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CONVERSATIONS

Darren P. Mckeeman

HACK TO THE FUTURE

I first corresponded with Bruce Sterling when the Electronic Frontiers Foundation referred him to me for sources on his latest book project. Recently, I spoke with him about his work and his ideas regarding writing and hacking.

COMPUTE: What is your new book going to be called?

Bruce Sterling: It's called, tentatively, The Hacker Crackdown: The True Story of the Digital Dragnet of 1990 and the Start of the Electronic Frontiers Foundation.

C: What prompted you to write about this?

Sterling: It was the [Steve] Jackson bust. . . . The Chicago Computer Fraud task force showed up in town . . . pursuing L.O.D. [Legion of Doom] people and fringe L.O.D. people, and they came down hard on [two alleged hackers]. They were in such a hurry that they went in and seized Steve Jackson's stuff, too, and Jackson didn't have anything to do with this. . . . Anybody could have told you that Steve Jackson was not into carding [using other people's calling card numbers], he was not a code kid [a person who sells long distance codes], he was not a software pirate. . . . They were trying to swat out a prairie fire.

C: Why do you think the public is so afraid of hackers?

Sterling: I think they are very afraid of computer hackers, but I think mostly they are afraid of computers. A computer hacker puts the face on the menace that is represented by computers. I mean, I am afraid

of computers. . . . I'm not computerphobic; I'm rationally afraid of computers. Computers are a challenge and a threat, and they're changing our society in ways that we can't control and don't understand. They're not to be trusted.

C: What would your definition of computer hacker be?

Sterling: I would say that if you were really a computer hacker, there would have to be some sort of intellectual curiosity about what you were doing. In other words, you're not just a code thief. . . . There are people running call cell operations [calling card fraud] whom I wouldn't call computer hackers per se, but they have everything a hacker [has]. They've got a Commodore, and they've got a modem, and they've got codes, and they've got teenagers working for them, and they've got a subscription to 2600 [an underground magazine devoted to hacking], and they've got police that hate their guts. So what are you going to allow here, a blood test?

C: What is the difference between computer hackers and the guy at the office who uses the computer to transfer a few bucks into his account or the guy into coding?

Sterling: There are appeals to the things that computer hackers do, and [it isn't] money. It's not the ability to embezzle funds. That's not the major kick. The major kick of hacking is power.

C: Do you think computer hacking should be outlawed?

Sterling: No, I don't really think it should. I think there ought to be laws against code theft and such, and I think that "the heat" are probably tice. The books we write do deal extensively with computer crime, and a lot of the characters do exhibit very militant antisocial attitudes

right when they say it's getting worse, and maybe ten years ago it was the sort of thing that got done in college dorms. But now there are guys from, say, Pakistan, who shoulder surf [run programs at phone booths from laptops] at airports and sell codes and stuff. I don't think that ought to be legal.

C: What does the future have in store for computer hacking?

Sterling: As far as I'm concerned, computer hacking has already had its Summer of Love. And now you're going to see more and more people doing the sort of things people did who were in L.O.D. in 1985 or 1986, except these [people] are going to be so unsavory, man.

C: What do you think of the word cyberpunk being used to describe hackers?

Sterling: I think it's very regrettable. [Cyberpunk] is a literary/ critical term. The idea that it would be used in this form sort of shows the basic ignorance of the science fiction milieu that's akin to the kind of ignorance that involves having Steve Jackson get busted. If he hadn't been making a game called Cyberpunk, this innocent guy would not have been struck down on his own property by agents of the federal government, not to mention the state of Illinois and Bell. Tagging people with line names, I guess it's useful, but not if it provokes some kind of knee-jerk reflex. I recognize it as a fait accompli; I'm not going to sue-not that I wouldbut I also recognize it is not a thing that is entirely without justice. The books we write do deal extensively with computer crime, and a lot of the characters do exhibit very militant

Bruce Sterling, coauthor of The Difference Engine, is currently writing a nonfiction book about computer hacking.

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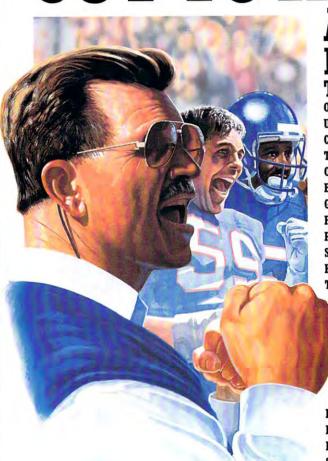
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