

A surrealist manifesto

21st Century Internet's Robert H. Reid profiles the entrepreneurs who wove the Web. BY MARK WILLIAMS

Architects of the Web: 1,000 Days That Built the Future of Business

By Robert H. Reid

Introduction by J. Neil Weintraut

John Wiley & Sons

370 pages, \$27.95

How many surrealists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Three. You need one to hold the giraffe, one to pile the brightly colored machine tools in the bathtub, and J. Neil Weintraut to explain that—if you look at the big picture—this is the best of all possible worlds.

At THE HERRING'S offices, Mr. Weintraut is fondly known as "Surreal J. Neil"—a sophomoric conflation of 21st Century Internet Venture Partners' cheery managing honcho with a local singer, Surreal Neil of Super Diamond. The name was suggested by Mr. Weintraut's fantastic optimism about the Net. At THE HERRING, when we need a quote defending the price/earnings ratio of an Internet "concept" stock, we call up Surreal J. Neil. Mr. Weintraut is the most fervid (and, it must be noted, the most affable) voice among those who believe that the Internet's possibilities have not been sufficiently hyped.

Come to Dada

So when *Architects of the Web* by Robert H. Reid—Mr. Weintraut's colleague at 21st Century Internet—arrived at our offices, there was a collective rubbing of editorial hands. And after reading J. Neil's 32-page introduction, our instinct seemed confirmed. Consider, for example, the following instance of syntax-fracturing prose—

merely J. Neil clearing his throat: "The surreal hyper-speed/happening/different virtual world of the virtual world... its uncanny and intrinsic nature to warp or obviate experienced-built knowledge, principles, and concepts—is unlike anything mankind has experienced at least in this century, if not in all time..." Here, among the piles of Internet-related hype and piffle shoveled THE HERRING'S way every month, would be a book-length document of unique oddness.

The assumption was that Mr. Reid, J. Neil's good right hand, had written the surrealist manifesto. Great fun would be had reviewing it.

Well guess what?

This reviewer found himself chuckling a couple of times, but it was usually at a well-turned phrase that Mr. Reid had brought off. Some of the earlier chapters are less than

zippy, revealing the strain of hard labor, but better such diligence than the echoing of technobusiness clichés—especially when Mr. Reid's motive for authorship is, one must guess, adding another notch to his curriculum vitae as a venture capitalist. But should Mr. Reid ever tire of that life, he seems to possess enough journalistic talent that he could even write for THE RED HERRING and command the princely fees it pays its freelancers.

Architects begins by pumping up Netscape's Marc Andreessen: predictable, and of course we now know better. But its second chapter covers Rob Glaser, CEO of Progressive Networks, working to make Internet audio and video viable without T1 lines, and committed to the idea that more than lip service will be required if the

disenfranchised are not to remain so in the Internet age. Next is the Java/Marimba story with Kim Polese, one that's still cool to read. Then Mark Pesce, the originator of VRML—not even an entrepreneur anymore, and the most visionary of the lot, Ariel Peler and Web advertising. Jerry Yang and Yahoo. HotWired's Andrew Anker represents Web publishing, and this reviewer (who assumes the parent magazine's readership are bank clerks in Des Moines wanting to feel down with the digital revolution) finished the HotWired chapter with slightly more respect for *Wired's* online strategy. Last is CNet's Halsey Minor, the very model of a modern major entrepreneur and the owner of the most respected brand on the Net.

Ripe for a sequel

These aren't profiles on the literary level of *The New Yorker*. If *Architects* were a movie, Joe Bob would give it three or four stars and tell you to check it out. Mr. Reid has turned in a serviceable piece of journalism that won't cheat its intended audience. Of course, because of the nature of the continuing transformations it describes, in two years' time its interest value will be mostly historical.

Or, as Surreal J. Neil phrases it in the introduction: "In the same manner that the world we live in is attributable to a major meteorite collision with the earth (which transformed our world from its previous era of the dinosaur), the Internet is a modern-day meteorite noteworthy not only because of itself, but rather because of the new world resulting from its aftermath." 🐉

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