

The slang expression “whatever” distills the essential situation into a single gesture. It arose and caught on because it captures so precisely, yet so flexibly, the Janus-faced attitude we assume as we negotiate the field of options that so incessantly solicit our attention and allegiance.

On the one hand, it’s a party, a feast, an array of possible experiences more fabulous than monarchs of the past could even dream of—it’s “whatever,” as in yippee!, as in *whatever* you want, whatever you can imagine; you can eat whatever, see whatever, hear whatever, read whatever, even *be* whatever. “No limits,” as the SUV and Internet ads all promise.

On the other hand, an environment of representations yields an aura of surface—as in “surf.” *It is a world of effects*. This is another existential consequence of the fact that representations address us by design. We are at the center of all the attention, but there is a thinness to things, a smoothness, a muffled quality—it’s all insulational, as if the deities of Dreamworks were laboring invisibly around us, touching up the canvas of reality with digital airbrushes. Everything has the edgeless flowing feel of computer graphics, like the lobby of a high-end Marriott/Ramada/Sheraton—the sculptured flower arrangements, that glowy, woody, marbly, purply, cushioned-air quality. Every gadget aspires to that iPod look—even automobiles. The feel of the virtual is overflowing the screens, as if the plasma were leaking into the physical

world. Whole neighborhoods feel like that now, even when you're standing in the street.

Especially "historic" neighborhoods. It's as if the famous ones—like Baltimore's Inner Harbor and Quincy Market, parts of York and Canterbury—have all been subjected to the renovating ministrations of the same giant company with one idea, the Red Brick, Gray Stone, and Iron Filigree Restoration Corporation. And as for little towns and villages with some claim—*any* claim—on our attention, well, I wish I had the copyright for those signs, painted in Ralph Lauren green or blue with the gold trim and the gold inlay of Gothic script. I mean, how did so many people in so many places decide to hang those out at the same time? Was that Martha Stewart's fault too?

Even what's left of the wilderness can have this virtual feel (see chapter 6). It's as if nature were succumbing to all the times it has been depicted in travel tales and adventure movies and nature shows, to all the times it has been toured and photographed and otherwise used—not, in this case, for raw material, but to provide an experience.

Here's a measure of how far into the natural realm virtualization has penetrated—one of my favorites, cross-indexed under Subtle. At the little zoo in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, one building is given over to a sequence of exhibits that illustrate the concept of an ecological niche—you know, flora and fauna from a rain forest, an Alpine meadow, a desert, a wetland, etc. Very educational. Perfect place for bio students on a field trip. And guess what the Prospect Park Zoo calls the building that houses this exhibit?

"The Hall of Animal Lifestyles."

I just love that one. Options everywhere—even animals have options.

And that's why, like so many expressions of mediation, the "whatever" gesture is a dialectic. As reality and representation fuse into a field of options, opposing tendencies arise like shadows. Haunting the

moment of “I can experience whatever I want” is the moment of “What difference does it make,” because this moment, the moment of the shrug, is essential to our mobility among the options.

We need mobility among the options because they are only representations.

And that means they are no more than they appear to be.

And so they are never enough.

And that’s why more is on the way. Always. That’s why trailers are better than movies. That’s why you are always already ready for the next show, even before this one is over. That’s why, in the midst of a fabulous array of historically unprecedented and utterly mind-boggling stimuli—whatever.

So mobility among the options in a virtualized environment gives to human freedom a new and ironic character. You are completely free to choose because it doesn’t matter what you choose. That’s why you are so free. Because it doesn’t matter. How cool is that?

This is another source of virtualization’s edgeless quality. It’s as if you live in a nested set of consoles, each with its own Undo and Rewind buttons. The notorious disposability of commodities is an aspect of this, of course, but, in a mediated world, disposability goes way beyond the physical. This isn’t just about paper cups and plastic bottles and Pampers. Take relationships (see chapter 5). The word “committed” now means something like “throw your whole self into it and hope it works out.” As opposed to “for better or worse, no matter what,” which is what it used to mean.

So the real world, dissolving into optionality, is reconstituting itself on a plane that transcends ancient solidities of nature and custom, craft and industry. The whole process, of which we have just afforded glimpses, has been accelerating since the invention of modern communication technologies (telegraph, photograph, telephone), and it crossed a qualitative threshold in the past couple of