

Modem Grrrl

Future hacker St. Jude has some advice for women who see technology as a problem: get modems.
By Rosie Cross

Jude Milhon is a hacker. St. Jude, as she is known, has been messing with code since 1967, when she taught herself Fortran and assembly code for the 1440. Once a Unix programmer, she "speaks C++ without an accent." Starting in 1973, long before CompuServe or easy access to the Net,

Milhon was a member of a "lefto-revolutionist programming commune" in Berkeley, California, that created the legendary Community Memory project, the first public online computer system. She is a charter member of the cypherpunks - a term she coined.

Rosie Cross interviewed the take-no-prisoners programmer via e-mail between Cross's home in Australia and St. Jude's in Berkeley, California.

Wired: What do you think about feminism and technology?

St. Jude: I think tech will solve all our problems, personal and scientific. Girls need modems.

Wired: Do you think women-only electronic salons that allow women to "gag" dweebs, dorks, and cyberbores are important? Or do you think the imposed "free speech" climate of the Net prevents control of some of the more abusive attacks directed at women, poofs, dykes, and people of different cultures?

St. Jude: Hanging out with nice people is nice. But I don't want to sit around in the politeness ghetto all the time. Hanging out with nasty-ass bigoted male teenagers is also good, if I can learn from them. I may pretend I'm a gay snotty male teenager myself - and why not? Particularly if I can turn somebody around with my expressed deviant opinion. (I am a gay snotty male teenager, now that I mention it.) Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words on a screen get at me only as much as I allow them to.

Wired: We accuse the patriarchy of constructing the spaces and language we use and occupy. Are American female academics ghettoizing these spaces, entrenching their class interests and setting themselves up as cops at a block party for the educated elite? Always on the beat for a bit of information, and overseeing what is said, to whom, and how it should be said?

St. Jude: Like a backhanded censorship? John Gilmore of the Electronic Frontier Foundation has said what may be the quote of the year: "The Internet treats censorship just like any other glitch: it routes around it." To use the language of the academics: The discourse is propelled by desire. Love laughs at locksmiths. So we'll talk about what we love to the people who can hear us - and if people keep on bullying us, after a while we'll find another trysting spot and leave the cops to themselves. We always have to drive the so-called infobahn defensively. Whether we're set upon by zealots or bigots or abusively correct politicos, we have to learn to defend ourselves.

Any kind of attack online calls for martial arts - aikido may be best. Use the enemy's strength against them harmlessly, but martial all your arts. So: learn to fight! Cyberspace is better than an acre of warm tapioca for a tussle. (I see no bruises here.) This is the best training ground for women; we may start 10 down in a physical fight, OK, but the keyboard is the great equalizer - better than the Glock .45. And combat on the Net is like Basic Training. The lonesome 14-year-old girl that I used to be could have managed her life a lot better if she'd been through this kind of boot camp.

Wired: Is the Internet safe for women? Is virtual rape possible? What could women do to these virtual rapists if they caught them - what would be a suitable punishment in data space?

St. Jude: Keep in mind, in cyberspace everyone can hear you scream. There was a woman crying virtual rape on LambdaMOO. It's a game, lady. You lost. You could have teleported. Or changed into an Iron Maiden (the spiky kind) and crimped off his dick. But by playing it this way, you've really lost. Because the MOO's also a social space, where you can meet people with real cultural

differences - like Klansmen - and make them respect you as a woman, as a dyke, as whatever. Toe-to-toe, you may change their prejudices forever. My gay buddy says he's battled people this way for years ... he's an online warrior for civilization, yes. Ignoring people until they go away changes nobody's behavior, and it certainly doesn't change their opinions. Cries for niceness don't make it. Toughen up! You're dealing with people here, and primates act better when you stand up to them and give them a reason to respect you. I hate this waaaah-I'm-a-poor-sensitive-weak-woman-protect-me shit. This kind of stuff generates more contempt for women. So fuck niceness!

Wired: Apparently the women's conference areas on the Internet are being taken over by men. A lot of people feel this is men trying to become more feminine, to understand the female psyche. Do you think this is true?

St. Jude: How do you know they're men? I'm no lady, darlin'. How do you know I'm not a man? How are you going to let only genuine gyno-type double-X, Barr-body bearing, real virtual women into your virtual salon? As those adventure games put it, "I see no genitals here." If they say they're women, I say they're women, and should be treated just like the rest of us - badly.

Anyway, I think it's touching that men should become transsexual moles to try to understand women this way. It may be that this is the only way the alien sexes can honestly converse - when they're bodiless, nothing at stake, behind the masks of their pseudonyms.

Online you can learn to be fearless, you can afford to be bold. I've found myself saying things on the telephone that I wouldn't say face to face. The Net subtracts even the human voice. When you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose. I can play amazing pranks, or I can do something even more outrageous: I can be honest. Say stuff so personal and real that my mind boggles to think about it now. This could be a breakthrough for humans learning about humans, not just men and women learning about each other. Sounds OK to me.

Wired: If you had a word to describe what you do when using this electronic medium, what would it be?

St. Jude: I'm a future hacker; I'm trying to get root access to the future. I want to raid its system of thought. Grrr.

Wired: If you could design a machine, what would it feel, look, and act like? How much grunt would you give it, and would you let it wear your black leather jacket?

St. Jude: Machines disappoint me. I just can't love any of these wares, hard or soft. I'm nostalgic for the future. We need ultrahigh res! Give us bandwidth or kill us! Let's see the ultraviolet polka-dot flowers that hummingbirds see, and smell 'em like the bees do. And crank up the sensorium all across the board.

Rosie Cross is a freelance radio producer, writer, video-maker, and self-proclaimed geek girl who lives in Sydney, Australia.