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Timothy Leary has mitigated from flippy trips to floppy discs.

The former high priest of '60s drug culture once advocated that folks "tune in, turn on and drop out."

Unplug yourself.

Leary landed in Chicago over the weekend to bring his "high tech revolution" to the Vic Theatre, where he conducted a public demonstration on Virtual Reality (VR).

These days, Leary is plugged into computers.

The Moody Blues once sang that "Timothy Leary Is Dead." Not true. Timothy Leary is living in disc drive.

"Virtual Reality is an obnoxious oxymoron, like artificial intelligence," Leary said in an interview a couple of days before his lecture. "It is designed by people who develop expensive equipment: the Air Force, NASA, large corporations. Their computers actually generate environments that are sensitive to your changes. That's wonderful for flight simulation or if you want to fill an ice cube tray on Mars. It's also good for arcades and entertaining people.

"But for practical use in education and communication, Virtual Reality is a scientific hoax and a consumer scam. The chances of any individual getting any of these gadgets are none."

And that's where Leary drifts in. The former Harvard professor/Merry Prankster is helping design computer software that he calls "electronic hallucinogens for the '90s." The reality of bringing Leary's Virtual Reality to the masses comes in the development of a compact disc that can be attached to video players and computers. Although the Chicago area is not normally associated with the Silicon Valley or MIT, two local firms are making strides in pioneering the compact disc. They are ICOM Simulations in Wheeling and Reactor Inc. in Chicago.

Reactor Inc. designed the video game "Virtual Valerie," which allows a player to wander about a graphically simulated woman's apartment.

The Wall Street Journal called this stuff "electronic LSD."

Leary turned 70 earlier this year. His trademark long hair has been sheared in favor of a more conservative professor's cut. Actually, after you look at him a long time, Leary begins to resemble Ray Walston in "My Favorite Martian."

Leary is the first to admit that more people attend his lectures to hear his spaced-out stories than to learn about Virtual Reality. He said one-third of his audience comes to re-celebrate the '60s, and another third is a younger group who learned of his legend through books and the Moody Blues mantra ("... Timothy Leary is dead; no he is outside looking in ..."). Finally, the last third are genuine chipheads.

"That used to bother me," Leary said. "I used to rush right in and start, but I realized that was unfair."

Now I try to give an introduction on who I am and what I've been doing."

Leary says he no longer does LSD or PCP and has no interest in cocaine or heroin. "I do use psychedelic plants and vegetables," he said. He won't elaborate much beyond that.

Why not?

"Because it's my fucking business," Leary answered as his furry white eyebrows mushroomed. "Why do you masturbate or why do I masturbate? I don't know, but it's not your business. Any American can do what they want with their body."

"I still use any drug I want. But I'm not advocating any one else to do so. I'm pro-choice on drugs for adults as I am pro-choice for women managing their own systems."

Leary currently lives in Beverly Hills with his fourth wife. (His first wife committed suicide, his two other marriages ended in divorce.) Leary's Southern California celebrity status and his jump into cold technology have not numbed his passion for social causes.

"The war on drugs is the most insidious and evil political situation that has happened in America since the Salem witchcraft," he said. "The demonization, the zero tolerance and the blank license to suspend all civil liberties is impossible to comprehend. No knock on the door. Turn in your parents and turn in your kids. It's awesome how skillfully it's been done, to turn this country into people who are lining up to pee in a bottle. But I don't emphasize drugs any more. I've been more involved in taking the power of these computers away from the experts and the nerds."

You get the feeling this mad dog just may succeed. These days his byte is stronger than his bark.

Timothy Leary finally and really did die in his Beverly Hills, Ca. home on May 31, 1996.

Video cameras recorded his death from complications of prostate cancer. According to a New York Times obit, Carol Rosin, a friend who was at Mr.

Leary's bedside, said his last words were: "Why not? Why not? Why not?"