

Feral Technology

Is going backward the only way forward?

Rich Dana (Ricardo Feral)

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“Everything not saved will be lost.”

—Nintendo quit screen message

Well into the 21st century, the term Feral Technology has entered the contemporary discourse, but with some exceptionally non-feral technology companies using the moniker because—well, they think it sounds really cool. The meaning of words is irrelevant in a world in search of a catchy web address.

My early interest in feral technology was motivated by a fascination with repurposing salvaged equipment or using technology in unintended ways. How to run your truck on used fryer grease, how to create burnable methane from dog poop, how to build a geodesic dome greenhouse out of what you find in the dumpster.

I was fully immersed in the worlds of DIY, sustainability, and renewable energy, and how those ideas might free us from the strangling grip of capitalism and help us begin the process of re-wilding ourselves and the planet. However, by 2009, feral tech was quickly being domesticated.

My obsession with all things sustainable brought me to the misnamed National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) where I worked as an energy specialist. Despite the allusion to E.F. Schumaker’s *Small is Beautiful*, NCAT is funded primarily by the US Department of Agriculture, and my job consisted mostly of working with farmers who wanted to tap into Obama-era subsidies for wind, solar, and bio-energy projects.

One afternoon, I received a call from a researcher interested in how to make biodiesel from poppy seeds. He explained that he worked for DARPA, the shadowy Defense Department agency tasked with adapting emerging technologies for the military. He was looking for ways for the US Expeditionary Forces (the Marines) in Afghanistan to “reduce their dependence on fossil fuels.”

He requested more info on small-scale biodiesel production and gave me his email address which ended in @cia.gov. I was coming to the realization that even my bohemian, Whole Earth Catalog, DIY tech dreams had unintended consequences.

Speculative fiction writer, William Gibson, wrote about the role of the bohemian in his 1999 *All Tomorrow’s Parties*: “They (bohemias) were a crucial aspect of industrial civilization in the previous two centuries. They were where industrial civilization went to dream. A sort of unconscious R&D, exploring alternate societal strategies.”

I had inadvertently been doing Research and Development for The Man! I left my position at NCAT a short time later, and began publishing a newspaper, OBSOLETE!, to explore technological and cultural obsolescence.

The process of communicating through a printed medium felt right, like creating a message in a bottle and throwing it into the analog ocean, rather than the digital slipstream. An invitation not for “Likes,” but for serendipity.

I concluded the introduction to the first issue with the following:

“You are doing the best that you can. We all are. What is an under-employed hipster with an over-extended credit card to do? More rushing ahead just seems to get us where we are right now. Perhaps it’s time for a lateral move.

“Instead of sending new technology to the ‘developing world,’ let’s look at the adaptation strategies that the Third World has adopted to survive the alien technology onslaught. What can we learn? Let’s dumpster-dive our culture and see what the corporatocracy has left behind. Make something new out of the empty vacu-form plastic package that they sold you your life in.”

A lateral move is the first yogic step toward the deconstruction of capitalism’s all-consuming glooshmaker. I began to look at old technology, not as a new way forward, not as an artisanal business plan, but as a tool for first achieving cultural homeostasis, transcendence, and then, hopefully, de-industrialization.

Throwing our wooden shoes into the gears of the machine can only slow it down for a minute, and preaching green anarchy through digital media only serves to de-fang the ideas we so desperately need to embrace. Ask any feral cat, and they will tell you that our next meal is waiting in the dumpster, and it may be a bountiful feast, or a Darwinian battle for survival.

Under capitalism, technology does not reach its full potential until it is obsolete. As machines lose value as rivers of economic growth, they are cast-off, at which point they fall into the realm of tinkerers and hobbyists, then into the hands of artists and revolutionaries. There, they are used (hopefully) not to generate profit, but as tools of liberation.

Within Mandan economic theory, this is a conversion from pure exchange value (how much money is it worth) to pure use value (what human need it satisfies). As Gibson points out, the churn of commodification within capitalist society consumes all new ideas as fodder for profit. Eventually, revolution becomes fashion.

Currently, I am fully immersed in the restoration of a 1920s-era Intertype hot-lead typesetting machine. This cacophonous wonder has no occult code, no algorithms. To create words, it must be oiled and greased and fed “pigs” of lead, tin and antimony. Its design was stolen from a watchmaker’s assistant, and the lines of text produced for printing, cast in molten metal, drop from the machine like hot, shiny new bullets. To set type on it is to commune with the physical manifestation of deus ex machina. There is no Delete key.

The twilight of the industrial gives way to the always-on, high noon of digital culture, and revolution gives way to disruption. The clockwork universe of Newton surrendered to Freud’s steam-powered id.

That is now being thrown, unceremoniously, into a shallow grave by bio-hacked transhumanists with fanatical visions of digital singularity/superego. But what of the industrial-era technology that refuses to die? What of the feral ideas that cross-breed in alleys, attracting the domesticated pets that wander too close to the shadowy edge of digital suburbia?

Postscript: “Everything not saved will be lost” is a common Internet meme among techies, attributing a deeper philosophical meaning to the Quit screen at the end of early Nintendo video games. It is, however, a misquote. The original message was, “All unsaved progress will be lost.”

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