

**Book Reviewed:** *Virtual Gods: The Seduction of Power and Pleasure in Cyberspace*  
Edited by Tal Brooke, Harvest House Publishers, 1997.

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This book has two main sections, one dealing with cyberspace and the other with virtual reality. However, it is impossible to completely separate these two topics and so the division between them is not quite as clean as the table of contents suggests. Broadly speaking, the first part of the book focuses on cyberspace and the way it has begun to effect the fabric of our social and political structures. The second part of the text focuses on how the individual responds to his new ability to create alternative realities, and to enter into the new realm of cyberspace through a virtual reality interface. Each of the four authors is represented by an essay in each of these two sections.

In this book the term *virtual reality* involves stimulating the human mind (usually through the senses of vision and hearing) in such a way that mind is fooled (or allowed to be fooled) into believing that some objects or experiences are really present or are occurring. Taken to its logical extreme, the goal of research and work in virtual reality is to provide stimuli such that an individual will not be able to distinguish between *actual reality* and *virtual reality*. Thus, *virtual* experiences will be as real to the individual as *real* experiences are. The book is full of examples of dangerous virtual reality situations. It mentions violent and sexually explicit video games that allow individuals to act out their fantasies without apparent consequences.

*Cyberspace*, on the other hand, describes the realm of interaction that is facilitated by computer systems and networks such as the Internet. Cyberspace is usually corporate in some way; one interacts with others in cyberspace. It is often the case, however, that people portray themselves differently in cyberspace than they are in the "real world". Thus, virtual reality can be used as a filter between cyberspace and the individual. One example of this interface is the *avatar*, a virtual reality projection of an individual that appears on the computer screen and can interact with other avatars controlled by other individuals. Apparently the term avatar comes from the Hindu religion and describes a being that is an incarnation of God.

All of the authors of the essays included in this book are involved in the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP). Founded in 1973, this project has the following purpose (as stated in their web page at <http://www.scp-inc.org>):

To understand the significance of the spiritual turmoil and pluralism in our culture; to research the effects and influence of the new religions, particularly those based on Eastern philosophies; to provide a biblical perspective of the new significant religions and other movements so that the church can respond appropriately; to produce accurate and attractive resources and bring the good news of Jesus Christ to individuals and society.

The essays clearly reflect the orientation of the authors. They view cyberspace as a realm that is being actively created rather than passively coming into existence. They describe how individuals

whose agenda is clearly the furtherance of new-age and occult philosophies have been at the forefront of the digital and computer revolutions. These individuals, by shaping and creating the ether of cyberspace, have done much to define how interactions in cyberspace are conducted. Thus, these people and their belief structures are having a profound impact on everyone in cyberspace.

In contrast to cyberspace, the danger and seduction of virtual reality is that it elevates the individual to the status of a god. It is argued that virtual reality is at best a means of hiding from God or escaping from reality and at worst nothing more than blatant self-deification. It is a “super-drug” that, once it has reached its full potential, will be far more dangerous than any chemical drug in use today.

Virtual reality is individual-oriented; it is inward-looking. The focus is on convincing the self that the experiences he or she is virtually experiencing are real. Cyberspace is community-oriented. Cyberspace is a place where multiple individuals can interact without having to reveal their true selves, but rather the projection of themselves that they wish to manifest. Often virtual reality is used to enhance the interface between the individual and cyberspace, but a key aspect of cyberspace is the interaction (sometimes passive, sometimes active) with other individuals.

A recurring theme in the book is that because of man’s fallen state, he will always seek to distance himself (i.e. hide) from God. This, of course, is the true nature of sin. The supreme danger in virtual reality is that in allowing man to create his own reality it provides a means by which man becomes the creator – i.e. he becomes the god of that reality. Although they do not come right out and say it, the authors all seem to have concluded that is impossible to experience a virtual reality that is in any way different from the reality created by God without setting oneself up as a god.

The authors have almost nothing positive to say about computers and networks (or technology in general), although they clearly use computers regularly. In an appendix entitled “Technology and the Fall” it is argued that part of the ability to know good and evil that the serpent tempted Eve with was the ability to evaluate the appropriateness (i.e. the “goodness”) of a particular technology to a particular task. The next-to-last paragraph of this appendix quotes Thoreau: “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end.” I think that this summarizes the message of this book very well.

I found the book very one-sided, without offering much in the way of how cyberspace could be redeemed. In the essay *Faustian Bargain* Brooks Alexander points out that “Because we are made in the image of God, even our evil intentions routinely produce good results as a ‘side effect’.”<sup>1</sup> The final appendix discusses how, because of the hope we have in Christ, the cynicism about the world of cyberspace virtual reality does not necessarily lead to despair. This seems an add on, or an after thought. After the sometimes alarmist tone (which is probably valid), it’s a little unsatisfying to have the book end by saying basically that “sure it’s bad, but in the end it will be okay because God is in control”.

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<sup>1</sup>Page 102