



The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet

By Margaret Wertheim

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Cyberspace may seem an unlikely gateway for the soul.

But as science commentator Margaret Wertheim argues in this "marvelously provocative" (*Kirkus Reviews*) book, cyberspace has in recent years become a repository for immense spiritual yearning. Wertheim explores the mapping of spiritual desire onto digitized space and suggests that the modem today has become a metaphysical escape-hatch from a materialism that many people find increasingly dissatisfying. Cyberspace opens up a collective space beyond the laws of physics—a space where mind rather than matter reigns. This strange refuge returns us to an almost medieval dualism between a physical space of body and an immaterial space of mind and psyche. Illustrations

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #575737 in Books
- Color: Multicolor
- Published on: 2000-05-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x .90" w x 5.60" l, .85 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In *Pythagoras' Trousers*, science writer and feminist Margaret Wertheim took an astute look at the social and cultural history of physics. She explored how the development of physics became intertwined with the rising power of institutionalized religion, and how both of these predominantly masculine pursuits have influenced women's ability to join the physics community. Now she has turned her attention to virtual reality, looking at similarities between how we view it today and how art and religion was viewed in medieval times. Her assertion is that rather than carrying us *forward* into new and fabulous other worlds, virtual reality is actually carrying us *backwards*--to essentially medieval dreams. Beginning with the medieval view, with its definition of the world as spiritual space, Wertheim traces the emergence of modern physics' emphasis on physical space. She then presents her thesis: that cyberspace, which is an outgrowth of modern science, posits the existence of a genuine yet immaterial world in which people are invited to commune in a nonbodily fashion, just as medieval theology brought intangible souls together in heaven. The perfect realm awaits, we are told, not behind the pearly gates but the electronic gateways labeled *.com* and *.net*. How did we get from seeing ourselves in soul space (the world of Dante and the late medievals) to seeing ourselves as purely in body space (the world of Newton and Einstein)? This crucial transition and the new shift propelled by the Internet are convincingly described in this challenging book.

From Publishers Weekly

In this serious and intriguing, if far-fetched, study, Wertheim (*Pythagoras' Trousers*) argues that cyberspace gives us "a technological substitute for the Christian space of Heaven." She explains that early Christians hoped to trade "the troubled material world" for the next one, where bodies would be perfected or disappear and "injustice and squalor" would vanish. Internet partisans make similar claims: in cyberspace everyone's equal and nobody's ugly. Christian theology, as espoused by medieval art and literature, imagined a place for bodies (this world) and a place for minds and souls (the next world). But modern science and modern thought (the Renaissance invention of perspective; Copernicus, Newton, Einstein) have explained and demystified physical space, leaving "no place more special than any other," nowhere for us to imagine that souls can be. Wertheim discusses hopeful fictions of "hyperspace," from H.G. Wells to Cubism to Star Wars, before turning (in chapter 6) to the Net, whose denizens?especially users of MUDS (multiple-user dungeons)?have, she contends, found a space for the soul online. This is, she adds, cause for both celebration and worry, since the "cyber-utopians" haven't found a clear way to make cyberspace stand (as Heaven did) for an ethics. Wertheim is intent on explaining the Net's meanings, not its workings. If her book belongs to one particular field, it's the minuscule?but mushrooming?one in which literary and cultural critics consider Net phenomena. As such, it's both provocative and worthwhile.

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From Library Journal

Science journalist Wertheim (*Pythagoras' Trousers*, Norton, 1997) explores the concept of cyberspace as a repository for spiritual yearning, suggesting that it returns humankind to a medieval cosmological position. That position dictates that we possess a physical space of body, and a metaphysical space (i.e., cyberspace) that many individuals hope will serve as a new space for the soul. She traces the history of space beginning with the cosmology of Dante. Her journey continues through the historical foundations of celestial space, relativistic space, hyperspace, and, finally, cyberspace. While there are many who believe in the transcendent potential of cyberspace, Wertheim suggests that cyberspace lacks the necessary moral dimension for such potential to be realized, leading the reader to question whether cyberspace can have any actual redemptive

significance. Instead, she says, cyberspace may serve simply as a metaphor for community, bound together by networks of relationships. For an informed audience, this is a provocative, if somewhat esoteric, study of space in its many conceptual forms.
A Joe J. Accardi, Northeastern Illinois Univ. Lib., Chicago
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