

Nerds with an Attitude

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The cyberpunk movement is influencing art, music, literature and even supercomputer design. Are cyberpunks creative visionaries or merely nerds with an attitude ?

When employees in the information systems (IS) department start coming to work with a copy of *Wired* or *Mondo 2000* under one arm and begin showing "cyberpunk" traits, should you quickly change your computer passwords, or do you invite the employee to lunch ? The cyberpunk movement is changing as fast as technology itself, and today's cyberpunker is as hard to pin down as, well, cyberpunk. But IS managers may want to keep a close eye on those cyberpunks working in their midst : they may provide a valuable window to tomorrow's IS frontiers.

Or, they may be someone with a hackerlike attitude you should be worried about.

Or, then again, they may be no more valuable or threatening than anyone else in the IS department. The answer depends on who you talk to.

Tainted images ? Cyberpunk often conjures up images of social misfits dressed all in black with far-away stares, spiked or long hair and electronic gadgets hanging from their belts. Not only is that image "hopelessly outdated", say sources close to the movement, but it betrays what may be the value of these technovisionaries to the IS manager.

A positive view of cyberpunks is held by Paul Saffo, a research fellow at the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, Calif. Saffo is a recognized expert on the cyberpunk movement and has written extensively about it. He says IS managers should credit the cyberpunks in their departments as being among their most creative employees and the ones who recognize where technology is heading.

"IS managers are going to have a hell of a time keeping up with the changes in technology", Saffo says. "They had better find out what direction the cyberpunk crowd is going in and latch on. The impact is likely to be significant, and it can be summed up by the term 'reinvention'" of new ways to do old things or new applications of existing technologies.

Up to no good

Holding a negative view is David Vaskevitch, director of enterprise computing at Microsoft Corp. "It's the same culture that 15 years ago was buying the blue boxes for free phone calling. It's a large anti-establishment subculture made up of mostly hackers".

A third view is reflected by Justin Rathner, director of technology at Intel Corp., who sees the movement in a mixed light. He says cyberpunks may be focusing "on some pioneering practices" for information sharing, but he has doubts about how much the movement will influence IS staffs.

"I don't think they'll have any more impact on mainstream information systems than the Nintendo kids", Rathner says. "In fact, the Nintendo users will have had more impact".

The movement, did, however influence the design of Intel's newest supercomputer, according to Michael Barry, vice president of analysis at GVO, Inc., a Palo Alto, Calif., product design firm. The computer, called Touchstone Delta, is encased in a wall of light-emitting diodes. When the machine is running a program, lights blink on and off, representing communication between the computer's "nodes".

"it is like a dance of light, a ballet", Barry said. To help design the product, Barry said the marketing team studied cyberpunk culture, science fiction novels and movies such as *2001* and *Star Trek*. It also visited a lot of computer centers to talk to programmers. "We were seeing a lot of Mondo 2000 T-shirts", he said. "The cyberpunk stuff is heavily in those centers, and the people are involved".

The movement was spawned by William Gibson's early futuristic novel *Neuromancer*. Gibson coined the term "cyberspace", which he describes as a "consensual hallucination... a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer". In his novels, computer jockeys actually enter cyberspace and move around in the network.

Since its beginnings just a few years ago in the San Francisco Bay area, the cyberpunk movement has explored many technological frontiers. Born in the underground, cyberpunk has also been "surrendering" to the mainstream, and the 100 or so original "hard-core" cyberpunks have now been replaced by legions of computer-literate people in the establishment.

While the movement toys with such topics as virtual sex and smart drugs that enhance intelligence and creativity, it has helped advance serious topics to the mainstream, such as virtual reality and wireless technology.

Cyberpunk is also having a real impact on aspects of the visual arts, music and technology. Hollywood has already borrowed from cyberpunk for several successful science fiction thrillers. Saffo says the benefit of the cyberpunk movement is the creative way it looks at where technology has been and how things can be re-applied for new uses. These are "people with crazy ideas, and not a lot of adult supervision, who seize the technologies available and create something new of it", Saffo says.