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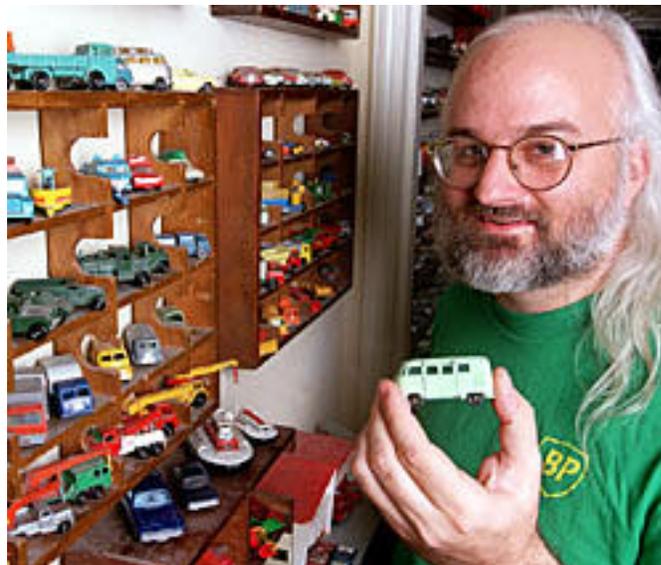


In the Land of the Weird, Standing Out Takes a Little Work

By GARY ANDREW POOLE

Dean Dierschow caressed his prized green and yellow British Petroleum marble.

It is the type of scene that plays out every day and night in Silicon Valley, Silicon Prairie, Silicon Beach, Silicon Alley, Silicon Forest and Silicon Glen. The Silicon rule: the weirder the hobby, the more interesting the person.



Dan Krauss for The New York Times

WAY COOL - Dean Dierschow at home with some of his BP memorabilia.

Dierschow, 39, knows of only two other people in the world who collect British Petroleum memorabilia. He has two BP marbles, three models of gas stations, numerous model cars

and trucks, three decks of cards, a ruler, a key chain, a flag, a tie clip, a soccer ball, a credit card, a mug, a tape measure and the pièce de résistance, a commemorative plate from the Alaskan pipeline.

"Pretty cool, isn't it?" said Dierschow, a game engineer at Segasoft Networks who says he has absolutely no connection to British Petroleum except that "as a kid, my favorite color was green."

Traditional business environments stress conformity and belonging to the local country club. Not so in geekdom, where status symbols have been reversed. Giving people a "core dump" on an esoteric topic like building a theremin (an obscure electronic instrument) from scratch is the Silicon Valley equivalent of playing 18 holes. Here it is perfectly acceptable, if not encouraged, to out-strange the person in the next cubicle.

But finding originality in nerd circles takes a heck of a lot of work. Dressing up like Spock at your weekly Trekkie club meeting just won't cut it. That is why you will see Alexia Massalin, an engineer at Micro Unity widely heralded as a technical genius, giving and receiving piggyback rides and collecting stuffed koala bears. Jonathan Hirshon walks to his public-relations job in Santa Clara's Tech Center twirling an ebony and silver 19th-century cane, one of his collection of seven walking sticks. "I rather enjoy being known as the eccentric guy with the cool canes," he said. Chris DiBona, a marketing director for VA Research, includes in-depth descriptions of terrorist groups on his Web page. "People say: 'Hey! You're that guy who's interested in terrorism.' It's a nice conversation breaker." Ben Thornton, a programmer living in the Silicon Hills of Austin, Tex., brags about being a nude ham radio operator.

Paul Gore, an assistant professor of psychology at Southern Illinois University, said techies had a predilection for prepubescent hobbies. "Programmers have very strong artistic tendencies," said Dr. Gore, who is a vocational psychologist. "Studies show that an openness to new experience correlates with overall intelligence. Some people might say these hobbies are 'juvenile,' but I see them as unconventional and very original." Thus, in Silicon Valley, midnight squirt-gun wars are not uncommon.

A soft-spoken man who says he washes his clothes "quarterly."

But do not expect to fit in just because you take unicycle lessons, said Lynn Taylor, a vice president at the recruiting firm Robert Half International. "Being gimmicky won't help you get a job," she said. But it

doesn't necessarily hurt.

Giving piggyback rides, for example, might not get you a job on Wall Street, but high-tech's mores are a bit different. "Piggyback riding reflects that the person is approachable," Ms. Taylor said. Finding techies with social skills is a particular challenge, she added.

"People tend to remember my name when they need someone in my field," said Ms. Massalin, the piggybacker and koala lover. She believes that exceptional technical people usually favor social experimentation and nonconformity. "I happen to know good-working but not otherwise exceptionally creative technical folks, and they seem not to have unusual hobbies," said Ms. Massalin, who is known to begin and end her conversations with the word "qua," which she says is the sound a koala makes.

Anyone can be a Denver Broncos fan or even have knowledge of Oriental rugs, but it is the rare adult bird who still collects Hot Wheels. Dierschow, the British Petroleum collector, is also a proud member of the Bay Area Matchbox Collectors Association.

Dierschow, a soft-spoken man who says he washes his clothes "quarterly," still has his first toy car: a 1962 Volkswagen Caravette, a camper in mint green. His parents gave it to him when he was 7 years old. He has an MGTD Sports Car, a 1929 4.5-liter Bentley and an ERF 686 Ever Ready Platform truck -- more than a thousand toy vehicles in all. While showing off his cars, Dierschow turns into a nerd version of Vanna White, holding them up proudly and chatting about his best piece: a 1953 Elizabeth II coronation coach. Dierschow calls the beat-up coach his Holy Grail. When he decided to become a collector of Matchbox toys in his late 20's, Dierschow found the coach.

"I decided to go ahead and spend \$165 for a lousy piece of metal because when I was a kid, that's what I wanted the most," he said, showing off the coach, tarnished and chipped and pulled by eight horses.



Dan Krauss for The New York Times

SAY `QUA' - Alexia Massalin at home with some of her 40 stuffed koala bears.

Upstairs in his house,

Dierschow has a collection of more than 1,000 cartridge video games. In another room, he also has what looks to the untrained eye like a pile of junk. Look closely, however, and you realize that it is a pile of old computers, peripherals, game consoles, joysticks and various cords. He has a dream: to stack the 30 or so consoles and have them running, as a sort of altar to video games.

"I didn't know you were collecting," said Michael Butler, a contract programmer and self-proclaimed "computer bum" who was at Dierschow's house. . "I got rid of some fairly obscure peripheral devices, like, you remember the Fairchild Channel F?"

"Yeah, I've got one," Dierschow said.

"Do you have the little control knobs?"

"I've got a couple."

"They tended to break. I had a few spares that I threw away."

"Oh, wow."

"We've never had this conversation, but one of the things that I've always wanted to do was take my KIM-1 and load it up with Microchess and leave it running! If you have a place for it here, I would be honored."

"Cool."

But it is downstairs, at his temple to BP, where Dierschow expressed the most glee. "I get some of the strangest looks when people look at this collection and say, 'It's, er, BP?' " He spends about 40 minutes a day at the Ebay online auction service searching for BP merchandise. "I'd love to have BP come over and take a look at my collection and photograph it or something," said Dierschow. He occasionally takes BP items to show off at work.

"Maybe it's a little bit weird, but I used to have a boss who was into windsurfing," he said. "That is weird."

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