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## Postcards from the Fringe

Guerilla Media Collective Searches For the D.I.Y. Truth

BY BRAD KING, FEBRUARY 28, 1997, SCREENS



**Paco Nathan, president of  
FringeWare, Inc.**

*photograph by Kenny Braun*

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Even fellow tech-culture scouts seeking out reality/cybereality gaps on a daily basis get stuck on the prospect of categorizing FringeWare. David Pescovitz, co-author of *Reality Check* (HardWired, 1996), a compilation of essays from *Wired*'s column of the same name and a contributing editor at the magazine *boING-boING* -- a career path similar to the one Nathan himself once trod -- describes the collective more by the characters involved than what they do. "For years, the FringeWare folks have been reporting back from temporary autonomous zones where riot nrrds, freaks, weird scientists, and other strange attractions run amok," he says. "But the best thing is that Paco and his colleagues don't take a hoity anthropological attitude and scribble notes from the sidelines. Instead, they're helping throw the party."

And what a party it is. These modern day Merry Pranksters are taking multi-media theory and applying it to the Net to create new forms of Real Time communities where netizens can make up their own rules, eke out a living, and have a little fun while they're at it. Along the way, the purveyors of this cyber-funk experiment drop jokes and metaphysical roadblocks to keep out those who might have less than a passing interest in the ride, and to keep those already riding the vibe on their toes.

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## MONDO-boING and the serendipity of the meta-organism

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FringeWare still sells its fair share of products: alien-abduction ID cards, conspiracy books, taboo religious materials like *The Satanic Bible*, as well as hard-to-find foreign language books and works by literary giants of the Beat Generation -- Burroughs, Leary, and Kerouac. But FringeWare's real mission, first and foremost, is the dispensing of information. "Part of the idea of FringeWare was to give a marketplace and venue to hard-to-find material," says Patrick Deese, owner and operator of the recently opened FringeWare bookstore, "I mean, Barnes & Noble isn't going to carry this stuff." Deese joined the troupe for real after years of minding the small pile of mail-order materials in the back of Europa books where he worked as a salesclerk, while Nathan banged away on the computer building the web page and e-mail list.

And it was back during that time, when FringeWare's first commercial space was busy gathering hard-to-find, counter-culture consumer items for mail-order, that the business as a whole -- quite serendipitously -- began attracting an eclectic mix of participants inspired by FringeWare's free-thinking maxim. In what would be the first of a series of events that can't be traced to any certain training or skill but ended up shifting the focus of the company profoundly, Nathan met Jim and Jamie Thompson at a local Electronic Frontiers Foundation (EFF) meeting. The couple are part-owners themselves of Small Works, a company which produces Internet security systems. In just a few months, as the dynamics of FringeWare began to shift and when Jon Lebkowsky -- an original co-founder --

left to pursue other endeavors in cyberspace, the Thompsons became majority stockholders in FringeWare and began work on the tech side of the business.

"For me it was an interesting group of people who were doing different things with Internet technology than I had done, and my thought going into it was to keep me on the edge," says Jim Thompson. "I thought it was a way of maintaining a newness and freshness, especially the weird tech world."

As it was, a legal development in this weird tech world would soon explode the company beyond the boundaries of the mail-order shop. The news-making arrest of Steve Jackson, whose Austin-based gaming company was shut down by the Secret Service, gave Nathan new insight into the possibilities and pitfalls of Net culture. Serving as a local correspondent for national tech publications including *WIRED*, Nathan the journalist kept readers up to date on Jackson as he sued... and won... his case against the federal government. Covering the controversial battle made Nathan a resident expert in the confusing legal aspects of this new medium, and gave him an advantage in his consulting business as well. "In 1992, having a website was like really weird," says Nathan. "I mean, doing business on the Internet, people were like, 'Is this even legal?'"

The current FringeWare team still wasn't assembled by the time the 1993 SXSW Music Conference rolled around, but the event would be responsible for bringing another key convert to the fold, as well as a print publishing aspect to the business. As a SXSW showcase organizer, Nathan was in charge of putting on a multi-media presentation involving a Brain Machine, a device developed with Japanese technology that was supposed to help people concentrate their energy in an effort to make aliens among us reveal themselves (really it just gives your head a little electric shock). Also scheduled to appear, as a more tangible part of the showcase, was Dissemination Network (DIS-NET), an industrial band from Denton, Texas who utilized giant television screens, keyboards, tons of lights, and lots of media sampling in their performance.

"They sort of put all the techno-type bands in the one venue and called it a Rave," says Monte McCarter, then band member and photographer, who would soon leave DIS-NET to become an integral part of the FringeWare staff. As a fan of *MONDO 2000*, which Nathan was already involved with, the two tech-culture heads hit it off immediately, and a few weeks later when Nathan was set to cover RoboFest for *MONDO*, McCarter offered his photography services for the article. As it happened, Nathan was getting ready to launch *FringeWare Review* and he needed somebody to help out with the art. "I think I kind of surprised him, I was the first person to apply for a job," says McCarter, whose home is aptly littered with old videotapes, keyboards, computer equipment, and various samplings of art -- all tools of the trade for a designer of a zine aimed at the new media cyberculture.

In this fashion, these explorers of the fringe have managed to stumble across each other, establishing the sensibility that has since guided the business; a larger, driving force that pushes people into certain places, creates certain circumstances. "I don't really like to talk about it," says Casey. "It's like if you define it, it might go away."

Unsaid then, the members seem to agree that the mix *and* the method are working fine. Each staffmember operates their side of the business in the way that makes them happy; group board meetings are spontaneous and accidental.

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"Any fool with a database can make a list of books," says Deese. "We're trying to write reviews, scan in the covers and put in hyperlinks. In *On the Road*, Kerouac uses a pseudonym for Neal Cassady, but you can type in Neal Cassady [on the FringeWare webpage] and that book will come up."

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And the organization continues to gain popularity and credibility in print. *FringeWare Review*, now boasting contributors such as R.U. Sirius, Erik Davis, and Erika Whiteway, who spearhead special issues on everything from feminism (issue #4) to chaos spirituality (#10), continues to bring its readers together in a "D.I.Y. love fest" where they can learn to live -- and conduct business -- in Net collectives.

So how does an alternative information peddler like FringeWare survive in the mainstream? Aside from the bookstore, which is just beginning to turn a very small profit, the organization also gets financial support from Nathan hitting the lecture circuit around the world from Austria to Canada expousing his cyberworld view. In addition, funds are amassed from the general computer consulting work that he and other members of the company contract out. But all the profits go into a big pot which is divided up among the different areas of the business. Despite FringeWare's successes, money remains a side product, the means to an end to keep the idea going.

"It would have been kind of a detriment for FringeWare, Inc. to come off big and make money," Nathan says. "We had time to really figure out what people wanted instead of us just doing what we liked. Besides, if we had made a lot of money right off the bat, it would have been like a feeding frenzy [for outside parties merely concerned with turning a profit]." That's the happy contradiction. FringeWare aims to make money, but not at the cost of compromise.

"When people come to our site, they are coming for information," Deese says. "Yeah, we want to sell them stuff, but what they are really looking for is information."

FringeWare has created a place where anything goes, where they, as the weirdest freaks of all, make it safe for alternative ideas to come together; a place to get information from the closest source possible. "[FringeWare provides] the notion of the temporary autonomous zone (TAZ) -- an arena that tries not to put too much of a spin on information," says Deese's assistant Scott Casey, who has been involved with FringeWare since back in the Europa days. "This is what [author and philosopher] Hakim Bey talks about. Immediacy. Get right up there close to it and check it out. Don't just trust what you hear about something."

So, the intrepid traveler daring enough to attempt to climb the mountain of information the FringeWare folks have assembled in their zine, throughout their bookstore, and on their web site -- while remaining able to laugh at themselves as they inevitably fumble along the electronic road -- will be serving FringeWare's great experiment to get people thinking again, even if it means hitting the edge of rationality. "There is so much that mediates between people and real information that can give you power," Casey says in one final prophetic and philosophical muse. "[FringeWare] is a medium to disseminate the most information with the least mediation."

So wherever FringeWare is accessed -- on the Net or in Real Space -- we can be sure that the new rules of chaos and information will be applied together in search for truth. Individual truth. A Do-It-Yourself kind of truth.

And I think I get it..

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*Brad King is a recent Austin émigré and freelance writer whose work has appeared in Cincinnati City Beat, and the midwestern music magazine, M00*

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