

Leary's Final Trip, the Web, Realized Multimedia Vision

Steve Ditlea | June 1, 1996

So this is how it ends, not with a QuickTime video but with a simple note on Dr. Timothy Leary's Web site:

Just after midnight, in his favorite bed among loving friends, Timothy Leary peacefully passed on. His last words were "why not?" and "yeah."

No doubt, he would have found such plain text terribly "industrial age" – an era he spent much of his life agitating against in the hope of bringing about a multimedia millennium, that consensual hallucination we now call cyberspace.

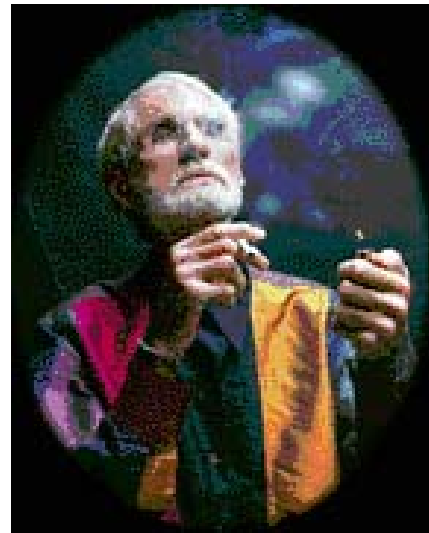
During his last months, while fighting the effects of a spreading cancer and its equally taxing treatment, Leary spent what time he could with his site's webmaster, Christopher Graves, and designer, Joey Cavella, posting his Average Daily Input of Neuro-Active Drugs, tweaking the Net to focus on "Hi-Tech Designer Dying" and raising the consciousness of today's wired generations to the certain death that faces us all.

For weeks Usenet and chat sites had buzzed with word of Leary's reported plan to commit suicide on a live feed via the Web, or in a QuickTime animation. Browsers clicked on Leary.com to find that the long-time advocate of cryonics (he had once planned to have his head frozen) had publicly broken with all cryonics preservation organizations and was considering "conventional plans such as cremation and burial."

Ever the visionary, till the end Timothy Leary was pushing the limits of technology and being frustrated by it. In 1950, long before his research into psychedelic drugs, he was one of the first clinical psychologists to use computers for personality assessments of patients (in an effort to bypass the biases and power of human assessors) only to be hampered by the lumbering batch processing mainframe computers of the day.

In the 1960's, while espousing the pharmonochemical technology known as LSD, he was among the first to popularize the term "multimedia" – though it then applied then to gels and glycerin and movies in "light shows," not to the digital technologies that would develop into the multimedia Web of today.

A friend and disciple of media philosopher Marshall MacLuhan, Leary took delight in manipulating all media, whether grabbing headlines with a simple catch phrase like "Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out"



Credit: Timothy Leary Homepage

or turning up in a pop song by the Moody Blues, whose “Legend of a Mind” repeated the refrain “Timothy Leary’s dead. No, no, no, no, no, he’s outside looking in.”



In his last weeks, Leary juggled interviews with conventional media, all the better to market his estate and its provisions for the maintenance of his Web site. Among his friends, limited-edition art works, like a hand-tinted portrait of Leary in his living room by the photographer Dean Chamberlain, were being offered for sale to endow his home page.

This reporter last saw Leary in February, when he was still ambulatory and intent on making his Web site his most public legacy.

“You’ll be seeing me on my home page,” he told the guests flocking around him at a party in the Hollywood hills for the New York photographer Cyndi Sherman. Then, slipping away to the balcony high above the lights of Los Angeles, he stood alone, peering back through the window into the kitchen and the activity inside.

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