

Voices In My Head
MindVox: The Overture

Copyright (c) 1992, by Patrick Karel Kroupa (Lord Digital)
All Rights Reserved

"...just as every cop is a criminal and all the sinners; saints"
--The Rolling Stones (Jane's Addiction cover(*1))

Prelude

This article has its inception in several dozen people asking the same questions with fairly consistent regularity. Namely those of, "where'd you guys go?", "what's the deal with MindVox?" and "what have you been doing for the last five years anyway?"

Overture does a decent job of tying up all of the above and then some, while providing a general overview about who we are at Phantom Access and what we're in the process of doing with MindVox. Sections of this article self-plagiarize heavily from my own writings in ENTROPY CALLING, which will be in a form suitable for publication sometime around the first quarter of 1993 at the rate things are going right now. My apologies for the perpetually blown deadlines regarding this work, but something always manages to pop up that requires my full attention, in this case MindVox itself.

I've done what I could to make everything understandable by even those who have no prior knowledge of who we are or what's going on, hopefully I have at least partially succeeded. If something is briefly touched upon and you don't understand its significance, then it probably means something to a smaller cross-section of people and you can safely ignore it.

While this is in many respects a personal account of my own journey through Cyberspace and what it has meant to me and a handful of my friends, on a larger scale the underlying theme and basic premise of how the electronic universe began and has evolved is reflective of the experiences of countless people who have been traversing the endless pathways of possibility with me for most of their lives.

First Light

A long time ago, in a thoughtspace far away, an event that would forevermore alter the shape of human interaction took place . . .

But we're not here to talk about that, instead we're gonna discuss computers and how a couple of guys named Ward Christianson and Randy Seuss wrote a program that would allow them to be set up as a kind of store-and-forward messaging system designed to allow their circle of friends to interact with one another by using these things called modems . . . and how this event would prove to be the first truly accessible step into the uncharted territory of what was to become Cyberspace.

From this empowering turning point in the late seventies, the ideas, dreams and fantasies that would transmute and amplify human potentials and evolutionary possibilities, broke loose from the shackles that primitive technology had imposed upon them and began to spin the electronic universe into existence.

Still in the very early stages of its development, Cyberspace, or the "modem world" as it is sometimes called, has until very recently remained a largely untapped forum unique within the history of our world. It is a rapidly shifting microcosm that in the early part of the 1990's seems poised to engulf the reality from which it was born, weaving together the threads of tens of millions of diverse dreams, into one mercurial tapestry that encom-

passes the collective consciousness of humanity and frees it from all constraints.

The non-space of Cyberspace is a place where global changes that would take years or even centuries outside of the online domain, can occur in weeks or months. It is a place where participants from all over the world share a unique common-ground based on nothing less nor more, than a belief in the same vision of possibility. It is a land where people who scoff at "The Elements of Style" frequently write paragraphs, pages, and even novels, full of big words, huge concepts, and absolutely gargantuan amounts of emoting -- while actually saying nothing tangible. In a little over a decade, the online microcosm has managed to experience the equivalent of hundreds of years of evolution. Not to mention the creation of hundreds of words which have found their way into the online lexicon despite the fact that nobody is quite sure what they mean in the first place.

During this turbulent period of rapid change the half-dozen systems of 1978, had grown to 45 or 50 electronic villages by 1980. These were the original outposts of Cyberspace, running on hacked together systems, hooked into industrial 8" drives, and networking at the blinding speed of 110 baud. To be honest, there wasn't really a whole lot of high level philosophizing going on regarding the brave new world that had dawned. Actually, most of the conversation tended to focus on things along the lines of, "How do you hook an 8" drive onto an Apple II?" and "ANY idiot can see that setting the 7th bit high on the xdef reg is the WRONG thing to do, OF COURSE it'll make the program crash, are you stupid or something?" It was a technological triumph, but one that was for the most part, still lacking many of the key participants that would shape the technology into designer realities.

As the seventies drew to a close, the sterility and bare-bones functionality that had predominated, began to make way for places created by people who truly wanted something unique and different. The mere existence of the technology was no longer that exciting, and as a greater number of people gained access to the hardware needed to jack in, the first electronic tribes gathered and began erecting monuments to their own ingenuity.

By the time the eighties were upon us, the handful of systems that had thrived during the latter half of the previous decade had multiplied rapidly, giving birth to new systems on an almost daily basis, and by 1982 there were close to a thousand outposts on the frontier. Hardware prices were falling, 1200bps modems were actually within the reach of many people who wanted to purchase them, and the online domain was beginning to attract a wide variety of participants from outside the technocratic elite.

A second pivotal point came during the summer of 1983 when the movie WARGAMES was released. Within several months the modem world literally doubled in size. An entire new generation of people were about to take the plunge into electronic wonderland and set off an explosive growth rate that has not slowed since then. It was a major and irreversible nexus point that would begin the abrupt transition from taking Cyberspace from the realm of underground sub-culture to the forefront of mainstream media.

In retrospect the early eighties were the "golden age" of Cyberspace. There truly was a new frontier just over the horizon, and we were standing at the edge. This period in the history of the electronic universe was unruly and chaotic, the first settlers on the frontier wouldn't arrive for another decade or so, and the only people here were a small collection of explorers eager to embark on the next adventure.

Of course one of the problems with "standing on the edge" of anything, is the trail that led up to it. You are there for some reason, or usually a very complex series of reasons, that have shaped your life up until that point in time, and caused you to become disenchanted with -- or feel limited by -- whatever situation you are locked into in the consensual reality that we all

physically inhabit at present. In other words, the "real world" isn't making you happy, and you want outta there.

Led by a an oddball contingent of misfits, dropouts, acidheads, phreaks, hackers, hippies, scientists, students, guys who could say "do0d, got any new wares?" with a straight face and really mean it -- and quite often -- people who managed to combine many of these attributes; the 1980's saw the rise of the first empires and kingdoms of Cyberspace.

As romantic and wonderful as this seems, and was . . . a lot of the people involved had been brutalized by life, and much of this new reality was borne out of a tidal wave of pain and dissatisfaction. When I first became an active participant in this electronic nervous system that was just beginning to experience its awakening; I was a little over ten years old. My early understandings of what this "place" was, were shaped by a handful of people whose skills I admired and sought to emulate, yet whose lives I felt great pity and sadness for.

There were of course exceptions, people who were so high on the potential of this technology and the completely new level of reality it could bring, that nothing more than a love of their creation drove them onwards. But these people were pretty uncommon, most of the pioneers were guys who were simply unhappy . . . or to be more exact, so unhappy that they had given up on finding joy in the "real world" and were constructing a rocket ship called Cyberspace to get them out of here as fast as possible.

"Peace, love and happiness" was not exactly the driving force behind the rise of the electronic domains. A more realistic rallying cry was one of "Gee this technology is neat, and I'm gonna use it to make a whole new world where I can be happy and none of you can ever bother me again. You'll all be sorry, just wait and see!" They were building the cult of high technology in the hopes that it would somehow save them from whatever they thought had prevented them from attaining happiness anywhere else.

Sadly enough "they" were not THOSE PEOPLE, "they" had become "us" and while the first steps into this place had been made possible by the phone phreaks and misfits of yesterday, the online world was exploding and changing at an incredible velocity, the rest of society was about to take notice in a big way, and a handful of disenfranchised teenagers had seized the reigns and were in the early stages of walking into the spotlight and taking the status quo for a big ride . . .

The Fall

Everything really was this big beautiful game, and here we were with an overview of the whole jigsaw puzzle, and the sudden power to do anything we wanted to do with it. For the first time in recent history you COULD reach out and change reality, you could DO STUFF that effected EVERYTHING and EVERYONE, and you were suddenly living this life that was like something out of a comic book or adventure story. In a place filled with magical lands and fantastic people who you had only read about, and suddenly you WERE actually talking to Timothy Leary, or Steven Wozniak, and some guy who was just on the cover of a magazine was speaking with you and thought that YOU were cool, and then finally you were IN the magazines and at the forefront of an entire sub-culture that was being rapidly assimilated into the cultural mythos.

It was a VERY interesting time and place in which to grow up.

Of course the problem is a lot of us didn't grow up. At a certain point in time having power that can have real and immediate effects upon all society, can do very strange things to your perspective of the world. Instead of learning to deal with the normal barriers that most teenagers in western culture find themselves faced with, you discover that you can blow right through

all of them without even slowing down. In this way you miss much of the growth and acclimation that people go through during their teenage years. Which is where a lot of old friends parted ways with reality and ceased to be explorers, becoming caught up in the real world implications of the power that was now at their disposal. In effect, they lost sight of the underlying theme that all our actions had been based upon, that of exploration and pushing the boundaries, and merely focused on the short-term end-result of what their abilities could bring them; in the process becoming the criminals that the Secret Service and FBI had said we all were.

What had begun with the best intentions, as the ultimate extension of human curiosity, had devolved into a cultural movement that had very little to do with the ideals that had inspired it. The term "hacker" had become synonymous with "criminal", and taking a look around at the state of the underground, it looked as if much of it had in fact degenerated into crime cartels comprised of angry teens who had little understanding of the underlying mechanisms they were employing to play with reality. It was no longer the exhilaration of knowing that you could actually reach out and touch a satellite . . . it had come down to the negative power trip of fucking with something for the sake of pissing people off or just showing the world how much power you really have at your disposal if you ever decided to throw a tantrum.

By 1988 what had replaced our outlook, was a mindset where the new generation saw two things: one of them was the potential to take advantage of holes in the system for personal gain. There was no longer any quest for knowledge, desire to learn, or need to push the boundaries of what was possible for the sake of exploration. Instead there were a lot of people who couldn't get past making free phone calls, stealing things, and causing trouble by following an already well-established pattern of action and reaction.

The second -- and perhaps biggest -- motivating factor had become the desire for personal attention in the form of self-aggrandizement: the ultimate hack had become the media machine itself. What was originally a by-product of our experiences, had become a goal in and of itself. And here is where things became REALLY twisted.

The media in the latter half of the twentieth century has become a very strange distortion of reality instead of the reflection it was intended to be. Since this is not an essay on the evils of manipulation through the use of media, I will stick with a very simple outline of how events occur in the real world.

A reporter, journalist, writer -- SOME PERSON who has their own desires and ambitions, wants to do an exciting story on something that will garner him or her a lot of attention and acclaim. Really they are operating from a point of view that has much in common with the "hacker's," which is the mindset of "I'm gonna get mine." So this journalist looks around at the headlines and realizes that there is a mounting wave of hysteria surrounding viruses and hackers and invasion of privacy and . . . gee, wouldn't it be a nice career move to do a story that will mix their name into whatever the hot topic of the next five minutes happens to be.

If the journalist is attached to any even marginally important publication, they will then get their pick from one of the current four or five "names" doing the rounds. On the other hand, if the journalist is just starting out and connected to something much smaller, then the chances are they will simply show up at some user's group meeting, find the nearest thing they can to a "computer nerd," do an interview, and then write it up expressing whatever the current publicly-sanctioned viewpoint happens to be (the usual slant has become: hackers are evil and can look at your credit rating, fear them).

I have been interviewed on many occasions and I know roughly

twenty people who have done the interviews that comprise the basis of about 90% of all media that exists in relation to the underground; be it in newspaper, periodical, television segment, or book format. WITH *VERY* FEW EXCEPTIONS, there have been countless solicitations to perform illegal acts in the presence of journalists, these solicitations move all the way into coercion in some cases. There are reports containing sentences that were never spoken, quotes taken out of context, information that was invented . . . there's simply no end to it. The reporter profits first by stroking the hacker's ego and giving him the spotlight that he thinks he wants so badly, and then continues to profit as the hacker rides a bigger and bigger wave of publicity that in every case leads to a very unhappy ending if the hacker in question doesn't have the foresight to get off the ride before it derails.

In any case, whatever happens, the reporter always wins. When the hacker's ride reaches its date with fate, the journalist in question can now write the closing chapter in the hacker's saga and tell the public how this nefarious evil-doer is being punished by the long arm of justice. This is followed up by the journalist taking on the "official" mantle of "hacker expert," doing the lecture circuit, perhaps writing a book, and then going out and finding a new horse to beat to death.

Obviously nothing can ever be this black and white, there must be a need for both parties to play their roles. The reporter is not THE EVIL BAD MAN who has corrupted the INNOCENT ANGELIC HACKER, nor does this scenario apply to all journalists equally, off the top of my head; Bruce Sterling, John Markoff, and Julian Dibbell come to mind as extremely ethical exceptions to the norm.

Usually the reporter who isn't quite so ethical is just somebody who is presented with a situation that can easily be twisted and misused if the desire for fame and fortune takes precedence over everything else. The reporter by the very nature of his job tends to be quite "slick" and worldly-wise, whereas the hacker in question is usually highly knowledgeable about computer systems while managing to retain an oblivious naivety about the workings of human beings in that elusive place called "the real world." This sets the stage for what transpires.

And you see a lot of people who used to be your friends, get ground up in this endless cycle as it repeats itself over and over again until one day you wake up and come to realize that you're seventeen or eighteen going on 90. You understand that everything in the whole world is comprised of bits and pieces of lies and half-truths, everyone is inherently corrupt, including you; a lot of kids who used to be your friends are now all grown up with no place to go and getting busted for such things as fraud and grand larceny; and you have utterly lost touch with anything even remotely "real." And yet, you're still a teenager and have another 70 or 80 years left to hang around on this planet.

This is right around the time that you're back in the media, only this trip around you're at the receiving end of law enforcement who have been prodded into a state of near-hysteria by the dawning realization that a bunch of kids really can dismantle the building blocks of the infrastructure that makes most of present-day society possible. Naturally enough they're scared, and they're in the process of doing what people have done for ages when they are afraid: going on a witch-hunt. Guess who gets to play witch...

So one day you find yourself wondering why you should bother buying another computer system and trying to figure out what the point of it all was anyway; to glimpse the limitless potential and then fall back and only see your own flaws amplified to cartoon-like proportions.

The 1980's were a time that saw the birth and death of the first dynasties of Cyberspace. Travelling through the electronic landscape of this period in time, was like traversing this sur-

real range of mountains, where amongst the sheer outcropping of rock, lush valleys, and snow-capped peaks, a collection of rather obsessive dreamers had built some of the most beautiful castles that were ever created and opened their doors to a populace of pioneers. It was absolutely transporting and timeless . . . and unfortunately -- in the short term -- doomed.

This has been an abbreviated summary of the atmosphere and events that started a kind of mass exodus out of the modem world for about twenty of us. We had spent our entire childhoods jacked into this alternate electronic universe, locked into playing our overly-developed personas, and almost no time figuring out who we were and what we wanted out of life beyond "further, better, more." This is nothing new or unique in and of itself, it was however something that gained a very tangible and immediate importance to many of us when we found that the thoughtspace in which we had lived a large portion of our lives had disintegrated and the people we had known and called friends, had largely disappeared and been replaced by every negative quality they possessed.

A lot of us dumped the remnants of this reality into a stack of boxes and took off for parts unknown. Whether college, work, a new circle of friends that didn't know who you were in Cyberspace, or even know what Cyberspace was; just about anywhere were we could start over and try to regain what had somehow been lost.

Transformation

"Ya live your life like it's a coma,
so won't you tell me why we'd wanna?
With all the reasons you give,
it's kinda hard to believe;
But who am I to tell you I've seen,
any reason why you should stay;
Maybe we'd be better off without you anyway..."
--Guns N Roses(*2)

After coming to the realization that visiting The Tunnel for the fourteenth time in three weeks was not going to change my life for the better, and having no idea what I wanted to do with myself, I dropped it all and got on a plane for the middle of nowhere New Mexico. Where I proceeded to cycle through all my negative tendencies at an accelerated pace, first becoming utterly obsessed with bodybuilding, to the point of five hour a day workouts, insane diets, steroids, and a silly-putty like transformation of myself to 6'2" 215 pounds and 6% bodyfat.

This was good for about ten months, before I found myself in the same mindset I had thought I could escape. Looking in the mirror and seeing a parody of who I used to be, wondering where to go from there. The answer was obviously to buy a Porsche and begin re-stocking my wardrobe with everything by Armani and Versace, yes I had it now, this WAS the right answer, I only had to look around at all the people I knew doing just this to see that . . . well, actually they were all pretty miserable, but again, it lasted for about nine or ten months.

Around this time I realized that aside from the fact that I was a pretty fucked up person who probably needed a lot of therapy -- which had never quite worked out the right way when I had it thrust upon me as a teenager -- I had become completely out of touch with my feelings. Not out of touch that I didn't have them, I had over a thousand pages of them sprayed across megabytes of disks where I wrote out all the things inside of myself driving me crazy; but out of touch in the sense that when I began taking things apart and analyzing reality, I had stopped listening to anything I felt inside and just tuned in to what seemed logical.

The problem being that the more you try to act out of logic, the more you find yourself applying logic to utterly emotional issues

in an completely crazed and self-destructive way. When logic should be asking: "Why do I want to weigh 215 pounds of muscle? What the hell am I doing?" it suddenly finds itself in the position of contemplating "Ok, so if I want to gain 5 pounds in the next 2 weeks, how many CC's of Deca do I mix with X mg. of Anavar, with what ratio of carbs/fat and what is the minimum PER of the protein I am going to consume in order to remain in an anti-catabolic state?"

Welcome to real-life Alice in Wonderland, taking place in your head.

At the age of twenty-one I had managed to attain a place where I possessed everything that I ever thought I wanted. Life is funny that way, you really do get whatever you desire. Endless hours spent reading thousands of books; the mix and match regimen of combinations of new nootropics and longevity agents; and the final combination of steroids and obsessive workouts had resulted in my achievement of the goal I had subconsciously been working towards for most of my life. I had succeeded in my efforts to become absolutely untouchable by anyone or anything.

When you are no longer in the middle of a situation and have the comfort of hindsight it's very simple to deduce what the underlying problems behind anything happen to be, and why you are acting in a way that is physically, mentally and spiritually destructive to yourself. While there is nothing inherently wrong with any action I might have taken, it all comes back to the question of why are you doing something? And looking back upon my life, I had actually lived very little of it in an attempt to make myself happy. Almost everything had been some sort of reaction to those around me, and how I felt I had to respond to them.

Despite my intellectual understanding of how brief moments of stimulus-response can shape a person's existence, like so many endlessly-referenced frames of film forever etched in their brain. Long-gone fragments of time that refuse to relinquish their hold on the present, telling people who they are, setting their limitations, and defining the boundaries of what they allow their lives to mean. In truth I had never managed to apply any of this knowledge to myself and had lived most of my life in accordance with the patterns of self-destructive programming perpetually repeating a loop in my head.

From childhood onwards I have been through a seemingly endless variety of extremes in my life; moving from levels of comfortable opulence, to near-poverty and back again, more times than I care to count. What I had learned from this was that being poor wasn't that much fun, and could really suck, therefore logic dictates that I must always have a lot of money and do whatever it takes to get it. In fact I'm going to be so unconcerned with money that I will start to feel anxious if I'm not wearing a \$300 dollar haircut and a \$400 dollar shirt. I have felt controlled by situations beyond my reach in the past, therefore I am going to learn as much as I can about everything, so that nobody will ever be able to fuck with my head and attempt to control me through misrepresentation of the truth. I have been out-of-control with various addictions and done such stupid things to myself that through combinations of downers and alcohol I have at one point weighed over 300 pounds; therefore I will understand every fucking piece of biochemistry that is known about the human body, I will do whatever it takes to look into the mirror and gain my own approval even if it means working out with such frequency that a pleasant sport becomes a daily torture session that leaves me nauseous and physically incapable of performing simple movements because everything hurts all the time. I will look like someone has spray-painted skin onto a statue no matter how difficult it is to maintain this state constantly, I will force myself to eat 6,000 calories of protein and 400 calories of carbohydrate, and if I can no longer think or move and my ultimate fantasy has become sleeping 18 hours a day, then that's what caffeine and amphetamines are for. I live in hell therefore I shall use drugs to escape my hell by taking week-long vacations on opiates, but I will never be controlled by anything, so on the 8th

day I will walk away from heaven and live through a couple of days of pain that hurt a little bit more than the rest of my life, but I will never be some fucking junkie, because I not only can do anything, I WILL do it, and I just dare the fucking universe to try and prove otherwise, because I can quit anything, I can conquer anything, I can do anything to prove anything to anyone and you can't stop me, because the entire world is full of weak, soft and stupid motherfuckers who talk much and do little; praise George Bernard Shaw and pass the Nietzsche.

Coming down off the adrenalin and testosterone rush the memories I used to write that paragraph with have triggered, I'd like to take this moment to borrow a quote from one of the greatest poet-philosophers of our time: "Happy happy! Joy joy!"

After endless repetitions of this cycle I had finally reached a state in which my internal programming ceased to function -- there was simply nothing left I could apply it to. Over the years I had overcome most of my psychological barriers through direct mental or physical actions, that had brought with them physical rewards that I was utterly incapable of applying to my life at that time. Welcome to oblivion.

Hitting absolute nothingness was the beginning of a very personal catharsis for me that finally led to turning inwards to see what was wrong, since externally, everything looked okay. I had attained a physical state that "corrected" everything my subconscious had said was "wrong" with me, yet for some bewildering reason I was not deliriously happy. A series of steps followed which eventually led to various experiments in the world of theatre and film, where I had the chance to re-connect with emotions, and get them back into some kind of perspective from the comfortable vantage point and attitude of: "they're not really mine, I'm only playing them." All of which reached a pinnacle when I began experimenting with LSD for the first time.

If you have never experienced what it is like to be on an acid trip, it will be difficult for me to convey the kaleidoscopic depth of experience you are presented with. It does nothing less nor more, than strip away every preconceived notion that you have ever had regarding what "reality" is. Beyond the special effects, intellectual realizations, and creative opportunity it presents, it leaves you imbued with one very basic truth of the universe: No matter what the actual outcome of your actions, what matters is your intent. If what you are doing -- whatever it may be -- is being done out of any reason other than a desire to bring happiness to people; to help humanity as a whole reach some greater level of understanding; to uplift and inspire people to reach for something that is within everyone's grasp . . . then you are wasting your time.

This is not exactly news, I mean it is the basic belief system that every religion on earth is founded on (with the possible exception of Satanism, and a few other offshoots of this system of thought). The problem with religion getting such a bad rap most of the time is largely due to the fact that most people who act as spokesmen for any given religious cause, are only mouthing words they comprehend on an intellectual level. They are not actually living in this state of internal alignment, so what they have to offer can be very suspect . . . how is someone who has not attained what he speaks of, supposed to help you attain it for yourself? While dogma may help a limited few, it will never reach most of those who possess the ability to think for themselves. Nor is standing at a pulpit or in front of a camera and ranting about damnation, going to help anyone reach any kind of positive state.

I obviously cannot speak for everybody, but from my own perspective I had read the holy books of most religions on earth when I became interested in psychology and the theories of Carl Jung -- who crosses over into mysticism and religious experience, going as far as the concept of "karma" with his theory of Synchronicity. Yet I never got anything from them other than an intellectual high of understanding how groups of people could be programmed

to behave in certain ways . . . which isn't what it's about. The EXPERIENCE is what all religions are based on, how you choose to interpret it is entirely up to you. But a very simple thing that becomes apparent is the basic truth that wherever your inspiration is coming from, if it fills you with the need to motivate large groups of people to do SOMETHING, be that something in the name of "God" or anybody else . . . then somewhere, you got the wrong message. Because there really isn't all that much to say beyond the very simple and obvious, "give love and you will get it." The only thing that needs to be changed is your attitude and outlook on life. Making group_of_people(x) move twenty paces to the left while wearing black hats and reading from the Holy Book of the Arboreal Tree Sloth, isn't gonna make the world a better place.

While this discourse is tangential to some of the issues at hand, in a great sense it is the underlying cause for all of them. Once you have seen the light as it were, or understood the bigger picture . . . it becomes very hard to go back to living life with blinders on regarding your own actions. Until it eventually reaches the place where I found myself. The point at which the only things I'm going to talk about are those that matter to me, things I believe in . . . things I believe will help people in some manner. Along with the realization that I cannot do a lot of things I used to do anymore. I cannot lie to people and present them with some image they want to see in order to get something from them -- because I mean, WHAT is there to "get" anyway? I can no longer be a politician or figurehead for causes that I do not believe in, and I will no longer waste my time taking part in meaningless drivel that serves to do nothing but entrench me in bullshit without end; I had already spent most of my life taking apart the rules and winning at whatever game I tried to play. What I never bothered to examine was the fact that I didn't "win" anything that ever brought me any happiness . . . what is the point in playing if you don't want the "prize?"

Stagnation of the Electronic Frontier

Moving forward in time by about two years, this was the attitude that I had managed to retain as I returned to New York. Everything was the same, yet completely different. What had been pervaded by Nihilism and vacuity only a short time ago, was now a pathway of infinite potential and limitless possibility. For the first time in almost six years I actually felt completely inspired and excited by the possibilities that life in general and Cyberspace in particular had to offer.

The summer of 1991 was a kind of "class reunion" for many of us. For the first time in almost half a decade we found ourselves back in New York City, the place where all of this had started for us such a long time ago.

What happened was pretty much the expected; an endless stream of jokes and self-deprecating humor regarding who we used to be, the three-letter acronyms we used to affiliate with or have in revolution around us, the state of the universe and everything in it, and a general time of catching up on who had done what. It was a strange situation, since we really had disappeared, to the extent that most of us had not talked with one another in years, it was almost as if picking up the phone and speaking with someone from back then would bring back all the bad things you were trying to get rid of.

Out of this gathering, I found about a dozen people who I no longer knew. People who had become submerged in drugs, and become lost in different sub-cultures where they could live out reasonable facsimiles of their childhoods forevermore; people who had completely lost touch with what they used to be, and become stereotypical examples of what people tend to term "computer geeks," the sum total of their interest in life having been narrowed down to that new bug in X windows client-server architecture and what it would mean to the future of the OSF; people who

hadn't changed at all and were still busy "getting over" on society in general; but perhaps most surprising, I found that about ten people I used to know had gone through a growth process very similar to my own, and actually succeeded in solving their quest and winning the prize we had all sought so badly.

The correct solution to the "quest," is of course, that there is no solution. There is nothing you are looking for, except for you, and once you realize this, you win the big prize, you find yourself, and get to live happily ever after.

After re-discovering that a group of us seemed to thoroughly enjoy each other's company, we eventually ended up having a weekly meeting where we'd get together and discuss various topics. Foremost amongst them was one that sprung up with increasing regularity as the weeks went by: getting back onto the frontier from a completely different angle. As years went by many of us had started completely different lives; some were in college, others had started companies or gone to work for companies they had once laughed at, and still more had started careers completely unrelated to anything they had been doing in the past. But it had become clear that what we really wanted to do was take the incredible promise that had been shown to us during our youth when we had walked along the edge of a new reality unfolding, and channel it into a positive direction that would benefit everybody.

As we found out, the hacker underground had continued with its headlong dive into oblivion. The underground had basically ceased to exist after the Operation Sun Devil sweep. Just about the only "hacker systems" still in existence were those catering to the teenagers whose priorities focused on ripping off phone companies, collecting VMB codes and pirating software.

While this was slightly depressing, it was also a foregone conclusion and didn't cause too much surprise. The main focus of our interest was what had become of the mainstream telecommunications nets -- given half a decade to evolve, something really exciting must have happened by now. The hardware that we ended up sitting in front of, would have made possible an undreamed of variety of possibility when taken into context with what was available in the past. We were used to 64K Apple][+ systems, or maybe tricked out //e's with 128K and PC's with 640K, and now we were sitting at a friend's house in front of a NeXT and an SGI Indigo. When you thought about the fact that 7 years ago you had paid about \$8,500 for a 4.5megabyte Corvus hard disk, and now you could buy an entire NeXT with that . . . it was, fantastic.

Before taking off on our expedition of present-day Cyberspace, we had spoken with some of our friends who were familiar with the terrain, and received somewhat tepid responses and a general dismissal of what was going on right now. Thinking the attitude was one of standard arrogance which we had all gone through, we didn't pay too much attention to it and set out to explore the new electronic nervous system of the world.

A couple of hours later it became shockingly apparent that most of the potential of the bright new technology that now existed . . . that could have been used to create and house an infinite expanse of innovation, communication, and pooling of thought, lay dormant. Thus far it had seemingly been utilized to construct gigantic file servers that advertised their existence by digitizing porno magazines and editing their dialup lines into the resulting scan.

All those wonderful places that we had travelled in the past, and had dominated the landscape only half a decade before . . . had indeed been razed, paved over, and replaced by an endless electronic expanse of snap-together tract houses that littered the landscape with numbingly identical systems. The frontier had packed up and moved back into labs where people like our friend with the workstations were working on applications that wouldn't see the light of day for another decade. And what was out there right now, was strikingly similar to a generic suburb of AnyTown,

USA.

Objectively a suburb is not a bad thing, it's planned out, logical, it works, it doesn't need to be any different from any other suburb . . . in short, it's functional. It's also very different from the environment we had grown up in, where everything was a new step further out into the unknown, where anything could happen, and nobody had ever been there before.

From our vantage point it looked as if the explorers had indeed gone back to their ivory towers (or haunted dungeons as the case may be), and a lot of used car salesmen had set up shop cranking out the snap-together tract houses, when they realized they could make more money doing that, than say, selling used cars.

It was truly a mind blowing experience to witness for the first time, systems that actually advertised themselves based upon how many lines they had, or how much storage. Attitudes that would have garnered a great deal of scorn and derision -- and in general made your advertisement the brunt of a lot of jokes -- were suddenly the accepted way in which systems chose to differentiate themselves from one another. Looking at them, it came down to the fact that the only difference between system (A) and system (B) was that one might have 16 lines while the other had 24, and system (C) was inherently superior to both (a) and (b) because it had 32 lines and 4 gigabytes of storage (used to house 10,000 programs, out of which the same 200 are downloaded over and over again, as the rest of the junk sits there gathering dust).

Even more frightening, on a system that had 10,000 messages on it, an average of 9,800 will be echoes of FidoNet or RIME or whatever-net, leaving a grand total of about 200 messages from the actual members. And frequently those 200 messages date back a year and a half . . . a couple of years ago a BAD one line system had that many messages in a week. A good one in a couple of hours.

To a lot of people Cyberspace has become one big file server . . . strikingly similar to what television has devolved into. An entirely passive place where you press buttons and get entertained, no thought required, no input necessary.

Realizing that we were merely skimming the surface, and might not know the whole story, we spent a couple of weeks becoming familiar with what had happened, and what the situation really was. Based upon several hundred conversations with various people who were involved with the current scene, we arrived at a couple of very basic conclusions.

In order to run a system in the present environment, and have users, you needed to have a pile of hardware, many phone lines, some sort of marketing and bookkeeping ability, a lot of spare time, coupled with infinite patience to put up with people, since they are now your customers, not just your friends, and if they call you up asking the same goofy questions you cannot take the phone off the hook or tell them to go away.

Where running a system in the past had meant giving up your second phone line, it presently involved a great deal of interaction with the department of Red Tape, and Bureau of Tasks You Really Aren't Interested In. This opened the door to the "used-car salesmen" people, since these were things they were used to doing every day. Conversely, it has almost universally been our experience that the guy who is a Unix wizard and can work magic with networking and programming, lives in deathly fear of signing paperwork, filling out his tax returns, or figuring out where he parked his car. And finally, the creative person whose main interest is making fantastic places, lacks the time and patience to write the code, and certainly has no interest in administrative duties.

In effect, most people with the desire to do something better, did not have the necessary \$25-30k laying around, and even if they did, they would never act on it because they'd be forced to

spend a great deal of their time doing a hundred things they had no interest in doing. So the online world had begun to be dominated by the file servers, who didn't really have much of an interest in being anything other than file servers, since that made the most money with the least effort, and anybody with \$25,000 could toss up a snap-together MeSsyDOS based system with very little technical ability required.

Thus began the era of the "tract-houses" where advertising and atmosphere consisted of rattling off hardware statistics and number of phone lines, along with the number of shareware programs available for downloading (an extremely amusing concept, considering that there are literally TERABYTES of free software available for the taking on ftp sites all over the Internet, which cost NOTHING to download from).

With the exception of two of three bright lights that had the right idea and were trying to do something different, most of the electronic frontier had indeed vanished. And it isn't so hard to see where a couple of years from now the same advertising agencies that sell brain-dead ads designed to induce you to crave one brand of beer over another, will be pushing SYSTEM X, because IT HAS 10,000 phone lines! Call now and leave your mind at the door!

Transcendence

It has generally been our experience that people are neither stupid, nor shallow. Everyone has the potential to think for themselves, to overcome adverse situations, and contribute something to this world. When placed in situations that offer these possibilities, people tend to come through with surprising regularity. In a fairly short amount of time you end up with a group of people doing something they themselves would have deemed improbable, if not downright impossible, if you had asked them at any other point in their lives.

Virtual Reality has the potential to become the single most important development in the history of human evolution. It is a technology that holds the promise of absolute liberation. It also holds the possibility of turning the world into the rather grim one that is the basis of much Cyberpunk fiction, a dark place where technology is used to oppress and suppress people.

By its very nature, it is very difficult to ever imagine the latter. In order to have a police state, you need to amass a certain amount of power, yet Cyberspace is the ultimate equalizer. It is a place where one person can wield as much power as 100, 1,000, or 100,000 people. Physical limitations are cast off, and in the event of conflict the playing field becomes that of mind vs. mind. Sheer numbers and a mob rules mentality cease to have any meaning when you can create infinite numbers of electronic organisms to do anything you want them to do.

The hope is that it will never sink to such a level of stupidity. Games are wonderful, but there is no need for conflict, all struggle tends to be internal conflict that has become externalized. When you want to convert the sinners, or prove you are right, all you're doing is having an argument with yourself. The beautiful thing about Virtual Reality is the fact that you are free to do that, for as long as you need, to work out that particular set of problems -- without harming anybody.

There is only one ultimate truth, which is BEING HAPPY and experiencing LOVE. How you choose to perceive it is a very individual matter. While it might mean blue to you, orange to that guy over there, and silver to me, it's all the same thing. In the real world if we held fast to those beliefs and behaved as people have been classically shown to behave, then we'd be killing each other over who has the right idea about love . . . Cyberspace allows everyone the freedom to co-exist without harming anyone else's world-view or belief system. And if you truly are given

the opportunity to live in an environment conducive to you happiness, then if that heretic who thinks orange is the answer were ever to show up at your front door, chances are you would be able to tolerate him, and even, "God" forbid, express the love you claim to espouse.

Phantom Access - The Ethereal Takes Shape

There was never any solid dividing line where we decided that we really wanted to put together a system where we could have the freedom of expression we wanted, with the ultimate goal really being the very simple one of pushing the envelope further and further out there. All of us had obligations, school, and personal commitments that would be difficult to integrate into this major change of plans. But inevitably the mass exodus out of college, the avoidance of unnecessary responsibilities, and the initial stages of planning were set in motion.

Six months later we had close to a hundred thousand dollars, top-down system design, a fully designed multi-user simulation engine, a general idea of what we would do and how we would go about it, a team of our friends together one more time, only this time as a real corporation, and over one thousand megabytes of the collected history of Cyberspace, dating back to systems that existed in 1979, that had been laying in dusty boxes filled with old Apple DOS 3.3 disks.

On April 1st 1992 MindVox went into its alpha-testing stage. Which loosely speaking means that we put everything together and watched it disintegrate repeatedly as the last 300-400 bugs were worked out of the system. Since then it has been running in protected environment mode with a collection of our friends and associates crash-testing the software, suggesting where rough-edges might be smoothed, and generally having a good time creating some of the atmosphere while trying to destroy the software in every conceivable way so that everything is solid upon inception.

In May of 1992 MindVox will open it's doors to the public. As much as we'd like to say that it's going to completely change everything, it will not. All it can do is allow people who feel in rhythm with this vision of the world to converge together in one of the most interesting nexus points of Cyberspace. To extend their reach, explore new levels of experience, and interact with some of the pioneers in the fields of computer science, networking, science-fiction, music, the arts, politics, religion, altered states, and future reality.

Our main priority is to create and continuously evolve an environment that fosters an atmosphere of dynamic creativity, coupled with access to information and ideas, that present you with a far greater spectrum of possibility than you might otherwise be able to access.

Thanks

Nothing of this magnitude could ever take shape based upon the merits of any one individual. The entire Phantom Access Group has been a collaborative effort since it began some ten years ago; the MindVox project is merely the first confluence of the diverse talents that comprise the core of Phantom Access Technologies, that has been directed towards the electronic and societal mainstream.

Looking back over the years, there are very few of my friends who have not in some way contributed to the genesis of Phantom Access and the creation of MindVox, and I'd like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of them.

People I would like to specifically thank, and without whom Mind-

Vox could not have been launched in the manner we wanted, include:

First and foremost, my fiance Delia, who has made much of the last several years possible; who never knew about "Lord Digital" when she met me; who has gone from "computers, uh, ugh, that's so . . . um, dull" to not only seeing the potentials inherent in the capabilities the technology presents to all society, but actually extending many hundreds of hours of her time to scripting sections of the project and designing human interaction POV's based upon her lifelong experience with theatre and film. She has also shown remarkable grace by retaining a sense of humor when dealing with 2am anonymous calls from computer dudes who feel compelled to ask "so, what does Lord Digital do in bed?" questions.

The second person to whom I owe a great deal is Bruce Fancher, my partner in this endeavor, as well as half a hundred projects that have spanned over a decade. Without you many things would not have been possible, and those that were would have been a lot less fun. It has been an interesting experience watching someone grow into an adult who has retained all the qualities that made them so much fun to hang out with in our youth, yet managed to temper that childlike glee with responsibility, humor in the face of adversity, and that elusive quality called character. Here's to another couple of decades of Lord & Lord.

I would like to thank every member of the Phantom Access Group for the thousands of hours spent designing, implementing and de-bugging the programs that make MindVox come to life. Respective of some people's desire to remain out of the spotlight, I will leave it at that. You know who you are & anyone who really cares to find that out can do so at any time they desire.

Phiber Optik: For applying his considerable skills in a positive direction and helping us make MindVox a very difficult fortress to lay siege to, while at the same time adding a tremendous amount of versatility to our networking and communications interface options. Most of all, thank you for having the courage to realize that the world is not always a logical or fair place and that no matter how intelligent you are or how noble your intentions, you can be dragged down by the stupidity and fear of those around you if you associate with people who do not share the same qualities you possess.

Charles: For a great deal of assistance in updating many of us regarding the current status of new technology and what's just over the horizon, as well as providing tremendous aid by showing us functional examples of the state of the art in distributed electronic networking, and taking us on a fast-forward cruise through a wide variety of hardware platforms and development tools. Your friendship, advice, and persistent belief in our vision, has been invaluable.

Len Rose: For being a good friend over the years and always giving assistance with anything we have needed. Most of all thanks for coming out of everything you've been through with optimism about the future and an intact belief system. Peace.

George Gleason: For being a person who has become one of my close friends faster than anyone else ever did. For possessing a really beautiful outlook on life & everything in it, and for always being a calming voice when things are completely crazy and the moon is full.

Bruce Sterling: For his encouragement, support, and a really funny talk at CFP-2. Most of all, the deepest appreciation for doing an admirable job of presenting the unbiased truth while chronicling some of the events that have taken place on the frontiers of Cyberspace.

Mike Godwin: For putting up with many long and strange phone calls regarding a wide variety of topics; for helping us to

avoid potential pitfalls and difficulty; for providing encouragement and advice, and in general, for being a really cool person who has gone out of his way many times to provide us with assistance.

Thomas Dell: For writing code full of obscure jokes and weird ramblings that do wonders to wake you up and get your full attention when you are changing things at 3am, and for being an exceptionally gracious guy who is one of the limited handful of people that have maintained their sense of vision in the face of impending mediocrity and industrialization.

Special thanks to Dan, SN, SR, D00f and everyone in DPAK and cDc, who comprise some of the very few who managed to grasp the obvious, and in turn make use of this knowledge in an entertaining and lucid manner. Additional accolades to DPAK for being the only eL!te duDeZ to use a four letter acronym instead of a three letter one. The vision, the sheer wow!

Mega-Supra-Surfin-the-Ozone Thanks to Mondo 2000. Beyond the sea of screaming fluff and designer hyperbole contained within the covers of any issue of Mondo, there is also a great deal of truth to be found about Cyberspace, music, art, film, and life in general. Mondo has thus far shown itself to be beyond reproach as far as journalistic ethics and presentation of the facts are concerned. It is also to be commended as a publication with a sound belief in typing words at random and letting them fall where they may.

Finally, tremendous gratitude goes to Jim Thomas. A person I do not know and have never spoken with, yet someone who has done an exceptionally important service to all of Cyberspace with the forum presented by Computer Underground Digest. Irrespective even of CuD, I have heard nothing but praise and well-wishing from the many you have helped. Thank you.

Additional thanks to: Paul, Yuri, Eric & Eric, Ken & everyone who has made the move to Phibro Energy, Drowned Fish, Andrew, Randy, Carl, The Plastics, TV, Eric Madeson, Richard, Harlequin, Dane, Jeff, The Galactic Knight, Laszlo Nibble, Colleen, Cereal "I live to be annoying" Killer, the cast & crew of LightStorm lighting and Manny "huh?" Riggs at Record Plant.

Patrick K. Kroupa

digital@phantom.com

Phantom Access Technologies, Inc. +1 212 988 5987

*1 Lyrics are (c) Copyright, some year or another by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, otherwise known as the Rolling Stones. The version I was listening to is a cover version done by Jane's Addiction.

*2 Lyrics are (c) Copyright, 1991 by Guns N Roses music Uzi/Suicide Records.