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## Time to Slow Down?

By [Elizabeth Weil](#)

Stewart Brand -- '60s whole-earth philosopher, '80s new-media chronicler, '90s new-economy consultant -- is stirring his coffee with a hunting knife, telling us that we ought to slow down. He's dressed comfortably, in jeans and a rough-hewn burnt-orange shirt, and he's talking about his current obsession -- time, speed, the ever-accelerating pace of life -- while sitting next to a prototype of what promises to be the world's strangest clock. (That timepiece, called the Clock of the Long Now, will tick once a year, gong once a century, and cuckoo once a millennium.) Brand, 62, is moving at his own sweet pace, pausing to think for 10 or 20 seconds before he answers each of my questions.

When did it first occur to you that we might be moving too fast for our own good?

(Long, long pause.)

Lately, Brand has been mulling over the rewards and the perils of "Internet time." That's a slogan, to be sure, but it's something real too -- something technological, something physiological, something personal. Money moves around the world at the speed of light. Product cycles are measured in months, rather than in years. People find it unremarkable to spend time on three different continents in the space of a week. And in-the-trenches Web workers feel like God's new chosen people. But Brand is worried. One thing that worries him is Moore's Law. Early doublings of computing power (and hence of speed) were manageable, he says. But the doublings of speed and power that are under way now could cause the whole Web fun house to come crashing down. "The Internet is a runaway plague," says Brand. "It's a self-accelerating system that makes itself go faster and faster and faster and faster. And if it's not framed properly, it will overleap itself, as Shakespeare would say."

Hence his "infrequently asked question": Can we make the world safe for Internet time?

Brand's 30-year history of intellectual achievement includes launching the legendary Whole Earth Catalog and cofounding the influential Global Business Network. But right now, he's just eyeing his clock and palming his knife. He looks simultaneously terrified and thrilled. "If the AIDS virus had been airborne, it would have been a runaway plague. Well, the Internet virus is airborne -- and it's running away. Engineers say that a tenfold quantitative change is a qualitative change. Well, through Moore's Law alone, we're getting three of those revolutions every decade now. That rate of change is tremendously exciting and rewarding, especially to the young, but if we don't take the long view, the fallout could be pretty intense."

Ever an optimist, Brand isn't troubled with Woody Allen-esque anxiety about the effects of relentless acceleration on the human psyche. He saves his worrying for global issues: for the natural environment in particular and for the cultural infrastructure in general; for ecosystems, for languages, for the bedrock institutions of civilization -- for luxuries that most of us mistakenly believe we no longer have time for.

To illustrate, Brand pulls out a diagram consisting of concentric circles. (Picture a sketch of the earth's

crust along with various interior layers.) The two outer layers are labeled "fashion" and "commerce"; the two inner ones are labeled "nature" and "culture." He calls his diagram "a pace-layering cross section of a healthy civilization." Spinning it around for me, Brand explains how the outer, ephemeral layers move very rapidly, while the inner, bedrock layers move very slowly but very powerfully.

Just then, in walks Brewster Kahle, Brand's longtime friend and current landlord, a man who made a fortune as a high-tech entrepreneur. (He sold his company, Alexa Internet Corp., to Amazon.com in June 1999.) Kahle is now hard at work on the Internet Archive, a project that is designed to save the Web from its own amnesia and to bolster its usefulness over time.

"Hey, Brewster, come on in!" Brand shouts.

Kahle, like Brand, is boyish, open-faced, and perky beyond his years. He also shares Brand's deep-seated sense of social responsibility. In 1996, he took it upon himself to begin dragging the Web out of its perpetual present -- to snap the Web out of its adolescent nihilism and give it a sense of history. Standing in front of the clock, Kahle points out that the average life span of an object on the Web is 44 days. The Internet has the potential to be the greatest library in the history of mankind -- a repository of memory, thought, culture, and scholarship; a record of what it means to be human. But without an archive, it's nothing more than a catalog of the perpetually changing now.

"A measure of a world that's not safe for the Internet," Brand pipes in, "is '404 File Not Found,' which is the norm!" Kahle smiles, shrugs, and looks for some notebooks in Brand's closet. After Kahle leaves, Brand says, "That man is definitely making the world safe for Internet time."

Lately, on the lecture circuit, Brand has been encouraging his audiences to distinguish the truly important from the merely urgent -- to make taking the long view once again natural and common, rather than difficult and rare. To be sure, Brand believes that there is a time and a place for sprinting. But we've all been going all out for almost a decade now, he says, and the strain of going so fast for so long is beginning to show. The way to ease that strain is to stop, for a while at least, and to make some investments -- in the biosphere, in culture (building the qualities of continuity and respect), in governance (promoting the emerging global order), in infrastructure (making a business case for education), and in archival depth.

Through his work at the Global Business Network, Brand has been leading clients through 20-year scenario planning -- often with radical results. "If you start thinking 20 years ahead, schools suddenly become really important to you, because that's where your workforce will come from 20 years from now. You start taking responsibility for your industry as a whole -- and that includes your competitors."

The simple truth is that investment in different time frames gets rewarded in different ways. "We're used to thinking that if a problem can't be solved within two years, it can't be solved, and that's a really bad way to live," Brand says. "With global warming, the time frame for making real change might be 10, 20, 100 years, but just taking on an issue of that scale unleashes a profound sense of optimism. And, paradoxically, that helps make the world safe for Internet time -- that is, safe for risk."

Brand pauses for a moment, deliberately, to let that idea sink in. "It's okay if the Internet crashes," he says. "That would only set us back about eight years. But if the biosphere crashes . . ." You see the point.

In Brand's view, the way to ensure sustainability is to learn to go both fast and slow -- to play the game at both extremes. "The new economy is simultaneously more niche-oriented and more global," he says. "So we need to learn to perform effectively throughout that spectrum -- to address not only the urgent and the local, but also the important and the vast."

Without such a balance, Internet time will advance unchecked -- pushing us to go faster, faster, faster, and running away like the plague. At that point, our civilization will come to resemble a creature with one oversize limb, designed for speed, and one atrophic stump, formerly used for practicing patience. It's not a pretty picture. To avoid it, says Brand, we need to embrace a paradoxical truth: "If you want to keep speeding up, you also need to learn how to slow down."

Elizabeth Weil ([lweil@ix.netcom.com](mailto:lweil@ix.netcom.com) [1]), a writer based in San Francisco, is completing a book on a self-made man and his spaceship. Contact Stewart Brand by email ([sb@gbn.org](mailto:sb@gbn.org) [2]).

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**Links:**

[1] <mailto:lweil@ix.netcom.com>

[2] <mailto:sb@gbn.org>