

## Reviews

**Release 2.0: A Design for Living in the Digital Age.** By Esther Dyson. New York: Broadway Books, 1997. 307 pp. Includes index and list of URLs.

While human nature remains the same, human institutions are deeply impacted by the advent of the Internet. Global yet decentralized, the Net is inherently transnational and profoundly transforms the ways we communicate. This prompts Esther Dyson to promise at the opening of her book to provide us with a design for living and to help us make sense of the changes that the Internet brings about in our role as citizens, rule makers, and community members.

Dyson has been described as the most powerful woman in the high tech world and named one of the most influential people in the American New Establishment. She is closely involved with the Electronic Frontier Foundation; advises Al Gore's National Information Infrastructure Council; writes for the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *Wired*, *Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*; runs the East-West High Tech Forum; and chairs her own company, EDventure Holdings, which focuses on emerging information technology worldwide. She is the publisher of the digital industry's monthly newsletter *Release 1.0* and the organizer of the annual European PC forum. She has powerful friends throughout the computer industry, as well as extensive knowledge of the Russian and East European computer industries and markets.

Confronted with such an impressive background, we cannot help but accept the invitation to live along with the author's uplifting entrepreneurial spirit and see the "web of trust" emerging out of her futurist vision.

The first sign of the things to come is the transformation that the Net brings into our communities, which are no longer restricted to a geographical location, and where cyberspace takes the place of real space. As the hierarchy in governance is no longer directly linked to physical space, we witness a power shift and an increased importance of self-government in cyberspace. While terrestrial governments should support but not take over electronic communities, Dyson insists they are responsible for distinguishing between commercial and non-profit activities on the Net, for protecting investors and consumers, as well as for ensuring that transparency and disclosure mechanisms are in place. Content control is a concern for terrestrial and cyberspace governments alike, and while in traditional politics Internet content regulation takes the shape of legislative acts such as the recent U.S. *Communications Decency Act*, Net governance should be more concerned to build reliable filtering tools and develop a system of decentralized ratings by third parties. Issues of privacy protection become increasingly relevant, and Dyson talks about a number of sophisticated software solutions which are meant to guard the individual from the menace of electronic surveil-

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lance. Anonymity is another concern, which Dyson links to the issue of accountability and discusses in the context of new forms in online and offline crime.

The Internet brings profound changes to the sphere of work—new skills come to be valued, new opportunities emerge, geographical location becomes less important, and self-marketing matters more. Many new companies are built around a single good idea, and those employees who can design innovations to help the company get or stay ahead, and who display creativity and intelligence, are most successful. The field of intellectual property is another area of transformation—it is less about pre-existing knowledge and more about the intellectual services of consulting and face-to-face conferences. The content creators function within a new framework of legal, practical, and commercial considerations, thus making the intellectual property directly dependable on community-based control.

The other sphere of profound changes is education, and the Internet is of greatest importance for it as it allows for an increased equality in educational chances, for a dynamic use of multimedia, and for a more intensive communication between teachers, students, educational institutions, and resources in a world where lifelong learning becomes an intrinsic feature of people's lives.

The people whom we encounter on the Net are ordinary people with ordinary emotions, motivations, and frailties. The very setting of the new medium, however, brings about an abundance of new situations which invite us to comply with new rules for living. So Dyson offers a set of rules to help us in the new environment, in essence recommending us to display a positive, friendly, honest, and good humoured attitude to others on the Net.

As someone who works mostly online and interacts with students located in over 30 countries on a daily basis, I agree with Dyson's overall discussion of the changes which the Net brings into our lives. Other than that, however, I could not find the design for living which the book had promised. A great deal of *Release 2.0* presents conceptually shallow discussion of concrete technological examples, making many of the chapters sound like newsletter pieces patched together. Very little discussion is devoted to the underlying philosophy. Compared with the writings of others who claimed to supply us with authoritative designs for living in the digital age, like Howard Rheingold, for example, Dyson's book certainly is a big step ahead. This, however, still does not make it a definitive one. *Release 2.0* is not the visionary book for which we all are waiting—one that would bring a real conceptual weight and would help us make sense of our rapidly evolving mediatic milieu. Esther Dyson's analysis of trends reminds me of the fare offered by consumer trends analyst Faith Popcorn, but is much less interesting to read. Dyson's "design for living" will sound irrelevant and non-convincing to anyone who was not brought up with the Silicon Valley view of the world.

In Canada, the book was marketed to wide audiences, but its real audience is a limited one. Dyson claims that the Internet is no longer dominated by upper-middle-class males who speak only English. At the same time, it is these same corporate folks who are her real target audience. The hype around *Release 2.0* is good publicity. The author is a self-promoter who cares about influence, and is after C.E.O.s with serious purchasing power who will hopefully come to desire the name Dyson on the roster of their corporate expert consultants.

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