Cyberculture Evolution

Jon Lebkowsky & R.U. Sirius
1996

Two of the principal fathers of technocluture, electronic media activist Jon Lebkowsky and cyber-theoretician R.U. Sirius, have known each other almost from the virtual beginning. Lebkowsky, co-creator of the Austin-based subculture media system Fringeware, Inc., met the co-founder and editor of *Mondo 2000* -- the now-defunct slick magazine that juxtaposed computer culture with drugs, sex, and graphic art -- back in the early days of the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), one of the first online communities. The two independent thinkers together created the late online *Mondo 2000* conference on the WELL, which Lebkowsky adds "had its 15 minutes as the white-hot, way-kool core of cyberculture".

Currently, on Thursday nights on *Hotwired*, Lebkowsky hosts the Electronic Frontiers Forum (EFF), a kind of an Internet think tank to which Net activists (and the online public) are invited to discuss the ramifications of politics both in and on the wired world. He's also working with EFF-Austin and EFF-Houston to organize a cyber rights conference slated for fall.

Though Sirius left *Mondo 2000* shortly before its collapse in 1995, he remains a ubiquitous Internet presence -- a search for his name turns up 30,000 matches at URLs all over the world. Sirius pens a regular column for *Japan Esquire* and is a contributing editor at a wide range of publications from *Wired* to the zine *bOING bOING*. His latest book, *Cyberpunk Handbook: The Real Cyberpunk Fake Book* (Random House, 1995), was co-authored with ex-*Mondo* colleague St. Jude.

Below is an edited transcript of an interview the outspoken online gurus conducted with each other over a period of weeks in a private conference on the WELL (the site is famous for these types of discussions, and is still going strong at http://www.well.com/). How did these media icons become cyber-cultured ? Find out as the history of an electronic identity morphs into a counsel on Eastern thought-inspired technophilosophy.

-- Jen Scoville

R.U. Sirius : How did you find yourself online and more generally a participant in technoculture ?

Jon Lebkowsky : Several threads in my life came together online. I was flirting with science fiction or speculative fiction, thinking about writing within that genre since I was around 10 years old, and then, in the early Eighties, as I was about ready to give up on science fiction as generally moribund, I saw a review of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in *Coevolution Quarterly* and found a copy at the Whole Earth Provision Company. I'd been reading the postmodern graphic zine *Heavy Metal* a lot while soaking in the bathtub, and from that I was well-acquainted with the nascent cyberpunk vision, but *Neuromancer* soldered those connections.

Not long after, I bought a computer and modem, and got online. I was calling SMOF-BBS (Secret Masters of Fandom bulletin board) in Austin where I stumbled onto "Jules Verne" and "Vincent Omniaveritas", *aka* Bruce Sterling. I was reading Bruce's e-zine *Cheap Truth* and hanging out at Armadillocon, an annual SF convention

in Austin where cyberpunk evolved from Gardner Dozois' toss-off terminology to a viable marketing niche, as it was also catching on as an actual *lifestyle* concurrent with the emergent digital cultures.

Eventually, I logged onto the WELL long distance from Texas, and got involved in cyberactivism after the Steve Jackson raid (which I read about on SMOF the day it happened in March, 1990). One of the SMOF-BBS regulars, Johnny Mnemonic, showed up on the WELL as "mnemonic", *aka* Mike Godwin. Godwin had just gone to work for Electronic Frontiers Foundation (EFF) as it was being formed, and the Steve Jackson case was the right thing at the right time for them. Steve wanted to form an Austin EFF, which was originally supposed to be an "alpha" chapter of a potential chapters movement. I became a founding member of EFF-Austin, along with Sterling, John Quarterman, Smoot Carl-Mitchell, and of course Steve. We incorporated and became very active, and I got into organizing and promoting cyber-events in Austin, with EFF-Austin as sponsor.

I'm leaving something out. John Barlow and several others created a conference on the WELL that later became the Hacking conference, and held a discussion there about freedom, privacy, hacking, and cracking that attracted renowned hackmeisters Phiber Optik and Acid Phreak. This was before I reached the WELL, but it was extracted and printed in an issue of *Harper's*. I think that discussion was one of the threads in the evolution of EFF, and in reading it I realized that *Neuromancer* was prophetic, that a digital underground was forming, that this was an opportunity to create a new kind of community independent of geographical considerations.

Around the same time, I noticed that the *Mondo 2000* topic in the Hacking Conference on the WELL had several diverse threads, enough to justify its own conference. An avid fan of *Mondo* since the *Reality Hackers* daze, I suggested the creation of the *Mondo* conference, which you and I cohosted, and which for a time was incredibly active with rants and raves from the edges of digital postmodern cyberfunk.

I met Mark Frauenfelder and Gareth Branwyn on the WELL, and wrote for Gareth's *Going Gaga* zine, and for the "Beyond Cyberpunk" HyperCard stack. Mark was expanding *bOING-bOING* and looking for editors; I offered to be fiction editor. The fiction submissions weren't that great, so we decided not to take unsolicited fiction. The fiction editor morphed into the Cyborganic Jivemeister, and wrote "Fiction That Bleeds Truth".

Paco Nathan and I met through the *bOING-bOING* connection, and in one of our delirious conversations came up with the idea for an online company called FringeWare. I spent the next three years of my life working on FringeWare, Inc., and *Fringe Ware Review*, and on FringeWare's online presence, along with Paco, Monte McCarter, and other fellow travelers (I've since left FringeWare to do other stuff).

I'm working at the moment at defining cyborganics, a term I used in a piece I wrote for *Fringe Ware Review #2*. Cyborganics is an extension of cybernetics, a word coined by Norbert Weiner. He wrote a book called *The Human Use of Human Beings*, and that title points to cyborganics. It's about technology as an extension and an enhancement of the human, a utopian rather than dystopian vision of the possibilities inherent in a world where digital technology is ubiquitous but softly applied.

RUS : Sounds like a pretty rapid trajectory from getting into cyberpunk, getting on the Net, *Mondo... bOING bOING...* FringeWare... and out. Did you have any history of alternative cultural interest or activism ?

JL : Oh, yeah, all the way back I was attracted by alternative scenes, radical politics, gonzo lifestyles, poetic humanism over, uh..., plastics. Eventually, I moved to Austin, enrolled in the University of Texas, and wrote a few pieces for *The Rag*, Austin's underground newspaper at the time. I marched against Vietnam, dropped acid, studied James Joyce while reading Thomas Pynchon on the side... dropped out of school for a while and lived with drunken poets and dopers on the fringes of Austin's student community.

Several things coulda happened then -- the most likely that I was going to become some kind of writer for the alternative press. I was really pushing in that direction at the time. I returned to school and was in an honors

English program studying experimental fiction, envisioning a kind of gonzo journalistic approach à la Hunter Thompson and Tom Wolfe as my most likely "career" path, but also considering law school with radical politix in mind. Instead I got married, started a family, and became a case worker. Some combination of Ivan Illich's de-institutionalizing philosophy and Shunryu Suzuki-Roshi's soto Zen sorta pushed me that way. We had a couple of kids and lived a weird sort of hippie/family lifestyle for several years, 'til the Eighties. By then, my wife had become a realtor, and we were evolving into a weird sort of misery, putting distance between our lifestyle and our ideals. That was when I discovered the WELL, which pulled me back on track and gave me the opportunity to approach both activism and writing again with a little sadder-but-wiser seasoning.

I often think about Charles Bukowski, how he stopped writing for 10 years, just worked at the post office and lived his crazy life. I went through a period sort of like that, only despite its crazy elements it had amazing stability... job, marriage, kids, etc. My life has been like that. I was born on the Aries-Taurus cusp, so part of me is on fire and part of me is on solid ground.

RUS : Net culture and the sort of cyber subculture that FringeWare/*bOING bOING*, etc., represents is a mixed generational thing, very much made up of people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Do you find that our experience as old farts from the Sixties becomes increasingly irrelevant, or does it keep on coming around again ? Is there something left to be completed, or does it just need to be jettisoned ?

JL : That's a good question. The real problem with the age thing is that, without saying so in so many words, the young Turks of cyberculture are invoking the spirit of our own "don't trust anybody over 30" ageist maxim. You and I have lived long enough to figure how fallacious that proscription really is, but having spouted it ourselves, we understand where it's coming from. And we know how futile it is to argue the point.

RUS : We were clearly onto something in the Sixties, but I think we did a poor job of defining the problem, and I don't think Generation X or whatever it is has done any better. We keep looking for superficialities, but the root of the problem is way deep. I think Sandy Stone was on the right track when she noted (possibly without intending to) that virtual community was potentially inimical to true community because it hides our growing sense of isolation under a comfortable layer of cyberfoo that defines itself as a coming together. I think Howard Rheingold said that we have to have more than digital Internet-working to form community, and if that is indeed what he said, I agree with him.

JL : We're always going to have exploiters, and they're buying and selling souls in cyberspace just like they do in physpace. Some of them appear to be our friends 'til we peel back the epidermal simulation and see what's ticking under there. So it's more important than ever that we form *true* community, not just to retain our humanity, but to make ever deeper exploration of the meaning of humanity, of existence, apart from our food-chain consumptive kneejerk day-to-day. To get this point across, and to communicate some little bit of wisdom gained over the years, is the challenge.

RUS : Well, cyberspace involves a break with real space and with history. Thing is, when you break with history, there's no context. You can talk for instance about "the natural ecology of the free market" without dealing with slavery, right ? There seems to me some value in insisting on the exploration of our history and the meaning of our times....

JL : That's the tricky Zen thing of acknowledging your historical context without attaching to it. In the Sixties and Seventies, I encountered a radical insistence on abolition of the preterit and loss of history, but it wasn't working, precisely because it invited recidivism, a cultural return to the same set of errors. I think we needed something like *Groundhog Day*. Alluding to that Bill Murray film, repeating an existence 'til it's right; i.e. until the attachments fall away....

But that's the thing. If you don't examine history, you repeat mistakes. If you do examine history, you may fall

into a conceptual rut. The Taoists say to look for the middle path, and so do the 4th way folks, though not so clearly.

"I'm just doing my jigsaw puzzle before it rains anymore."

I was talking with my friend Joseph Rowe today about how the busywork of virtuality is a good way to hide from the real need to do various kinds o' work on yourself. Cyberfoo fills the head with noise, and ensures that you can't think your way into deep crevices of the mind and spirit. Folks who do this and have any kind of sensitivity tend to be way depressed eventually because they're not handling the demands of individual evolution, the depression is really a manifestation of the need to go deeper, or the frustration of that need. So I'm in a quandary that's actually part spiritual, part ape, and part cyborg... what t'do ?

I think I've already discussed that term "cyborganics", but I can say more. I think it's about finding the right relationship, in human terms, between human and machine. It's natural and inherent that technology will evolve and become more powerful, a greater presence in our lives. That's happening now, and it's essential to redefine in this context what it is to be *human*, and figure how technology can enhance without suffocating.

RUS : On the other hand, if we hold on tightly to what we think it means to be human, we might be missing the point. Cyborgization might be our way of mutating ourselves against our own will.... Let the machine into your heart, as Rudy Rucker says. The question of humanism and free will is a complicated one, I think....

JL : Agreed. And I'm not so sure that we can "control" evolution as much as we think. In fact, *homo sapiens* are characteristically delusional about control.

RUS : Right. So how do you give up your "control" delusions without making yourself ripe for exploitation ? This is a question the guruheads should have asked themselves in the Seventies.

JL : Oh, yeah, that really *is* the question. Though I've never studied aikido formally, I like that approach : learn to blend with the energy of your opponent in a way that's effective but not aggressive. I'd like to cultivate that approach in myself, however, in doing so, I'm wrestling demons on both sides -- the passive and the aggressive.

RUS : So what do you do now that you're no longer a FringeWarian ?

JL : I'm cyberactive, for one thing. I'm actively involved with EFF-Austin again, and *HotWired* has asked me to moderate a forum on Electronic Frontiers. The "electronic frontier" of the Internet or, in a larger sense, the Matrix, is booming, and if you dig the history of frontier development and boom cycles, you can see what's going down behind the hype.

As a frontier is settled, the newer settlers want to impose their concept of "civilization", close the saloons and the bawdyhouses and round up the Indians, y'know ? This implies a certain power, and success in squashing one kind of expression leads ineluctably to an attempt to suppress others. Today, they close the bawdyhouses and the saloons, but tomorrow, they may be shutting down the newspaper, the minority church, or the dissenting political party.

Without strong adherence to a constitutional framework that protects the rights of everybody, consensus politics doesn't work to protect diversity, you get a manipulated consensus wherein power and special interest can create a restrictive legal template that squashes the kind of cultural and philosophical variety that is essential for social and political life to have any consequence.

This is happening *now* with the Internet, and those of us who have spent years exploring the possibility of online community development can see our work threatened by interests for whom evolving intentional communities

in cyberspace are irrelevant. So many folks coming to the Internet now see it in terms of the model most familiar to them : broadcast television. They see the World Wide Web as a set of "programs", and they disregard the interactive dynamics, the quality of Internet-working that, for many of us, holds the most promise.

The broadcast model is so entrenched, and the smell of money so compelling, that it's hard to fight that conditioned perception. In fact, many of us who would've fought that fight have trouble sustaining a sense of purpose as dust flies from the virtual land rush, the rush to capitalize on Internet-as-hot-new-medium within a new telecommunications context. I was certainly guilty of putting the civil liberties issues aside to develop a "virtual market", until Senator Exon encouraged me to wake up and smell the coffee.

Paradoxically, I've done some consultancy on the business uses of the World Wide Web, since I seem to have developed some expertise in that area, and that brings up another important aspect of the "boom" phenomenon, which is its vulnerability to collapse. There's been quite a rush to develop companies to provide various Internet services : connectivity, Web servers, html encoding and Web design, etc., as individuals and corporations rush to develop an online presence. One of the points I make when I'm doing consultancy is that it's hard to assess the commercial impact of the medium at this point in its development, before the fever breaks.... We still don't know, for instance, how effective online presence will be as advertising, or how well "online storefronts" will work. We don't know how well the public's fascination with the Internet will hold, once the novelty's worn off. And there [are] other strange attractors. I wouldn't, for instance, want to be an Internet service provider right now, because the day may come when the phone companies will blow those guys right out of the water.

On the other hand, I really dig doing content on the Web, and I think there'll always be room for Webzines like *TAZmedia*, the one I created for FringeWare, *HotWired*, and the various others that are springing up : *Suck*, *Salon*, *Urban Desire*, et al.

RUS : I wonder if the frontier metaphor isn't a little bit off the mark and dangerous to people's conception of how much freedom is possible "on the frontier", since a real frontier gets settled but electronic conceptual space is virtually unlimited ?

JL : You imply that "cyberspace" is less constrained than "physpace", and I'm not sure that's true. But it's so different. The concept of virtual space or cyberspace depends on "consensual hallucination", as Gibson called it, which means that it's socially constructed by participants in what amounts to a quasi-delusion.

RUS : Cyberspace is constrained by certain practical technological limits as well, in one sense. From another point of view it's only constrained by imagination -- and the imagination of every individual therein and how far they're able to take it. But, certainly, the human psyche is constrained by its programming. The question is how do you break through the unspoken conspiracy to believe in stupid, destructive, and oppressive things ? I believe that people know better, but still dedicate their entire lives to defending those things.

JL : That sounds like the Buddha, or Gurdjieff.... The sense that most folks are sleepwalking through life, unaware of their true nature, though it's right *there*. That lack of awareness is normal, and the lack of awareness of the lack of awareness is metanormal. I think that's supposed to be the curse of existence in this particular frame of reference, whatever it is. Don't the physicists say that the material world is all probability, nothing "real" in a real sense ? This shit just drives me crazy.

RUS : And then somebody whacks you on the head with a stick and you're enlightened. And then, the next day, your head is just sore.

JL : Exactly. That elusive chaos butterfly, always causing hurricanes and headaches.

RUS : So, do you divide up your straight life as a nine-to-fiver and your fringe life, or do you see it all as one

continuum ?

JL : I'm good at what I do so I can get away with being a bit weird. Working along the fringe cultivates a beginner's mind; everything is new and nobody's an expert. That's way different from the established organization of a government job, so it's a way different scene. They sorta complement each other.

RUS : Well, you must be pretty excited about hosting the EFF forum on *Hotwired*. Maybe you can have a big hit and retire from the nine-to-five.

JL : What I'd like is more freedom to explore various juxtapositions of consciousness, technology, and politics, so it'd be nice to "have a hit" if that's what it meant. Otherwise, I'll just keep plugging away in whatever discretionary time I can find. Paco [Nathan] used to describe me as a catalyst, one who pulls people together and gets 'em moving in a particular direction. One way or another, I guess I'll keep doing that.