

• The Internet, White Wolf style;

• New rules, new rotes, new gadgets, new realms;

• Storyteller advice, plot ideas, online gaming, and more.

KING OF PATTERN

MAGE

White Wolf Game Studio

WORLD OF DARKNESS

Khavan