

Generation Web

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Part 2: The Wired World

We saw in the previous article that young people are leading the way into a new world, exploring territory that is unfamiliar to anyone older than 20. But what are they doing there?

The short answer is they are providing the content of the internet. Here are some ways in which everyone contributes to the world of cyberspace.

Social Networking

The biggest name in the social networking world is currently Facebook. It's one of many sites, including Bebo, MySpace, Orkut, and Twitter. But what exactly is social networking, and what do you get with Facebook?

When you sign up, you get the chance to record some personal information, to upload a picture and use a few well-chosen words to describe yourself. This information goes onto your own page – your window on the world.



Facebook's strategy encourages you to link with as many friends as possible, though what exactly "friends" means in this context is open for debate. When someone becomes your friend, they are notified every time you change the information on your page, and you see all their updates too.

Social networking offers community, belonging and worth. It enables you to create a little corner of the internet that is yours alone, to reinvent yourself as you describe your tastes and interests, post pictures about yourself, tell the world what you're doing and what your mood is. It's a great way to earn popularity. A cool design means more friends, and more comments: "xx people like this."

Even more than the number of friends you have, keeping up to date and knowing what's going on with those friends is what matters. Facebook, and its great imitator Twitter, have made it possible to stay abreast of the changing internet not by the day, or even the hour, but by the minute. Now we can be in touch with people who are present at an earthquake, a riot, a concert or a rally, and find out in real time what they are seeing and thinking.

Chat and Instant Messaging

Chat is the cement of the modern Web, and often it's a complete mystery to parents. I've heard many parents say, with a note of mystification in their voice, "She gets home from school, and straight away she goes online and starts chatting to the people she was with half an hour ago! What is there new to say?"

The language of chat is a foreign language to people who haven't learned it – deliberately so, in fact. Parents might be watching over their child's shoulder as they type, but not understanding a word of what appears on the screen.

Games

In the past, computer games were you against the aliens, served up by the

All Saints Alive

computer for you to blast into oblivion with your intergalactic ray gun.

The Space Invaders are still invading, but it's much more fun when the aliens aren't just created by the computer, they're real people playing against you in real time.

In these online games, you are frequently in control of an avatar. Originally this was a Hindu word for the manifestation or appearance of a deity – an incarnation, to use a Christian equivalent. To be incarnate in a game, you have the freedom to determine your appearance, your skills and abilities. As you progress, your avatar gains in strength and skill, and you become more popular and sought after as a colleague, more feared as an opponent.

Virtual Worlds

Finally, it is possible to have a virtual life in an online world, earning currency, building a house, trading and interacting with people from all around the world. One such world is called Second Life, and in it, you can do just about anything you can do in real life. You can dance, you can test drive a car, you can have sex. You can even go to church!

Second Life is definitely an “adult” experience, and so Teen Second Life has been created alongside it. For younger children, there are other sites, with a more cartoony feel, such as Club Penguin, or Habbo.

Young people are always reinventing themselves, trying out new personae as they grow and develop, moving between friendship groups and adopt new fashions. An online space allows them to blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality – to have an online personality that's more compelling than their identity in real life.

Reflections on Online interaction

Something in the nature of online interaction amplifies certain aspects of relationship and distorts others. It is like a lens, that amplifies communication, giving an intensity to emotions, and a depth of feeling combined with immediacy.

Curiously, young people will often say of online friends “He understands me better than anyone else.” and shockingly, say it in all sincerity of someone they have known for only a fortnight. Their natural reservations and danger instinct do not kick in, but their sense of connection most certainly does.

In my next article, I will attempt to peer into the future, to describe where I think the internet is going next. After that, it will be time for a hard look at the dangers it presents.



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