

“Waiter, give me a gigabyte skinny latte with a couple of chocolate-RAM-chip biscotti. Actually, it’s a bit late, make that latte 2400... ah, what the hell, make it 28.8, I don’t have to go to work tomorrow. Oh, and I’m feeling gregarious tonight, 15 minutes of wire time for the little lady in the corner. Tell her it’s from “Surfer Boy”. Thanks, babe...stay wired!”

There is probably, by now, an Internet cafe in your city. That’s right, the flavor-of-the-month in entrepreneurial chic is popping up like whack-a-moles in every city with a basic telephone system. It seems the wireheaded, unsexy assembly of nodes and domains we call the Internet has suddenly become the scene everyone wants to make. The “Information Superhighway” now has rest stops.

In case you haven’t yet run out and plunked down twenty bucks an hour for a little screen time, an Internet cafe is a normal, unremarkable coffee bar complete with self-conscious, industrial-looking decor and computers on the tables. The computers come fully loaded with the latest gee-whiz software, games, and libraries of bookmarks for you to visit. You can just idly “surf the net” while blowing on your mochaccino, chat with cafe dwellers anywhere in the world or even rap with those in the same cafe.

Leaving aside my other rant, tentatively titled “Even Though I Love Coffee, the Last Thing We Need Is Another Flippin’ Coffee Bar”, I am puzzled by the appeal of these cafes. Much like “Cop Rock”, it doesn’t sound like a good combination in the first place and once you experience it, it just doesn’t work. Now, I will grant that I’m not as with it as I once was and I just hate to be cynical (right!), but haven’t we been down this road to hipsville before? Doesn’t this smell a bit familiar? I’ve got it! It smells like Roller Boogie Rinks and Laser Tag. You know, ideas that every two-bit entrepreneur pounced on like a secretary in a porn flick because this trend was for real, here to stay, the “next big thing”. But of course, like its countless predecessors (shall I mention roller skating waitresses and 3-D movies to those of the older generation?), interest will eventually flag and these places will be emptier than Madison Square Garden during the NBA Finals.

Or will they? This exhumes the ever-present question: is the Internet really different? In this case is it just another fad, or is it something genuinely significant enough to bear the weight of its own hype? What does the Internet embody that makes it ripe for the coffeehouse culture?

Once Gertrude Stein and company founded the Lost Generation in the 1930’s amidst pungent grinds and thick smoke, the coffeehouse became inextricably linked to the modern literati. The Beatniks then rediscovered the coffeehouse in the late fifties and dragged it back into the spotlight, making java joints more than just gathering places for intellectuals,

but temples of free expression—performance houses for the unpublished, unshown, unrecorded, and uninspired. While some notable figures like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg achieved sufficient escape velocity to move beyond the smoky showcases, most of those who graced their stages were simply there to be heard and to sound their barbaric yawp. The coffeehouse stage, thus, became a talismanic symbol of totally free, inclusive, unmediated expression, a freewheeling, shameless, black bereted and turtlenecked Wild West of intellectual freedom.

Since coffeehouses are no longer home to this cerebral rodeo (although many new McCoffee shops aim to simulate a sanitized version of that atmosphere) its spiritual descendent is the electronic realm. Why not, then, bring these two close cousins together and revive the spirit? Is this apparently incongruous marriage really a genius stroke like Reese's Peanut Butter Cups or is it just another New Shimmer ("It's a floor wax! No, it's a dessert topping! Wait, it's both!!")? While it may seem that these are two great tastes that taste great together, the alliance is really quite shallow. I think it betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the Internet to miss the point that the Internet has replaced coffeehouse culture, not become part of it. In fact, I can think of few things less suited to the modern coffeehouse than computers. It has all the congruity of a Salvador Dali canvas.

If you've ever been to an Internet cafe, you know what I mean. When I think of a coffeehouse, I think of low light, tables facing out to allow people watching, the din of conversation and metal spoons against porcelain saucers. What you get instead is tables facing away from other people and towards video monitors. There might be plenty of conversation going on, but you'll never hear it—most interaction is going on through the local network cables that connect you to your fellow patrons. You can talk yourself blue about the positive things an establishment like this can provide (socializing for the socially impaired, access to try out expensive software before buying it, learning more about computers, etc.) but it is painfully clear from the hypnotic gaze of most of the patrons—some wearing headphones to truly shut out the world—that there is something very wrong with this picture.

What that is, I think, is the driving force behind the cybercafe glut (other than making a quick buck off the trend du jour): the desperate attempt to make something that is inherently antisocial into something social. I do think the Internet is more than a means of communication. If it were just an appliance, a tool, why would there be any fuss? I think ham radios, for example, are good machines for increasing and disseminating information, but I've never seen anyone build a social event around them. This is because they are mere conduits; the Internet is something much more significant.

Despite all the talk about the loss of community in the modern world and the autoerotic solitude encouraged by the Internet, I still believe that the desire to connect with others burns white hot inside of us. The need for a social context strains desperately and with increasing futility at the tight seams of our ever-shrinking lives. This is why, even when we make choices that narrow our contact with others, we do all we can to include as many people as possible.

For example, what is one of the first things we do when we meet "someone special"? We introduce them to our friends, of course. And what happens if our friends don't like Mr. or Ms. Right Now? We're crushed because what we want most is to have it all; we want the antisocial exclusivity of love but also to be able to share this one person with our "community". Often this is impossible. The whole point of the intimacy love generates is to give ourselves to one person above all. Does the phrase "forsaking all others" ring a bell for anyone? To communalize this relationship, then, is to go against its essential nature, often with injurious or ridiculous results.

Internet cafes draw this modern paradox out to a ludicrous extreme. At best they are pointless, at worst they are a delusional and thin rationalization. I think that no matter how much people deny it, they're terrified by the physical solitude required by the virtual world. If people really believed that the Internet brings people together, there simply wouldn't be cybercafes.

That said, I am not a hard-hearted man, and I do realize that there is a big world out there beyond my front door. Or my national borders at least. It is a simple fact that, outside North America, Europe, and Australia, the Internet is not the kind of household appliance we have come to assume it is. Even in technophilic Japan, relatively few people have private Internet accounts. In response to this, Internet cafes are springing up all around Asia. Why? Because for most people, outside of universities, such places are the only way they will ever see the Internet, their only chance to dip their toes in the pool. Color me hypocritical, but I actually think that in other countries these cafes provide a positive service by introducing the culture to the Internet and exhibiting what can be seen on it. Theoretically, this will increase demand, which will bring down the generally prohibitive price of online access.

So, you are asking me, if it's good enough for them why isn't it good enough for us? Because, as is so often the case, where you stand depends on where you sit. What may well be a victory for info-egalitarianism in another culture is, in a nation of brief attention span and unthinking worship of all things new, a delusional attempt to make a warm, hip, sociable silk purse out of a really, really useful and powerful but antisocial sow's ear.

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