

An Interview That May Or May Not Interest You

By Curtis Curtington

We are fortunate that for nearly four years, Excel author and guru John Walkenbach has not only kept busy at his regular writing gig, but also indulged in his real calling as ringmaster of the rollicking online circus known as the **J-Walk Blog**.



In those years, Walkenbach has consistently produced a highly entertaining and varied blend of elements, all filtered through his unique and comic perspective. His readers and commenters, including several detractors, always acknowledge the addictive nature of the **JWB**, even when taking him to task for whatever post they may consider his latest outrage. This, coupled with Walkenbach's enthusiastic and wide-ranging curiosity, results in a blog that is perhaps closer to the bar on the TV series *Cheers* than any other site on the web. Unlike that fictional bar, however, the **JWB**'s clientele comes from all over the planet and Walkenbach's blog is a real place. Kind of.

On a recent Friday morning, Walkenbach took some time for a phone interview. I warned the blogger to expect some hard-hitting questions, even one or two that might be somewhat emotional for him.

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JW – Man, I'm dragging. I stayed up too late last night with 12-stringer, drinking and playing guitars.

C – *You want to postpone this and try again tomorrow?*

JW – I'll be fine. Go ahead.

C – *This blog seems like it would take a vast amount of time. Describe your process.*

JW - I do a lot of web surfing for source material, but I would be doing that anyway. I wake up, fire up my Bloglines, check the RSS feeds and there are probably a dozen pretty fresh links from the previous day that I draw on. There's so much amazingly entertaining stuff out there. I've gotten very efficient at picking that out and writing it up. It takes about a minute to post by copying and pasting with the little FrontPage VBA program I put together.

I've also got a bookmark folder called "Possible Blog Links" with usually two hundred items in it. If I run out of topics I go through that. A lot of those items go

away though; the link is broken or it's been covered by every other blog in the world. So I post quite a few things the moment I find them. I've got it down to a science.

C – *See, that's important, because somebody with no technical background would create a less interesting piece.*

JW – That's a good point. Most blogs are done by non-technical people. That's why they all look the same, just pure text with very little formatting and usually no images. They all use the same standard templates.

C – *And they all die.*

JW (laughs) - And they all die. Most of the top bloggers are technical people no matter what their subject matter is. They know what they're doing, they can go in and change their templates and do little fancy things that are not part of the blog software packages.

But with a typical blog, you enter copy in a text box and if you want to make something bold you have to put in the HTML tags to do it. I've got all that *wissy-wiggid* in FrontPage so I can just click on a button, make things bold, indent stuff, make bullet points, number, and drag photos in there. If I had to sit there and pound out all this HTML stuff by hand, I wouldn't have a blog. It's just too tedious. My set-up removes the tedium; it's like writing something in Word, then pressing a button and it's published.

C - *And this is a system you created? Is it something that someone else can tap into?*

JW - I've actually published how I did it, but I don't think anybody has ever taken those instructions and put it together. It would be nice if you could package it all into one little thing, but you can't. It's kind of complex.

C - *How has the JWB changed since you began in October, 2002?*

JW - Back then I didn't have comments so I was basically talking to myself. I got the occasional e-mail, but otherwise very little feedback. Now the minute I post something I get comments on it. It's good feedback and very entertaining for me.

It's also increased my readership. Back in the old days I thought I was doing pretty well if I got 150 people to read the thing every day. Now it's up to as many as 15,000.

C - *Does that amaze you?*

JW - It does. Two years ago, I'd compare my stats to *Boing Boing's* 15,000 visitors a day and think that was unreachable. Of course, now he's probably getting close to a million a day.

C - *Other than enabling comments, what do you attribute that increase to?*

JW - I don't know... longevity? Most people get here by way of a Google search; they're just looking for information, not this blog. Maybe five percent of those will take the time to look around and maybe half of *them* might bookmark it and come back. That's where the increase comes from, as well as from lots of incoming links.

For instance, remember that stupid little blond joke? It's been responsible for about 5,000 hits a day for the past couple of weeks. It became a circular thing: somebody would click on my post, then click on about twelve more and it would finally come back here. I don't know who put the circular part into it, but that really made it good. Everybody who posts that silly little junk has their hits go up incredibly. It's just some accidental meme that started out in somebody's cheesy little Live Journal. It would be interesting to trace how all those links relate to one another.

C - *Do you consider yourself an entertainer?*

JW - I do. When the term "blogosphere" shows up in news articles they're talking about political blogs that actually have an impact on things, on decisions. The whole "bloggers as journalists" thing doesn't even remotely apply to me. People don't go to my blog for useful information although there is often some of that there. It's a break from work. You fire it up, see what's new, start commenting, and suddenly an hour has gone by and corporate productivity has gone down the tubes.

C - *So it's a plot on your part to bring down capitalist society.*

JW - Yep.

C - *When you first enabled comments you kept things light; for one thing, you wouldn't allow political arguments. Now you almost encourage them. What changed?*

JW - It wasn't a conscious decision. I just came to realize it doesn't matter if things get heated -- especially because it often gets very amusing.

C - *Does it signal any kind of change in your political point of view?*

JW - Maybe it does. When I started this I was apolitical -- I just had zero interest in politics. Then events slowly started to interest me and the more I paid attention

the more interesting it got. Now I read political stuff every day. I even read the White House press briefing transcripts! The blog has changed me; it's made me interested in politics.

C - *Has it caused you to reach any different conclusions?*

JW - No. I've always known the whole system is crooked. Now I'm just paying more attention to how and why it is.

C - *If it wasn't this President, but Kerry or Mrs. Clinton, would you feel the same?*

JW - The same kinds of things would be going on. I don't think it's possible to elect a President who isn't crooked any more. Whatever qualities it takes to get there are bad and that's what we end up with.

C - *This change also seems mirrored in your willingness to take on religion. Obviously, the Sam Harris book influenced that.*

JW - The book solidified my thinking on religion. It's so well written and laid out. I'd always been cautious with joking about religion. But after reading Harris I asked myself, "What's so sacred about religion that you can't make fun of it?" You can make fun of every other thing in the world and yet you're supposed to respect religion. That makes no sense. So in maybe a not-so-subtle way I've been trying to demonstrate that you *can* make fun of religion. If certain beliefs seem absurd, point that out, laugh at it.

C - *Do you consider yourself an atheist?*

JW - I'm probably an *apatheticist*. Basically, I don't care if there is a God or not. It makes absolutely no difference in my life.

C - *Do you feel competitive towards other blogs?*

JW - Not really. I just like to see the numbers rise steadily. That's enough motivation for me to keep it going.

C - *But you don't see something and think, "Oh, I've got to post this before anybody else does?"*

JW - Sometimes I'll say, "Wow, this is brand new, I better get this up before *Boing Boing* or *Metafilter* posts it." But it's just for fun. I'm not trying to scoop them or anything.

C - *So there's (squeaky tiny voice) a leetle, leetle, tiny bit of competition?*

JW (laughs, then in a squeaky tiny voice) - Tiny, tiny competition.

C - *Do you think blogs are here to stay or that they're just another form of citizen's band radio that will fade?*

JW - Blogs will be around a long time because it's an easy way to get stuff online. In the past people would set up static personal websites, post stuff and then try to organize it in some way. Like my Spreadsheet site: it's a traditional website with organized links to pages. New content is hard to fit into something like that.

The beauty of blogs is that they create their own organizational structure. You can just start posting things and they get assigned to categories. Whoever came up with this, it was a great idea. Something will eventually replace blogs; I have no idea what that might be, but it will probably have the word "social" or "community" in it.

C - *You've occasionally joked about turning the blog over to someone. Does it sometimes become too much of a responsibility?*

JW - No, it's not a responsibility at all. It's something I'd do anyway - hang around and go to web sites. I can put as much or as little time into it as I want. This morning I woke up feeling like crap and I almost posted a "Closed for the Day Due to Hangover" sign there. Then I just threw in a few links, only took about fifteen minutes and I said, "okay this is enough for a while." Other days I'll go gung ho and make 30 posts in a day. It's also a diary for me. For example, I found out when **Toad's** birthday was by looking it up on the archives.

C - *You've hinted at other writing ambitions like writing a novel. Is that something on your agenda?*

I would definitely like to do that. I've never actually created a file with a novel outline or anything. But this next round of Excel books might be the last for me. There are enough of them right now where to produce a nice steady income that'll keep up for awhile afterwards. So writing a novel would be fun. I think I could do it. I have no intentions of it ever getting published, but it would be something I'd do for a personal accomplishment. I should have been doing it over the last year...

C - *Ah, the story of writing... "what I **should** have been doing when I **wasn't** doing it!"*

JW (laughs, then) – So, when are you going to start asking the questions that will make me cry?

C – *Okay. Remember you opened that door because this will probably be somewhat upsetting. (pauses) What's the real story with Jim Kloss's eyebrows?*

JW (hesitates, caught off guard) - Eyebrows? I haven't noticed his eyebrows before.

C - *Oh, come on! Don't play cute with me.*

JW (defensive) - I haven't!

C - *You don't notice them because they're not there.*

JW (plays dumb) Oh, he doesn't have eyebrows? Seriously, I've never noticed that. Let me see, I've got a whole bunch of pictures of him. Wait a sec...

*There's a long moment while J-Walk looks up photos of **Whole Wheat Radio's** resident ranter, Jim Kloss, on his computer. Then finally:*

JW - Oh, man! (his voice catches) I'm not seeing... (pauses, clears his throat)

C - *Are you crying, J-Walk?*

JW - Me? No, unh-unh, no way, not at all.

C - *Really? Because I thought I heard a little blubbering just there...*

JW (with a slight quaver) - No. I'm not crying... (pauses) But I am very unhappy...

C - *Sure, sure... I understand. I know those images can be disturbing.... Let's move on to another question.*

JW (interrupts) - Look, I've got to get going.

C - *Oh.... Sure, okay. Bye?*

Walkenbach doesn't respond. In the moment before J-Walk hangs up, I hear the loud "honk" of him blowing his nose.