

Access to Tools

Welcome to a new millennium with the old Star Chamber.

I've been having fun with XML and XSL these days, and I've finally managed to get the [Paracelsus Bookshop](#) built on top of an XML database. To tell you the truth, it's not very fancy, but it does contain some of my favorite books of all time. Which reminds me: have you seen the book list feature at Amazon? They make it incredibly easy to surf from list to list to list. It's a great idea and a dangerously easy way to waste time.

Finally, here is a [gratuitous link](#) to go check out my weblog, where among other things, you can learn more about Ed Pegg Jr.'s

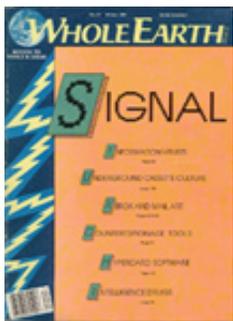


amazing chaos tiles, pictured below.

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On a dreary rainy day in the winter of 1987, I was headed to my girlfriend's house when fate steered me into a nearby bookstore. Fate is always doing this to me. No sooner do I see a bookstore out of the corner of my eye than fate is shoving me right into it. What else can I do? Usually nothing terribly fateful happens, and after I poke around for an hour fate lets me back outside. But on this day I stumbled across an odd magazine with an orange cover: issue no. 57 of the Whole Earth Review. It was, as it happened, a gemstone. Discoveries like this don't happen very often, but when they do, they make all that aimless browsing worthwhile. Thank you, fate.



Originally spun out of Stewart Brand's Whole Earth Catalog, the Whole Earth Review is a somewhat obscure magazine with the motto "Access to tools and ideas." Its content varies from flaky New Age rants to serious nuts-and-bolts hardware to geekboy gadgetry. Published in Sausalito, it has a very California feel to it. Issue 57, subtitled "Signal," was a special issue about the "proliferation and convergence of communication channels." Plenty of geekboy fun, with something else besides. Its compact format had a kind of web-like feel of content and contact information mashed together. I was smitten. I read the whole thing through, every word of it, multiple times. It seemed to be saying something very urgent and very useful about what was happening technically and culturally in the world.

Technology-related magazines of that time tended not to report on technology or science as a cultural issue. There were publications like Scientific American on the heavy end and Discover on the light end, but they were reporting on things that were far away, things set on a pedestal. Popular Science was a longtime geekboy standby, but from an editorial point of view it was a total cipher. It was filled with boring do-it-yourself projects or hyperbolic futuristic scenarios that felt painfully out of date even before they never happened. If it wasn't magnetic screwdrivers, then it was flying cars. But who cared? As for tapping into the cultural zeitgeist, there was Omni magazine, part of Bob Guccione's media empire. Omni was a weird mixture of science, reporting on paranormal weirdness, and speculative fiction. For a while it captured a certain compelling newness. But it was a little too airbrushed and aloof to sound the call of a revolution.

This was the scene in which issue 57 of the Whole Earth Review appeared. It succeeded in making tech news accessible, subversive, and exciting. And it benefited from superb timing. I think that Kevin Kelly, the editor for issue 57, got it right by

talking about the convergence of communication channels. This was the pregnant period before the Internet took off, back when the World Wide Web was just a twinkle in Tim Berners-Lee's eye. Here are some of the things that were discussed in that one issue.

- *memes and information viruses*
- *fractals*
- *virtual reality*
- *hyperlinking software (Hypercard)*
- *body modification*
- *virtual communities (mostly bulletin boards)*
- *zines*
- *smart drugs*
- *cheap street tech for radio and video.*
- *challenges to copyright law*

It was a dramatic sunburst of information to me at the time; it was a battle-cry to participate in something important. I find it impressive that the same list today might serve as a table of contents for any current tech-culture magazine. I still have issue 57, and it's breathtaking how many big trends were spotted early by Kevin Kelly, Howard Rheingold, R.U. Sirius, and company. But "Signal" was just one special issue, after all, and the next Whole Earth Review swung away from information convergence as a pervasive theme. Still, it was a harbinger of a cultural wave just starting to roll. Soon after this came Mondo 2000, a glossy magazine that went so far out of its way to be hip that it was nearly opaque. Even so, for a good many issues, it tapped into the same excitement surrounding a young culture of accelerating interconnectedness. It was too vain and self-indulgent to last, but it set the stage for the one that still endures: Wired magazine (where, not coincidentally, Kevin Kelly served as editor for a time). And Wired was the magazine that took geekboy culture from obscurity into the mainstream.

I was inspired to think about this because recently fate had propelled me into yet another bookstore, where I saw issue 103 of the Whole Earth Review. The theme was "Tools are Revolution," and it was guest-edited by none other than Kevin Kelly. He's at it again, spotting cultural hotspots like weblogging, the Long Now Foundation and their tireless clock, and his own list of really useful websites, tools, and books. Buying the magazine was like meeting an old friend.

But as Kelly himself points out in the editorial for issue 103, the world and the magazine's place in it have changed dramatically in the last ten years. The magazine still vibrant and useful, but somehow less vital today. The web has made access to even the most obscure tools and ideas easier than ever before. Participating in online communities is cheap and simple. To my mind, issue 57 saw it all coming. The revolution I read about thirteen years ago has come to my doorstep. The cost of participating in the culture of connection has dropped precipitously. And at last I have found my voice in it. I don't have the time or money to make my own magazine, or even my own xeroxed paper zine. But I can make a website and run a weblog. And I can write this by way of expressing myself to whoever is within earshot, and also by way of thanking Kevin Kelly and the good folks at the Whole Earth Review. And so I do: thanks.

