

Web's eye in the sky brings new insights

Every once in a while, in the course of your life, you see something that changes everything. You realize that imagined possibilities are becoming real, and the world is going to be very, very different. That happened to me a couple of days ago, when my kids showed me "Google Earth." Google Earth is a computer program. Google Earth changes everything.

Google Earth is a free download from earth.google.com, you just need a computer and an Internet connection. Back in the day, only geeks like me even knew what those were. Now almost everybody's online. That's what makes Google Earth possible.

Google Earth gives you a view of Earth from space, something that only astronauts used to have. But it's better than that, because you can zoom in. And how. The computer scientists at Google have taken satellite images of the earth and organized them so you can zoom in from orbit, down through the atmosphere into cities all over the globe.

But why stop there? Drop down further until the cities turn to city blocks. As you fly over Colorado Springs, click on "Roads" to highlight Interstate 25. If you drop down further, street names appear. Follow the streets to help find your house. Drop down to the maximum level the computer will permit. Your house will be clearly visible. Maybe even your car.

If you are not awestruck by taking this cyberjourney from home planet to home town to home sweet home, then you are made of stone. The world is going to be very, very different.

It's going to be different because it's going to hi-res. Right now satellite pictures are at about 10 pixels per meter. When we get to 100, you can recognize faces.

It's going to be different because it's going to high bandwidth. Instead of still images, Google Earth or some competing technology will show you video. In real time. Don't get too attached to nude sunbathing on the back porch.

It's going to be different because kids are embracing this technology. My 9-year-old nephew used Google Earth before I had even heard of it, and I've been working with



OPINION

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computers for 25 years.

It's going to be different because technology breaks down borders. If you want to see how arbitrary borders are, just fire up Google Earth and check "Borders" as you watch the world. The red lines appear and disappear with a click, blinking over an indifferent planet.

It's going to be different because global imaging technology fights cultural ignorance. People who want to know what's going on somewhere else on Earth will fire up a program and take a look. No wonder

totalitarian regimes try desperately to control Internet access. Life in free countries is better. More and more people will learn that.

It's going to be different because we're going to be different. Being able to fly over the planet from your house to the Eiffel Tower with a couple of clicks gives you a more global perspective, so to speak. People talk about one world, one planet, and our common humanity, but we seldom experience that in a deep, visceral way. With technology like Google Earth, that experience will become more and more common.

I'm a scientist. I know that different and new aren't always better. Technology is a two-edged sword; fire brings warmth but also burns. I tell my students it's the job of science to make politicians' lives difficult. I suspect the geeky gurus at Google will prove my point in spades.

But I think the human race is up to the challenge. That's why I find the technology so exciting. Anything that emphasizes our common humanity, gives a more global perspective, and makes the human condition more accessible has got to make the world better. I can't wait to see it happen.

The world's first scientist, Archimedes, once told his king "Give me a lever long enough and a place to stand, and I will move the world." Last night, a mere 2,000 years later, I spun our planet with a mouse click and thought of him. The lever is the Internet, that makes sense. But we no longer need a place to stand. We'll just sit in the family room, in front of a computer.

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