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The Speed of Technology

SXSW 2000 Interactive Festival

By Roger Gathman

Keeping the World Safe for Internet Time

Stewart Brand Keynote Address

Nothing is more exhausting than hearing "cool" come out of the mouths of members of the interactive community every other sentence. It immediately activates my slap reflex. This is a meme I can live without. But hearing Stewart Brand say cool, in his lecture on the Long Now project in the last address of the SXSW Interactive festival, was different. Brand, after all, put out the first Whole Earth catalog. He hung around both Bucky Fuller (that's Buckminster to you) and Ken Kesey. When Brand uses the word, it's like, well, God using it. It's all right.

Denise Caruso's introduction touched on Brand's credentials: one of the founders of The WELL, an original member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and -- with his book, *How Buildings Learn* -- a guru among a diverse group of Web designers who have taken his architectural suggestions and applied them to site design.

Brand's address wasn't directly about the Internet at all. In keeping with his latest book, *The Clock of the Long Now*, it was about the speed of technology. That speed is measurable according to two "laws": Moore's law, which posits a doubling of the storage capacity of silicon chips every 18 months, and Metcalf's, which states that the power of the Net (economic and political) grows as the square of the people on it. Brand's speculation is that if these two laws continue to function, we will reach a social Singularity -- a hyperexponential set which reaches infinity in finite time. I'm not sure what that means, in social terms. In outer space, it is called a black hole. Brand ominously calls it a possible extinction event.

Dressed in a cheap blue shirt and chinos, with a bouncy walk, Brand is not a gloomy man. After giving us a number of interesting diagrams about the different speeds of the different layers of civilization, he plunged into a slide show about a 10,000-year clock his Long Now organization is installing in the side of a specially purchased mountain in Nevada. The mountain has bristlecone pines on the summit, the oldest trees on earth. His slides showed various features of the clock, which is being designed by Danny Hillis. The name "long now" was suggested by Brian Eno, and the 10,000-year span of the thing complements the 10,000-year span of civilization so far. The Long Now clock turns once a minute, and has a number of neat features, and is nine feet tall. Like his mentor Buckminster Fuller, Brand exudes a magisterial sense of planetary responsibility, which he is willing to invest in sometimes goofy-sounding projects. I'm not really sure that Brand's clock is the kind of total symbol he wants it to be, but who cares? At least Brand's lecture, and the answers he gave to the eager questions from the audience (not one of which mentioned e-commerce, thank God), were definitely about the major themes: Does the

speed of technological change threaten us with extinction? How can we start giving back to those on the other side of the digital divide? And maybe most important: How can we preserve biodiversity?

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