SV

SWIRL INTO SPRING!

Fashion 2000 is pretty, witty and bright. **By Mary Gottschalk**

GET REAL Paulina Borsook on why virtuality is bosh   GO FISH Laurie Daniel on why anchovies are great—except on pizza

MY FATHER WAS a very creative driver, and used to sail through stop signs on the quiet streets of Pasadena where I grew up. When queried about his behavior, he'd say, "stop signs are for the *goyim.*" Meaning, stop signs are for the gentiles, for those Other People, but they don't apply to *me.*

It's a good metaphor for understanding what goes on in the valley now, regarding the notion of "virtuality." Virtuality is not the idea that we are possessed of Plato's ideal of virtue, but the notion that we in high tech are dissociated from the constraints of time and space, and it doesn't matter where we all are—everything meaningful (entertainment, social life, shopping, education) does or should happen online.

The MIT Media Lab's Nicholas Negroponte, early investor in and former end-paper writer for "Wired" magazine, used to philosophize that our glorious new world to come was of bits, not atoms, and that we would all, Real Soon Now, cast off the surly bonds of Earth.

Wrong. Everyone wants to work and live *here*, in Silicon Valley. Secretly, everyone knows what really matters is what happens in the real world, and that what goes on in that other virtual world ranks less. John Lennon said that nine-tenths of life consists of showing up. You really do have to be there. Virtuality is bosh. And here's why:

Work

If virtuality weren't bosh, University of California, Berkeley, professor Anna-Lee Saxenian wouldn't have written an entire book called "Regional Advantage" about the conditions unique to Silicon Valley that give it supremacy over its historically privileged rival, Massachusetts' Route 128. And Silicon Alley and Silicon Prairie and Silicon Shamrock and a hypothetical future Silicon Great Frozen Taiga wouldn't be other than the distant also-rans that they are.

REAL TIME

"Virtuality" is a valley buzzword. And guess what: It's bosh.

By Paulina Borsook
Illustration by Jo Rivers

Venture capitalists wouldn't insist that firms have headquarters within a half hour of their offices, and new VC firms wouldn't kill to have headquarters with a Palo Alto address or on Sand Hill Road. Getting actual face time with a VC wouldn't be considered such a coup. And VCs wouldn't be so adamant about hiring executives who have been with a company that went public, or who have worked at name-brand companies or educational institutions. You need to have gotten that MBA from Harvard or worked at Yahoo in the early years.

Entire start-ups wouldn't up and move from New Jersey or British Columbia to the valley.
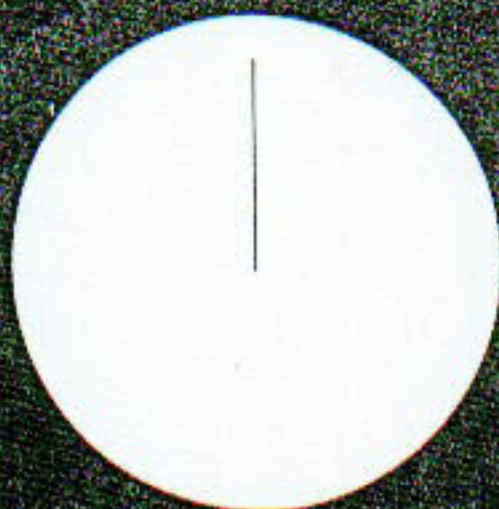
High tech wouldn't always be lobbying to raise the number of H1B visas—after all, theoretically you could program just as well in Sri Lanka as Mountain View.

Start-ups wouldn't insist that staffers spend long hours *in the office.*

Valley companies wouldn't reward their employees with lavish entertainments and Christmas parties, with live music provided by real singers and comedians in the flesh.

Incubators, where small start-ups share resources and informal collaboration in the physical world, wouldn't exist. Academia and industry would not do their intricate dance, in which businesses spin out of close-by industries.

Round Zero and Webgrrls

teous well-trained drivers and fork-lifts and skilled sous-chefs and warehouse management. Kozmo is about humans on bicycles and the craving for Mars candy bars. None of these assets is virtual.

Travel

Advances in communications technology have always led to advances in travel: *We have heard about you people and your lands, and we want to see for ourselves! Or we miss you and we miss you and we will drop on by!*

The paperless office has created inconceivably greater amounts of paper, and places such as Kinko's—where *paper*, the artifact of the virtual worlds of PowerPoint and desktop publishing, gets duplicated onto more paper—flourish as never before. Similarly, because e-mail has made it easier to stay in touch with people far away, you

and Grace-net, where people go to network, would not continue to rise and rise; industry meat-markets such as Demo and TED, or Esther Dyson's and Dick Shaffer's conferences, would not be thriving.

The Internet Engineering Task Force, the all-volunteer organization of geeks who determine the future technology of the Net, wouldn't meet (rotating from East Coast location to West Coast location to other-than-U.S. location) three times a year. Participants share many fine lunches and dinners, and as is universally acknowledged, all the real work gets done in the hallways. If anyone understands both the beauties and the limitations of doing things online, it's these guys.

The Bay Area wouldn't have replaced Wall Street as the No. 1 destination for graduating MBAs—and MBAs wouldn't be moving out here in packs whether or not they have jobs already lined up.

> John Lennon says that nine-tenths of life consists of showing up. You really do have to be there.

Two of the Web's biggest success stories, Amazon.com and eBay—wouldn't rely on *shipping*. Amazon doesn't download books electronically, and if people didn't care about tennis bracelets or Pez dispensers—non-virtual stuff—there would be no eBay.

The much-celebrated Webvan is about the internal combustion engine and cour-

VIRTUALITY

are more likely to want to travel to see them, or to get to know and maybe even work with people far away that you wouldn't have met before—and travel to see them, too.

Videoconferencing would have replaced business travel—never mind that no one likes how she or he looks on video. I want the convenience of *you* appearing on my computer monitor when I feel like talking to you, but *I* don't want to give up my business trip to New York.

There wouldn't be, comparing 1996 to 2000, suddenly a lot more timely, cheap, and non-stop flights between San Jose and Austin, home of Dell and Motorola, and . . .

It wouldn't be surpassingly difficult to get a hotel room in the valley during the business week, and new hotels wouldn't be going up.

San Francisco International Airport wouldn't have just needed to go through its $2.4 billion expansion, creating a capacity of 24 international gates. And there wouldn't be serious discussion about buying Cargill's $300 million South Bay salt ponds for wetlands remediation so SFO could build another runway for when fog socks in the airport.

There wouldn't be talk of creating a new trans-bay bridge south of San Francisco, and commuter trains north from the valley wouldn't be booked up as soon as they are put into service.

Mass transit and affordable housing wouldn't be on the agenda of the Santa Clara Manufacturers Association.

Telecommuting wouldn't be a privilege that's earned or negotiated for—except for that small class of genius coder-monkeys (who code from anywhere) or session-musician-type consultants who have always jetted around anyway. Consider the gripes the Merc's "Mr. Roadshow" received about valley commuters enraged about being stuck behind gravel trucks as both cars and industrial vehicles made their way over Highway 17. If virtuality weren't bosh, people wouldn't be commuting, they'd be *telecommuting!* They wouldn't care where they lived, because after all, it's all bits and not atoms, so why live in former sleepy surf-town Santa Cruz instead of suburban Campbell? And after all, we shouldn't need gravel, because who actually needs bridges, buildings, and roads like Highway 17?

Education

Where would you rather your child attended high school: Nueva Academy in the gorgeous Crocker mansion with views toward the bay or an online home-school operation?

Whom would you rather hire, the woman with the Wharton MBA or the one with the online degree from the University of Phoenix? Which would make you feel more confident about your son's future: a computer science degree from Stanford or an online certificate, say, from UC Extension?

Families wouldn't hock their patrimonies so their children can attend colleges and professional schools where tuition runs to about $30,000 per year—for the ineffable advantage of actually *being* on campus at Cornell or Brown or Harvard's Kennedy School.

Home

It wouldn't be the case that in December 1998 there were approximately 13,000 homes for sale in Santa Clara county, and in December 1999 there were approximately 1,000. And it wouldn't require a household income of about $175,000 to afford a median house in the county.

Hectare after hectare of prime agricultural land from Gilroy to Merced to beyond Tracy wouldn't be turning into tract housing.

There wouldn't be bitter fights about tear-downs in Palo Alto and Menlo Park: If the particulars of how you are situated in the world don't matter, why should you care what happens to your neighborhood? And if it doesn't really matter where you are, why should you care what your house is actually *like?*

There also wouldn't be the small but acrimonious battles over leaf blowers, as there have been all over the Peninsula: People wouldn't care about pesky real-world manifestations like noise and pollution, and groundskeepers wouldn't care, in terms of how their hourly wage is diminished, how long it actually takes to do the physical labor of cleaning up a yard manually.

VIRTUALITY

Social life

There wouldn't be the proliferating high-tech social institution of weekly or monthly Interesting People dinners (by invitation only) where people actually get together to talk in real time.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation and Craigslist wouldn't host parties.

People would neither get dressed up for, nor actually attend, the Webbies.

The high-end travel services wouldn't employ people—as opposed to bots. Just as people who have made it can now afford to

have *people* (investment managers, personal assistants), as opposed to software, to aid them in their lives.

It's hoi polloi who always have to be answerable to their e-mail and beepers and cell-phones; the elite get the privilege of leading non-virtual lives, i.e., with the implicit accessory of an assistant/servant class that filters and routes most communications *by hand.*

There wouldn't be such a market for books about high-tech business and high-tech businesspeople. Writing a book wouldn't be a sign of having arrived in the valley—nor would having one written about you, your company or your investment play be considered a fine PR strategy. There's status in

having a manifestation of your ideas and your success in the real world (a magazine, a book,) instead of just on the Web or in a pdf file.

The high-tech landscape

And to bring up what's often considered a minor consideration: Why has microprocessor production increasingly moved to locations (Idaho, Malaysia) where land is cheaper and environmental regulations are more lax if their manufacture didn't have a real, and non-virtual, impact on the world? Why are there so many Superfund sites in the valley? And why is the Packard Foundation spending $175 million over the next five

years in the effort to preserve open space if humans don't need to be in contact with the natural world and if population pressures aren't critical? And if more than 10 percent of the electric capacity in the U.S. power grid is used to run computers, just how does that electricity get generated?

Virtuality is bosh. Virtuality is for those Other People who don't get to be here in the middle of our omphalos of the high-tech world. Virtuality is for the *goyim.* 🔲

PAULINA BORSOOK
is the author of "Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High-Tech," which will be published this spring.