

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'aae' in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a dark blue square.

Charrette: freespace

HAPPYTHINK.Inc

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ABSTRACT For many years I have been writing a city in which all of the contradictions of capitalist society and urban development are condensed and exaggerated with brutal clarity. Every aspect of daily life from education, to body parts, and views of trees, has been commodified in a manner that even the pessimists of former times could barely have imagined. It is a city that sprawls to the horizon in all directions and sits on the brink of ecological catastrophe. As is usual in such tales, the dark cunning of the human imagination works hard on ways to categorise and control human behaviour. However, like all dystopian narratives, it is a vision of the future that is rooted in the present, a story that simply stretches and distorts the social and material reality of everyday life. For example, to speculate on the collapse of urban civilisation and of the metamorphosis of education into a grotesque parody of a retail outlet, is only possible, because the forces that could make it happen have already been unleashed. What follows is a fragment from the testament of the City's last librarian.

“I am haunted by little drones that fly around inside my head. They buzz and clatter like mechanical mosquitoes and are utterly relentless in their determination to sell the informational sound-bites that have replaced what was left of education. “Want to sound smart in front of your friends? Then Socrates’ sound-bites are for you. Ten classic phrases for 9.99.’ ‘Do you find books boring with too many pages? Osmosis Injection Synopses will do the job for you. Read whilst you are asleep.’”

I am more or less alone in this marble ruin that was once a glorious edifice to learning. I have read about vengeful warriors who burnt libraries and filled nearby rivers so high with corpses and scholarly tomes that the flood defences broke and the surrounding streets were strewn with red ochre stained paper. I

have heard other tales of how zealous guards full of hate broke down the doors of innocent people and arrested them for harbouring censored material, which they then, with joy in their hearts, set alight in the public square. But here in this city, nobody really cares about the library. The window panes are patched with plastic, and the roof leaks will not be repaired. Already the philosophy section on the fifth floor has been half destroyed and the rare manuscripts in the special collection have turned to dust. Other sections are in an equally precarious state. Daily, whole chapters in human history crumble and disappear. The building creaks with neglect and at regular intervals the crash of timber and tear of paper puncture the otherwise dusty silence. I am old enough to remember when hundreds thronged the hallways and the whole library hummed with passionate conversation. But today there

are probably no more than a few dozen individuals and most of them are so old they will soon be dead. Few amongst the population have a need for such places any more and once I die the doors will probably close for good.

The student customers of HappyThink.Inc know nothing of this world and are more than content with the online gaming universe that long ago replaced educational institutions. In a way it is perfectly understandable. It is safe, secure, predictable and has none of the terrible uncertainty of unknown and difficult ideas.

There is little point weeping. It is to be expected, and no more than the logical outcome of the deeply held belief that the world and everything in it, including education, should be run as a business. It is a conviction that is centuries old, and like a religious shibboleth, became an article of blind faith. Even today, long after a few large monopoly providers conquered the urban economy and destroyed the illusion of choice, the ideological campaign continues unabated. I can hear the disciples ranting even now. "There can be no alternative. Economic self-interest corresponds with human nature. Free markets are the ideal and only way of resolving society's needs." And so on. That such propositions were mythological and empirically unverifiable never seemed to matter.

And so it came to pass that just as the farmer once went to market with bags of corn that were weighed, priced and sold, so the vendors of education broke knowledge up into measurable chunks, tagged them and joined the busy world of commodity exchange. Students became customers, and in the same way that they sought out the cheapest three for two offers on bread and beer, so they bought lectures on art and science at gloriously knock down prices. Customer ratings and reviews ensured that whatever they purchased, they could be safe in the knowledge that it would give a maximum return for minimum time spent and would match their shopping history and consumer profile. A perfect fit.

Nobody really remembers when it happened. Like a slowly incubating deadly virus, it was passed from one generation to the next until all distinctions between shopping and learning, and knowledge and information were lost. If there was a ground zero moment, then it was

probably when the City's executive committee changed the law to allow private contractors to bid for franchises to run educational services in direct competition with what was once called the public sector. Senior managers of educational institutions, wasted little time in introducing business values. Students were charged fees, and university campuses and websites underwent an immediate retail makeover. Illuminated hoardings, alluring holographic sales assistants, pop-ups, digital announcement boards, and flashing neon, combined in an hallucinogenic barrage of sound and colour that advertised the month's best selling lectures, promotional deals on popular modules and body satisfaction services.

Meanwhile, overnight, management and workplace regimes were introduced that would not have been out of place on a production line or in an authoritarian corporation. Nothing was off limits and nothing was sacred. The employment of time and motion studies might once have seemed anachronistic in an academic environment. In fact, it proved remarkably easy to calibrate staff performance in terms of income from work sold, fees earned through course delivery, and numbers of papers cited by entrepreneurs and business leaders. Seeing absolutely no difference between running a University and a pharmaceutical plant or car factory, CEOs introduced productivity targets, performance related pay, medals for good citizen workers, compulsory monthly health checks and random drug and alcohol tests, all designed to spot slackers and potential deviants.

As in any branch of modern industry, the maintenance of corporate values soon became of paramount importance to the smooth running of Universities. To this end and so as to ensure loyalty and ideological conformity, morning assemblies were introduced at which staff and students were required to recite the core mission of their institutions in time to martial rhythms.

It wasn't a conspiracy, and the CEOs hadn't set out to wreak havoc on the achievements of human civilisation. They were simply following the operational rules of the market place - efficiency, order, and measurement. For without tangible quantitative and technically precise description, the labour of an academic worker, an educational info-pack, or any other

commodity, cannot be priced and therefore sold or exchanged. As such the very language of academic and intellectual life absorbed strange new words and criteria that previously had belonged only to commerce. In what resembled a process of reverse alchemy, technicians endeavoured to measure and quantify notions of quality, intellectual value and even happiness.

Naturally enough activities that could not be described using the language of cost accounting or quantified so as to appear neatly in ledgers, spread sheets and league tables, fell by the wayside. It was simply the logic of the market at work. If material could not be delivered cheaply and effectively then like a remaindered book sent for pulping it was deleted from the curriculum. There was in fact no particular antipathy towards any subject. If the arts, speculative philosophy, humanities, abstract mathematics and critical theory could be transformed and linked to the needs of industry, commerce or the political ambitions of government then they had a future. It was simply the case that freethinking, autonomous thought and independent creativity tended to be difficult to categorise and control. It was also overly dependent on actual human contact, immensely time consuming and therefore far too expensive.

As for students their priorities like those of any consumer were the best deals available for particular products. Help was on hand from specialist websites that compared offers from rival service providers and weighed up the price of modules against the value placed on them by potential employers. The social and intellectual benefits of pursuing an academic subject that demanded critical enquiry and the rigorous subjection of propositions and ideas to intensive debate became a strangely antiquated idea.

Not surprisingly, computers were increasingly used to mark assignments through automated quizzes and multiple-choice tests. It was also apparent that they could be used for teaching. It was an omen and signaled the dawn of the fully on-line course and virtual campus. As the digital transformation gathered pace it was inevitable that Universities would sub contract more and more of their services. Key research staff that could generate income were for the time being at least, protected. Flesh and blood teachers however became an endangered

species and like specialist stonemasons, weavers and other rare subcontractors, were only ever called upon to update on line course material or help develop new modules as customer preferences changed. Customer feedback even at the early stage indicated that contrary to market forecasts, students actually preferred virtual teachers and once it became possible to modulate the teachers' voice to suit various regional accents and languages, and better still in the more sophisticated costly versions to upgrade the virtual teacher to a facsimile of a well known celebrity, the venerable human profession of teaching was stripped of its halo.

Universities spent small fortunes on aggressive marketing campaigns and rapidly sold off their inner city real estate at the same time as they strengthened the departments of Business Administration, Advertising, Marketing, Litigation and Insurance. Whereas once physical universities enrolled thousands of students, a new on-line mega campus could, in a short space of time boast hundreds of thousands. Predictably servers crashed such was the unseemly rush to graduate in record time with one of the discount degrees on offer. It was a lucrative but thoroughly cutthroat market, flooded with all manner of would-be educational entrepreneurs from honest brokers to pimps and peddlers of bogus information.

Like any commodity producer, market leaders like HappyThink.Inc knew that to remain profitable and ahead of the competition they had to carefully weigh up the twin aspects of the goods they were selling. Modules and courses had to be produced in a cost effective way so as to maximize the return on investments, but it was imperative that they instilled desire and longing in potential customers. To this end they employed cutting edge computer modelers and game designers to construct visually addictive and fully immersive experiences with none of the spatial limits, discomfort or awkward chance encounters of the ordinary high street, university campus or shopping mall. Its first version was a fairly tame affair and little more than a three dimensional standard website with drop down menus viewed through wrap round spectacles. Although commercially successful users complained that it was boring and offered few challenges. In response, HappyThink's programmers went to the other extreme and designed an abstract infinite

matrix through which the student, wearing a wired body suit and headset could navigate as if a weightless celestial body in space, clicking on endorphin rich plug-ins that created the sensation of being whisked through optical wormholes. This philosophically avant-garde experiment nearly put the firm out of business such were the number of complaints from users of nausea, synaptic meltdowns and bouts of agoraphobia.

The next version was a masterstroke of technology and nostalgic irony. With the aid of body sensor pads and cerebral implants, digital data can stream directly to the brain's neural networks. Completely immersed in a real time environment, a student can enjoy the full sensual experience of being at an old style University complete with Academic Departments and Faculties. With everything rendered in extraordinary photo-realistic detail, a student can drink with friends in bars, sit in lecture theatres and meet virtual professors for tutorials. Fully interactive, it has proved immensely popular not least because users can create their own ideal body image and personalities, change gender, form friendships and have simulated sexual relations. Mindful of international markets HappyThink.Inc include a series of menus so that students can change the ethnic profile and student demographic and choose different geographical settings that comes complete with variations in climate, weather fronts, flora, fauna and wild life. Not only that but the programme also includes various architectural options that allow the student to study in anything from a steel and glass laboratory full of animated machines, to a medieval style campus full of quads and spires or an ancient scented garden full of roaming toga clad philosophers. For these reasons and others manufacturers argue that the virtual University is in many ways superior to its 'real world' predecessor. It allows students to come and go as they please at any time of day and night, work at their own pace and earn credits as when they feel comfortable. Needless to say the system is full of catches. The basic educational package has to be paid for by monthly direct debit. But to access the full range of options and regular upgrades, the customer has to pay additional fees. Not surprisingly, student debt is massive and rates of course non-completion high as is the number of bankrupt students who distraught at not finishing game levels answer one of the

myriad pop-up adverts posted by moneylenders, pawnbrokers and escort agencies.

I am despondent but glad I do not have long. I stare out across the rooftops at the fetish architecture of money and power that dominates the city's skyline and which is rivaled in size only by the gargantuan retail parks, gaming halls and stadia used for mass rallies. Yesterday a vast rent appeared in the floor of the history department that threatens to tear apart memory itself. It is pointless complaining. Long ago there were critics who gave impassioned speeches about the sanctity of true knowledge and how 'pay to learn' courses would eventually destroy the intellectual fabric of society and widen the gulf even further between rich and poor. Sadly, but all too predictably, they were patronised as relics who were disconnected from reality and the self evidently exciting and prosperous future of pick and mix self-checkout degrees.

On occasions an individual will venture through the doors and stand in awe beneath the towering shelves of books as if they have seen a ghost, but they are few and far between. I do not think we have long. The economic depression is deepening, and whilst the parents of the wealthy will continue, for the time being at least, to pay for the full range of options available in the most costly on-line courses, the vast majority of the population are cutting back on expenses. This is when we will reach the tipping point. As it stands at the moment large sections of the civilian population with low credit ratings can't afford to pay more than the minimum required to complete the elementary modules necessary to gain employment.

What is even more disturbing however is that the very poor are rejecting altogether courses regulated by HappyThink.Inc and the City's Executive which although expensive have some residual academic content. Instead they are turning to back street dealers who for the same price as an elementary module in literacy from HappyThink sell a whole bootleg course of recycled garbage data. Even more alarming is the appearance of new rival educational providers like the Assembly of Gods. The entrepreneurs that control these businesses have skillfully combined shamanistic prophecy, astrology and elements of old monotheist belief systems into what is an

instantly ideologically addictive cocktail. In vast auditoria, preachers with the aid of cutting edge technology deliver an audio-visual spectacle that is so powerful that it induces epilepsy. Many worshippers confuse this with transcendence. And then two years ago in an act that caused great alarm in the marketing department of HappyThink.Inc, the Assembly of Gods issued its first Bachelors degrees.

I do not know what the future holds although there are plenty of clues in the literature department. Perhaps conscious of their own vulnerability, ancient writers filled volume after volume in which they imagined the countless ways in which humanity might meet its end. It could happen as a result of tectonic catastrophe, celestial event, plague, flood, or actions directly attributable to human activity. In some scenarios humanity enters into what can only be described as species regression. Cognitive abilities fade, superstition replaces reason, and language, the bedrock of civilisation, begins to shrink and then disintegrate. I can see it happening and the drones that are flying around in my head have changed their pitches to sell God and denounce all forms of rationality. Disturbing numbers of people are beginning to distrust individuals who are too clever. In many quarters, it is now considered pretentious and undignified to use polysyllabic words or to profess too much on a particular subject. Whether it is the fault of the Assembly or HappyThink, it has become normal and fashionable to question the validity of the whole idea of scientific proof and objective truth. The situation is perilous.”