

Dante in Denver

by

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*Through me you pass into the city of woe:
Through me you pass into eternal pain:
Through me among the people lost for aye.
Justice the founder of my fabric moved:
To rear me was the task of Power divine,
Supremest Wisdom and Primeval Love.
Before me things create were none, save things
Eternal, and eternal I endure.
All hope abandon, ye who enter here.*

Dante, The Inferno

Digital identity is no walk in the park. My employer felt intuitively that “digital identity,” whatever it turned out to be, would be our corporate future, achieving for us the sublime state of commercial grace that only comes from being at the epicenter of business activity – ideally as a monopolist. They sent me out on my own to find the way. So I studied the maps until I felt I understood the market terrain. Then I studied the picture of the ideal place so that I would know it to see it. With the absolute certainty that only comes to the partially informed, I stepped out.

The Digital ID World Conference 2002, in Denver, sounded like a good place to confirm what I'd learned and meet the people that could turn our plans into reality. The golf turned out to be so magnificent that I could overlook just how awfully I play these days. Then the two days of sessions increased my knowledge of the digital ID environment exponentially. My certainty eroded with Newtonian predictability. By Friday I couldn't be sure of what I knew or why, who to believe, or where it was all leading. (In fairness, my disorientation could have been the result of the thin mountain air. At least that's my theory about Rageboy.)

Doc Searls was on stage, wondering rhetorically whether anybody who might actually use a digital identity had been consulted about what they wanted or needed. Interesting question, I thought.

Before Doc got through another pregnant pause, the darkened room began shimmying like an aging belly dancer. “I think we really need to have a conversation with these consumers if . . .” was the last thing I heard before my own lights went out.

A familiar man was standing over me when I came to. He had the genteel look of a southern gentleman, and a wizened face that said he'd seen some in his time. We were going to have a conversation, I remember hearing, as he led me through a jungle of what looked like solder, silicon, and whizzing bits. To get to where I wanted – needed – to go, he told me, we'd have to go through The Dark Place of technology. ‘Oh shit, we're not in Kansas anymore,’ I thought. I gathered that he was going to lead me through it when he grabbed my wrist with one hand and with the other latched on to a passing data packet, pulling us both into the bowels of the Dark Place.

The blinding speed turned into an abrupt stop microns from a psychedelic pane of glass. “What the fuck is this,” I asked, sounding a little too much like Ozzy Osbourne for my liking. I could make out a huge human face through the fog of ever-changing lights. “Who's that?” I queried, my eyelashes brushing the window.

“That is an unfortunate,” he said, sadness in his voice. “Sometimes we call them *users*. They're not really part of the Dark Place. Every now and then they get asked for their opinion or rear up on their hind legs and bark a bit. Mostly, though,

they just take what gets tossed their way. I thought you might like to have a look because we're on the cusp of our journey and every now and then you'll hear about them. Sometimes it'll sound like they're powerful – especially in groups, when we call them the *market*." The giant face leered at us, drool slipping from the corner of its mouth.

"Why's it staring at us," I asked.

"I was hoping you'd figure it out on your own," said my world-weary guide. After a suitably affected pause he continued, "But time's wasting so I'll tell you. He's not staring at us. We're inside his monitor, and the glowing colors behind us is – to him – what must be a pretty fair porn site." I wheeled around to look into the void but saw only dancing colors. "He's one of the more unaware users, who cares so little about himself that he's given up his credit card number for access to a little binary bootie. There are others, of course – the *informed* unfortunates – who are so anal they crap diamonds. They don't use anything anywhere any time. I'm fairly sure they don't really know – or care – much about *digital* identity though. Somebody's got to tell them . . ." My guide's voice trailed off. As the sudden need for a shower overcame me, we hurled back into the ether.

"Are we here?" I asked when we'd stopped again.

"Of course, we're *here*. A smarter question might've been, 'Are we *there*?" My guide took a deep breath, and unleashed a rapid-fire commentary. "This is still just a preliminary stop. Thought you might like to hear another side of the conversation. Somewhere out there, way at the other end of the wire plugged into this RJ-45 connector, are the businesses and governments that want stronger digital identity. Sad part is they don't know what they really want or why. Some of them think it's for better e-commerce; others to reduce online fraud and theft. Some think they can make better online deals. A bunch want to offload liability for inadequate due diligence. Most though – especially marketers – want more information to provide better, more personalized service. Naturally there are a few organizations that think this is all bullshit: we'll find them later. Anyway, these otherwise well-meaning people are part of a juggernaut being spun around by forces of evil. They don't have a clue which way's up, and every time it looks like they've got a solid footing, something –"

He stopped, took a chest full of air, looked around as if something was closing in on him, and continued, ". . . comes to shake them up again. Mostly, they've got other things on their minds: like business. You know, selling products people want, making profits, serving shareholders, maybe even contributing to the world at large."

We shared a little laugh. "Governments have their own problems, like trying to make sure our decaying society is more meaningfully participating in its own governance. Not exactly an easy task. That, and making sure that taxes are collected, driver's licenses are distributed, births are recorded, roads are safe, . . .

"Anyway, here's our ride. Hold on! It's going to start getting a little weird now," he warned (maybe just a little too late), gripping my upper arm. Deep into the bowels of the machine we went. It was dark. I worried about what I might see next. The image of the salivating degenerate stuck in my mind's eye.

Sector 1: Hawkers

Our first stop was a monstrous trade show. There was a tremendous din from the floor as thousands of men and women spoke over one another. Louder and louder they grew, each more impatient to be heard over the others. I turned to my guide.

"Vendors representing every part of the identity spectrum," he said. "Just look at them prattling on about their *solutions*. Every one of them is absolutely certain of the power of his or her product."

I watched as they talked . . . and talked . . . and talked. Everyone was selling faster and louder, insistent to be heeded. They kept talking at one another with convincing arguments and rhetorical questions. They aggressively thrust in closes with killer intensity. Nobody heard a single word anybody else was saying.

"We have to cross through the room to move on," said my guide. So we went down to the show floor and worked our way toward the doors at the far end. I sweated buckets; it was much warmer on the floor than upstairs looking down on the show. At every step a different vendor made a pitch. By habit, I engaged the discussion of the first few that accosted us. The first one was a 'directory guy.' His answer to identity was in the structure and use of directory and meta-directory. "But," I said, "while I may not be well versed in your technology, it seems to me that there's more to this identity stuff than just a glorified relational database. Don't you think . . ." He may as well not have had ears. He continued his patter not missing a beat between the end of my sentence and the planned end of his own paragraph.

The next one to get in our way was a biometric vendor. With a mere fingerprint all my problems could be solved, she assured me at great length. She was literally bowled over like a ten-pin by another hardware vendor, followed by a software developer, and so on down the line. They were

unyielding like the tide, and equally without concern for anything that got in their way.

Slowly we made our way through the crowd. "What's with the little hammers," I asked.

"Oh, that's they're reminder," said my guide. "For them every problem is a nail."

We arrived at the door. It was time to decide whether I really wanted to reach identity nirvana. Maybe it just wasn't worth it. This seemed like it could get freaky fast. Before I made a decision, we ducked out of the room sealing off the din of the show behind the door.

Sector 2: Whiners

Hands still on the door, sucking in the cool fresh air and savoring the hollow silence, I slowly turned to address the growing murmur behind me. The thundering silence that blankets you after a sustained loudness was giving way to a persistent chirping. That, in turn, ceded to the full-throated jabbering of a media scrum. There in a throbbing mass was every pleading advocate, outraged phobic, and ranting naysayer you could imagine. "What the hell is this?" I asked my guide.

"Some of my friends call them whiners, or moaners, or bitters, or so on and so forth. Truth be told, usually they'll keep you on your toes; make you think straight; justify yourself from every angle. Still, they're one-trick pains in the ass creating doubt," my guide began. "You should notice all sorts in there. This area is a barbary coast for everybody who's part of the problem but can't be classified anywhere else. Some are transient. That's what makes this place the most interesting - I think."

"They redeem themselves . . ." I asked.

"No . . . redeem isn't exactly the right word here. 'Bore' would be better. As in, they lose their passion and move on," he explained.

"Huh?"

"It's like this," he said, pointing at the crowd. "In that bunch you've got consumer advocates fighting for something. Like privacy, for example. That's a noble cause. Whether it's somebody impassioned for personal reasons or a paid mouthpiece, they fight the loud fight for a while. Lots of non-practicing lawyers here, and they all move on pretty quickly," he winked. "Trouble is, they mistake their problem as *the* problem, not just a contributing part. They probably realize it; they just choose to - paid to - ignore everything else. Really, they're not stupid."

Pointing to another klatch of kvetchers, my guide continued, "But there's just so many. Like the techno-neurotic - can't think of a better description. Whether they're the religious types seeing Revelation or Luddites trying to turn back

the clock of progress, they spend every waking hour finding any reason to paint technology as the Devil's work or the downfall of society."

Our path through the throng ensured that we bumped against absolutely everyone. And the slightest nudge would reset and start their audio tracks. "Ignore them," my guide directed me. "Their only audience is in the next room. That's part of their pain." Yet I couldn't help but listen in as we passed by.

"There's a few here who seem to make a bit of sense," I said. "Why -"

"A common mistake. It only sounds sensible at first. We could stay until you figured it out but there's a lot of ground to cover. So here's the answer: they sound reasonable because they rally discrete bits of history and convenient metaphor, loosely-related experience and questionable statistics. But they're all wrong. Wrong because the stories are misused and the metaphors - sometimes called *historically successful business models* - don't hang in the identity context. Most of the experiences are valuable but usually of limited applicability. They can be convincing though, I'll give them that. All the more reason to watch out. What they're really after (and, having been through here before, I've come to believe they don't even know it) is *perpetuation*. They want to perpetuate some success from their past here in this new place now. Perpetuation is easier than creation."

Before us was a curtain like those set up at the side of a temporary stage. We stepped through the gap and this second lesson receded to memory.

Sector 3: Soothsayers

The klieg lit scrum of talking heads we left behind was practically indistinguishable from the front part of this new area. People talking: always talking. I couldn't hear most of it because we were standing upwind in a stiff breeze that had no apparent point of origin. My guide was quiet, which seemed to me a little unusual. His countenance was glum. We stood still for a good long time looking on at the masses of people.

Unlike the melees of the first two areas, this room looked organized. I noticed that many were gesturing vigorously as though preaching damnation from a pulpit. ('No escaping irony,' I thought.) Others milled about, keeping a decent distance from the others, making staccato reportage to invisible audiences. Another group provided a variation on this theme, sitting behind desks. Still others, sitting at laptop computers muttered to themselves with each keystroke.

In this last group of writers were several subspecies. Closest to us were the well-dressed with pseudo-intellectual bearing. Their work had

the appearance of finality and, given the colorful charts accompanying the text, bore the mark of rigorous intellectual, or at least mathematical, research. The titles gave them away: *An economic analysis of the IT sector, Quarterly Analysis . . . , . . . projections 2002 – 2007*.

Behind and to the left of these analysts was a group that looked to be spending much more time on spreadsheets than word processors. Square miles of output covered the floor. Text to support the numbers bore only the consistent theme words *business plan*. These people did not have the pale-faced, anemic back-room accountant or analyst look. They were flashier, and very persuasive. It was hard to tell whether they were consultants, investment bankers, or venture capitalists.

The third and largest group was spread out at the back, tucked into a multitude of nooks and crannies. They toiled head down, feverishly excreting word after word upon word.

“These are my people,” whispered my guide reverently.

“Beg pardon,” I responded. “What are you talking about?”

“There but for the grace of . . .” he was saying. But I missed the last part of his thought when I realized that everyone was saying the same thing. It sounded like a catechism or serenity prayer recitation at a large A.A. meeting. I turned to one of the typists nearby and said, “You know, what they’re all saying, it’s not exactly right. I think what they mean is . . .” As I finished my thought a peculiar thing happened. The wind that had been at our backs shifted and was now carrying the multitude of voices back toward us. Slowly, like the radiating of a shock wave, a change swept over the chorus until my own words echoed back at me with increasing force.

I nudged my guide into action, and we made our way to and over an ornamental walking bridge. With one last longing look back at the crowing crowd, he said, “At least they’re spending their time doing what they’re good at.” And we moved on.

Sector 4: Propeller-heads

“This is so . . .” I struggled for a good adjective. The auditorium-sized lab we were in was lined with white-boards and polka-dotted with dev servers. Pretty normal looking people – if you consider ragged and besandaled normal – were deep in the oblivious state of intellectual rigor. They were a focused lot with an air of Russell Crowe’s John Nash about them. The smell of calculation was in the air, the gibberish of differential calculus was on all the boards. Every second computer had a slow-moving progress bar with a half-rendered 3-D model in the background.

“Here’s where most people get stuck on this voyage,” my guide said, breaking my concentration on the flickering screens. “As soon as you get past the theory and social notions of identity, or modify the word with ‘digital,’ the conversation takes a turn this way: the mysteries and wonders of technology. It doesn’t matter whether it’s PKI, Kerberos, and the other cryptographic security measures, or biometrics, or bandwidth and networking – especially wireless, or firewalls and security perimeters. Eventually everything finds its way to the technology which confuses everyone but these guys.” As I looked around, I could see coders, architects, researchers, and other geek archetypes in the fluorescent glow.

My guide continued, “I think I’m pretty clever, so I’ve always felt relatively comfortable that I could understand the basics of what they’re doing. Still, some people really want to make sure everyone is slightly dazed and confused – maybe ‘reliant’ is a better word. It’s easier to be dismissive and protect of the mystery of your work if nobody understands it. Take cryptography, for example.

“Seems to me that there are a few problems with this approach, mostly on the business side of technology. First is that some of these savants love the thrill of the chase for a theoretical optimal – like seeing anti-matter – more than they appreciate the practical worth of their efforts. In technology, I think, there’s often more solution than problem. Second, technology specialization is like a well of information: deep and narrow. (Know what the logical end of specialization is? You know more and more about less and less until eventually you’ll know everything about nothing. Hey??) Anyway, the problem is that specialists only care about their little part of the world and don’t see the rest. They create exclusive little communities. To protect those communities, they create a language and set of customs: a self-imposed Tower of Babel. The rest of us can never appreciate the nuance of the language – especially if we need to know more than one. So we’re at the crap end of the inside joke. Sadly, it’s those inside jokes that eventually support business solutions.

“Why don’t these people have discussions with anybody else? Why can’t they communicate with each other? Hey? Nobody to translate.”

We walked amongst these aliens for what seemed like days. Every now and then, interspersed among the acronyms and jargon was a word or a phrase that lit a bulb of recognition in my head. He’s wrong, I thought. This isn’t that difficult; you just have to pay attention. If only I could piece together the words I knew with the words I could infer meaning from, by the time we left I wouldn’t feel so out of place. It was working, I thought, but as we passed through new areas and among different specialties the meanings I

thought I could count on slipped and changed. I couldn't keep up with the feedback loop and got confused. Eventually I was completely disoriented and had to sit down to regroup. My knees got weak and I felt myself falling.

I felt my guide catch me beneath the shoulders. He dragged me along, heels trailing on the anti-static flooring. I rambled as the room fell away behind me, "Maybe if I took a little more time and studied a little more . . . I could get it all . . ."

"Amateurs . . ." he scoffed, "never learn." And we slipped out the door.

Sector 5: Dilettantes

"This place is fun - if you keep it in the right perspective," my guide was saying as we entered a new ballroom. It looked like a cocktail party. One of those meet and mingle networking sessions put on with the low-grade wine and origami hors d'oeuvres. "You know how the techies had you going with too much special knowledge and a special language? How you wanted to actually understand it all? These guys here are the same - but different. I'll fill you in as we go. But you have to discover and fully experience this on your own, so I can only give you a word of warning: 'Trust yourself and what you know.'" He paused, letting it sink in, and then commanded, "Let's go mingle."

It was like every cocktail party I'd been to. Different-sized atomic clusters of people here and there. A few people were holding things together at the nucleus of each conversation with others doing their part orbiting about like electrons. At a distance the conversations sounded diverse and particular to those involved in them. Listening closer, however, they were all essentially the same, probably because the subject of identity was the fusing energy holding the clusters together.

The bits of conversation we involved ourselves in had an air of deep and considered thought. Each participant in turn eloquently held forth on a subject. Sometimes the topic was business cases, at other times it was technology standards or processes. Every now and then, ever so fleetingly, the discussion touched on policy and social concerns. Mostly, though, it could be reduced to a business-focused technology-fuelled discussion of digital identity. Business focused because it seemed that the thematic considerations were: How can it make money? Who will it disintermediate? What is the most cost-effective, highest-margin market-capture take-to-market model: strategic partnering or viral network-alliance marketing? Was Liberty's SAML spec more market-making than WS-Security? Could the infrastructure capital cost be financed on a

transaction-fee basis so that the ROI of a distribution campaign can be front-loaded while the proprietary infrastructure is purchased downstream out of after-tax profits, keeping the burn-rate and overheads low because of the virtual organization structure? . . .

"Who are these people?" I asked, interrupting my guide's bemused chuckling.

"Oh, the usual suspects. The same folks that were investment banking in the 80s, tried their hand at wireless or telecom, got into the dot.com bonanza, and then - again - found themselves and their well-educated pedigrees without income," he said.

"You mean -"

"Unemployed MBAs, mostly," my guide answered. "Although there is a host of other opportunists and pretenders here too. A few follow-the-fad executive types are in here somewhere. You know," he digressed into editorial comment, "the most dangerous person in the room is the eloquent incompetent."

"Good one," I acknowledged. "But isn't part of the grifter's gift the ability to keep you snowed until just after you've been had?"

"Absolutely!" said my guide maybe sensing that I wasn't as stupid as I looked. "That's the dangerous part. You can, of course, protect yourself a little bit though. It's as simple as this: *nullius in verba.*"

"Huh?"

"It's the skeptic's motto. Don't believe anything they say. Not a bad bit of advice since it's hard right now to figure out who really knows anything and has something significant to say, and who's just blowing the latest buzzwords fast enough that they seem to mean something. Next, stick to what you know and build off that. Keep common sense and a history of the world in mind. That doesn't mean comparing everything to the Roman Empire; but question the likelihood that 'everything is different now.' What kind of horseshit is that? It's taken thousands of years and countless developments to get us to this place and time. I'm completely in favor of the notion that the Internet has changed the paradigm. But let's be practical. It's still about people, and the Internet has not - yet - radically changed people and the collective, cultural unconscious. Third, recognize these people by their markings. I mentioned the MBA thing. That's a good start. But, watch for copies of or references to *Business 2.0*, *Red Herring*, *Fast Company* and some of the other epistles to the fallacists. If they worship one particular god and adhere to a bible found on the virtual business shelves at Amazon, be careful. Fourth - and this is important - keep asking questions. Sometimes you can hop through the horseshit by acting like a kid. Repeatedly asking, 'Why?' is a simple way to

find out if they think or just talk. It's not going to win you a lot of friends, but –”

“You're suggesting that this is unique to the digital identity world?” I asked, trying to prevent an impending rant.

“No. Just that this is part of the journey. Nice question though. Keeping me honest. I like that,” he responded. “I think you've got the picture here. No point in wasting time re-learning lessons. So, let's hit the road.” And with that we pooped the party.

The Connection

“An airport lounge?” I asked looking around at the faux sumptuousness and transient look of the room we were in. “Looks like a *Red Carpet Lounge*, and they don't even have free liquor. Why are we here?”

“One question at a time boy,” responded my guide. “Sure you don't want a drink? I'm buying . . . expense account. Part of the job.” I accepted and we took our beverages to a window seat. “This is the half-way point. Granted, Buddhists might have issues with the notion of enlightenment calculus, and having gone through five of nine stops its not an accurate description, but it's a rest stop.”

“Just for a drink?” I prodded.

“No, *not just for a drink*,” he mimicked chidingly. “Take a look around.” I did. In the crowd there were a few familiar faces. Whether they were people I'd met or simply reflections of the types of people I'd been encountering since I dove into the digital identity world, I wasn't sure.

“What's their story?” I asked, watching a few of the others in the lounge.

“They're just like you. Making the journey. They come from all walks. The more disoriented ones have probably gone through a familiar place. One where they might have stayed if they hadn't kept an open mind and taken up the journey in earnest. In a way that the Eastern religions might appreciate, a crucial part of this exercise is shedding what you think you know and opening yourself up to what you need to know. . . Naahh . . . that's bullshit too.

“The others,” he continued, “have not had to face that challenge yet. Like you, I think.” Just as he described, some looked a little more shell-shocked than the others. Among those in the latter group, most had an air of anticipation and anxiety while others seemed more serene. Anticipating the question, my guide offered, “Seven to two that the easy-looking ones make it all the way.”

“I don't gamble on things I don't control. Sorry,” I responded. “Which ones are the guides?” I continued.

“None of them. These folks – for whatever cosmic reason – whether by choice or imposition are making this trip alone. You've got the benefit and burden of my support. Now, if you haven't had enough pseudo-religious psycho-babble, I surely have. Finish up. We've got places to go.” The last of the scotch whiskey went down as I got up, and we walked to the escalator and out of the lounge.

Sector 6: Overseers

“This is a little surreal,” I said trying to stay casual. The room had a kind of Apple Computer “Big Brother” commercial quality about it. Even the colour. “The real world just isn't sepia tinted.”

My guide, who was not guiding so much as tagging along at this point, responded from behind, “Your right. But then again, there's always been a little bit of other-worldliness to this bunch. And, as a group, they're schizoid.” It was true. Some of the people I could see looked active and engaged, with apparent purpose in their gestures. The constipated majority, however, had the ossified look of petrified wood. Even at that the people in this group were wavering back and forth more than any of the others I'd seen so far. Because I tend to think that smarter people – or those with more information anyway – are more likely to shift position in response to the complexities of real life, I was willing to assume that these were especially bright people. That got cleared up pretty quickly.

While we watched, like synchronized swimmers they gracefully assembled themselves into working groups, committees, sub-committees, commissions, and other mini-organizations. They then proceeded to isolate themselves from one another and in a series of articulated gestures began a highly organized, practically Talmudic process of activity. While we couldn't hear any of the groups specifically, they collectively adhered to three themes.

First, there was procedural talk. Who was allowed to speak, whether the floor would recognize a speaker, how long the session would last, how all interested parties would be heard, and when reports and recommendations would be rendered. Second, there was a lot of debate about the value of whatever happened to be the purpose at hand. One member in each group was designated to or simply felt compelled to go on about some tiny quibble. As that speaker held forth, others would vigorously counter or support. The vast majority, though, looked like children lying on their backs finding shapes in the clouds. Apparently unanimity was required in the discussion, so nothing changed. The third theme was advocacy. Which is to say that in some of the assemblies one or two of the people would be

extremely animated. They'd work themselves into apoplexies, refusing to yield to any type of counterargument. This theme fascinated me, so I tuned in on one or two of the verbal cannonades as we walked past.

“... and it is in the civil good that . . .” was a common refrain. Then I heard one woman saying, “... But the threat to the individual right to privacy has a constitutional imperative that overrides any possible common good that could come from the imposition of such invasive and potentially damaging technologies, regardless of the benign intent behind them. We must never allow a single drop of this type of water to seep into a crack in the wall of civil rights lest the softness of that single drop be given the opportunity to raise itself into the catastrophic power of the tsunami and tear down those walls that the founders built . . .”

“Wow. She's good,” I marveled to my guide. “Her thing is privacy. But what's the story on the rest. And, what's the deal with the wavering?” I queried.

“Glad you asked, and since we're getting near the door – not to mention that these folks will recess spot on four-thirty, I'll explain. You've got a good ear for the privacy people. They're everywhere foretelling gloom and doom. Stop everything in its tracks, they do. That's not necessarily a bad thing because checks and balances are essential. We believe in it. But, there are a couple things here. First, privacy – or the privacy argument, rather – is on shaky ground because it's both ill-defined and a moving target. Second, most people don't give a shit about their privacy and don't have any privacy anyway. They'll give up most of their private information – which is different for different people at different times – for something as ridiculous as a free razor or chance to win a trip to Jamaica. But they'll let themselves get whipped up by some joker standing on *principal*. Most of the people raising these issues, not just privacy, are paid to do it. On the other hand, whether by the government they serve or on behalf of an interest group, they keep everyone honest in a bizarre sort of way. Make you think a little harder about what you're doing.

“Which brings me to another issue you have to be careful of, and an explanation that might help out with the whole flip-flopping thing you saw,” he continued. “Don't ever mistake advocacy or a strong position on anything – particularly but not only from these people – to be in the public good or for the benefit of the world at large or anything else warm and fuzzy like that. It's all about money. Some are fronting for special interests with deep pockets: businesses and industry groups. They're either fortifying something so they can have a leg up or are protecting something that's being threatened – like a practically

monopolistic competitive advantage. Far be it from me to lay down a caustic track on our democratic system of representation, but there are more than a few people who move as the winds of money shift them.”

“Is that jaded or realistic,” I asked hoping to sound erudite and worldly.

Instead I apparently came off as naïve when my guide continued, “Jaded is what it is. But jaded is reality these days. Doesn't really matter, as long as you understand the rules. Besides it's all about power and money, and that hasn't changed in a long, long time.”

“What's over there?” I asked, pointing to a distant area that had the locked-down look of a kennel.

“Cops,” he said. “All kinds: local sheriffs, feds, Interpol, you name it. Spooks too. Everybody and anybody, that could or would like to use more information to make the benign police state a little more real. You don't have to be a paranoid to think somebody might want to watch you. Of course, their masters back here play down that fact – deflect it really – using whatever they can. Public safety and security is the best club in their bag right now. Sometimes I'm with them; sometimes I'm not – it's hard: security or the Fourth Amendment. I said it before and I'll say it again: *nullius in verba*.

The sweep second-hand on the clock above the chamber door that we were moving toward passed the eleven on its way through the thirtieth minute past four o'clock. I looked about and everything was as it had been on our march through the room. As I checked the clock again, the thunderous clap of hundreds of gavels hammering nearly knocked me on my face. In the seconds it took for me to catch myself and look around at the room again, they had all disbanded and were milling about in disarray. “No point staying here,” said my guide. “Show's over.” And the oaken door closed behind us.

Sector 7: Criminals

“This'll be easy. You should have a pretty good handle on this group, even though you'll probably never meet any of them. Mind you, meeting a few wouldn't be such a bad thing either,” said my guide as we passed by the steel bars separating the cells from the concrete hallway.

“Why are we in a prison?” I asked.

“Where better to see a key reason why positive digital identity has got to be figured out? Of course, these are the second-rate criminals – they got caught. But still, behind these bars are the hackers, thieves, defrauders, misappropriators, speculators, and other assorted con artists who have tried to take advantage of our society's trust

and gullibility to line their own pockets," started my guide. We had walked up a set of stairs to a second floor. These cells, however, were a little less severe than those below. "Down there are the small-timers and chumps who have done petty things like impersonating somebody to steal an HDTV from some unsuspecting retailer. Maybe used the credit card of someone they know. Hackers on a thrill-ride of vandalism and digital extortion. Software and music pirates are down there. It's a street-criminal culture. Not especially bright - cunning. Did you notice all the gas-bar attendants and waiters? They were small time skimmers - got credit card identities from dupes right in front of them and sold it to criminal organizations in Eastern Europe. How about the innocent looking ones who did it all the old fashioned way by taking a stroll through the cemetery or obituaries section and then rebuilding an identity from the ground up? 'Ground up!' he repeated. Get it?

"I'm personally in favour of putting the online pornographers and casino site owners down there as well. But mostly they avoid getting caught or end up on this floor. Here we have people who used false identities for much more sinister purposes such as drug trafficking, extortion, and money laundering. Again, small timers at the front end . . .

"On the second floor," he continued as we looked into the cells with a few more civilized refinements than those below. "are the better criminals. Still criminals, but showing a little more brains - in a retrograde kind of way. At least most of them were conspiracists who had others doing the work for them or were the brains behind a big operation. These are the master-minds behind large enterprises that were hacking for the gold-mines of data and personal information that opened huge opportunities for using false identities in wide-spread criminal activity. In here are the talented hackers; the ones with real skill. Most of them would have been in Sector three except they had ambition and a much larger world-view. And . . .," he said cupping his hand over his mouth and breathing heavily, ". . . they came to the dark side." Apparently not getting the desired reaction, he continued, "It's the premium wing of the criminal white collar crowd. Mafia dons, the occasional drug kingpin, a serious embezzler here and there, and so forth.

"Obviously they get lighter treatment - maybe in deference to their imagination and ingenuity, probably because they stayed above the baser criminal fray. So in these cells are tables, a little privacy for concentration, and more liberty to make your stay a little less *punative*. It's allegedly about rehabilitation, which, seems to me, is a euphemism for 'criminal graduate schooling.'" Listening intently, I hadn't noticed that we were

now in an entirely different area. Another floor or maybe even another building.

"Remember when I said that this place might not be what you expect?" my guide asked. "Well this is why," he continued, spreading his arms to embrace the luxury suites that surrounded us. The only difference between these suites and those of any high-end hotel - not including the absent *fourth wall* that allowed us to see what was going on - was the essentially honor-system monitored perimeter that was supposed to keep the guests from leaving. That and the fully equipped work area inside the suite.

"What am I seeing here?" I wondered aloud.

"This is what you can get from a one-time lapse of reason or a life of committed corporate crime. Not all the people here are criminals in the traditional sense. There are lots of citizens here who have not even countenanced crime per se. They're spending time in this . . . club fed place because they're guilty of crimes of omission. There are executives and political governors who waited too long to take identity seriously or who denied its imperatives. They and others allowed crimes of identity theft to be committed against their organizations and to others in general because they didn't take the necessary precautions.

"The nerdier looking ones here might have been CIOs or CTOs who ignored the signs, made excuses for the problems, and chose to support other priorities. One or two of them waited too long on old technology or didn't properly configure it: like making sure ports were closed on the firewalls," he rolled on. "Mostly though, they simply didn't have the foresight to see what was going on - how the world was changing - and put their organizations into jeopardy. The ones with the less luxurious apartments (Oh how they suffer!) were doubly at fault because their businesses and governments were supposed to be leaders. And they failed in a position of responsibility." My guide paused and reflected.

"Of course," he continued, "some of them actually committed identity-based crimes. Not serious ones necessarily: abuse of authorizations, inadequate authentications and misrepresenting or impersonating others for expediency sake. Happens all the time. They just did it more and got caught."

And the last steps of the staircase took us completely out of the lock-up area.

Sector 8: Microsoft

"Interesting. The last steps lead right out the door into a beautiful park. Do they get this too?" I asked, looking around at the giant Redwoods and lush green foliage. My understanding of where we

were was being revised as I looked at the large new buildings dotted about the serene, manicured gardens. This was no park. It was some kind of campus or kingdom. Maybe we'd arrived at some modern Versailles. Maybe . . .

"Not even close," said my guide, interrupting my thoughts and bringing me back to the conversation. "Although some might argue that this place is not so far removed from the one we just left, it's here for an entirely different reason."

"So?" I asked.

"Welcome to Redmond," he said. On cue, a service vehicle with 'Microsoft' on the door panel drove past. Very nice. Interesting blend of high-tech modernity and Washington woodiness. Probably a nice place to go to work each day - at least from an esthetic point of view.

"Why are we here?" I asked, anticipating one of at least several possible answers. Was it because Microsoft was the great Satan of the high-tech world? Could it be because their software and desktops, so pervasive around the world, were full of security holes? Could it be because of the Passport fiasco and the rest of the privacy issues or their various run-ins with the justice department and other perennial opponents? Were we here to get a little juice on their real plans for world domination? Did we have to come and prostrate ourselves before the gods of personal computing?

"Short answer: to get there you gotta go through here," he began. "Longer answer . . ." he continued with a great inhaling of the cool Pacific mountain air. "Microsoft represents a small group of power-brokers in the industry. Nothing, and I mean nothing, happens without their touching it. Oh, others try, and some succeed to one degree or another, but mostly Microsoft is there like a fat kid on a Smartie. That creates an interesting problem, and a real opportunity.

"The problem is that Microsoft is there. They extinguish competition and act like the schoolyard bully that they are. What they can't beat, they buy. And they've got the money to do both. They're a capitalist cancer in some eyes. Everybody's suspicious and only the brainlessly brazen few will consider opposing them. Even their partners hesitate with them. Like Woody Allen said, 'When the lion and the lamb lay down together, the lamb doesn't get much sleep.' So it is with Microsoft: they chill a lot of the industry. Add to that a rapacious greed for having everything their way and you've got the makings of a bad actor. Thank God there's open source, and a few other 900-pound gorillas out there to keep them modestly in check.

"Think about what they've done in the identity space. First there was Passport. That exploded when word got around that Microsoft was using all those force-fed passports to create a huge

storehouse of information on users and compelling commercial participants to work through it. That may not have been the intent, but that's how it worked out. Then there's all this passport-based .NET MyServices business that got going and transmogrified into the current .NET strategy of identity federation," he continued. "Don't even get me started on the whole MSN business," he said quite obviously needing no such prompting to continue. "Am I the only one who thinks that maybe there's just a little too much concentration happening here?"

Being a grudging admirer of Microsoft's position in the market and their skill at perpetuating their status, I was starting to get a little concerned that this was going to be just another Microsoft bash. The next several minutes did nothing to dispel my fear. My guide carried on with a diatribe that included a broad and scathing critique of Microsoft's methods. "Consider," he said, "that like knock-off houses making fake Gucci, Microsoft dumbs-down the technology and produces lower quality product. Rather than raising the bar, they lower it so that more people can play. . . ."

Catching himself, he changed his tone and confirmed, "But is that such a bad thing? Taking it to the masses? What good would computing and networking power be if it were restricted to the rocket scientists of the world? Sure their software has holes in it: so do they all. Only Microsoft's a better target for hackers to make a name for themselves than 'Bob's accounting software.' The CIA site takes more hits from hackers than 'Pancho's Online Pizza.' We gotta give these guys a bit of a break. Software doesn't have to be perfect; it has to be better than commercially adequate. The world evolves and so will software. They're doing that. Think about what they've precipitated just by joining the fray.

"Would Liberty exist and be active if Microsoft hadn't opened the path by putting up Passport for everyone to shoot at? Would the standards be going up and getting spread wider if Gates hadn't committed his company to raising security - 'trustworthy computing' I think they call it - as a pre-eminent purpose for Microsoft? If they hadn't responded to Liberty with WS-I, engaging Microsoft, IBM, and even more players in the business, would we be on this path now? Doubters Jack." I thought he was finished. But he'd only been refueling, and bulldozed on. "They're as full of shit as everyone else, and when Bill Gates wants to do nice things it's through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation NOT Microsoft. They're in it for their own self-interest. So's everybody else. So what? The real story is that without Microsoft there's no urgency. This juggernaut creates focus and lights a fire under the industry. Where they go, we shall follow. That's opportunity. And that's good.

"So Microsoft is here because they're Microsoft?" I asked, trying to sound like I knew what I was asking.

"No, not really. They're here because Microsoft is big and recognizable. They bring all this into the boldest relief. There are, just behind those trees, different campuses. Campuses in Santa Clara, Armonk, Provo, Redwood Shores, Palo Alto, Cupertino, Austin . . . They're like Canada though: the same but different - and smaller. I like this one though. Love the Pacific Northwest. Air's clean and fresh." With that my guide made a last great inhale of the moist air. Like a mirage, Redmond faded away around us until we were standing in a great void of space.

"This is interesting," I called to my guide.

"Yeah, that's a word for it. This wasn't supposed to happen. Obviously a technical glitch or a software bug. Hold on for a second; it should change." And so it did.

Sector 9: Sophists

"Why do these words only make sense when some people say them?" I asked, genuinely interested in an answer. We were sitting in the midst of a mélange of seminars and discussion groups, at what appeared to be a well-worn, faceless conference centre.

"Are you sure they make sense?" replied my guide. "I keep warning you not to believe everything you hear. There's a hypnotic sexiness about some of the words and phrasing that you're going to be listening to for the next little while. It soothes you into complacency. Then, WHAM! You're wondering what went on and why the world's passed you by."

"No, really, I do understand it. Some of it's a little more difficult, but basically I can keep up. It's kind of like my graduate classes - actually more like fourth year undergrad when we all used the big words to camouflage our uncertainty with what we were talking about. Sometimes I think I hear the chirping of lawyers, but they're a few rounds back aren't they?" I asked.

"I thought I told you that there are no hard fast rules here. It's not a fraternal order or professional guild we're going through. It's fluid, so you probably are hearing lawyers. Most likely it would be lawyers like Lessig. Those talking the big talk: theory, jurisprudence, the long-term effect on society, and so on," he responded. "It's okay. Most of what they say is redundant."

"Au contraire, mon guide agé," I retorted. "Most of what they say is quite necessary and makes perfect sense. But, just like grad school, most of what they say has little immediate or practical relevance upon the rest of the world at large. To the uninitiated or those who don't understand the

language, it might seem superfluous though. In reality, it's not the language but the point that's often superfluous. They're splitting hairs - arguing about the number of angels on the head of a pin. It's not them I'm having difficulty with," I said, taking an interest in what was going on. They were into the thick of a banal debate about the number of virtual identities that could be maintained by a single physical or legal entity. Finally a boring subject that was interesting to me; one that provided comfortable argument and discourse. Even if it was largely unappreciated by the money-making crowd, it seemed important at least at an intellectual level. "These guys over here though," I said to my guide, taking my attention from the lawyers and focusing on another crowd in sharp suits, "are a little hard to keep up with."

"Aaaahh," my guide said knowingly, obliging me with a response despite obvious ennui. "Those are the faces that belong to the names gracing the business section shelves in most bookstores. Some are academics; most are consultants. Look carefully, you'll find a recognizable "guru" or two in there," he said, the word guru falling out of his mouth as if it had a worm in it. "The only reason they're here is because they're not totally full of shit. These are smart people who aren't always selling snake oil. They know a thing or two, and every now and then they'll pull off the dumb-down hats and raise the level of the conversation up a few thousand feet into the philosophic stratosphere. Usually they don't last here very long because nobody gives a crap about what they say when they're here. It's useless."

"What do you mean *useless*?" I asked.

"It has no *economic value* - at least not to the people and organizations with pockets deep enough to make something of this whole identity thing," he responded.

"Have you ever heard of Chuang Tzu?" I asked. My guide shook his head, which I took as a signal to continue. "Chuang Tzu was Chinese teacher, a founder of Taoism. One day he was asked why all of what he taught was centered on what was useless. He responded with:

'If you have no appreciation for what has no use
You cannot begin to talk about what can be used.
The earth, for example, is broad and vast
But of all this expanse a man uses only a few inches
Upon which he happens to be standing.
Now suppose you suddenly take away
All that he is not actually using
So that, all around his feet a gulf
Yawns, and he stands in the Void,
With nowhere solid except right under each foot:
How long will he be able to use what he is using?'

"His questioner replied, 'It would cease to serve any purpose.' And Chuang Tzu concluded:

"This allows

The absolute necessity
Of what has no use."

I explained.

"Uh huh. I like it, I really do. But you're only going to find a tough audiences for that one," responded my guide thoughtfully. "I gotta tell you, kid, you're starting to sound an awful lot like the people down here. I'm getting a little concerned for you." Actually, I was feeling comfortable with the surroundings and the conversations going on about us. They were appealing primarily because there was no ROI attached to them. They were big questions with no answers. There was a continuity with the universe in the discussions. But, I did understand my guide's point. It wasn't going to pay the bills or take me any closer to real enlightenment. "It's okay," I said, "I'll get over it in a second.

"Why are they here?" I asked. "What's the lesson?"

"No lesson *per se*, I'm afraid," he said. "If I were to put a lesson into words for you though, I'd say that the big questions like those going on here are easy to get sucked into. Some people - like you, maybe - could probably enjoy yourself here. What's more, the results of all these conversations that are useless are, as you so tediously pointed out with your Taoist reference, actually quite important and lead to more useful thinking and actions. Your boss probably won't be terribly impressed with it though. Big talk like that confuses people. It's not simple and easy. It's not carefully bounded. It doesn't lead anyone to sense that we're in control of this one. What's more, it doesn't make money. That's reality boy," he concluded.

"Do I sense a 'but' coming?" I queried.

"But . . . somebody's got to do it. Just try not to get caught," he advised.

"Anyway . . . if there are no more questions, I guess we can go," the now distant voice continued. Applause filled the air, the lights came up, and the doors to a reception area were thrown open. The crowd began filing out of the seminar toward the cash bar. On stage, Doc Searls was disconnecting his computer from the projector as the more eager and brave crowd members rushed to congratulate and question him privately. Around me, the bloggers were wrapping up their real-time color-coverage of Doc's presentation about the confused state of digital identity.

I filed out into the foyer and waited a respectable amount of time to make my own congratulatory remarks, hoping Doc would remember my witticisms and erudition. "I'll have to look at your slides on the archive site later. I'm sure the presentation was great, but for some reason or another it inspired a bizarre daydream

for me," I explained after the standard networking type pleasantries. Doc, who was bent over fiddling with his computer, peered up under his brow.

"Really? Was it *enlightening*?" He asked in a strangely synchronistic way.

"Funny you should choose that word. I think it was all about finding enlightenment in this crazy world of digital identity," I replied. "I went through nine different areas and encountered at least nine different types of participants.

"I wonder if that's it." I pondered aloud.

"Not a chance sunshine. We're just gettin' warmed up," he said coyly.

"You know, the whole thing seemed very familiar. Like Dante and Virgil. I wonder if its supposed to be hell." I posited again.

With ever so slight a twinkle in his eye, Doc replied, "Always has looked like advancing technology though."

FIN

During the day, Timothy Grayson works for Canada Post Corporation, in Ottawa. He is the author of "Every Canadian's Guide to Common Contracts" published by HarperCollins. grayson@templar.ca

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