

## A UBIQUITY INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN LEVY

Steven Levy, the chief technology writer for *Newsweek* magazine, has written a number of highly best-selling books, the latest of which is *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Culture, Commerce, and Coolness*. When we asked acclaimed software developer Marney Morris to comment on this interview and she responded: "I've been reading Steven Levy's thoughts on technology for over 20 years, and he is still as fresh and insightful as he was back then -- in the beginning days of the personal computer. Steven weaves the implications of technology change into social meaning with wit and intelligence. He was the best, brightest and funniest guy in the tech arena before he moved to *Newsweek* in '95, and he still is. He is a great guy and a great journalist. I'm honored that I got to say so." When we interviewed Steven Levy he was at his office at *Newsweek*, and we asked him whether he spent much time there.

LEVY: When I'm in town, I go there every day. I live in New York City, and don't have a giant apartment. My wife, who is also a writer, works at home, so I like to come in.

UBIQUITY: What part of town do you live in?

LEVY: I live down in The Village, and the office is near Columbus Circle.

UBIQUITY: What do you see your job at *Newsweek* as?

UBIQUITY: I see it as being about technology -- however I define it.

UBIQUITY: In the spirit of Ladies First, tell us about your wife.

LEVY: My wife is the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Teresa Carpenter, who writes about true crime and, lately, more about history.

UBIQUITY: Tell us more about your position at *Newsweek*.

LEVY: Here at *Newsweek*, my official title is Senior Editor. You could also call me, I guess, the chief technology correspondent. I do a column every couple weeks called "The Technologist," and write stories. I also contribute to a lot of other magazines: I've been contributing to *Wired* since it came out. And I write books about technology.

UBIQUITY: How do you see yourself as any way having a different turf -- and maybe the answer is that you don't -- than some of your peers.?

LEVY: Well, rather than saying I have a different turf, I'll just say that I have a fairly consistent take on what it is that I find really interesting and new from the world of technology -- whether it's personalities or the technology's effect on people, sometimes even how the technology plays out. I have ~~(set of)~~ the whole world of technology as my pallet. And *Newsweek* doesn't have a whole lot of technology writers. We have some other ones, but I have no prescribed beat, and there are no dividing lines I have to worry about. I'm pretty free to write about whatever I want to in that whole broad world of technology.

UBIQUITY: How did you drift into technology journalism? I know you were not a technologist in college. Tell us a little bit about your background and your intellectual history.

LEVY: Sure. Well I was an English major in school and went to grad school to study Literature and got a Master's at Penn State, after which I determined that I wasn't going to be an Academic, so I decided to be a Journalist. I found I really liked long-form journalism, and I became a freelance writer focusing on writing about stuff that interested me, whatever it happened to be. Pretty much anything -- whether it was

music or sports or trend story. At one point, I think it was 1981, I got assigned to do a story about computer hackers.

UBIQUITY: A long time ago. Who were you with then? Who assigned that story to you?

LEVY: The story came from Jane Fonda's movie company. There was an editor who my wife used to work with at the *Village Voice* named Susan Lyne, who is now the CEO of Martha Stewart Media. And before that she was at ABC, where she green-lighted "Desperate Housewives." But Susan was working for Jane Fonda's production company and she had heard about this world of computer hackers and thought I might be a good match for it. Her idea was that if I wrote this project up as a magazine then they would pre-option it and see if they wanted to make a movie of it. So I went to *Rolling Stone*, for which I had been doing a lot of work at that time, and was a contributing editor there in the 1980s. They thought it was a good idea so I wrote the story for *Rolling Stone*. For awhile, the movie people thought about making a movie out of it, and I did go up to MIT with Susan and Bruce Gilbert, the producer, and meet Marvin Minsky and try to figure out how we might make a movie out of this. I was just fascinated by that world. I had gone to California for the story and met a lot of fascinating, smart and accessible people, and I loved the way they looked at the world and solved problems. I decided I'd write more about this, and it was a good time to do that because computer magazines and computer journalism were moving from the hobbyist to the professionals, and were for them because I was "a real writer." Publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire* that I was working for were happy to have me write about that world because I was someone whose stories they knew, and because they knew I could get a good story about this subject, which was a little strange to them. So I just followed up on that and did a book about hackers -- and there it was.

UBIQUITY: I'm curious about why you think the story didn't seem to work as a movie project.

LEVY: They kept talking incessantly about "breaking the back" of the material. And also around that time, the movie "War Games" came out and I think they felt, well, gee, maybe that was our movie. And they just couldn't figure out how to do it.

UBIQUITY: Do you think you'll ever revisit it as a movie project?

LEVY: Well, I don't know. I always "Hackers" would make a great movie, through the way you handled the material would be important. And just that sense of the early MIT people, in particular, who saw the magic, the interactivity with the computer. And were the pioneers in that sense, and were great people. And some of the stories were hysterical.

UBIQUITY: I think you should go back to it. I think it would make a very good movie.

LEVY: Well I agree with you. It has no car chases, but...

UBIQUITY: Put a car chase in.

LEVY: Well, I could... Actually, the MIT did a subway bit where they tried to figure out the shortest way to go to all the stations or whatever. If Spielberg is reading this, my email is on Newsweek.com. So anyway, I wrote "Hackers," and I was doing a column for *Popular Computing* magazine. Then that went under around 1985 and I started writing columns for *Macworld* as well as non-technical publications like *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's*, and places like that. Then, stepping on my wife's turf, I did a book about a true crime story, about...

UBIQUITY: Einhorn.

LEVY: Yes, a murderer, Ira Einhorn. He was Philadelphia's sort of Allen Ginsberg and Abbie Hoffman rolled into one. He murdered his girlfriend, and they found her in a trunk in his apartment.

UBIQUITY: That sounds like a movie, too.

LEVY: Actually, that was made into a NBC-TV miniseries, with Naomi Watts playing the victim. Boy, I found that Einhorn story depressing. I got very friendly with the family of the victim and it was a very sad story. It made me realize that I was much happier writing about people who were more optimistic, and who opened my mind up, so I did a book about artificial life and then a book about the history of the Macintosh, and then a book about the revolution in cryptography. And most recently, one about the iPod.

UBIQUITY: Is there any book you're most proud of?

LEVY: Well that's a little hard. I'm proud of different books in different ways. But I have to say I feel so lucky to have tackled the "Hackers" book when I did. It could have gone in any direction, really. I had never written a book before, and it was a big project. It was a suggestion of an editor that I do this book about hackers. I was eager to do a book, and that was certainly a subject that interested me, but my first concern was, gee, how do I get a book done in the most expeditious way? However, this particular editor encouraged me to think big and just to be as ambitious as I could. And as I went down and started the path of researching this, originally I thought I would do a part in Silicon Valley about the early days of the personal computer revolution and the home-brew computer clubs, and maybe follow it up with a couple of more contemporary parts. But as I got into the book more, I realized that the bedrock of this culture was at MIT, which is where it really got going. That's where they formed a template for hackers everywhere. So I kept getting drawn back there, because those people at MIT invented computer culture as we know it. And I had a wonderful experience documenting that really important phenomenon and being really the first one to talk to these people. It was almost like being an anthropologist stumbling upon an undocumented civilization – but one which then turned out to be incredibly influential in the world. And the people were, , just amazing. And as an extra little bonus, the last remaining inhabitant of that culture, was a person I did these in-depth interviews with who was a person who had never talked to a reporter much before, this guy named Richard Stallman who turns out to be an incredibly influential person to this day. And I captured him back then in the early 1980s, in his formative years. That and a like a lot of things just joyfully conspired to make that book relevant for a very long time and I was able to put it all together and do a lot of research in a pretty short period of time to just tell that complicated three-part story, which a lot of people still read. It's really incredibly gratifying, because every week I'll get another email from someone saying, This book changed my life; or, I just reread that book; or, when I was a kid I read that book and then I became a hacker myself; or, I changed my career after reading your book. John Carmack, the programmer who wrote DOOM, said the book was a big influence on him. And it's just incredibly gratifying that the book turned out to be so important to so many people, and that it is still being read.

UBIQUITY: Earlier, when I asked you how you set out your turf, I was thinking mainly about turf within your own organization, *Newsweek*. But what about your turf with regards to other prominent journalists, like Michael Schrage who is also MIT, and John Markoff.

LEVY: Interestingly, Michael was doing work for Rolling Stone when I started there, so I've known him for a really long time. And I met John Markoff when I first started working in this field. Everyone told me, You've got to meet this guy John Markoff. I did, and he became one of my best friends.

UBIQUITY: Do you think you three guys are working the same turf exactly? Or is there...

LEVY: No, I don't think so. I think we each have our own approach to things. My own approach, by and large, is to try to tell my story through people, try to get the technology through them. Sometimes the computer or the program or whatever might be a character in my narrative, but I see things sort of through a narrative scope.

UBIQUITY: And what about John Markoff and Michael Schrage?

LEVY: Well, John writes for a newspaper, he sometimes will do narratives, especially in his books. His last book was really wonderful, and told the story through people. Michael is interested in concepts, so his books are a little bit more about how you could use technology for management and things like that, which is an angle I don't pursue at all.

UBIQUITY: What is your next book going to be about?

LEVY: Well, I haven't really figured that one out yet. There's a couple ideas I'm exploring, since I haven't committed to any of them I'm really not ready to talk about them.

UBIQUITY: Why don't you do one on Ray Kurzweil and his group?

LEVY: Interesting. I mean, I've met him a few times and he's a fascinating guy. Well, maybe if Ray helps me live forever, I'll certainly get around to doing a book about him.

UBIQUITY: So what are your current enthusiasms? I know you're high on the iPhone.

LEVY: You're right, I am pretty high on the iPhone, but I don't think I'll do a book about it. I think with my iPod book and then the Macintosh book before that I've probably Applied out. But the connectivity thing and social networking is pretty interesting. And I'm really interested in Google as a phenomenon and as a kind of a groundbreaking company.

What else? Music. I guess I just did a lot of that in the iPod book, but a lot of my activities online are about music: getting music, learning about new music, staying in touch with people about music, sharing music.

UBIQUITY: So do you think music is the dominant app of our time?

LEVY: Well I don't know if it's truly the dominant one, but certainly it's an app that becomes very important to people, because people really love music. And this generation of technology really enhances your musical experience. It reacquaints you with music you forgot about, it introduces you to music and music makers you have never heard of. It allows you to learn about what your friends listen to and what other people listen to. And maybe you learn about your friends through their music. So I think it's more like a metaphor for the way technology can enhance our lives -- and also, as an incidental byproduct, disrupt businesses. What it's done to the music industry is a drastic example of what something that's wonderfully disruptive for some people can sometimes be not so wonderfully disruptive to the poor people whose business model is also being disrupted, if not completely trashed. And as someone who works for mainstream media, I can see such disruptions in a variety of ways.

UBIQUITY: What are your thoughts on the future of gaming and simulation? How big a deal are they going to become?

LEVY: I think one of the most underrated books the last 25 years was David Gelernter's "Mirror World." A few years after that the book came out everyone was talking about virtual reality, and David really was pressured to say whether he saw it all playing out this way or that way. What does it mean? You turn down a thermostat in your house. You feel warm and down the thermometer. But if you go to Google Maps and go to your house and use an encryption code as the key to get into that house, and

then zoom down and flip a virtual switch which then connects to the same controls that the wheel in your on the thermostat does, what's the difference, really? So that kind of mirror world that Gelernter talks about is the world we're going to be manipulating and living with and interacting with in the future. And we have things like Google Earth and the Microsoft version.

UBIQUITY: I think you used the term revelation when you were talking at what was happening at MIT when you started working on your first book. I was just about to ask you then: have there been any huge surprises to you? Any true revelations?

LEVY: Well, I mean, there have been a number of surprises. One of the nicer surprises is when I wrote "Hackers" in late 1983 I was somewhat pessimistic about the prospect of that hacker spirit. I thought that mammon would suppress it. But it's turned out to be fantastically resilient, and subsequent technological developments and adoptions once-obscure developments like the ARPANET show that, , that that spirit can grow and really spread with very impressive breadth. I feel that with the Internet and, most Web 2.0, is that it that user-generated everything is the essence of the hacker spirit. It's not in terms of writing program code but in terms of using a technology to be creative and to share in the sense that those MIT hackers did under what I call the hacker ethic. So I think that this technology becomes a terrific distribution point for that mindset which says that information should be, if not free, then as free as possible – though not in the monetary sense, but in the distribution sense. What information you get and produce is more important than who you are or where you come from, what you should be rated on is strictly your performance. And all that stuff in the hacker ethic. That whole phenomenon was an enormous surprise to me, and it was a wonderful one.

UBIQUITY: How do you think that spirit has been absorbed by, or has impacted. folks like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs?

LEVY: Well, in different ways. I think that Bill is an interesting case, because on the one hand he grew up with that, but on the other hand he's pretty much a hawk in terms of intellectual property rights. And, from the very first, when he confronted the Home Brew hackers over Altair BASIC, he called them thieves. But, I think he's smart enough, and more than smart enough, to realize how important that spirit is in just growing the pie of technology and making all that bigger. And I think that, to some degree, Microsoft has adapted to that throughout the organization. Steve Jobs, of course, and Apple, more explicitly, embraces open sourcing in some senses. Steve understands how that could be powerful in distributing music, and has been fighting the record labels in terms of that.

UBIQUITY: What about the future of the book, and printing, and reading?

LEVY: I think about that a lot. I think that, as wonderful as the form of the book is, it's ridiculous to think that we're not going to come up with some electronic device that is able to replicate 99% of the good stuff about a physical book along with all the extra virtues you could have, like electronic storage. It's going to happen. I don't know whether it's going to happen in five years or ten years or thirty years. But it's got to happen, and you're going to have something which is flexible and as readable – and pleasurable as a physical book. And they'll have all the stuff that comes with being digital – searchability, connectivity, you name it. And that's going to be a huge change, and eventually it will change the way writers work and what they write, just as the printed book made the novel possible. So I think that, in the short term, yeah, you find me still writing books and hoping that people will still buy the books. And I think they will buy books, if not necessarily mine. But in the long term all publishing has got to be electronic, and I think that's going to change a lot of things. Some of those changes will be things that we'll miss, but I think that if you take a broad view of history, everything will work out just fine. You know, it's sad in a sense that we don't

have the oral tradition, that we don't sit and tell long stories over bonfires. We've moved on to something else. Maybe it's time to return.

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