

"Did We Dream Enough?" THE THING BBS as an Experiment in Social-Cyber Sculpture By Lori Emerson

0. The Thing that is THE THING

In 1990, artist Wolfgang Staehle and Blackhawk (the handle for Peter Von Brandenburg - the writer, critic and producer of the movie *Cyberpunk* [1990]), conceived of the idea of an online virtual community for artists. By 1991, Staehle, Blackhawk, and a group of about ten others launched THE THING Bulletin Board System into what was then exuberantly called "cyberspace." The renowned early virtual community was at first for artists based in New York City and later included those who could connect to nodes in Düsseldorf, Cologne, Hamburg, Basel, Berlin, and Amsterdam. What makes THE THING particularly unique is not just that it was for artists to discuss art but that Staehle and others saw the network itself as an evolving work of art that came out of interactions between engaged users. It was a constantly emergent, experimental, boundary-less "thing" whose meaning, as Staehle put it at the launch of an exhibit at the New Museum in 2013, "would come out of the relationships between the people and not the modernist ideal of the single hero artist that the market loves."¹

Unlike most BBSs, THE THING had no call limit, download limit, or minutes per day limit for users; it also started out with two phone lines connected to USRobotics 2400 baud modems and, within a year, it operated using four powerful 9600 baud modems. Without question, these technical conditions contributed to how quickly THE THING established itself; it started out with only around a dozen users, but by the end of 1991, THE THING had about fifty users and, by the end of 1992, there were roughly 120 with an active core of around 40. Once THE THING connected with its European nodes the number of core users ranged from 250 to 300.²

1. Cyberspace is not the internet

While THE THING moved to the nascent World Wide Web in 1995, looking back on both the technological affordances of the particular pre-Web Bulletin Board System (BBS) software package THE THING used as well as the kinds of interactions and discourse that emerged as a result, it's clear: the social possibilities of cyberspace did not survive the transition to the web (or what we now simply refer to as "the internet," collapsing distinctions between networks that used to be more clear). Shoshana Zuboff offers a devastating description of how our contemporary digital world differs from the cyberspace ideal in her epic *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*:

Surveillance capitalism runs contrary to the early digital dream...it strips away the illusion that the networked form has some kind of indigenous moral content, that being "connected" is somehow intrinsically pro-social, innately inclusive, or naturally tending toward the democratization of knowledge. Digital connection is now a means to others' commercial ends.³

By contrast, from the perspective of 2020 the pre-1995 internet looks a lot like the realization of what William Gibson famously defined in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer* as a "consensual hallucination."⁴ And certainly descriptions of technologies from the time do resemble elaborate dreamscapes, especially when one reads descriptions of technologies such as virtual reality while knowing their extreme technical limitations at the time and even now; for example, one user posted on THE THING in 1993 that "...VR will be an enormous capacitor. It will soak up all the id in the world. Libidinal, Violent, Revolutionary, even intellectual impulses can be absorbed."⁵ As Fred Turner outlines in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, the creation of cyberspace was indeed a conceptual, perhaps even ideological, shift driven by the gradual process of transforming and re-envisioning the unrealized hopes and dreams of a 1960s notion of liberation as telecommunications networks in the 1980s and early

1990s - networks whose inherent tendency toward decentralization, many believed, would inevitably undermine hierarchies and binary thinking and instead allow for the countless self-determining communities, identities, and genders to bloom.⁶ Take, for example, the following description from 1991 by the so-called "philosopher of cyberspace" Michael Heim:

Cyberspace is more than a breakthrough in electronic media or in computer interface design. With its virtual environments and simulated worlds, cyberspace is a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our very sense of reality...When on line, we break free, like the monads, from bodily existence. Telecommunication offers an unrestricted freedom of expression and personal contact, with far less hierarchy and formality than is found in the primary social world.⁷

Unfortunately, as the 1990s wore on and early adopters experienced the "modem world"⁸ as one inescapably tainted by commercialism, real world bodies, politics, and identities and as late adopters came of age on the Web, "cyberspace" became something of an inside joke and a decade's worth of gorgeous and often experimental writing/thought on the potential which lay before us got brushed aside as charmingly naive at best and foolishly techno-utopian at worst.

But, looking in particular at THE THING BBS, what can we recuperate from these early visions of cyberspace? What can we learn and take into the present beyond the feelings of nostalgia for a bygone era that burble up as we read posts that refer to emojis as "typographical physiognomies"⁹ or ones that report that "laptop computers have a strong...field that emanates from the bottom, courtesy of the hard disk...If this source is sitting in your lap, your gonads will be getting a goodly dose of AC magnetic field. Better keep the laptops on the table..."¹⁰ or ones that declare, "I am fed up with New York Telephone!"¹¹ Heim and others may have been wrong about the degree to which we escape our material lives and bodies when we go online - not to mention the fact that cyberspace was decidedly not welcoming or sometimes even utterly unavailable to women, people of color, and those who were economically disadvantaged. Nevertheless, if we go back and look carefully at the particular technological affordances of specific networks such as BBSs and especially what they offered that the eb never has, there is more than a grain of truth in Heim's and others' predictions that's not always evident just from reading the text of posts that have been painstakingly recovered. Even with the misalignment between rhetoric and reality, the consensual hallucination that was cyberspace was still partly grounded in material conditions such as the gradual affordability of the personal computer; faster, cheaper, and smarter modems; and the possibility of an individual person - not a massive international conglomeration - owning and running an online community.

2. A Bread Board System, not a Bulletin Board System

THE THING BBS ran on a DOS-based software package called TBBS (The Bread Board System). Creator Philip L. Becker called the software a "bread board system" as a way to move away from the longstanding association of BBSs with analog bulletin boards and toward a more modern association with electronics breadboards that were the physical basis upon which one could attach circuits. And in fact, TBBS was anything but generic software for running bulletin board systems. As I discuss below, the capabilities of this software are as non-trivial as the facts I mention above about the number and speed of the modems THE THING ran on and they are also intimately tied to the degree to which THE THING could in fact offer some version of Heim's vision of cyberspace.

Remarkably for BBS software of the time, TBBS made it possible to have up to 16 lines on a single BBS which (assuming one could afford to pay for the phone lines) meant it could potentially handle as many as 32 simultaneous callers. This capability allowed THE THING community to grow rapidly and sustain itself in ways that less sophisticated BBS systems could allow. Moreover, as users

dialed in directly to an individual's phone number (in this case, Staehle's), quite in contrast with our current age of surveillance capitalism where social media networks are owned and shaped by massive international conglomerates, users had a transparent relationship with the technical infrastructure that, in turn, created a level of informality on the network that further helped build a sense of community.

Also, as evidenced by THE THING nodes that were created across Germany, the software was capable of providing service in multiple languages. Unlike most other BBS software available in the U.S. at the time that only provided service in English, TBBS put THE THING in the unique position of being an international network as its English-speaking and German-speaking nodes would gather and transmit data late at night and early in the morning while calling rates were low. System administrators (sysops) could also customize nearly everything about the user interface - from the menu titles and menu structure to the number, name, and functioning of chat rooms, forums, file sharing, and electronic mail. For example, there are many posts on THE THING from 1992 and 1993 dedicated to discussing, reorganizing, and revising new discussion fora. Blackhawk, aka Peter Von Brandenburg, posted in 1992 that "I feel we should take advantage of TBBS's capability for nesting and not overburden the opening menu selection screen. Therefore I will include and combine new and old fora in larger structures and try to maintain the 10 item screen we have now." He then goes on to suggest the follow fora which I quote in full to give readers a sense of the wild range of doings possible on THE THING:

E-Mail

Local (within the board)

Net (global)

General Messages

Bios (like what JN put up)

Thingstuff (tips, tricks, hints and rules)

Unedited/Unassigned (things that fit nowhere else)

Sensation State

Madame J.'s Dungeon (JS's interactive art piece)

Lounge (area to discuss S&M theory)

Pharmacy (area to discuss drugs and perception)

Game Room (for people like NLP and those who want to play games)

Parallel Hell (a primal scream shock corridor, FM would live here)

Berasith (the first word)

Exquisite Corpse (as is)

Mad Libs (for those unfamiliar, a cut and paste word game)

ANSI collage (it's possible to play with these primitive graphics)

Sound collage (?)

Reflex/Self/Reflex

The 8th Day (biology, genetics)

Cyberactivity (computers, robots, v.r., etc.)

Little Science (math?, physics?, disciplines without subcultures)

Specieism (discussion of other creatures, life forms)

World Orders

Real Realpolitik (political structures including geopolitics)

War Toys (things martial - fetishistic or otherwise)

Big Kulture (the multiculture debate would go here)

Apprehension

Life Overdose (advertising, Joe Camel goes here)

Mass Media (films, music, books, etc.)

K-K-Kunst (fine art, galleries, museums, etc.)

Death Watch (SP's obits)

Board Room

[same as it ever was, with the possible division into finance, structure, ethics, projects, internal politics, etc.]¹²

Sysops even had the ability to virtually walk a user through any operation by invoking "line monitor mode." As the manual explains, "When in this mode, you will see the displays being sent to the user. You can also use this mode to 'hand-hold' a user, because you can press any keys for the user, taking complete control of his [sic] session if you wish."¹³ While the latter capability does augur coming concerns about privacy and surveillance, since the vast majority of sysops were essentially small business owners more interested in growing and maintaining a community of users, and since data collection, surveillance, and tracking of the type and scope we know today did not yet exist, generally "line monitor mode" was seen as a welcome innovation.

However, despite the fact that the barriers to entering the "modem world" were relatively low as a user, if one wanted to run a powerful BBS using TBBS then one had to first pay at least \$895 in 1991 for the software, then purchase a dedicated PC (since the software predated multi-tasking OS software; the price of a PC of course varied widely but the could have cost as much as \$2000), a dedicated phone line and - as the TBBS manual emphasizes - a high quality modem (in the case of THE THING this would have been two 9600 baud modems) capable of running twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.¹⁴ Excluding the cost of the phone line, these costs could have easily added up to over \$5000, equivalent to roughly \$9400 in 2020. Thus, despite the extreme degree to which TBBS made it possible for sysops to carefully shape and control their Bulletin Board Systems, once again it is important to not succumb to a nostalgia unmoored from material circumstances. The TBBS software made it possible for THE THING to realize many of its goals - as I describe in further detail in the proceeding sections - but it was not particularly accessible or user-friendly. Over and over again throughout the early years of this network one reads posts bemoaning the difficulties posed by the software which must surely have prevented the network from attracting more users; for example, one poster points out that "the software prevents one from being able to put a space between paragraphs...Those long, long blocks of texts are really intimidating, especially for a new user. Very hard to read, seemingly impenetrable."¹⁵

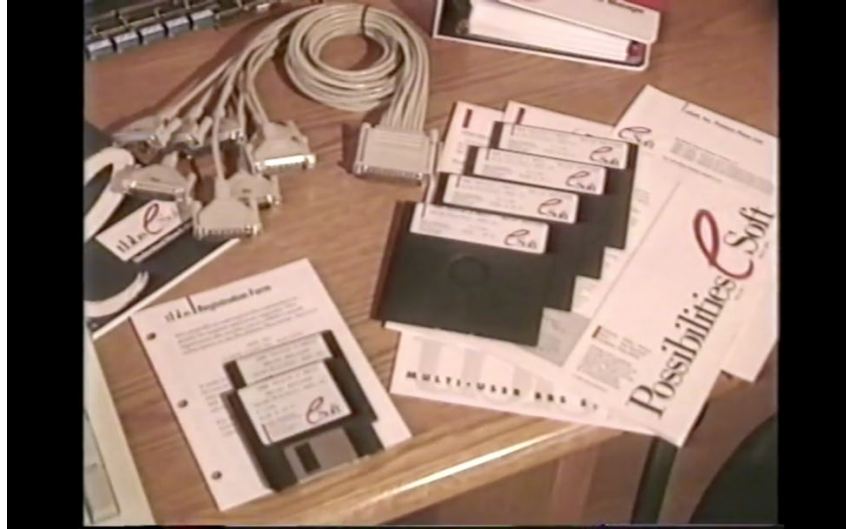


Figure 1: A screenshot from a TBBS promotional video from 1993 that shows the dizzying array of hardware, software, peripherals, and documentation one needed to set up a BBS on TBBS.

By contrast, at one point the Sysop openly reports frustration not with the TBBS software but with list members' lack of knowledge about how to reply to a text by quoting a portion of it: "I don't know about other readers, but, I for one, find these endless reply chains irritating. To make it easier for readers with short attention spans...let me suggest you quote the portion of the text you are responding to"¹⁶ - a less-than-straightforward process which he then has to explain in another post:

When you <R>eply to a message and you are in the full screen editor, hit Ctrl-Q and enter the line numbers of the text portion you want to quote. If you don't know the numbers hit <l> for list. It's really easy and especially useful when replying to an older message. I am looking forward to the day when there's no more need to employ time-consuming hermeneutics to figure out what these replies are in reference to. Class dismissed.¹⁷

If my research into the deployment of the term "user friendly" has taught me anything, it's that "easy" is not only context-specific (and highly dependent on one's gender, race, and economic status) but the term can also be used to subtly make way for those who do find it easy (whatever "it" is) and shut out whoever is not the ideal imagined user. In short, intentional or not, "easy" is all too often a powerful word for gatekeeping.¹⁸ One can imagine without too much difficulty the demographic of most sysops and the ways in which their power and influence couldn't help but shape the conversations and communities on their BBSs.

3. The Network as Art, Art on the Network

The Thing is a computer network dedicated to aesthetic discourse, an open forum for communication, confrontation, and celebration. The Thing actualizes the German artist Joseph Beuys' idea of "social sculpture," a group artistic process accessible to anyone with an active mind (and a modem). Within The Thing's "virtual space," no one can claim mastery--artists can dispute the snipes of critics, for example, while robot scientists can

challenge the perceptions of psychoanalysts. Is it art? That's for none of us to know, and all of us to find out.¹⁹

Despite the caveats I list above on the relative accessibility and/or user friendliness of THE THING BBS and its host software, TBBS, the high degree to which the network was programmable and customizable by and for its community of users had profound effects on the extent to which THE THING could imagine and even partially realize its dreams to be a virtual night club of sorts that was both for artists and *itself* art. For example, the creation and rearrangement of fora on THE THING that was initiated by members of its community was also an example of how the network was "social sculpture" (recalling Joseph Beuys' 1970s notion of how society and art could be woven together via the notion of "social sculpture" whereby all of everyday life is art and all members of society are contributing artists). While "social sculpture" is usually associated with Staehle's particular vision of what THE THING network was and even could be, over and over again denizens of THE THING themselves commented that it was indeed, for them, a "collective text,"²⁰ or a "strange combination of workstation, playpen and padded cell and it changes all the time and can have a very different flavor, week to week."²¹ Or, as user "SABINE" put it in an email to Staehle in June 1992, the way THE THING blurred and shifted and played with the boundaries between public and private was precisely what made it such a compelling hub for community:

It looks more like a club - and is a club = public? that's one of the great things about THE THING: people write down their comments in private situations, maybe even addressed to special people they have in their mind while writing, but in the situation in between, the immaterielle moment in the mailbox, it's public. and than [sic] private again (at home, PC)...maybe that's the reason that some participants...suddenly got in love with insulting everybody. private invoices, made public, written private, red public; the modern voyeur...no 'anonymous public'...²²

Also, given the affordances of TBBS I discuss above combined with the fact that - with the exception of being reliant on a telephone carrier - a BBS could be built and maintained by an individual or a collective, it was not unreasonable that members of THE THING felt a "contagious enthusiasm for what was suddenly possible, combined with a sense of play and a curiosity for what would happen next." Further, it's worth underscoring that "what was suddenly possible" was not only the feat of having an independently owned and operated international network, but it was also the feat of being able to create a virtual community of artists who saw the limitations of the mainstream New York art world which had, and probably still does have, overwhelming control over the determination of what counts as art and who counts as an artist. As Staehle put it in a recent interview,

There was this inspiring community feeling that we were able to reframe the discourse, that we had the means to realize our ideas independently of the traditional art system...When I see the whole project in its totality today, I see a huge sculpture with concentrations in some parts and countless lines of flow of people and information. The whole thing was a social and technological work of art - a creation and a creature. Did we dream enough?²³

Again, the feeling of community was more than just a feeling - it was grounded in how TBBS and by extension THE THING provided a multi-line, multi-lingual, customizable, flexible, and, ultimately, transparent platform. If early networks such as THE THING were populated by people hallucinating an alternative world together, their dreamings of, as Michael Heim put it, "unrestricted freedom of

expression and personal contact, with far less hierarchy and formality..." were not entirely divorced from the material realities of what was possible before the Web flattened, homogenized, and learned how to profit from our online interactions.²⁴

THE THING also reminds us that with a PC, the right software, a phone line, and a modem, *in theory* anyone could not just participate in but help build this consensual hallucination. And perhaps it's exactly this vision of cyberspace that we can bring back to 2020: small, vibrant online communities - like those exemplified by mesh networks - that are independently/communally owned and managed, whose technical infrastructure is intentionally modest, and whose slowness is fully embraced. These are not just "other" networks - they are slow networks whose refusal of Silicon Valley's relentless, fast-paced push to own the future aligns them more with the "tempos of democracy" which are, for Zuboff, "slow by design, weighted by redundancies, checks and balances, laws and rules." Ironically, the cyberspace of tomorrow may be one that is one that didn't even exist in the early 90s - one that is firmly grounded in time, space, and in the mechanisms that create a citizenry.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Michael Connor for his wise and helpful feedback on this essay. Thank you as well to Andrew Brandt for finding a copy of a TBBS manual and to Jason Scott for his continued willingness to point me to BBS-related resources on the Internet Archive. I would also like to thank W. Patrick McCray for reading an early draft of this essay. Finally, I am grateful to Wolfgang Staehle for his willingness to answer my many questions about THE THING as well as to Rhizome/New Museum for their continued care for and engagement with THE THING, for all these years.

¹ Quoted in Joshua Kopstein, "'The Thing' Redialed: how a BBS changed the art world and came back from the dead." *The Verge*. 15 March 2013.

² Wolfgang Staehle. "The Thing questions / partly about TBBS set up." Email, 20 July 2020.

³ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York (Public Affairs Books, 2019), 9.

⁴ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*. New York (Ace Books, 2004), 51.

⁵ Charles Warren, "REPLY TO MSG# 7096 (THE TOUR CONTINUES.)" THE THING. 04-18-93.

⁶ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago, IL (U Chicago P), 2006.

⁷ Michael Heim, "The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace." *Cyberspace: First Steps*. Ed. Michael Benedikt (1991): 59, 73.

⁸ Kevin Driscoll, "[Re-Calling the Modem World: The Dial-Up History of Social Media](#)."

⁹ Jeff Harrington, "REPLY TO MSG# 520 (ART SUCKS! BEAUTY'S COOL ;-)." THE THING. 09-23-93.

¹⁰ Morgan Garwood, "LAPTOPS." THE THING. 04-01-93.

¹¹ RUMPLESTILTSKIN, "PRO CHOICE." THE THING. 05-26-92.

¹² Blackhawk, "REPLY TO MSG# 277 (NEW FORA)." THE THING. 04-04-92.

¹³ Philip L. Beck and Alan Bryant. *The Bread Board System User Manual, Version 2.2M(Multi-Line)*. (Philip L. Becker Ltd, 1991), 2-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 1-58.

¹⁵ BRATTYSLAVIA, "ONE LITTLE PROBLEM." THE THING. 03-18-93.

¹⁶ SYSOP, "DEMYSTIFICATION." THE THING. 07-16-92.

¹⁷ SYSOP, "QUOTING." THE THING. 07-16-92.

¹⁸ Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*. Minneapolis, MN (U Minnesota P, 2014).

¹⁹ Daniel Pinchbeck, "REPLY TO MSG# 183 (BROCHURE Q&A)." THE THING. 08-05-93.

²⁰ SCHAEFER, "REPLY TO MSG# 2153 (RE: ART WORLD ORDERS)." THE THING. 09-26-92.

²¹ BLACKHAWK, "DIFFERENT SYSTEMICS." THE THING. 03-20-93.

²² Sabine BV, "SYMP." THE THING. 06-27-92.

²³ Susanne Gerber, "Crossing-Over of Art History and Media History in the Times of the Early Internet - with Special Regard to THE THING NYC." *Social Media Archaeology and Poetics*. Ed. July Malloy. Boston, MA (MIT UP, 2016), 313.

²⁴ Michael Heim, "The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace." 59, 73.