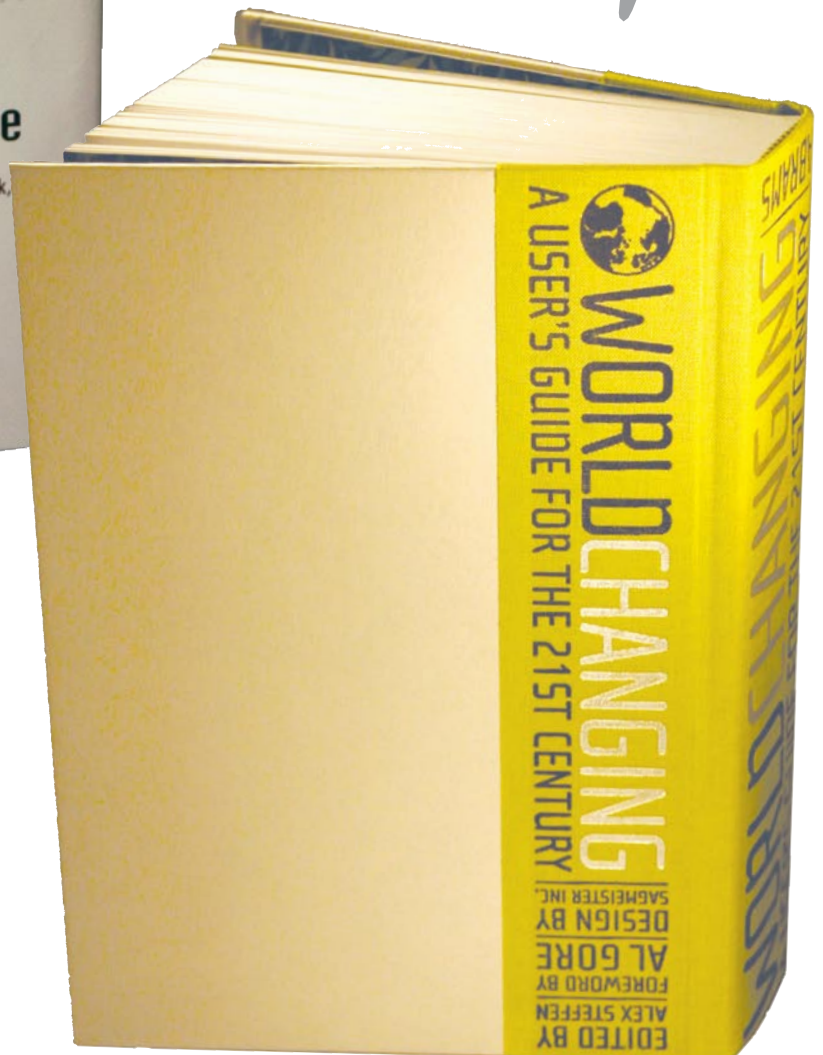
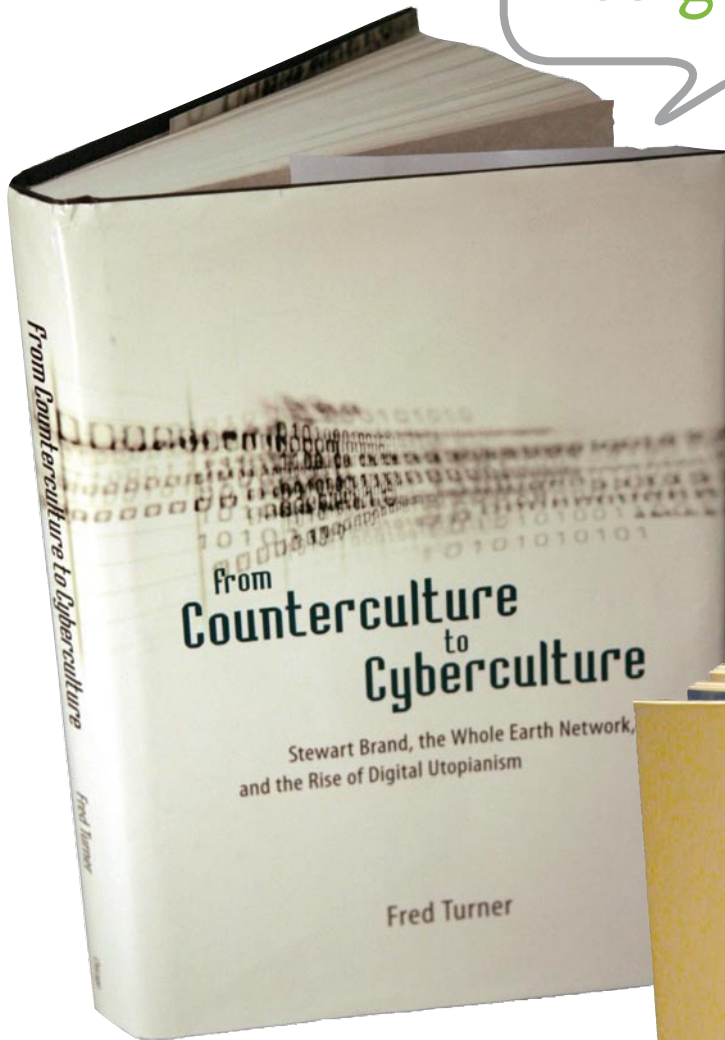


Designing a Better Future

A conversation about
technology, politics, and culture
with authors
Fred Turner and Alex Steffen

moderated by Lilly Irani



The culture of utopianism played a critical role in the techno-culture of what became Silicon Valley; this movement is the natural forebear of the techno-ecological sweeping the Valley today. We asked authors **Fred Turner** and **Alex Steffen**, whose new books *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* and *WorldChanging* discuss how utopian counter-culture influenced Silicon Valley's development, and how current utopian culture can improve our planet, respectively, to chat about the roles that technology, politics, and culture play in the design of artifacts and the creation of the future.

What does the future look like to you?

STEFFEN: Really, we don't know. The conflict of not knowing is what *WorldChanging* is about and seeks to address. We're headed towards a future that is pretty dire: ecological collapse, conflict, and social disruption. But we're also seeing the outlines of a future that is unimaginably good: widespread sustainable prosperity, more democracy, human rights, and personal. But how we get from here to the good future is pretty vague.

TURNER: For me, the question is how do we get there? And who is "we" when we get there? That matters enormously.

My take on this is that Americans labor under the idea that visibility is power. It comes from living in a celebrity culture—the idea that "If I just express myself, I'll be heard." That's not true. And even if you're heard, you might not be heard in places where you can make change. Or being heard, you may not have the other kinds of leverage you need to make change happen. I went to a meet-up at the start of the war and was astonished to find my neighbors there. I found all these folks who were lamenting the start of the war. That group did not grow into a protest movement that stopped the war, despite our temporary visibility.

STEFFEN: It's worthwhile to separate out a couple of concepts here: visibility, transparency, and findability. Many of us have had this idea that this visibility

is power. That isn't always, or even often, true. Those people who profit from the current arrangement have become very good at ignoring and countering the kinds of visibility that comes from things like protest movements.

That said, there is enormous value to findability—the ability of people who care about similar issues to connect with one another and then find other people out in the world who believe the same things they do and want to see the same kind of change.

There is also enormous value in transparency. In places with lots of transparency, things almost begin to change themselves. For example, in Kenya, there is a whole movement to bring transparency into the operation of government—things that are really simple, like transcripts of parliament. By bringing that information forward, like who got paid by whom in government, that kind of information fuels a movement for change. The simple act of telling people what's going on has enormous power to change the dynamics of the situation.

TURNER: When new media activist groups take on what had been the role of the press—bringing transparency to political life—that's very powerful. I still think taking on states is very hard.

Steffen: That's true. One of the quotes that we say a lot at *WorldChanging* is, "optimism is a political act." We live in a time when we are encouraged by all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons

to remain cynical. Cynicism is itself a form of keeping people in power.

TURNER: That is well put. I am trained by profession in crabbiness and hole finding, which are exactly skills that impede the constructive hopefulness that Alex is pursuing.

How are the ideals and strategies of *WorldChanging* similar to and different from Stewart Brand's new-Communitarian movement of 30 years ago?

STEFFEN: There is enormous continuity between *WorldChanging* and *Whole Earth Catalog*. But there is an enormous difference in how we think about change. There is a greater embrace of the realities of the 20th century life, like urbanization, globalization, multiculturalism, and technological programs. We understand now that there is no way to build a sustainable society without other people. If China burns all that coal, no matter how green we get, the sea level is still going to rise. There's no way for us to make it if they don't make it too.

Turner: But how do you get China into the conversation and get them doing stuff?

STEFFEN: That is the critical question right now. I'm shocked by the number of people from other countries who have approached me to explain that the kind of information we talk about on *WorldChanging* is simply not available.

Is this like Voice of America for a bright green future?

TURNER: But with a more interactive mode! What's interesting about new media here is less this ability to broadcast information than the opportunities for locals to wikify and contribute their own stuff. What we need very badly is a way to listen to what folks on the other side need—not just to tell them.

STEFFEN: That's exactly right. The chair of our board, Ethan Zuckerman, helps run an organization that attempts to go after that question. "Global Voices" brings together bloggers from all over the world to get that conversation going.

Turner: There's a mode of doing social work of all kinds that emerged in the 60s and amplified dramatically with the World Wide Web. It didn't begin with the web. We're seeing a shift from institutions to networks, and from organized bureaucracies to temporary collectives.

But you haven't gotten rid of power. Once power shifts from being managed by rules and regulations to being managed by cultural affinity, it becomes very hard to critique it. If you're going to do social change through groups that are organized around cultural affinities, you then need a language for questioning that power and a way to reach out to those precisely not like yourselves. That's what didn't happen in the 60s.

What constitutes a better future?

STEFFEN: My working definition is one in which we have more or less stabilized our relationship with the ecological system we depend on. We should work towards building a civilization that increases the number of options available to our descendants. Right now we're decreasing options.

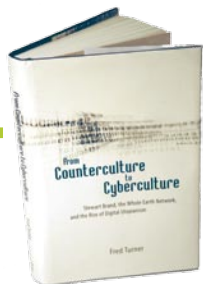
TURNER: Success would be having

institutions and mechanisms in which those goals can be engaged in a state of perpetual pursuit. I'd like institutions that allow poverty not only to end but to be continually put down, like we've had institutions that have kept polio at bay.

STEFFEN: Ringing the alarm bell isn't working. But something changes when you switch the conversation from problem to solution. Focusing on the problem means coming to an agreement on the nature of and responsibility for that problem. But if we talk about methods for solving the problem, you might find that people who never considered themselves allies agree.

When there were lots of discussions in the 60s about what ought to happen in the third world, there wasn't a lot of progress. When the conversation turned to solving the debt problem,

“What we need very badly is a way to listen to what folks on the other side need—not just tell them.”



From Counterculture to Cyberculture review by Björn Hartmann

In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner delivers a detailed, deeply researched social history that examines how ideals of the 1960s American counterculture came to form the ideological foundation of today's Internet culture. Designers can gain insight from Turner's illustrations of how cultural ideals shape what is designed, how it gets designed, and what we call the things we make. Turner, a journalist-turned-assistant professor of communications at Stanford, follows Stewart Brand—artist, writer, founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the early online bulletin board system, *The WELL*—and Brand's collaborators from the beginning of the Cold War to the meteoric rise and fall of the dot.com era. Along the way, Turner draws connections between hippies and World War II defense researchers and shows the unlikely allegiance between digital rebels at *Wired* magazine and the

Republican party of Newt Gingrich in the 1990s.

This is a story about the creation of zeitgeist. The people who matter in design are not just the designers and the users—artifacts are not just a product of the workbench, but also of the mindset the designer brings to the workbench, which is determined by culture. And social brokers like Brand are influential in determining how cultural ideas interact.

Turner's investigation into the politics of information illustrates the development and movement of concepts and values among communities. This deep dive into the history of Silicon Valley will have designers questioning the origins of their ideas and ideals in a very useful way.

From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism, by Fred Turner. (September 2006.) University of Chicago Press; 354 pages. ISBN 0-226-81741-5. List \$29.00 in hardback.

“I hope more designers ask themselves, ‘Who have I designed for? Whose world have I changed?’”

you found that people from the socialist left came together with people from the Christian right in this strange coalition in total agreement about what the solution is.

What can designers do?

TURNER: Designers spend a lot of time trying to solve problems that are set by corporate clients. Designers could be not only making a living, but identifying important problems to solve. The problem setting piece is often neglected in design. Who benefits from this problem set? What is at stake here? What changes if you fix this problem and for whom? Especially when I spend time in the design world in Silicon Valley, I hope more designers ask themselves, “Who have I designed for? Whose world have I changed?”

STEFFEN: That’s just what I was going to say. We need to up our personal ante as creative people. It’s more than “in your pro bono time, go do something good with your creativity.” Every single design decision has impact in the world.

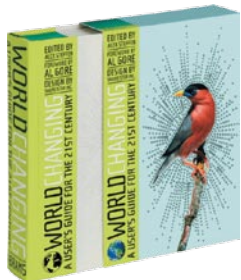
Let’s take sustainability and the construction of a chair. One can design a chair solely interested in its comfort and aesthetic appeal. Or one can start looking at the toxic footprint, whether the materials are recyclable, the labor that will produce it, how the product will die.

Designers have a sense of learned helplessness in dealing with clients when it comes to these sorts of issues. Companies now have an interest in putting out better designed objects and

services. *Fast Company*, *Business Week*, and *Fortune* are starting to understand the success you can have by doing good. Corporate America is also learning about the liabilities when they don’t do good. Designers can help companies build that better thing, whether that thing is a chair or an annual report. Not bringing up these issues means the designer may be shortchanging the client.

Can you provide examples of designers who have engaged with these issues as inspiration?

STEFFEN: Look at people like Bill McDonough, Michael Braungart, Natalie Jeremijenko, John Thackara, Ross Lovegrove. There are really phenomenal designers out there who have been pushing on this for a long time and are beginning to see rock star-level demand for what they do. As Bruce Sterling says, “If we are successful, people won’t look at a product and say ‘Look at this sustainable product!’” It’ll be taken for granted that if a product is allowed to be made, it will be sustainable. 🖐️



Worldchanging: A User’s Guide to the 21st Century review by Björn Hartmann

Worldchanging.com is a Web site that reports on technologies and techniques for a sustainable future. Its premise is that “real solutions already exist for building the future we want. It’s just a matter of grabbing hold and getting moving.” Worldchanging, a companion book, is a snapshot of Worldchanging.com’s online activity.

The print format of Worldchanging works—the time-honored tradition of immersing oneself in a book on the sofa is a much more satisfying experience than reading the same text on your screen. The unhurried structure of sofa reading encourages one to reflect as the material sinks in.

In many ways, Worldchanging is an intellectual offspring of Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*. Each focuses on positive cultural transformation through technology; *Worldchanging* echoes *Whole Earth’s* format, with large

categories such as stuff, shelter, and community accompanied by short editorial reviews. But while *Whole Earth Catalog*, as a resource for the counter-cultural consumer, focuses on personal, small scale technology available for purchase, *Worldchanging* takes a broader, less immediate perspective. It is not a catalog in the retail sense; rather it is a broad compendium of examples, strategies, and visions for change on many levels. Many technologies discussed are still the subject of research, such as green nanotechnology, or in the conceptual stage, such as online reputation systems. And some are truly out of this world, such as the problem of recycling space junk.

While at times the book’s focus is scattered, jumping from smart shirts that hug you to landmine awareness groups, *Worldchanging* is still an inspiring read.

Worldchanging: A User’s Guide to the 21st Century, by Alex Steffen. (November 2006.) Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; 608 pages. ISBN 0-810-93095-1. List \$37.50 in hardback.