

An Interview with Kevin Herbert

By Louise Reitman



Kevin Paul Herbert
kevin@trippers.org



Louise Reitman
louise@maps.org

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KEVIN PAUL HERBERT is a computer programmer and software designer. Entirely self-taught, Kevin skipped college while his technical peers have advanced degrees. As an early developer for Cisco Systems, he developed software that now runs on millions of Internet routers worldwide. Kevin's work has been written about in *Wired* magazine (www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2006/01/70015), and he has been a major supporter of MAPS over the years. In addition to computers, Kevin enjoys dancing to live music (psychedelic jam bands) and psychedelic DJ electronica. He also builds costumes containing wearable electronics for performance, and has performed as a dancer at concerts at the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado and other venues. Kevin is a strong supporter of civil liberties and social responsibility. He strongly believes that individuals, not governments, are responsible for social and moral decisions.

This interview was conducted by Louise Reitman. Louise interned at MAPS, in their Ben Lomond office, for two summers, and she volunteered to do psychedelic emergency work at the Burning Man Festival in the summer of 2006. Louise will be graduating from Barnard College in New York City this June with a degree in History.

Louise: *In general, what type of connection do you see between psychedelics and the recent computer technologies?*

Kevin: From my personal experience, psychedelics have helped me to get past some of my most challenging problems. Overall, I feel like it's affected the development of my ideas about what our responsibility is to society for the kinds of technologies that we develop. I think that it also has given me insight into how to create technology. So, extrapolating from there, I think that many technical people have been exposed to LSD—although, it's hard to say just how many people. This is because engineers working in corporate situations don't want to get into trouble.

In general, engineers can't really talk about their psychedelic use the way that, say, Alex Grey can talk about how he was tripping on this or that while he was doing a painting.

Psychedelics are especially helpful with the development of new computer technologies because recent developments have shifted toward more open technology, and an increased reliance upon software, as opposed to reliance on machines and mechanisms. I think the fact that everything in the world has become more and more flexible, and more programmable, is a result of people taking LSD at early times in their life, like in high school or college. It changes one's vision of the kinds of technology that one can build. It encourages a departure from things being rigid and imposing. Instead, contemporary computer software is flexible and malleable, changeable and not static. An example of a rigid system would be an old school-style cash register, where you had to press certain buttons in a certain order for it to work. Today a flexible unit would have interfaces and menus, where you fill things in and proceed in whatever way is convenient for you and suits the way that you think.

Louise: *What kind of relationship do you see between the Internet and psychedelics?*

Kevin: I think that the primary reason that we have networks like the Internet is because of graduate students at Stanford, MIT, and Berkeley who tried psychedelics. These psychedelic graduate students were influenced by ideas to build things that were open, distributed, and based on trust models. The opposite of an open network would be like a master-slave network, like the way IBM was building their networks. The IBM network had a mainframe that ran everything. Then, from that, there was remote terminals and remote job entry devices.

Everything was like this top down model of thinking. It was like the mainframe was some guy at the top running everything, controlling everything

underneath it—as opposed to the networks that we use now (called peer-to-peer networks) in which all the machines creating the network are essentially equal. Like in IBM-style networks you didn't have computers at each location talking to one another. Now it's a mesh of everything talking to everything. So, I think the reason that the world has embraced open networks, and has given up centralized, hierarchical control, is from psychedelic inspiration.

Louise: *How have psychedelics influenced your work in particular?*

Kevin: LSD showed me a lot about myself. It's helped me feel comfortable making the decisions that I thought were appropriate. Like, I think that LSD helped me realize my desire to skip college, and it contributed to my confidence in following through with that. In a technical context I've seen solutions that otherwise evaded me. I've had specific situations where I've had a really complex problem that I've spent weeks looking at—then I would end up having a psychedelic experience, like tripping on LSD while seeing the Grateful Dead, and I would have it figured out. I remember seeing a BBC-Discovery Channel production series in 1997 that talked about how some of the electrical engineering students at Stanford were given LSD. They said they could visualize the electron flow through the circuit, and it gave them the ability to really think about it visually.

So, I think that LSD can help you out of these problems you've been wrapping your mind around for weeks. It can give you a fresh perspective on a problem that's so complex that it's not good enough to try to explain it to a coworker or something else. I also think LSD can be your best honed career advisor. I made my decision to leave the first firm I worked for, DECK, and work for Cisco Systems, while I was seeing the Grateful Dead on acid in 1989. The experience gave me the insight to see the writing on the wall—that the technology DECK was behind was not going to be the one to win in the marketplace, and they were really looking at the world in an old school way. So LSD has led me into states of mind where I'm able to make important life changes.

Louise: *What do you think the future*

holds in store for technology?

Kevin: I think that we are at a crossroads, where what happens with technology depends on the decisions that people make. Right now, the growth of all of the computer networking is making outsourcing very easy. [Outsourcing is the arrangement in which one company provides services for another company that could also be or usually have been provided in-house.] That's why we have all these call centers in Bangalore. The world is being reshaped by this technology export. I think that right now, as a society, as we contemplate issues like the ones being debated in the Senate right now concerning wiretapping, and immunity for telephone companies, the direction that technology takes is going to depend upon our relationship with technology and our relationship with ideas of what are our liberties.

I think that psychedelics, like LSD, are caught right in the middle of that battle. Sasha Shulgin has this notion of cognitive liberty that says that you own your own body, you own your brain, you have freedom of thought—so why don't we have the legal right to use LSD? These are the same issues that are occurring in technology. What represents our freedom? What represents what the government is allowed to regulate, and for what reason?

John Barlow, a psychedelic luminary who wrote lyrics for the Grateful Dead and founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation, wrote this article in the late 1980s called "Crime and Puzzlement." In this essay he compares the present time on the Internet with the American "Wild West" before the Law had moved in—before the marshals and sheriffs and everything else had moved in. At this past year's Burning Man, the theme was "utopia versus dystopia." I think of technology and the Internet, and I could go either way.

People being able to work anywhere in the world is one choice. The other choice is jobs will travel anywhere in the world, where people will be paid the least to do them, because where you are won't matter—which might mean that your boss may see you all the time, or it might mean it just doesn't matter. No one will care

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because we'll all be concerned with the quality of our work output. We'll have technology to create either kind of scenario, but where we go with that depends on whether we're willing to embrace a model where things are open—including our own minds—or a model in which things are closed, including our own minds and the things we can think about, as well as the chemicals that we can use to affect how we think.

Louise: *What is your ideal vision of the future in reference to technology?*

Kevin: My ideal vision is one in which people have a right to real security. We have a right to use cryptography, to keep prying eyes out from our communications, a right to reverse engineer technology. My view is of a world where innovation is rewarded and not stomped upon. The current climate is really all about protecting intellectual property. The laws have changed. It used to be that you couldn't patent computer software. Now, in the U.S., starting in 2000, people can use copyrights for various reasons, and it's all about forcing people to have less choices and having people give away their freedom.

Louise: *Why are people being given less choices?*

Kevin: There's a whole set of complex reasons for doing it—like forcing you to buy one particular music player, to forcing you to buy the same movie over six times for various reasons. Or not being able to play your music or movies on everything that you own, to wanting to put in backdoors that you can't know about. We're at the point where there's starting to be cryptographic hardware on computers, but it's possible to make it that only government approved software can run on your computer. However, it's also possible to protect your computer from the prying eyes of the government, and how that is built really depends on society. For me, it's the same battle that we're fighting over psychedelics—do you have the right to modify your own mind? Do you have the right to modify your own computer? What are your rights and what is your own? What are the limits of society and what are the limits of the individual? •

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Dreaming of MAPS

“A building, the Institute of the Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies. I was inside. There was an Albert Hofmann robot that was in the lobby, very mechanical looking, with a massive head, but just from the chest up, no legs, very stationery. But the head moved around and it was having conversations with people, students. Further inside, the building progressed into a series of staircases that went in every direction. Almost like an Escher picture. There was one classroom where they were studying sound theory and dissonant noises and their effects. At the bottom of one long staircase there was a whole room covered in chalkboard, the floor, the ceiling, the walls all had chalkboard on them. In this room there were a bunch of people writing equations on the floor, ceilings, walls, so that there were mathematical sequences everywhere. And that is all I remember, then I woke up.”

– Josina de Bree