H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dinty W. Moore. *The Emperor's Virtual Clothes: The Naked Truth about Internet Culture.* Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1995. xviii + 219 pp. $17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56512-096-9.

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Published on H-PCAACA (September, 1995)

This book is scheduled for release in September. Its timing is perfect. Many of our grandparents now have e-mail accounts at America Online. Windows 95 has been hyped beyond any other commercial product in memory except Michael Jackson's HIStory . Digital Emperor Gates was recently declared "the world's richest man" by *Forbes* magazine. Computers are now pulsing with colors and sounds that have made them seductive companions for classrooms, living rooms, airline seats. Electronic gurus like John Perry Barlow have declared that the Internet "is the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire." (quoted at 197) Has somebody been spiking our ether?

Let me digress to remind about the computer's trajectory through popular culture. Computers were giant and malevolent brains in films like *Gog*(1954), *The Invisible Boy*(1957), *Alphaville*(1965), and *Logan's Run*(1976). *Dr Strangelove* (1964) presented "The Doomsday Machine" as the ultimate world-destroying technology. *2001: Space Odyssey* gave us Hal the Robot, who turned against its managers. *Colossus: the Forbin Project (1970) portrays a maniacal, god-aspiring machine. But by 1977 (the year of Apple Computer's birth in a humble garage),* Star Wars *gave us the loveable R2D2 and CThreepio. They have been followed by other huggable computers whose loyal service has expressed the populist dream of computer-empowered masses. (If you don't believe me, just get Microsoft's* Cinemania_ Cd-rom and search for films about computers.) Dinty Moore–not a nom de plume and not named for the beef stew–and his friend Henry David Thoreau may be just the guides that many students of popular culture will need at this moment of electronic cultural ecstasy. Moore has been skeptically attentive to some of the millenarian fervor. But rather than giving us a Luddite rant with Thoreau as his tiny chorus, Moore has navigated the terrain of electronic space gently, sympathetically. He has taken a series of representative electronic domains and charted the features and native behaviors experientially.

Moore's unstated rule is that he will not write about any Internet phenomenon that he has not directly experienced himself. This leads to awkward moments, as when Thoreau urges him to find a virtual partner and have some cybersex, but Moore dutifully performs and then reports the resulting sensation (disappointing, but hilarious). In these areas where he is a novitiate, he also supplements his understanding by conversing with those who have sacrificed hours (and sometimes careers) to networked communication.

Moore's chapters cover subjects such as electronic mail, community bulletin boards, spamming, flaming, MUSHes (Multi-User-Shared-Hallucinations) and MUDs (Multi-User-Dungeons), usenet groups, and the Newt-vaunted electronic democracy. He also provides an appendix of "Internet Jargon." His aim, in addition to evaluating the culture significance of electronic social relationships, is to provide elementary background information to those who do not know about the domains he interprets.

Moore is a consistently amusing, deadpan internaut. Adding value to his wry, usually deflating comments are extensive quotations from the bulletin boards and from confidential electronic correspondences between people maintaining therapeutic or romantic relationships on the Internet.(This material is quoted with the permission of the subjects.) Because of its precision in providing ethnographic data about Internet behavior, this book will be valuable for as long as anyone cares about what people did and said. It is a series of cultural snapshots that will invite interpretation for decades. Many of his extended citations will seem alien in tone, vocabulary and syntax to readers who have not traveled the same electronic roads. But that is precisely its documentary value.

Moore's analysis of electronic democracy is wonderfully commonsensical, as he sends a frivolous message about his neighbor's theory of lawn mower clippings to president@White House.gov and receives the unthinking, automated nonsense that one would expect of a

"wired White House" that pretends to be electronically responsive to netizens. One of Moore's questions is "if the Internet only gives us greater access to our elected officials' press releases and public statements, and not to our elected officials, how the hell is it going to change the world?" (125) The question itself refutes any likely answer.

Moore would have us choose between a revolutionary or an assimilationist interpretation of the Internet. "I searched the electronic woods for all of these enormous, world shattering, status-quo-upsetting changes. I looked and looked until my eyeballs would no longer focus, but I just didn't find proof. Instead… what I found was that the Internet and all its clever bells and whistles are rapidly being assimilated *into* our world." (200) On the whole, I agree. But my reservation about this conclusion of *The Emperor's Virtual Clothes* is that Moore says little about the inspiring transformation of scholarly communication of the sort that we have experienced within H-net. I believe that the Internet has shown the potential to democratize and internationalize scholarly discussion and publication on a scale comparable to the invention of printing press. But that's my book, not Dinty W. Moore's. If you want a whimsical talisman that will help you keep calm amidst the current electronic frenzy, read this book. And do a favor for our puzzled progeny by saving it where they can find it.

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Citation: John S. Lawrence. Review of Moore, Dinty W., *The Emperor's Virtual Clothes: The Naked Truth about Internet Culture.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. September, 1995.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=160

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