Is Cyberpunk the Counterculture of the 1990's ?

Steve Mizrach

The Red Light District of the Virtual Community

As that amorphous zone called cyberspace comes into being, it is clear that its terrain is not what many of its advocates would like to claim. The shape of cyberspace was meant to be antiseptic, hierarchical, clean and seamless, like a Pentagon war room; for, after all. the ARPANet (today's Internet) was meant to make the automation of warfare more efficient... and when the brains of NSFNet got to work with it, they imparted their seal of possession - with their preferred model being the hermetically sealed scientific laboratory, the ivory tower of pure, untrammeled research and uninterrupted discourse. These two models, the war room and the science lab, were the early basis for computer networks. And then along came the first party crashers. Their model was a different one - Chiba City from William Gibson's Neuromancer. A town of taverns known for being fast, dangerous, exotic, and wild.

"Virtual community" enthusiasts saw many possibilities for the new networking technologies. People's could link up around common interests and concerns and unite in ways that geography normally would prevent. The net could unite technologists, artists, poets, philosophers, and activists in new projects for transforming society. But they still had a somewhat antiseptic vision. Their vision had no room for pranks, commerce, conflict, braggadocio, propaganda, or adventure. Their communities, if created, would look too much like the planned communities of suburban life - you know, the ones walled off from the rest of the world with perfectly trimmed landscapes and ostentatious porticoes. But the new uninvited guests were children of the inner city. At least, the inner city of the imagination, if not that of "realspace".

By the mid-1980s, it was apparent that cyberspace had a lot of frontier zones where all kinds of highwaymen and con artists played their trade. These people were not all shiny, happy riders of the Great Information SuperHighway. Some had a downright attitude. They wanted to screw the system, to throw a monkey wrench in the churning corporate gears of the telecom companies. They had had predecessors : the "hackers" of MIT who considered no locked door or password to be an obstacle; the "phreaks" of the 70s who "blue boxed" their way into 20-way conference calls; and the "pirates" who thought no software protection system should be left uncracked. These were the problem children of Operation Sundevil. They read a particular kind of sci fi genre which offered a dystopian, techno-entropic future. The name of this genre was cyberpunk.

Hacking the Old Counterculture

It has long been a truism of American political thought that there is a 30-year cycle of American politics, alternating between conservatism and experimentation. America had just come out of a conservative decade in the 1980s, and everyone was expecting that something like the 1960s would be coming again in the 1990s. To meet this retroexpectation, fashion designers eagerly complied, recycling all kinds of things from earth shoes to Nehru jackets. No one knew what the 90s would bring - people talked about a new fiscal sensibility, a new stay-at-home attitude (cocooning), and maybe a new simplicity. Nothing that really looked like a counterculture; just a cultural retrenchment. And then Time magazine, that great barometer of American life, told us who the counterculture would be : the cyberpunk. A new youth explosion was underway - but this was a Generation Xplosion, which meant taking to the airwaves instead of the streets.

People quickly found out this new counterculture was not quite like the old one. They preferred the rave, with its hyperaccelerated remixed digital music, to simple acoustic folk songs; their drug of choice was Ecstasy, not pot. These were not New Age flower children looking for "peace and love"; instead they were New Edge hiphoppers out for "tech and cred". Rather than having some kind of "back to nature" romanticism, these folks preferred the urban disorder of the city, and they saw technology as their weapon of choice, not the enemy. Their heroes were not the Hippies of Peoples' Park - instead they looked to the pioneers of pirate radio as their icons. Not surprisingly, old countercultural types like Timothy Leary, John Perry Barlow, and Robert Anton Wilson quickly joined their ranks, proclaiming cyberpunk was the next wave of struggle against the System and all it stood for.

Their were superficial similarities, of course. The cyberpunks had a curious enthusiasm for neurochemicals, especially ones that they claimed increased energy, intelligence, or memory, although they rejected the idea that drugs might lead to some kind of peace or mystical harmony. They eschewed political activism, civil disobedience, and protest marches. Intead, they preferred a more essential form of the guerilla strike - one that used the phone lines rather than the picket line. There was no point in asking the Man for anything. Simply pick up your keyboard and take what you want from him, 'cause he won't give it to you.

Challenges to the Norms of the Emerging Information Order

In order for cyberpunk to be a counterculture, there had to have been a culture it was rebelling against. And sure enough there was. It was the culture of the multinational corporation, which viewed information as proprietary; the culture of the new information and service economy, which offered rebellious underachivers only McJobs or McData Processing positions; and the culture of the Computer Establishment, which made lots of dumb rules about where one could and could not go in cyberspace. The slogan of the old counterculture was "Make love, not war". How nice. But the slogan of the new counterculture was less romantic, and more matter of fact. "Information wants to be free".

The rebelliousness of that slogan does not seem evident at first glance. But when you think about it, it is as dangerous as any other manifesto. They meant all kinds of information. How to eavesdrop on people. How to rig vending machines and pay phones. How to bootleg music concert tapes. How to snatch classified information from the government. How to write viruses. How to write logic bombs which paralyze computer systems. How to break into corporate voice mail. How to get satellite or cable TV for free. How to make pipe bombs and homebrew your own LSD. How to sabotage the workplace. How to break into databases. Even how to get information about other people - things we might consider a matter of privacy - and how to use it against them.

In a multinational Information Order, where publishers of movies, software, books, and other forms of information (genome sequences ? indigenous knowledge ?) are increasingly trying to establish a monopoly standard of intellectual property (through treaties such as GATT) so no one else will grab their cash cow (especially somebody in the Third World), and other corporations are zealously seeking to guard their proprietary "trade secrets" from industrial espionage, the slogan "information wants to be free" is a ticking time bomb. The multinational corporation wants complete control over information, to hoard the data that monitors their market penetration and investment opportunities. Information is the lifeblood of the multinational corporation, which must always be watching the stock market in several time zones. If someone is sitting there messing with the pipeline, the CEOs understandably get a little nervous.

Wielding Power in a Cybernetic Age

It is somewhat of a truism that as computers control more aspects of society, the people who can control those

computers also have more power. Computers route our transportation systems, manage our commerce, enable us to communicate with one another, automate many aspects of our lives, and maintain a great deal of information on each and every one of us. They do the business of the State and the Corporation. Thus they are prime targets for the discontent of the disaffected. Don't like your boss ? Reroute all his incoming phone calls to a sex chat line. Don't like your teacher ? Hack into the school and "fix" your grades. Don't like your friend ? Just "adjust" their credit rating. Pissed off at society ? Retime the downtown traffic lights. Mad at the government? Blitz every fax machine on Capitol Hill with drawings of Zippy the Pinhead.

So many people depend on computers for their lives, that any group which can take control over computers have a lot of power. The cyberpunks know this. They often proclaim that there is a higher social mission to their misdeeds. By crashing the phone system, they want to prove that the phone system is unsuitable. By penetrating a security system, they claim, they want to show how laughable society's reliance on technology for security is. By reading your email, they want you to come to realize that the government is probably reading it too, and you should protect yourself with encryption.

Virus/logic bomb/Trojan writers see themselves as the vanguard of the movement - they are the Weather Underground of the cyberpunks. Computers control too many aspects of our lives - there's no point in hacking into the System here or there. Let's just shut 'em down. Infecting the government's computers with a virus is not just a prank. It's political terrorism. Imagine what would have happened if someone was able during the Persian Gulf War to infect the military C3I system with a virus and paralyze the U.S.' force coordination ability. That would have stopped the war a lot sooner than any "give peace a chance" sit-in. In the cybernetic age, "direct action" has taken on a new meaning.

The "Social Organization" of the Computer Underground ?

Gordon Meyer wrote a paper a few years ago by this very name. Basically, he chose to look at the computer underground as a loose confederation of criminal organizations. This is generally how the Secret Service views the matter, although cyberpunk partisans protest there is an important social and political importance to their actions; so say their manifestoes, anyway. However, if cyberpunk really were some sort of countercultural movement, one might expect to see some sort of solidarity or cooperation. Cyberpunk apparently fails in this regard, because their seem to be no united "goals" for the movement. There are people hacking over here, hacking over there, but no common coordination, goals, or structures to be found. Cyberpunks are notorious for rating on each other and turning each other in. And they are famous for backstabbing each other in every way possible. Hacker paranoia is legendary - they don't trust anybody, and since most of them use "social engineering" to trick people, they expect others to try and trick them.

There is no wrath like that of a cyberpunk scorned. They find extravagant ways of wreaking revenge on others who claim to be better hackers than they are. This is where cyberpunk fails as a true counterculture. Despite the slogans and manifestoes, there does not seem to be a unifying ethos. There are attempts to "hack" out a Hacker Ethic - you should redistribute pirate software, not sell it yourself for profit, etc - but no attempts to enforce it or make it a true standard. Most computer undergrounders really don't have any sense of a grand social mission for their activities. It's just a way for them to get things they want for free and to go places where nasty grownups force them to get expensive accounts for before visiting.

They'll steal some little old lady's phone card number as quickly as they'll rob WATTS service from some big corporation.

There does not really seem to be a social organization to the computer underground, because most cyberpunks are loners, working for themselves. Some hang out in groups like TAP or 2600, but they only do so to share codez or hacks or other information - there is no real effort to collaborate on projects. Sociologists really don't

know what the demography of the CU is. Most assume that the average cyberpunk is a white suburban American male; a socially inept adolescent with poor hygiene. Maybe this is the demographic average, but no one's really done the studies to figure it out. This picture hides the growing internationalization of the hacker trade, as more and more of the Third World starts to resent the information monopolization of the First World. Outside the U.S., in fact, the political dimensions of cyberpunk come more into focus, because the motives for computer theft are true need, not suburban boredom and adolescent rebelliousness.

CyberPolitics : is there any ?

While few cyberpunks are explicitly politically active in the classical sense (most do not vote), in their discussions with each other, an implicit politics does emerge. The underlying value system of most cyberpunks is libertarianism. The government just has no bloody business telling you what you can and cannot do with your modem, or what information you can acquire or send, or what you put into your body, or what you do with your money. For most of them, privacy is an important issue - they're tired of the government reading their mail and maintaining data on them (who watches the Watchman, after all ?), so they use cryptographic methods to protect their communications and transactions.

Since data encryption theory and technology is supposed to (in theory) be under the sole control of the National Security Agency (ciphers are classed as "munitions" vis-a-vis foreign export), providing people with public-key cryptography is also a rebellious act. The CUers who do so are called "cypherpunks", and they feel that people should use encryption to protect themselves from the State, and decryption to access the classified information that it so jealously guards from them. Some "cypherpunks" believe encryption can ultimately destroy the State - if one enciphers their monetary transaction, taxation will become impossible. It's not for no reason that many of them are called "cryptoanarchists".

Cyberpolitics is basically informed by a lot of what's going on in the general culture. Chaos theory, postmodernism, Dadaism, and Situationism (especially the latter's use of elaborate pranks and cultural detournement to savage 'the spectacle') attitude influence the pessimism of much of cyberpunk politics. The cyberpunk relies on the detritus society casts away - shredded phone system documents, junked electronics equipment, and dumped password printouts - for much of his trade. In many ways, his politics is just one of parasitism. Society is not going to improve very much, but the cleverest "console cowboys" will be best prepared to exploit the situation and turn it to their advantage.

Grime and Bamboozlement : Thinking about InfoCrime

If you broke into somebody's house and took nothing of value and locked the door on the way out, did you commit a crime ? What if you rearranged all the posters on the wall, opened and closed all the drawers, and copied everything that was in the person's notebooks, but still didn't take anything of value ? Have you committed a crime ? What about if you copied what was in the homeowner's diary, or used their stereo, or broke some of their glasses ? Now it becomes a bit more tricky. So it goes with computer hacking. Many computer 'intruders' do malicious things - erase data, leave Trojan horse programs or logic bombs or viruses, read personal mail, or harass other users. Yet others break into computer systems for the same reason that people climb Mt' Everest. Because it's there.

If one breaks into a computer, copies information normally publically available anyway, and doesn't delete or change anything, there might be little evidence they were ever there. However, many computer network administrators are trained exactly to watch telltale signs of such computer "penetration". The question remains as to the criminality of their activity. Breaking into a computer, like breaking into a house, is defined as a crime. But it seems to me that the true criminal activity involves what you do once you're inside. What if you leave something nice (maybe some flowers) for the homeowner ? How about a note saying something like "you need

better locks" ? This is what does seem to be somewhat 'puzzling' about current computer crime laws. Besides the fact that they are practically unenforceable.

Maybe most everybody agrees it's wrong to steal phone card or credit card numbers from innocent and unsuspecting people, or steal from their ATM accounts. But what about blue boxing and "borrowing" a little bit of phone service from AT&T ? So you make a $15 phone call for free. It's not like the phone companies and cable companies and so on aren't sucking people dry anyway. And while software "piracy" is defined as a crime, this type of theft is apparently one of the most common in the world, since there are very few people who obey the very strict and explicit noncopy instructions in their software license - which grants you the right to use the program (read the fine print) and not the rights to the program code itself ! If the L.A. Riots were a "rebellion", then maybe some of this computer "crime" is insurrection also ?

And what about the old "Hackers" and "Punks" ?

Steven Levy and others who knew the original Hackers of MIT are hopping mad. They are mad that these "hooligans" of the 90s have stolen the name "hacker". They would rather that these people be called "crackers", because they do not live up to the noble Hacker Ethic of the MIT hackers - make technology accessible to people; decentralize information; create programming code that is understandable rather than elegant. Anything that got a piece of technology to do something it was not originally designed to do (probably because it was poorly designed) was a "hack". Levy protests that the original Hackers tried to disseminate information to the masses, not hoard it for their own personal gain or power agendas. They were people who would rather "code than sleep", the ones who launched the Personal Computer Revolution which liberated America.

Yeah, right. Some people pointed out to Levy that the original Hackers were not so different after all. Many of them came up with equally elaborate schemes to steal time from the university mainframe - they were "computer intruders" too, who also found ways to swipe stuff from the coke machines and the pay phones. Many cyberpunks suggest the dichotomy (of cracker = secretive, malicious, dangerous, destructive, etc. versus hacker = open, socially minded, constructive, honest, etc.) is a false one, and that Levy is guilty of a good deal of romanticism. After all, didn't Wozniak and Jobs sell out when Apple patented its system architecture, making it an effective monopoly ? Hackers exceed limitations; crackers simply manipulate what's already there. Or so we're told.

The original punks have held their own protest against the cyberpunk label, as well. What's all this business about technique and technical prowess ? The whole thing about punk music was - so what if you don't really know how to play ? Get up there and make some noise anyway ! The 70s punks think it somewhat ironic that these "computer nerds" are using the punk label, as if wearing all those cool "MainFrame" clothes bought at the mall gave them some kind of edge. To many of the original punks, cyberpunk is too much posing, and too little substance. In any case, it's apparently clear that the names "cyberpunk" and "hacker" are contested domain; and, to a certain extent, "computer underground" is, too.

Cyberpunks : the new Lumpenproletarians of the Information Age ? Or something more serious ?

So we've looked at some ways in which cyberpunk may be a new counterculture, and some ways in which it may not be. As with any movement, the question always remains : will they sell out ? Will they be co-opted ? Capitalism has, as usual, found various ways to cash in on the trend, with cyberpunk novels, clothes, video games, gadgets, and so on, completing the process that Herbert Marcuse describes so well. The fact that many ex-hackers are now going to work for computer security firms suggests (not unsurprisingly) that, like the hippies of the 60s, these folks are willing to cash it all in for a cushy job and a corporate jet.

Are the cyberpunks a more serious challenge to the System than their predecessors ? As suggested above, they definitely have the potential to be a greater challenge. Imagine the dismay of the Hagen Daz corporate exec when he finds out that 20,000 cases have been accidentally routed to the north pole. Imagine the frustration of the government bureaucrat who finds out that all his files on "troublemakers" have been scrambled. Imagine the anger of the Pentagon general who finds that his drone-piloted planes are actually bombing the Atlantic Ocean instead of Saddam Hussein. Or the media monopoly executive who finds that his satellite network now seems to be only carrying "Ren N Stimpy". But for these same reasons, cyberpunks may be a greater danger to society as a whole, not just to "the Powers That Be".

Instead of just "dropping out" of society, or just parasitically feeding off of its information monopolies, cyberpunks have the potential to change it. But to do so they'll have to learn those weary lessons of Movement history. You know what they are. Study up. Think globally, act locally. And most importantly, don't mourn, organize. Just think what cyberpunks could accomplish if they actually learned to cooperate with, talk to, and trust each other. If instead of pulling pranks on the Man, they actually started to try and take away some of his power. If instead of sabotaging grassroots bulletin-board systems, they jammed the signal of propaganda engines like Voice of America. Then we could say that maybe, at long last, the New Counterculture has come of age...