

# PRO DOMO

## VIRTUAL UNREALITY

Trickery is probably as old as mankind. In school, we learned that work is ennobling. However, most people believe that sufficient wherewithal is more important for a carefree life than a noble mind. Some even tend to use their wits to save themselves undue effort and to reap the rewards of others' endeavors.

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Today, fraud has become an industry in itself. Loveable scoundrels of the past – characters often featured in popular dramas and novels – have been succeeded by professional crime factories. Arrayed against them is an army of law enforcement and justice – an army that is increasingly costly, yet less and less efficient. Modern technology has equipped the evil-minded with an arsenal more appalling and unfathomable than ever before. But the most fearsome danger of all is that the lines separating honesty from guile, fair business from shady transactions, a desire for a secure livelihood from predatory behavior, are becoming less and less distinct.

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In Eastern Europe 20 years ago, for instance, the route was opened not only to virtuous ideas of political transformation, but all sorts of bad intentions. The demolition of communist state power led to the dismantling of the mighty state security apparatus and its extensive agent network. High-ranking officials, with their extensive connections and intimidating status, could easily transform political power into lucrative business posts; while the rank-and-file, with their skill in the use of firearms, communications and conspiracy, found rewarding job opportunities in the underworld. These people know the police inside and out; they are fully aware of its organization, methods and instruments. They possess countless valuable and revealing documents about the former agent network. Many former agents have since become key figures in political and business life, and would spare no sacrifice to conceal their murky pasts for good. Hence, the underworld can easily find collaborators: not only among underpaid civil servants, but also among the ranks of the political elite, who earn a lot (but never enough).



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Criminals dressed as policemen – policemen disguised as criminals. Ex-agents set up as party leaders – apparatchiks reborn as mafia dons. Omnipotent bank executives today – wanted criminals tomorrow. Multimillionaire entrepreneurs one moment – repentant prisoners the next. Are they real characters or just ghosts flitting around the boundaries of a newly built world?

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Where does reality end and the virtual world begin? With age and experience, we may guess. But what kind of a world are the younger generations coming into? Our children's eyes are glued to movie screens and monitors filled with virtual creatures and objects of a virtual universe. They can take rides on virtual spaceships and submarines, experience virtual earthquakes, floods and apocalypses. Perfect toys created by state-of-the-art hydraulics and visual devices: for our children, these have replaced reality.

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Where does reality end and deception begin? Is the money you get real or just a convincing photocopy? In the shop, is your credit card being handled properly, or are duplicates being made to siphon money from your bank account? Is the business letter a genuine offer or junk mail? Is a viral bomb ticking in that email attachment warning of virus threats? Is what you read in the newspaper a hard fact, or just part of a well-paid marketing campaign? Is he a pious servant of God or a child molester? Is it the voice of the brilliant soprano, or a simple studio remix? Is the ambitious party leader an honest patriot or just a career opportunist thirsting for power?

We are roaming about the world, confusedly. We do not dare to take a good look at each other. We just try to guess. ■

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