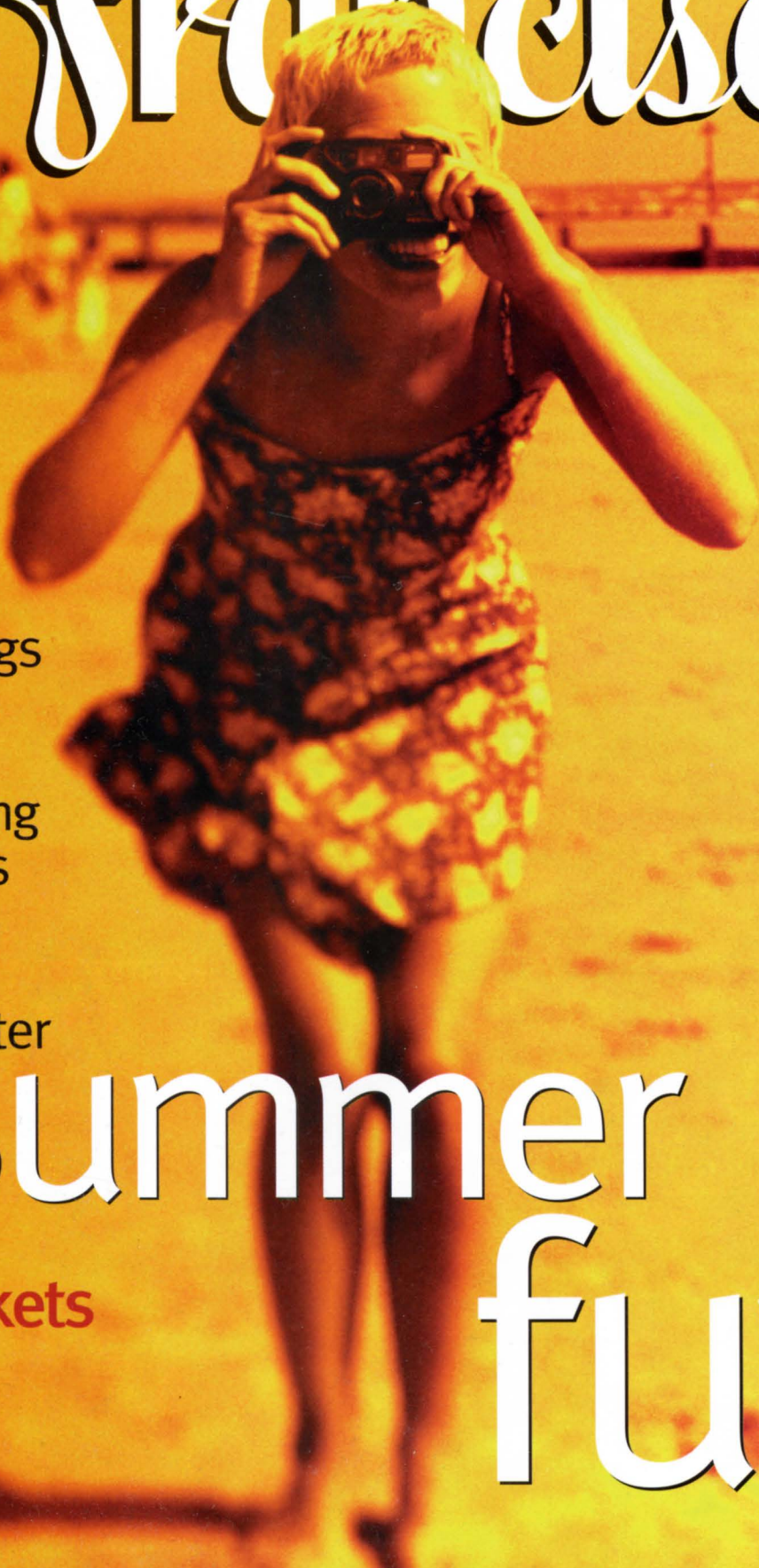


Web guru brought down by UFOs

Big money on the high seas: the Sydney-to-Hobart disaster

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ALIEN VIEWS

In Silicon Valley, Joe Firmage is thinking outside the box. Way outside.



by Erik Davis

photographs by
Kevin Irby

LATE ONE NIGHT IN OCTOBER 1997, JUST FOR THE HECK OF IT, JOE FIRMAGE decided to go Web surfing in his Santa Clara office. As the CEO of a major Silicon Valley start-up company, USWeb, Firmage didn't have a lot of leisure time. But he had studied physics as an undergrad at the University of Utah and wanted to brush up on some of the latest findings. So he did a few searches and soon came across a report by a Lockheed-Martin scientist asserting that inertia, the Newtonian force

that makes your tennis balls sail, was an electromagnetic side effect of something called the zero-point field. To him, the article suggested a new method of space propulsion—a way of conquering gravity without rockets—and Firmage, who was fascinated by all things extraterrestrial, was intrigued. Very intrigued.

But Firmage, then 26 years old, couldn't concentrate on the article with everything else pressing down on him. He had been in Silicon Valley for two years, and USWeb, which he had founded with his partner Toby Corey, was already hitting the big time. An Internet consulting firm that was launching monster companies like Harley-Davidson and Levi's into cyberspace, USWeb had snatched up scores of Web development shops on its way to becoming a billion-dollar operation. That night, frazzled from preparing USWeb for its initial public stock offering, Firmage downloaded the article to read later and went to bed.

The next morning at his home in Los Gatos, his alarm buzzed at 6 a.m. But instead of getting up to go to the gym, he rolled over and hit the snooze button. As he lay there half-slumbering, Firmage says, an image appeared over his bed, a bearded gentleman with a head of dark brown hair.

"Why have you called me here?" the being asked, clearly irritated.

"I want to travel in space," answered the astonished Firmage, who spoke without a moment's deliberation, as if in a dream.

The fellow seemed nonplussed. "Why should you be granted the opportunity?"

"Because I'm willing to die for it!"

Then, says Firmage, the man produced a sphere, an electric blue ball about the size of a cantaloupe, which entered Firmage's body, rippling through his muscles and producing unimaginable waves of uber-orgasmic ecstasy.

As you might expect, Firmage greeted the day feeling rather light on his feet. Which was a good thing, because the Asian currency crisis was unfolding just as USWeb's pre-IPO road show was set to begin. But Firmage came through with flying colors—USWeb raised \$50 million—all the while secretly nursing memories of his baffling encounter. "Anybody you'd talk to prior to this whole escapade would describe me as about the most rigorously logical, analytic type you could possibly meet," he says. "So for me this was a particularly profound experience, because it was inexplicable."

Firmage's vision did not exactly appear out of thin air. A descendant of Brigham Young, Firmage was raised a Mormon and grew up hearing tales of the otherworldly human who led the young Joseph Smith to the golden plates he translated into the Book of Mormon. Firmage abandoned his faith at age 15 and made science his new religion. As for his sense of cosmic awe, he traces his feelings to that defining moment of his generation, *Star Wars*, and to Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, the surprisingly

"Why have you called me here?" the being asked.
"I want to travel in space," answered the astonished Firmage.

popular public-television series about the history of the universe. "It was beautiful and it was science, and therefore it was real, far more real than religion to me."

Following his otherworldly encounter, Firmage enthusiastically investigated zero-point energy, or ZPE, the term some physicists use to describe the enormous store of quantum energy that fills even the smallest and most empty regions of space. Given its remarkable potential as an energy source, ZPE has become a flash point for all sorts of fringe scientists, free-energy researchers, New Age physicists, and maverick inventors.

As he researched ZPE on the Internet, Firmage heard the siren song of the extraterrestrial. Having scarfed up flying-saucer books as a teen, he began to delve into the house of mirrors that characterizes the world of UFOs, chasing whatever elusive truths snake through that labyrinth of vision and hoax, conspiracy and anomaly, science and psyche. Firmage wound up making an esoteric range of contacts, including, he claims, top military and scientific leaders. In less than a year, he became convinced that UFOs were absolutely real and that the government had been keeping that knowledge under wraps since the fabled alien spacecraft crash at Roswell in 1947.

With the same confidence that shot him to the top of the Internet heap, Firmage also came to believe that he, Joe Firmage—brainiac, triumphant CEO, digital darling—was the man to lift the dense fog of lies obscuring the truth about aliens. So he decided to write a book, or rather, he gathered 15 anonymous "experts" to write one with him, nondisclosure agreements and all. Then, late last November, with naive and foolhardy courage, Firmage went public with his beliefs, promoting and Web-publishing, at considerable expense, a 600-page tome audaciously called *The Truth* (www.the-word-is-truth.org). And once *The Truth* got out, Firmage's silicon success came tumbling down.

The day after Firmage put his name on one of the prepublication teaser pages for the book, Mark Kvamme, the CEO of CKS, a slick Silicon Valley ad agency that had merged with USWeb, received a sarcastic call from a business rival. "Boy, am I going to enjoy competing with you now that your CEO is becoming the next L. Ron Hubbard," the man gloated. Soon panicked investors started ringing up. A CEO going public with extraterrestrial conspiracies was not good for business, not good at all.

Within a week, Firmage voluntarily stepped down from his executive position—though he admits that if he hadn't gone willingly, he would have gotten the boot. Initially, he retained the title of head of strategic planning, but when his ET research hit the press, even that largely symbolic post became a thorn in the side of USWeb/CKS. Wall Street thought he was nuts, and the headlines didn't help: "From IPOs to UFOs," "The Ex-CEO Files," "The Truth is Out There (And Joe Firmage Is Paying for It)."



Nor could people keep a straight face when confronted with Firmage's comment in a Silicon Valley trade journal that he found a government document testifying that fiber optics were reverse-engineered from crashed Roswell saucers. It was all getting to be too much. In January, he simply resigned from the firm. For all the visionaries and gurus it claims to harbor, Silicon Valley still answers to the bottom line.

Few bothered to comment on the fact that Firmage made his silicon millions from the same medium that sucked him into the intellectual netherworld of UFOs. After all, the Internet lends substance to whatever topic you happen to check out, and it dissolves the formal distinction between truth and image, center and margin, rumor and news. The

Web is a kind of conspiracy machine, a mechanism that encourages speculative leaps and dreamlike links between tons of data files, connections that engender tantalizing theories and amazing claims.

But if there is a cruel irony to all this, Firmage doesn't see it. "I can assure you of one thing," he tells me. "We would not be having this conversation today if it weren't for the Internet. Without it, I would not have been able to reach a critical mass in my own knowledge."

Firmage still holds on to his USWeb office, located at the end of a long corridor, which he's forced to rent from the company. The shades are drawn against the bleached Santa Clara day, and

“We are on the cusp of the greatest possible discoveries of human history.”

his desk is a jumble of NASA videotapes, financial manuals, and copies of the *Journal of Religion and Psychical Research*. There are boxes piled on the floor, giving the room the unsettled feel of a house whose occupants are halfheartedly preparing for a move.

The man himself is slight but handsome, with sharp blue eyes and a close-cropped reddish beard, and he seems wound as tight as a spring. The moment he begins to speak, it becomes evident that Firmage is not some brain-baked abductee or straw-chewing hick mumbling about funny lights over the cornfield. He is an astonishingly bright and articulate man, who enunciates crisply and treats every conversation as if it were a debate between gentlemen. “I assert to you,” he’ll say, before his razor-sharp mind starts pursuing some curiously logical proof of alien contact.

Ufology is full of kooks and hustlers, as well as intellectuals like Firmage: geeky and deeply sincere left-brain mystics bent on nailing down truths that consistently elude the net of reason. But ufology is only the tip of the ET iceberg. Between *The X-Files* and *Contact*, aliens have achieved a pop presence not seen since the days of 1950s B movies or 1970s flying-saucer cults. Alien abductees now run neck-and-neck with satanic abuse victims in the race for most outlandish psychological pathology, and even a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist like John E. Mack is taking their claims seriously.

Many hardheaded scientists who loathe UFO buffs are also increasingly open to the notion that intelligent life may exist elsewhere in the cosmos, and the recent discovery of a planetary system surrounding Upsilon Andromedae, a nearby star similar to our sun, only bolsters the hunch that there are parallel Earths out there. “The idea that we are alone in the universe is absurd,” says Michael White, British author of the forthcoming *Life Out There* and a biographer of Stephen Hawking and Isaac Newton.

This is exciting validation for a lot of folks, especially in Silicon Valley. The massive signal-processing effort known as SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), which uses radio receivers to scan the skies for intelligent bleeps, is headquartered in the valley and receives much of its dough from computer pioneers Bill Hewlett and David Packard, Intel cofounder Gordon E. Moore, and Microsoft gazillionaire Paul Allen. (U.C. Berkeley recently announced the establishment of the university’s first chair for SETI.) Though Firmage has gone deeper into the heart of weirdness than most, his journey can hardly be considered anomalous in a region full of technological futurists, freethinking nerds, and hard-core science-fiction fans.

Still, Firmage isn’t your average UFO buff. Unlike a lot of folks, whose idea of the big picture amounts to a 72-inch TV, Firmage thinks on a truly grand scale. As he makes clear in *The Truth*, which wends its way through a morass of theology, politics, physics, and natural history before it even gets to the

Roswell goods, Firmage believes that ETs only make sense when you see them on a cosmic juncture he calls the Kairos moment.

“We are on the cusp of the grandest possible discoveries of human history,” he says. “Five thousand years ago, most of us were living in caves and huts; today our spacecraft are leaving the solar system. There is an undeniable trajectory there. Modern science seems to have its head in the sand, believing, like every generation before it, that that trajectory somehow stops at the end of the second millennium.”

Firmage’s own trajectory blasts full speed ahead. He believes we are just a hop, skip, and a jump away from learning how to tap zero-point energy from the quantum vacuum—a process that he claims would allow a spaceship to travel through the vast oceans of space without fuel or rockets. In other words, warp drive on demand.

As you might imagine, this opinion is not universally held among modern physicists. Even if you grant the possibility of exploiting zero-point energy—a notion that already sends the eyebrows of most physicists to the roof—you still have to build a mechanism to harness the energy. Could such a contraption ever be built? “Let me put it this way,” says Andrew Jaffe, Ph.D., a researcher at the Center for Particle Astrophysics at U.C. Berkeley. “There are many more mechanisms that would be impossible to build today—and they are much simpler than dealing with vacuum energy!”

Such sentiments do not deter Firmage, the sort of man who brazenly utters statements like “Modern physics is full of shit” and writes such declarations as “There is OVERWHELMING evidence that the UFO phenomenon is real.” In Firmage’s mind, the only plausible scientific argument against UFOs (the lack of physical evidence doesn’t seem to bother him) has been the impossibility of explaining their



propulsion system. But because he believes conquering gravity is possible, then so too is interstellar travel. Aliens, he says, could well be in our midst.

Firmage does not claim to have a bead on the exact origins, identity, or purpose of the extraterrestrials, but he does know one thing: They are the good guys. He says they are teachers, here to help us strap on the psychological shoes that we'll need for our birth as galactic citizens. He also believes that the founding myths of world religions were created by these teachers in order to seed human culture with a heightened sense of ethics that we'll need for our ultimate graduation into space.

By plugging spirituality into a galactic framework, Firmage hopes to keep the ethical and mystical core of religion alive in a world ruled by naturalism. It is his own fantastic attempt to heal the rift between science and religion, a rift that he believes must be sutured if we are to avert the environmental catastrophes that loom all about us. Indeed, the most moving and convincing passages of *The Truth* bristle with Firmage's informed passion for the physical world and his perfectly reasonable pessimism about the present course of things. As Firmage puts it, "Y2K is a gnat compared to the seriousness of the damage we are inflicting on the biosphere."

Firmage's ultimate faith is not that the aliens will save us but that the stone-cold truth about their existence will trigger a massive transformation of human culture. "It will indelibly mark in the consciousness of an entire species that the cosmos is coherent," he says, "that the majestic and sweeping history of human art and science, of war and peace, had a point, and the point was to build sufficient coherence that a birth was possible, the birth of a species into space. If I am right, then all the individual choices throughout human history were part of a spiritual process of learning."

For Firmage, the Net is a harbinger of this spiritual transformation. "It is no accident that society develops an Internet before the types of things that I am talking about could ever become realized," he says. "From my perspective, the Internet is very literally the mind of humanity."

Firmage's view of the Internet, and his zero-point energy hypothesis, are thus elements of technological apocalypse, if we remember that apocalypse originally did not mean fire and brimstone but revelation. "People will instantly and viscerally understand that there is a far grander scheme, that they are part of a *Star Wars*-like script," he says. "And when that happens, you will see the beautiful process of self-construction of society that you know can happen with intelligent organisms."

Firmage is definitely out on a limb with his belief in the transformative powers of aliens. But his environmental convictions are not so farfetched. If flying-saucer sightings in the late 1940s and 1950s were manifestations of nuclear anxiety, our current

crop may be tied to the more pervasive if ill-defined sense that we are making mincemeat of our lonely orb. In his forthcoming book *Passport to the Cosmos*, Harvard's Mack writes that one of the central themes of the alien encounters he studies is the conviction that Gaia is on the brink. Mack has worked with over 200 purported abductees, whose experiences tend to be far more freaky than Firmage's bedside chat, and he is convinced that we cannot explain the phenomenon within our conventional categories of reality. "There is some kind of intelligence that we are connecting with," Mack tells me from his Cambridge home. "It's not simply the imagination of people."

This intelligence, he says, seems particularly obsessed with the ecological crisis, as if it were a cosmic feedback loop that kicks in as the world decays, breaking through our scientific materialism in the only way it knows how: waking dreams, persistent myth, and supernatural anomaly. ETs are the new elemental heralds, the elves and leprechauns of a globalized and dying forest. And while encounters with these critters are often traumatic, Mack insists they can be transformative as well. "This experience shatters people's constricted worldviews, which can then connect them to a larger reality. It opens their pores to the divine, to home, to source, to what we once called God."

Firmage has certainly had his pores pried open and is willing to weather the slings and arrows of outraged commentators because he thinks he'll get a ringside seat at the glorious apocalypse ahead. But for the moment, the truth has yet to materialize outside his Web site, and so Firmage carries on. He is hunting down offices for his International Space Sciences Organization, which will quietly fund research efforts and his own proselytizing. A glossy, full-color print version of *The Truth* is in the works, and he's also finishing up an hour-long film that he plans to take on a 20-city speaking tour, a spectacular *History of the World According to Joe*, brought to life by the Bay Area's most expensive computer graphics artists. Firmage has also become something of a star in the UFO community, a martyr for the cause who has used his newfound celebrity to chat up millions of people on radio shows and Web sites.

For all his messianic fervor, however, Firmage is too smart to completely ignore the possibility that he's backed the wrong horse. "Whether I am right or wrong, I think that this will serve a valuable function for society," he says. "If I am wrong, it will be the most clear case yet with which to tear down the fiction of this whole domain. If it is untrue and has infected someone as promising as me, then it should be taken down." So far, despite Firmage's efforts, the self-published *Truth* has been virtually ignored by policymakers. He admits that if nothing happens he will be extremely disappointed. "I genuinely feel like I've leaped off the cliff," he says. "I hope there's a parachute when I pull the rip cord." ❧