Digital Media and the Wild Imagination [1]

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TW Column by Martha Nichols

Why We Still Need the Real World



There's nothing like a thirteen-year-old to get a parent raving about the evils of technology. In other cultures and epochs, a kid the age of my son would be making fire and shooting real arrows. But in twenty-first-century America, the technology that worries me is all about virtual reality on a screen.

The irony is, I like digital media. And I remember being thirteen, too, escaping into reading and writing, conjuring worlds that existed only inside my head. Much as I love a good hike, I prefer a good book.

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But lately I've felt restless in DigiLand, troubled by something more pernicious than the fact of kids glued to screens. I've tried to convince myself new technologies will help my son's generation address mega-problems like climate change. But I also question how people growing up with smart phones learn about the real world, especially when so much of what they share online is derivative.

When I first saw *Avatar*, James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster film, I was awed by that imaginary landscape of blue humanoids. Yet, the story is banal, degenerating into Military Baddies exterminating Noble Savages. I ended up resenting *Avatar*'s virtual reality—the feeling of actually sitting in the jungle, as if I could reach out and touch a creeping vine—because all the details had been imagined for me. What should have felt rich and strange was anything but transformative.

The gorgeous computer graphics that fuel so many virtual landscapes often disguise the same old attitudes about machines and nature. Worse, they trap us in the narrow worldview of those who dominate the high-tech industry: young white guys. Digital technology has enabled the human mind to fly free, but not freely enough—not in the wild, unplanned ways that might free a few actual human beings.

The razzle-dazzle of screen life is entertaining, of course, but that's not the only hook. Part of the allure is the promise that technology can solve everything from failing schools to drought and plagues of locusts. Silly as this sounds, fantasies about how to perfect humanity keep surfacing with each crop of wealthy entrepreneurs.



Consider Sam Frank's cover story in *Harper's* this January about being "among the apocalyptic libertarians of Silicon Valley." For decades, Frank writes, a certain kind of nerd has "imagined a world made out of code, one in which politics is an engineering problem and every person is a master of atoms and bits."

Frank, a cofounder of the arty online magazine *Triple Canopy*, admits to the peculiar pull of this evergreen meme even as he finds "the rhetoric repellant." The summer before last, he says, he attended the Global Future 2045 International Congress, which was "funded by a Russian new-money type who wanted to accelerate 'the realization of cybernetic immortality.'" Frank summarizes the predictions of keynote speaker Ray Kurzweil, director of engineering at Google, like so:

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> Circa 2045…, we will blend with our machines; we will upload our consciousness into them.

I'm not part of the futurist elite, but it seems to me I came across the brain-in-a-box idea—not to mention a pseudo Garden of Eden of simple villagers who feed a hidden computer "god"—watching reruns after school of the original *Star Trek.* Much as I mourn the recent passing of Leonard Nimoy, it was hokey in the 1970s. In "Spock's Brain," the Vulcan's wetware is harvested and hooked up to a computer to run an underground city of women who are too dumb to understand the technology themselves. In this episode, which first aired in 1968, Spock is led around like a zombie until he's finally reunited with his brain—but only after Dr. McCoy dons what amounts to a hardware thinking cap in order to perform the surgery.

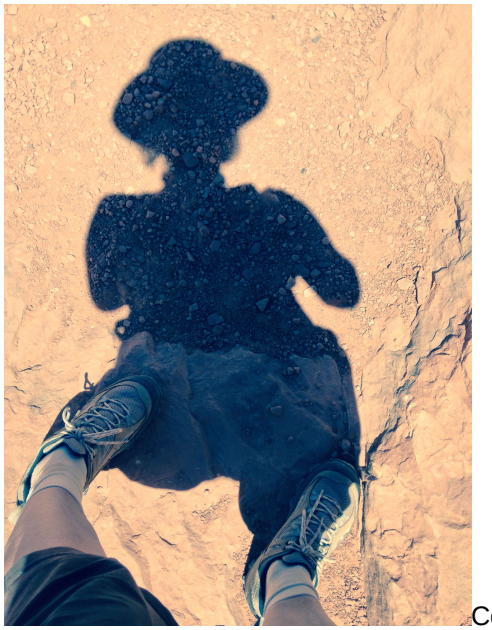
Alas, most of the people who create the technologies we increasingly rely on aren't cultural visionaries. In the way-back time of macramé and flower children, at least the tension between Man and Machine was obvious on a show like *Star Trek*. But these days, even many non-nerds seem to take the superiority of computers for granted. Witness the post-millennial "life hacking" trend. A recent *Psychology Today* feature, "Building the Perfect Day," is typical:

> We now know that with a handful of hacks, both large and small…, we can reconstruct our 16 waking hours to maximize productivity, leisure, and connection, while restoring alignment with our core chronobiological instincts.

When a standard self-help article takes on the language of computer science, I feel a chill. Now, we're all supposed to be agents of change, passionately pitching our ideas for saving the world—for a payoff. "Passion" in this context has little to do with emotion. Forget any kind of messiness like love, grief, or making art for no money.

I'm far from the only one questioning the impact of digital living, thank God. On a recent pass through an airport bookstore, I found Andrew Keen's *The Internet Is Not the Answer* prominently displayed. Just a few corporations own and control much of today's digital media. "The new networked economy is making most of us poorer," Keen writes. "Rather than creating more competition, this digital disruption is a principal cause of our structural unemployment crisis."

Beyond the ongoing bad news about the economic power divide, however, I feel a strong need to exist outside the virtual reality we're collectively creating. Despite all the natural metaphors—clouds, cobwebs, viruses, hives—the digital realm can seem as devoid of wilderness as a meadow that's been bulldozed.



Connecting any kind of media with wilderness may seem odd, but as John

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Durham Peters frames it in his forthcoming book *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, “To understand media we need to understand fire, aqueducts, power grids, seeds, sewage systems, DNA, mathematics, sex, music, daydreams, and insulation.”

Creative manipulation of the world is as natural to humans as walking upright, Peters argues, which means technology inevitably affects the way we conceive of nature, wilderness, and the most basic biological facts of life. In a chapter called “God and Google,” he observes toward the end of the book:

> In 2013 Google started a company aiming to ‘solve death,’ putting it on the wrong side of the sages. What would we be without death and forgetting, and without the willingness to abandon all our carefully accumulated material vessels of memory and immortality? Could our storage-crazy moment grasp the lesson that the worst thing to happen would be to lose loss?

Facing death is the biggest existential wilderness there is. Part of being human is to exist within time, to worry about being forgotten. Theoretically, then, those in search of cybernetic immortality could change the nature of time-bound existence—a notion that makes me want to pitch my computer out a window.

But if there’s one thing a wide-ranging book like *The Marvelous Clouds* gives me, it’s hope. Peters, a communications professor at the University of Iowa, takes a long view of media development—of empires rising and falling since the invention of graves to mark the dead—making clear why new media sometimes feels so old:

> The world is still mad, smart people make catastrophically boneheaded choices, Wednesday afternoon is still Wednesday afternoon…. Digital media have not abolished bills, backaches, or crummy weather—to say nothing of rape, poverty, or scorn.

After fifty-odd years of living, I know that human experience is disorderly, even chaotic, trailing past mistakes, jokes, regrets, accidents, and unconscious assumptions. Yet, it’s those “catastrophically boneheaded choices” that make for great stories and art, not hacking our passions into search terms and tweets.

This morning, I paid more attention than usual to my screensaver, a set of nature images that came with my MacBook Air. I’d set them to run in a tiled pattern: the swimming polar bear whose reflection looks like a cloud, a tropical bird with jewel-tone feathers. They’re very pretty, but I know I’ll change them soon. With their saturated colors, arranged in perfectly edged tiles that shift on a screen, they aren’t nature. More than that, though, they aren’t *my* nature photos, which are linked by memory and feeling to what I was doing when I snapped them in the real world.

My son distorts his own pictures with goofy effects in iPhoto; he plays his flute along with a YouTube karaoke version of “Chandelier.” He gets bored in a heartbeat. He’s a creature of his digital time, and I delight in his ingenuity. I just don’t want him sinking into the morass of crowdsourcing, of dumbed-down “likes” and look-at-me performances that so much of digital media entails. There’s power in our collective creation, no doubt, but the virtual realm also feeds on itself. It faces inward not outward, a bunch of disembodied heads watching each other.

Imagination may seem like an ever-renewing resource, but it’s not. Imagination needs plenty of unplanned hours and open space, and it will starve if the conditions aren’t right. The truly wild imagination requires the conflict inherent in living among those who aren’t just a reflection of you. And to grow, it needs something rarely encouraged by screen life—a tolerance for whatever untracked wildernesses emerge.

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Publishing Information

- "Come with Us If You Want to Live" [5] by Sam Frank, *Harper's*, January 2015.
- "Building the Perfect Day" [6] by Holly Pevzner, *Psychology Today*, January 2015.
- *The Internet Is Not the Answer* [7] by Andrew Keen (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015).
- *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* [8] by John Durham Peters (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Art Information

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Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief of *Talking Writing*. Just as she was finishing this column, Leonard Nimoy passed away, prompting her to write a TW tribute: "Mr. Spock Was My First Crush." [9]

Martha also nods to *H Is for Hawk*, Helen Macdonald's acclaimed 2014 memoir and natural history of goshawks. Macdonald beautifully conveys the connection between nature and humans. Here, she describes the Brecklands near Cambridge, England:

> It's not an untouched wilderness like a mountaintop, but a ramshackle wildness in which people and the land have conspired to strangeness.

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