



Rako Studios » Media » Tech » System-engineering » Harleys and open systems

## Harleys and open systems

**A baroque and antiquated design is compensated by the open system, and the people that surround it.**



I have a hard time expressing the dynamics of Harley ownership to non-motorcycling types. An interesting observation I've made is the parallel between computers and motorcycles.

### **A computer analogy**

The people who complain about Harley technology are perfectly parallel to the people who complain about the x86 PC hegemony that exists in the computer world.

Yes, the apple has a better addressing model but segmented architecture isn't that painful and the irony is that code optimized for segments actually runs very well in a modern

micro since the segments are brought completely into the cache memory where they can run the fastest.

Yes, the video system of an Amiga is superior to the VGA standard and has only recently has the PC world gotten with the program regarding video.

These are what I call geek-based observations. This is because they ignore the greater whole, the system and the society. If geeks would yank their head out of the databook bus specifications they would see that these appliances called PC's are evaluated by **the convenience they provide to the customer,**

1. Harleys and open systems
  1. A computer analogy
  2. The social aspect
  3. The appeal and abomination
  4. To keep a Harley on the road
  5. Integrity
  6. A closed system now
  7. Why I love Harleys

not the convenience they provide to the manufacturer or programmer.

That I can get a 1982 copy of Visicalc and run it in a DOS box on my Windows NT4.0 workstation is pretty impressive. It will even print and save files. I have several computers at my consulting business. Even the old '386 is running windows 95 and they are all on a simple peer to peer network provided by those wonderful people at Microsoft.

Of course everybody knows that the aftermarket is what makes the PC architecture so robust. IBM keeps trying to make proprietary standards, remember the microchannel and OS2? IBM is now totally marginalized after having missed out on billions of dollars of revenue. I expect the same will happen to Harley in the next 50 years.



### The social aspect

As to the social aspects, if I have a problem with my machines, either computer or Harley, I can call up five or ten close friends and get

advice and spare parts. Try that with an Amiga or an Apralia. **Harleys are an open system.**

Another way to characterize the social aspects of Harley ownership is to examine the angle of ownership that seems to drive 99% of human behavior that I observe: Status. Now, I'm not saying that it's right, as an engineer I would hope people would be a little more nuts and bolts in their product decisions but all I see in our society is people buying 40 thousand dollar 4 by 4's that will never see snow or dirt.

I still laugh when some Ricky racer zooms past me on the road. It's best when I'm giving a ride to some pert attractive twenty-something who wouldn't hang around the same room with me except I've got a Harley (5 of 'em actually). As the Ricky racer drops a gear or two and speeds off I just shake my head and laugh. I say to myself: "wow wheelstands in 3rd gear, too bad you lost the race the minute you walked into the wrong dealership." I guess each to his own. The racer wants road rash and tickets as his trophy. I prefer the comely young women.

### The appeal and abomination

After 25 years of riding Harleys I can understand the appeal, and it's a social appeal and not a mechanical one. Lee Parks was rather kind in his editorial about the design and technical merits of Harleys. I will be a little more direct.

Harley's are an engineering abomination. This is true even after you give them certain prerogatives such as air-cooled and 45-degree twin. The design ranges from goofy such as putting the primary drive in front of the alternator and the rear drive behind the clutch to abysmal.

Let the entire iron Sportster line stand as testimony to abysmal design. Some of the designs were OK for the period they were introduced in, and some were crap right from the start. Harley never used to have the money to design things right and when it was a known problem they didn't have the money to change them.

This gave use iron cylinder heads in 1957 and generators on 1984 motorcycles. The interesting thing is this is what also created the open system. The 57 Sportster had iron heads and a generator just like the 1984 bike. There's plenty of infrastructure and talent behind them. A 57 motor will still fit a 84 frame. And there's always someone at any bar I've been in that will swap stories about their iron Sportster and the human suffering it engendered.

### **To keep a Harley on the road**

To keep a Harley on the road requires one or a combination of three things:

1. You have to be rich. Not just to purchase the behemoth, to keep it on the road. A 400 dollar 10k-maintenance? Just wait until the primary belt breaks.
2. You have to be a genius. Putting together a front end or adjusting a clutch or trouble shooting these horrid pieces of fecal matter requires an intellect of exceptional ratiocination.
3. You have to be popular (or social). Then you can call up types 1 and 2 and hopefully keep your bike on the road.

Of course in this analog world we live in the fact of the matter is that every Harley rider is a combination of the above three archetypes. All the moaning of late about the influx of Rubbies and Yuppies are simply the people who are primarily type 2 and 3 complaining about the influx of type 1 people coming into the life.

### **Integrity**

The next observation about Harleys I'll steal from an Ayn Rand novel. To paraphrase Howard Roark: "Bikes can have integrity just like people and just as rarely. A Harley looks dangerous, it sounds dangerous and it feels dangerous. That's the implicit honesty, because in fact, a Harley is dangerous."

If a Harley doesn't kill you it will get you in trouble with you're wife or your boss. I admire that honesty and so do a lot of other people. Every time I swing my leg over one of my Harleys I get a gentle reminder :

"This might be the last time." That's why Harleys are so robust that they can transport people in highly altered states and still have a chance at arriving at the intended destination, which may have been no destination at all. I'm sure a CBR900RR is fun to drive when your loaded. but why play with nitroglycerin when tradition shows gunpowder is just as fun and far more stable?

### **A closed system now**

If I ever get around to it I plan on writing a book titled "Harley Davidson--Legacy of Betrayal". It will detail how Harley has let down and forgotten it's customers, its employees and it's dealers over the past 100 years. The interesting thing is that it didn't matter. Indian was even worse.

What Harley lacked the user provided. Money, brains and society. Now that the infrastructures in place there is no reason to change. When Harley designed a motor that's pretty decent because they got Porsche to show them a few fundamentals I'm truly elated. Elated as a gearhead.

But when you learn that only 18 parts are carryover and that the entire bottom end, crank and case are replaced a unit for service you realize the legacy of betrayal goes on unabated.

Other than still not getting the breathing or oiling right and the addition of low reliability cam chains, the new motor is really spiffy. So was the microchannel. And OS2. When the design goal is to screw the aftermarket and the independent shop the product design suffers.

Harley and Porsche engineers are geeks too. They just don't get it. If they spent a few years in any independent Harley shop they would see the blood of 5 generations on their hands. The yuppies and rubbies might not care. They only apply money to solve their problems.

### **Why I love Harleys**

I guess the simplest way to sum up why I love Harleys (while hating Harley Davidson) is to observe that it was Harleys that brought me to Duncan and Dale and Ralph and Roger and Renee and Preacher and Charlie and a thousand other people who have enriched my life immeasurably.

Too bad the Motor company doesn't want to go along. My buddy Sammy has a bootleg Harley shirt. The Lawyers in Milwaukee® would be livid. It has the orange bar and shield but instead of Harley Davidson the shield reads "Greatful Davidson" Under the shield is a script rocker that reads: "At least I'm enjoying the ride." Too bad the boys and girls in Milwaukee aren't.