

# The Weekly WoKer

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## 1 Welcome to the Weekly WoKer

Welcome to Volume 5 of the Weekly WoKer, the first weekly newspaper for WoK Forums. Inside this edition you will find:

- A brief editorial piece offering my personal view of what has happened this week
- An overview of the week's activities, including descriptions of any exciting events that might have taken place outside of the usual schedule
- The first in a series of interviews with WoK participants
- 'Piet's Page,' a weekly column by forums mayor Piet Hut
- Next week's schedule

## 2 Letter From the Editor

As predicted in last week's issue our growth in the new year has been parabolic. This week we have

- Successfully launched the rotating MC (Master of Ceremonies) system for the working hypothesis chats
- Seen a remarkable presentation from Karen Sobel-Lojesky and Steven Tainer about the possible effects of virtual worlds on children, and the potential implications of this question on our investigation of the working hypothesis

- Held the second of our discussions about Remi Brague's *Wisdom of the World*
- Continued our expansion into Second Life
- Launched a web-site for our Qwaq-Second Life Liaison
- Received a lot of attention in SL circles after an interview with Forums Mayor Piet Hut
- Continued our new kind of dialogue about the working hypothesis between Steven and Piet in the Wiki

One of the themes this year in WoK Forums has been how to focus our content down so that what we have cuts deep. Our interest in virtual media and other developing technologies naturally calls into question the nature of the content that we ourselves are generating. How can we be sure that what we create has value—that we are not just skipping stones across the sea? This question is likely to remain open, since to answer it we would first have to ground our understanding of what is meaningful and then discover how that relates to our creations. In the case of the WoKer we have decided to scale down our coverage of the minutiae of forums activity in order to focus more on the hard-hitting features like the interviews.

We would also love to begin publishing more letters to the editor, so if there is anything on your mind please feel free to write the editor at [abmcgowan@gmail.com](mailto:abmcgowan@gmail.com)

### **3 Remarkable synergy develops between presentation, WH talks, and reading group**

A remarkable synergy has developed this week between the Sunday presentation, the reading group, and the working hypothesis discussions. The central thrust of the Sunday talk was that there may be a strong correspondence between the kind of environment children grow up in and their ability to develop certain kinds of capacities and neurological connections. In particular, the presentation questioned whether children's virtual worlds might place children in an impoverished, already digested environment that limits the scope and depth of their capacities as human beings. We also considered whether the effects virtual worlds might have on children can tell us anything about our experience as adults in an increasingly virtual world, and about our experience as human beings in general. The central issue of the reading group discussion was the role of the world in grounding ideas about values, ethics, etc., and one of the hot topics in the WH discussions is the role that environment has

in shaping our ability to apprehend certain subtler aspects of human experience. This discussion has touched not only on cultural background, but on specific, individual experience and various kinds of preparation.

The questions remain. Is the kind of insight that the WH attempts to describe accessible to a western audience when not read by Clint Eastwood? What role does ‘the world’ have in determining aspects of our experience? Is it possible to ‘ground’ things like value and meaning? What role does technology have in these considerations? How can we begin to determine the answers to these questions? These are the questions that we will be considering next week.

## **4 Second Life expansion continues to accelerate**

Over the past week our expansion into Second Life has accelerated rapidly. In addition to continuing our QSL meetings Second Life’s Kat Lemieux (Katherine Prawl in real life) has created a web-site for the Qwaq-Second Life Liaison at <http://qwaq-sl.org>. If you would like to contribute to this site or want your blog listed in the blogroll, please contact Kat at [kat.lemieux@gmail.com](mailto:kat.lemieux@gmail.com)

Forums mayor Piet Hut was also interviewed by the UgoTrade blog. You can find the transcript here: <http://www.ugotrade.com/2008/01/15/exploring-reality-in-virtual-worlds-with-piet-hut/>.

## **5 Interview with Bob Magrisso**

For the first Weekly WoKer interview I talked with Bob Magrisso. Bob is a general internist in Chicago. In addition to his private practice he is also on the faculty at Northwestern Medical school, where he works with residents and medical students in a clinical setting.

Due to the length of this interview I have split it into two parts. The first part is about Bob’s background, both in science and in spiritual practice, and includes an interesting discussion of his near death experience—something in which I believe he is unique for the forums. The second installment, coming next week, covers his experience in virtual worlds, including the gallery of his own artwork that he created in Qwaq forums.

Andrew: How did you end up in WoK Forums?

Bob: It’s an interesting story. I was writing an article that was connecting some aspects of physics with the near death experience. I went to the library—to Northwestern library—and I was looking up a book of David Bohm’s collected works.

And about three books away was another book, whose name I can't remember. It was a scientific forum on the limits of science that was held in Santa Fe in the mid 90's. And since the topic I was working on kind of had something to do with the limits of science I was really drawn to the book, just because of the title, and I started to read it. And I remember reading it, and thumbing through it I found an article that was written by Piet. I was thinking, 'wow, this guy was writing about exactly what I've been thinking, except it's so much better formulated than my own thoughts.' So I took out the book, did some reading and some googling, and e-mailed Piet with the article I was writing, not knowing who this person was. And fairly soon I got back a detailed response, and then we exchanged a few e-mails, and then he was in Japan and coming through Chicago to go to Holland. So we made up to meet in Evanston where I live, had a wonderful dinner, and I also brought a friend of mine who is a professor who is a philosopher at the University of Illinois, and we ate at Mount Everest, and Piet said, "I think we've had a peak experience," and it was really a nice experience. I've only met Piet once more—no twice more in person. Once he came to an astrophysics conference in Chicago, and another time in NY.

A: When did all of this take place?

B: About two years ago.

A: When do you feel like your interest in WoK like topics and science/spirituality kind of topics begin to take shape?

Bob: as an undergrad in college. As a physics major I was very interested in the understanding that physics had developed as a way of understanding reality, and I had some other experiences of alternative states of consciousness, and as a result of the conjunction of these two things I began to wonder more generally about reality.

Then I went to Hopkins and studied neurophysiology, and I was really interested in mathematical processes and brain function. But partway through that I realized something, which was that I really did not enjoy being in a lab. I enjoyed being with people, and doing something that had a much more immediate value. I also felt that I wasn't sure I really had enough motivation to be a scientist—a professional scientist—and I really liked being with people.

A: had you picked up Cafh<sup>1</sup> by that point?

In 1972, which was when I first entered medical school, I went to a conference about dolphins. John Lily was running the conference, and he was kind of an explorer of the psycho-physical kind of world. He was a physician, and one of the few scientists who was working in that kind of area. I went to a conference where he spoke, and it was the first time I had learned anything about meditation. And at that conference

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<sup>1</sup>A 'path of spiritual unfolding' founded in 1937. For more information see the official web site, [www.cafh.org](http://www.cafh.org)

I picked up a little brochure about Cafh. That's how I discovered Cafh—I went to a workshop—and that's when I entered that.

A: So you've been with this one path for 30 odd years—very unusual in this age of spiritual consumerism! Are there any particular events since you began practicing Cafh that stand out? I know you have mentioned your near death experience, but are there any others? And of course I am interested in hearing about the near death experience, too!

B: I had my near death experience in 1995. That experience came at a time when I was having a kind of mid-life re-evaluation about what was important, what wasn't, and so forth. Essentially I had a heart-attack, and fortunately in the emergency room had a cardiac arrest and was resuscitated. The experience itself really shook me to the core, and in doing that it actually reaffirmed the value of my spiritual interests more than ever. It kind of turned out to be one of those things that has been a spur to me than any kind of a hindrance. A lot of renewed energy came out of that. For the sake of full disclosure I think it is also important to add that I had been seeing a Jungian analyst, and I am also very interested in Jung, and that was also very helpful to me to work through these issues.

A: Was there a Jungian component to the near death experience, that is, did you have any visions of different kinds of archetypes or mythological figures?

B: there was a visual componenet, a sense of movement in a star-filled sky towards some lights that were really figures, but it wasn't very detailed—it was the overwhelming sense of awakening and peace and release that was more striking, more than anything visual or narrative.

A: Was it more kinesthetic?

B: There was no sense of having a body. There was a sense of movement... the words, every time you say a word it's like, "it's kind of not like that" There is a whole big thing posted on the web<sup>2</sup>. I gave a round at our hospital where I described this whole thing in pretty good detail.

For me, the issue goes to the issue of mind/body psycho/physical science/religion all of these dualities are things that really interest me. Not in just an intellectual sense, but in a real kind of alive sense. And so that kind of experience kind of shakes you up... and then I got involved with a group called the IANDS (International Association for Near Death Studies). It's like a whole second career.

A: So do you see the primary thrust of the vision—the essence of its message—as being something like shaking up the boundaries in the dichotomies that we conventionally use to understand the world?

That's a pretty good summary. The issue of boundaries has become a very

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<sup>2</sup><http://chicagoians.org/stories/Robert%20Magrisso%2C%20MD>

live issue. I think the name of the book that I mentioned earlier was actually ‘no boundaries.’<sup>3</sup> I think that’s what attracted me. I began to see that the near death experience is one example of a boundary experience, where you go up to some boundary that you thought was there and you go beyond it. I think we have those kinds of boundary experiences in lots of different ways. I think his experience is a really concrete example of boundary issues. Most of us like to live within boundaries. Not that many people want to cross boundaries, and professionally it is sometimes risky to be crossing them.

## 6 Upcoming Events

- Steven’s Ongoing Lectures on the Contemplative Background of the Working Hypothesis: Saturday, January 19 at 5PM ET in the Colloquium Room
- Sunday Guest Lecture: Prof. Zenon Pylyshyn will present on basic issues concerning the nature of knowledge and understanding, Sunday, January 20 at 5pm ET Jan 20
- Monday evening Reading Group: Monday, Jan 21 at 10pm ET. We will continue to concentrate on the book *Wisdom of the World*, by Remi Brague.

QSL meetings and Working Hypothesis Chats will continue. You can find the details at <http://www.waysofknowing.net/VRExplorations.html>

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<sup>3</sup>Hut, P., 1996, in *Boundaries and Barriers* [Addison-Wesley], p. 148-187; on the web at <http://www.ids.ias.edu/piet/publ/abisko/ab.html>

## 7 Piet's Page

Last month, I wrote a ten-page paper titled 'Virtual Laboratories and Virtual Worlds'<sup>4</sup>. It was meant for the proceedings of an astrophysics conference held in Capri, Italy, in September. All the other talks at the conference addressed the main topic, the evolution of star clusters. Having already given more talks on that topic than I can remember, I decided to talk instead about the experience I have had setting up and running two Qwaq organizations: our own WoK Forums, and another one called MICA, for Meta Institute for Computational Astrophysics, the main topic of my talk.

After submitting my paper to the proceedings, I also put it up on the web, on the default place where astrophysicists share their preprints. I wasn't sure whether anyone would be interested in the topic. Each day between fifty and a hundred new papers appear there, almost too many to even read the titles, let alone the abstracts. To my surprise, within days of posting my paper there, I received quite a number of reactions from fellow astronomers, including several invitations to give a talk on the subject of virtual worlds as research and collaboration tools. The next few weeks saw even more reactions, increasing from people outside astronomy.

At first, I was puzzled by so so much response. I knew that virtual worlds have become somewhat of a hot topic during the last year, but I thought that there must have been zillions of papers written already, so I had not expected my paper to stand out in particular. However, when I finally found the time to explore Second Life (SL) over the holidays, and to read books and articles about SL, I began to see what must have happened. While enormous energy has been poured into the forming of communities within SL, and in building all kind of fun virtual structures there, few people seem to have both tested and reflected in detail upon the way in which SL and other worlds can be used for serious academic and/or business work. I had played a rare role of a self-reflective guinea pig, it seemed.

That impression was strengthened when I was interviewed in-world in SL by Tish Shute (Tara5 Oh in SL) a few days ago: within hours of the interview appearing on the web, one of the leading 'metarati' (as Tish calls them) picked up on both the interview and my little Capri paper with a strong endorsement<sup>5</sup>. The bottom line is: what we are all doing here in WoK Forums, and specially the self-reflective nature of our discussions, may turn out to be making history in ways we can only begin to fathom!

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<sup>4</sup><http://arxiv.org/abs/0712.1655>

<sup>5</sup><http://blogs.electricsheepcompany.com/chris/?p=258>

## 8 Quote of the Week

I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which, when you looked at it the right way, did not become still more complicated.

– Paul Anderson