> This version has been slightly updated as of 02/2020 to reflect that digital homes get destroyed, disappear, move. References have been added to elements that were common knowledge in 1995 and now need an explanation. The Internet just entered common awareness, smart phone have not yet been available, video conferencing was a geeky activity.

My Home is my Memory is my Home

Florian Brody

Is my home where my heart is or where my computer is?
Is home where I want to be or where I am?

With: Gustav Mahler, Alfred Polgar, Alan Ginsburg

In an environment where on one side properties become more and more important and on the other side our economic interests shift from objects to information, home is no longer defined by geographic coordinates but by the access path in an information net. Home is not only a shelter but also a communicative place where you can define at least some of the rules and feel secure.

Otherwise the home concept would not have had such success in programs like HyperCard[1] and on the Web as well as IRL[2] the safe place to get back to. In an environment that is messy by definition we need a place to go home, from where we can start out again.

No matter how you perceive home, it is always embedded in memories, and different technologies are used to maintain these memories and thus connect to home. Nevertheless, the home experience of the body is complementing the memory even when in a motel room with a laptop PC, living in a virtually- generated world results ultimately in alienation from the ego which disconnects you from the outside world (Schaff 1977). And connection to the net cannot replace the personal experience. The role of virtual reality systems is heavily debated as a replacement for the outside world. We do not know yet if our mind can adapt to a degree that we accept VR worlds as more real than real worlds. If we have memories there, we might begin to accept it and develop a form of belonging to it.

Cases of people reacting like machines have been described in literature as mental disorders, as in the case of Joey, a boy who believes he is a robot (Bettelheim, 1962).

Interaction and communication is in many ways assumed to be with the computer rather than through the computer, and human interface design encourages that (ct. Also Weizenbaum, 1976). And while the computer can serve as a memory place for 'home;' that is, a place to attach memories to.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HyperCard

[2] In Real Life: An Abbreviation that makes fun of itself by being used.

By analyzing the computer as a home two distinctive aspects have to be reviewed – the computer as a memory place and the computer as a communication device. While these two aspects cannot be separated in their usage, it seems to make sense to discuss them separately.

The computer as a memory place

The computer is more than a device sitting on my desk – it is the place for my memory, my memories and that is what home is all about.

The computer as a communication device

While two or more telephone lines at home is becoming standard in the US, Vienna is just moving the phone from the attic into the living room.

Many have pointed out that the telephone is the first electric VR machine, as you can talk to someone without having to see them, but what is more important here – and this holds true equally well for the computer – it extends the home. Avital Ronell in her Telephone Book asks: When does the telephone become what it is? It presupposes the existence of another telephone, somewhere, though it's a totality as apparatus, its singularity, is what we think of when we say 'telephone.' (Ronell 1989)

Home is used in many computer systems as an 'anchor' for orientation in complex environments. Whenever you get lost you go home.

>**help home**
>
>**Syntax: home**
>
>**Instantly teleports you to your designated home room. Initially, this room is the LEGO Closet (#109).**
>
>**You can change your designated home; see 'help @sethome' for details.**

(from: MediaMOO[3] Help System)

Meeting in strange places, specially inside a computer can be awkward at times. One suddenly realizes that all this Global Community chat is not made for people.

>**Guest smiles**
>
>**You say, "Isn't that weird - you sit in AMS and I In VIE and we meet in Boston, Mass"**
>
>**Guest laughs**
>
>**Guest says, "it is a bit awkward..."**

(excerpt from an original conversation in the LEGO/Logo Lab inside the MediaMOO.)

The Kaffeehaus Metaphor

The Kaffeehaus as Memory Place.

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[3] MediaMOO is a professional virtual community with its membership restricted to professionals in media research interested in exploring virtual text-based worlds. It [is] was at purple-crayon.Media.mit.edu 8888; additional information is at https://llk.media.mit.edu/papers/convergence.html

Vienna has the great advantage of a unique institution the Kaffeehaus, which has nothing to do with the café. You are neither at home nor in the open public; You are in your Kaffeehaus, in an environment known to you, where you are known, where you have information resources available[4] and partners to communicate with. It is similar to a networked environment - with the advantage that the agents are really intelligent and the coffee is good.

A whole literary style has emerged from authors working in the Kaffeehaus rather than at home. One of them, Alfred Polgar pointed out: In the Kaffeehaus you find people who want to be alone but need company to do that. And there are so many who hate the Kaffeehaus even though, or because, of the fact that it is somehow a home to them (Bernhard, 1982).

The Electronic Cafe

Electronic Cafes were around before the I-Way discussion heated up. Kit and Sheri opened their Electronic Café on 18th Street in Santa Monica many years ago, and it has been a template for many other similar locations around the world. Their activity is actually less that of a café but more of a meeting place of some sort of activist group in search of international connections. Their preferred technology was always the video telephone, a technology that never really hit the market as the bandwidth we have available - despite all arguments - is still very narrow. Still, black and white jerky video phones have their community around the world and serious sceptics are told that Bishop Tutu has one of those phones and so much for that!

Is the computer becoming more and more the defining environment in a non -communicative society, thus replacing neighbor-communication with long-distance communication via electronic devices?

Home is where you hang your head.

Home as a Place

Being at home is being in a known environment - and as much as home means something different for every reader of this text, we all know the feeling associated with it. It is more than a place to stay but not necessarily one's own apartment or castle. I will try to argue that the concept of home is losing its relation to the place we live in as the conceptual home moves towards a dynamic medium, away from paper and hooks and all the other things that surround us and define the space we live in.

While the mind-body discussion is still unsolved, home is getting more from where you hang your hat, or as Groucho puts it, your head, but where you hang (should read: plug-in) your mind. While home is still a place, it is less of a geographical and more of a conceptual place.

Home as an Address

Home is also the place where you can be located by others. While houses used to have no street address but a name that identified them, places like Brodie Castle near Elgin, named after the family, or houses like Zum blauen Schwan in Vienna, named after the house sign, today the location of houses has no more importance to get in contact with the people who live there.

Recently I saw a card that identified the coordinates of the owner by three numbers, the 9-digit ZIP code that identifies a PO-Box in the us, the telephone number, and the Compuserve[5] address:

> John Miller
> 90210-5499

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[4] Decent Kaffeehäuser not only offer the major newspaper of the world but also an encyclopedia and the waiter knows answers to most general and personal questions.

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CompuServe – obsolete private email service

(212) 555 1212
        100322, 9999

And while in small towns people still know where you live and can give you directions (turn right behind the red barn…) the basic conversation today is about how to send messages from Compuserve via Internet to some other system.

Getting in contact

Our relations are no longer networked to the other side of the street we live in (read: we put our body to bed every night) but via hyperlinks in virtual nets. Not only are we resuming a nomadic life style abandoned for very practical reasons many generations ago, we can also easily carry around many aspects of home in a laptop computer – and can be met at home in the most desirable places. A lot has been written about information junkies (Rheingold 1993) and their need for communication. The Global Village where we all get together is being used as a metaphor for the round table where we meet to discuss whatever moves us. Rheingold analyses the state of CMC (computer-mediated communication) and writes about the addicts on different systems: the Minitel in France, the campus networks, the XXX BBS (adults only) in the middle of nowhere. The feeling of logging into the WELL (4) for just a minute or two, dozens of times a day, is very similar to the feeling of peeking into the café, the pub, the common room, to see who's there (…) (ibid. p.26). It also has a similar devastating effect to one's agenda – you lose hours a day chatting away on interesting but not particularly critical issues. The most interesting aspect in all this discussion about global communities and worldwide information exchange is Rheingold's point, that the WELL works only for people who live in the area after all. Attending the annual WELL picnics has become an integral part of life on the net. Many discussions do not travel well and need a common cultural field. Home is more than a mailbox – it is the cultural environment that surrounds us – but not necessarily a geographic position.

The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link[6] is a Bay Area (San Francisco) based system that has gained cult status as the computer conferencing system to an extent that the art group Station Rose performs sessions about the WELL as art pieces. Rheingold's book The Virtual Community, Homesteading the Electronic Frontier, (Rheingold 1993) tells you everything you will ever want to know about the WELL and the people who have their home there.

My home is my Library

I am very often involved in discussions about the future of the book and if electronic media will kill the book. One of the reasons people are so concerned about the possible vanishing of books is their quality to make a home comfortable. For many of us, home is defined by books. Not only by books as a decorative item in a room, but by the book as an outside representation of mind. The transition of the hook from paper to a dynamic medium thus endangers our home concept. This is one of the reasons for irrational resistance to electronic books.

Locations revisited

The Art of Memory uses rules for places and rules of images not only to remember but also to create conceptual worlds: Constat igitur artificiosa memoria ex locis et imaginibus - and no matter (sic!) whether we sleep every night at a different place or continue to live in the room we were born for the rest of our days - the concept of home is what creates it, not the place alone - the memory that holds the traces that are constitutive, for home is built by images of places and places for images. (Yates 1969)

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[6] https://www.well.com/

Nothing to write home about? Even when away, home is still the place to write to - to get back to - but can you feel homesick for a home stack, a home card, or a homepage of a WWW server? Probably not, as none convey any feeling of being back home. On a home page you cannot touch the green, green grass of home. Home has changed in dimension but has not lost its magnetism. And while the phone has moved from a contraption in the attic to a commodity in the living room - preferably cordless - you feel the umbilical cord only when you stand freezing on the corner of Broadway and 14th fresh out of quarters.

Phone company ads live on mothers calling their babies - people getting in contact, staying in contact. Are we moving out of the restricted home, defined by geographic borders or are we moving in?

When you show up on the doorstep of an English manor it is quite possible that the butler may tell you Milady apologizes, she is not at home and you will have to wait until you get a nice card

Mr. and Mrs. John Miller
at home
on Saturday, November 5
from 4 pm

– you are not personally invited – you are being told that Mr. & Mrs. Miller will be at home and willing – if not happy – to see you. This is the way things still work – unless you meet for a chat in the Internet where social conventions are still very rudimentary - because of the code being restricted to ASCII. Don't leave home without it

The industry tells us that home is where we want to be and that they can help us feel at home, Home has become the ubiquitous word in every catalogue in every marketing campaign. Sony and others offer home entertainment, Microsoft created a home imprint suggesting that their CD-ROMs are for home use, communications companies help you stay in touch and credit card companies suggest a home abroad when needed.

Cars make great homes too: people sometimes prefer to 'live' in their car, even if it is not an RV or motor home, while retail statistics show that people spend

more money on their car stereo than on their home equipment. One of the reasons why we have favorite books is that we feel at home in them -.

Home inside a book bringing it all back home

"Ich fühl mich nicht Zuhause" – I don't feel at home – the feeling of not belonging here where one is is common upon Jews, especially in the Diaspora in Europe, where traditionally they have been on the run forever, living out of their suitcases. Gustav Mahler, the famous composer who, coming from a small Bohemian town with at that time a predominantly German- speaking population, who became world famous in Vienna, felt threefold homeless - as Bohemian among the Austrians, as Austrian among the Germans and as a Jew in the whole world. Ultimately home is not inside the books, not inside the house, but inside ourselves.

> Mother (to small child who wants the light left on): But you sleep fine in the dark at home, sweetheart.
> Child: Yes, but at home it's my own dark.
> — (Applewhite 1994)

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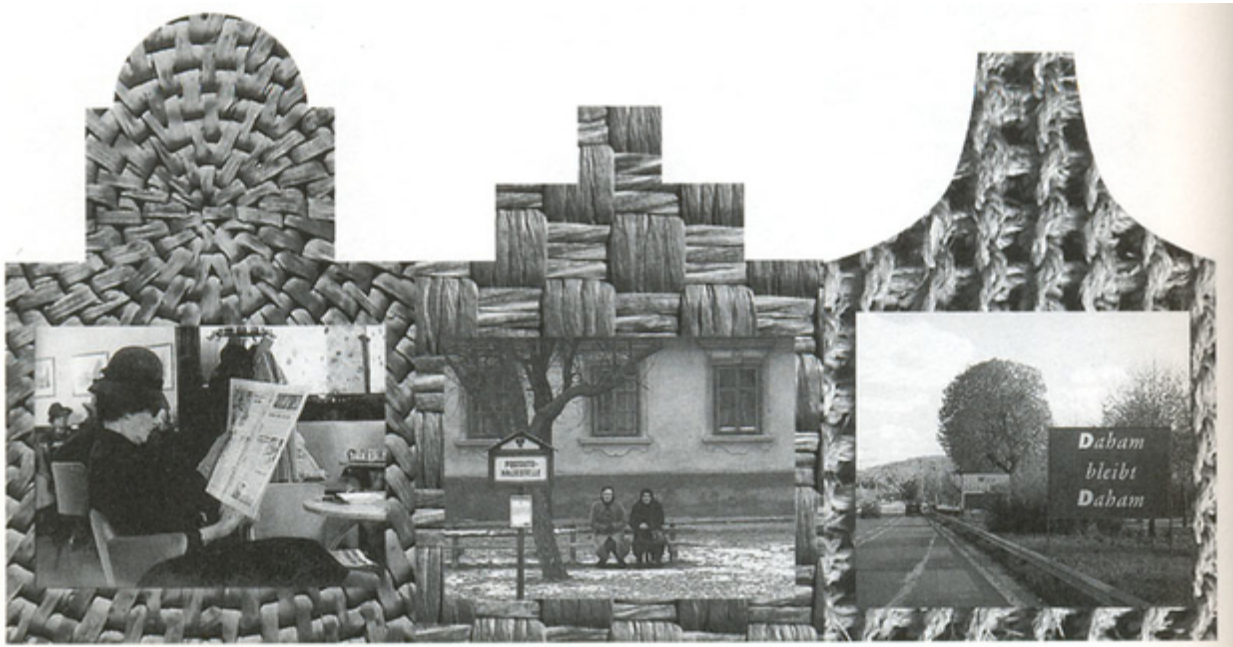
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