On March 19, California governor Gavin Newsom announced the first statewide shelter-in-place order in the United States. The next day, Nintendo’s Animal Crossing: New Horizons launched and quickly became a hit as players the world over prepared to isolate in their homes. And almost exactly twenty-five years earlier, on March 10, 1995 Microsoft launched the ill-fated Microsoft Bob.

Bob was personally friendly and user-friendly; that was his job. Bob had been designed as a guide to bring the vast majority of Americans who had not yet entered the digital age into the fold. Bob presented users with a fully simulated environment, in this case a house which contained all the tools and accoutrements necessary to take care of the household affairs. To access their calendar, the user would click on the calendar hanging on the wall. To balance the checkbook, simply select the black bag sporting a golden dollar sign. The user could even explore the house through simple navigational elements. The public family room granted access to the same programs as the private rooms but allowed for cross-user interaction; it also contained a tasteful fireplace. Gates himself saw Bob as the first step toward agent-based computer interaction wherein the human user engaged with the computer in human terms: experientially, socially, and spatially.

Bob represented a particular socio-technical imaginary that saw the future of computing as bending toward the human lifeworld rather than vice-versa; not for nothing did Microsoft originally call the project “Utopia.” Bob would have been the first step toward what philosopher Don Ihde (1990) calls an “embodied relation” with cyberspace, where cyberspace simulates the natural shape of the human sensorium. This was the mid-90s, after all, at the height of cyberspace mania where the exciting future of computing was the wholly immersive cyber-
worlds promised by William Gibson novels, Neil Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, and any number of cheesy cyberpunk films like *Johnny Mnemonic*, also based on a Gibson story. Bob was a rudimentary version of what I think of as the VR paradigm; not VR in the sense we think of it now, but an embodied vision of computing.

Microsoft Bob was also a profound failure. The cognoscenti so used to command-line interfaces and (begrudgingly) desktop metaphors almost universally derided what they saw as Bob’s infantilizing visual scheme. In his book *Interface Culture*, FEED webzine editor Steven Johnson (1999) claimed that “Somewhere along the way the good faith of user-friendly metaphors had been replaced with the hysteria of total simulation” (p. 60). The disdain dripping from the phrase “hysteria of total simulation” speaks to the total dominance of what Ihde calls “hermeneutic relations.” Where embodied technics expand upon the body’s natural extensions and senses, the hermeneutic technology is abstract; it must be read. The embodied Bob was quietly swept under the rug and the hermeneutic desktop spread unchecked.

Yet in the past two months the VR paradigm has enjoyed mainstream attention in a way it has not for years. From the 2000s through today the VR paradigm survived almost entirely through gaming and the relatively brief, bright light that was *Second Life*. Yet almost any event you can imagine has in the last sixty days taken place in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Students have graduated in *Animal Crossing* (Groux, 2020), couples have married (Garst, 2020), and museums have been toured (Carpenter, 2020). More recently, players have even brought protests into *Animal Crossing’s* ambit (Jackson, 2020). None of these uses of a virtual world are novel in themselves; people have married in MMOs since the time of MUDs. What’s different now is the mainstream popularity of social experiences through VR interfaces.

So what do *Microsoft Bob* and Tom Nook have to say to one another now that I’ve brought them face to face? In the interest of space, I’ll only offer three possibilities. Firstly, that the VR paradigm always faced certain internal limitations, yes (Bob had a bottomless hunger for memory and VR is expensive) but what has always kept it down has more to do with social and
cultural priorities. Put simply: the speed of the world of work demanded a streamlined human-computer relationship. The pandemic slowed that world down. Second, that there is real human comfort to be found in an embodied cyberspace. Compare the experiences people have shared in Animal Crossing – a real space to be lived in - with their rising discontent with the shallowness and manipulation inherent to flat, click-based platforms like Facebook. And third, it is possible that the pandemic has forced people to reappraise the VR paradigm of virtual space. Just as COVID may represent a turning point in the academy’s relationship with online learning, we may be experiencing a cultural inflection point with the VR paradigm. Once the world re-opens the pace of late-capitalist life will pick up again, certainly, but consider too the inevitable recession. In the midst of rampant unemployment and intensifying political alienation, embodied virtual spaces could continue to act as comforting social oases in the days to come.

1 VR never died, of course, but aside from the utopian hopes academics and transhumanists attached to Second Life, no general purpose embodied virtual realm has ever truly gained a foothold.

Works Cited


