

SHE LOGGED ON TO THE SUPERHIGH-
WAY, STRAIGHT INTO THE SMARTEST,
SEXIEST, WEIRDEST ALL-NIGHT PARTY
IN THE NATION, AND NOW THERE'S
ONLY ONE PROBLEM: GETTING HOME

ILLUSTRATION BY JOEL NAKAMURA

CONfessions

OF AN INTERNET JUNKIE

IT'S FIVE A.M. and I'm still on the Net. My eyes are unfocusing, and my mind is getting ready to do the same. I compose talk show commercials and public service announcements in my head:

"It started innocently enough. 'Kim' got a computer account in college and began experimenting with a vast computer network known as the Internet. Gradually, she became dependent on her daily fix. She was soon spending the wee hours of the morning glued to her computer screen. Sleep and nutrition were relegated to scattered naps and Cup-o-Noodles. Her grades went out the window. She was [host pauses for dramatic effect] an Internet junkie. Join us next time, when we talk with netaholics."

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The Internet is not an on-line service or even a single computer network. It is a web of systems linked together by software and phone lines. Built over the bones of a Defense Department computer experiment, the Net now reaches some 20 million people in more than a hundred countries and continues to spread, bloblike, from major cities to the Third World to Small-town, U.S.A. You could fit CompuServe, America Online, Prodigy, the Empire State Building, the Grand Canyon, Willard Scott and a year's supply of Jolt Cola inside the Internet and still have plenty of room left under your seat and in the overhead luggage compartment.

Why has the Net become such a teeming digital terrarium?

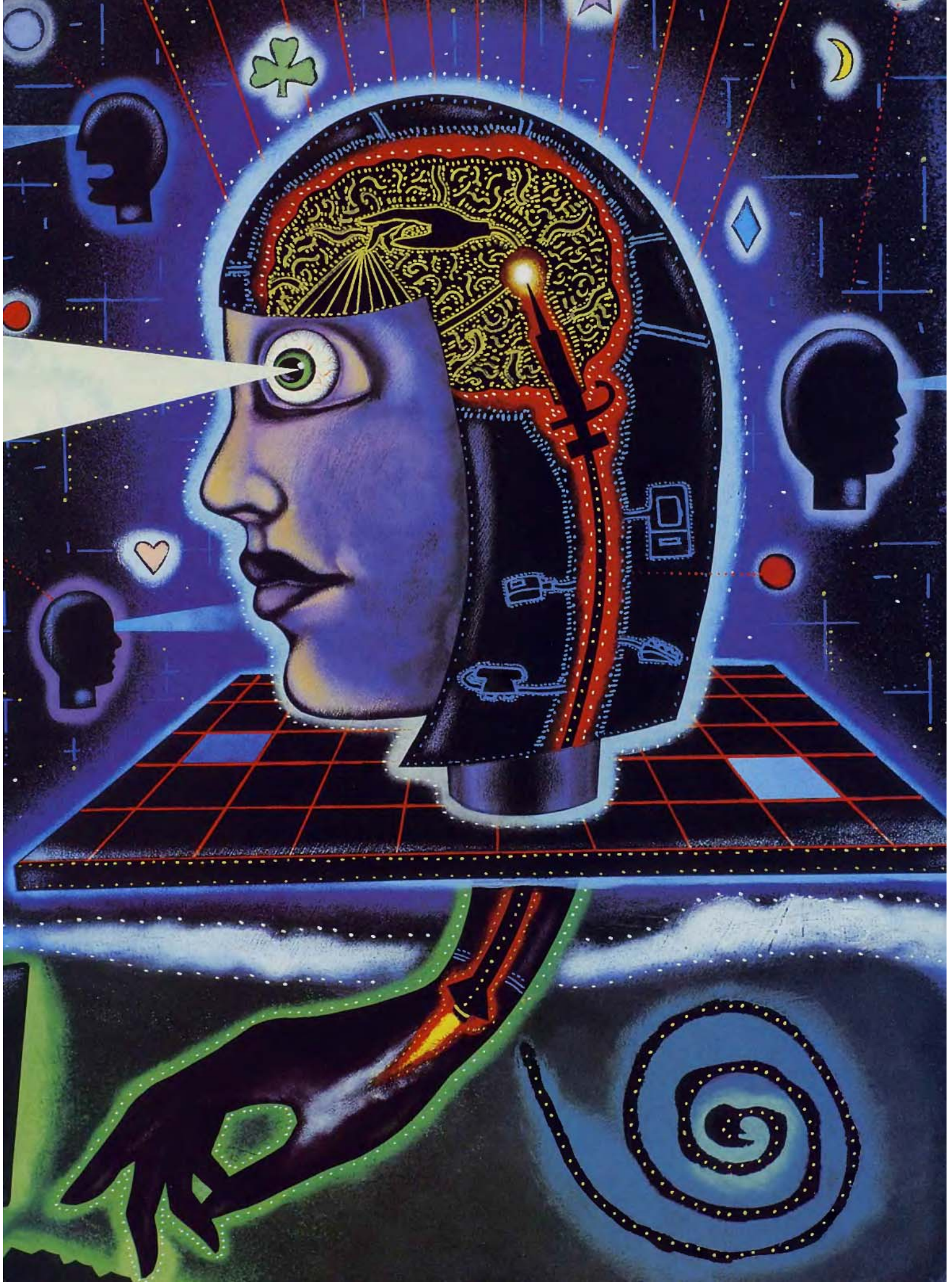
Can you say "addictive," boys and girls? I knew you could.

Can you say "complimentary samples for the kiddies"?

At any medium-size university, Internet access is high-grade, universal and free. College students start using it the way I did, to e-mail ex-high school classmates, long-distance lovers and buddies in far-flung foreign exchange programs. Using the university supercomputer to say "Put a shrimp

article

By **J.C. HERZ**



on the barbie for me at U. Melbourne, you lucky bastard" certainly beats the hell out of paying for phone calls to Australia. And people who never, ever write letters—people whose very literacy was once in doubt—become prolific Internet correspondents. Why? Because netting is the ultimate procrastination. You're right there at your computer. A few simple keystrokes will keep that pesky take-home midterm at bay. ("Why don't I just e-mail Ted to remind him that my team wiped the floor with his team last night?")

•

It didn't take me long to exhaust e-mail, though. I knew only so many people with computer accounts, and I was in constant communication with all of them. I had a choice: Get back to work, or see what else the Net might have to offer. Opting for the latter, I stumbled into Unix one night and accidentally punched up the Internet gateway. It looked curious, so I opened it and logged on, at which point my computer did its best impression of Heather ("They're here") O'Rourke in *Pollergeist*.

My screen began to scroll up and up and up for minutes, spewing thousands of news-group headings, including a Church of the Subgenius bulletin board, five or six Barney the dinosaur vigilante hate groups, a pirate radio forum and the Alok Vijayvargia fan club. The index was breathtaking. It read like some whacked-out librarian had taken a few hits of crystal meth, decided that computer languages, television, fan clubs and sex—in that order—were the definitive human pursuits and overhauled the Dewey decimal system accordingly.

I picked one doorway at random and found myself in the middle of a raging news-group debate on the questionable legality and ethics of Internet chain letters. I backed out, ran to another data door and opened it. Same thing, different subject. I checked out another, and another. When I looked up, it was 4:30 A.M. I was euphoric. I walked home through the predawn mist, through the sodium light, through the sprinklers. They were on. I didn't care. I couldn't sleep. All that I could think about were artillery aficionados butting heads with tree-hugging homosexual Quakers, my newfound ability to surf from a gourmet vegetarian round-robin to e-zines and volume upon volume of Chia Pet trivia. (I would later discover that everything on the Home Shopping Network has been fetishized in some nook of the news-group universe.)

I sit, rapt, as one manic netter crafts

a chilling QVC psychodrama: Lorena Bobbitt, having lashed Billy Idol to the kitchen sink with Topsy Tail hair tools, brandishes a Flowbie and threatens to dismember him for whorishly appropriating the term cyberpunk.

I love Usenet. It is the sluice and the slush pile into which all media flow. This is the place where a lifetime of cable television, blockbuster movies, video games and advertorials, having fermented during endless Western Civ lectures and brain-rot summer vacations, finally bursts forth.

Elvis has been spotted a few thousand times on Usenet. Jesus shows up occasionally. But that's not surprising, considering half the people on the Net think they are Jesus. The place has a messianic streak a mile wide.

Case in point: alt.religion.kibology is a news group revolving around the slavish worship of Internet legend James "Kibo" Parry and the study of his personal quirks. For reasons unknown, Kibo has amassed a huge following of Net acolytes who simply must know the answers to questions like: What is Kibo's hat size? Who is his favorite Monkee? What is his favorite episode of *Davey and Goliath*? Queries often end with a polite kowtow: "Kibo is God."

In the future, everyone will have his own news group.

For a pop culture scavenger, Usenet is the mother lode. There is a strong temptation to live on it. It offers channel-surfing to the nth degree, remote-control narcosis taken to a higher level. TV plods along from week to week. Reruns happen only once a day. But Usenet goes as fast as you can absorb it. It stones you with an accelerating sense of information overload.

To chill out from Usenet flamefests, I usually hit Internet Relay Chat, the Net's real-time ham radio analogue. It has news-talk channels, sex channels (euphemistically known as "hot tubs") and conference channels where people have meetings and get actual work done. IRC is a notch more interactive than Usenet—five simultaneous conversations are feasible—but it's surprisingly mellow compared with the manic rants on Usenet. Even so, some people spend all night on IRC. IRC addicts tend to lean harder on the Net than do Usenet grazers.

But they're both lightweights next to MUD junkies. MUDs, Multi-User Dungeons, are the hardest stuff on the Net. They go beyond IRC's warren of chat rooms into a more intense idiom: virtual space. That is, you have to walk through room B in order to get from room A to room C. When you log on to a MUD, you're confronted with architecture: rooms, tunnels, floors, corners to turn, doors to open, inanimate ob-

jects to trip over or step around. Four people in different countries can meet in a MUD room, exit through four different MUD doors and go their separate ways, only to bump into one another some time later in another part of the MUD.

For the dungeon programmer, the tradeoff is this: grades and sleep in return for a custom-built world in which he is an omniscient, omnipotent god, a Mr. Roarke to the MUD player's Fantasy Island tourist. A MUD of one's own is a source of intellectual joy and pride. It's also a control trip. Not surprisingly, plenty of college and grad students blow off homework to tinker with their MUDs, to make them bigger, more detailed, more complex, more perfect. On a compelling MUD, netters will build crawlways, catwalks and condos and generally swarm around talking and fighting and screwing and killing one another. At which point the MUD god can sit back, grin from ear to megalomaniacal ear and have Tattoo fetch him a frozen cocktail.

Pretty soon, the MUD some comp-sci student started as a diversion is taking up a good chunk of the university computer's brainpower and telephone bandwidth. In some cases, the cortex of a MUD grows so labyrinthine that it overwhelms its computer site like a vine, blossoming beautifully as it strangles its host. For this reason MUDs have been banned in Australia and at a growing number of small liberal arts colleges.

But more MUDs pop up every day, based on MUD gods' programming talent and a faith that if you build it, they will come, and that if it's a really good MUD, they'll stay. I met a character in Cyberion City who had built a house there—a house, as in floor plan and interior decoration. The living room, I recall, showcased a rare Jim Morrison photo, an extensive set of Miró prints and a framed Woodstock ticket stub.

I complimented my host on his interior-design flair. We chatted. He'd just finished building the virtual pad. He had construction plans for a *Wild Palms* theme park in the backyard but didn't have enough of the MUD's internal currency and was still saving up. We talked music, work, politics.

See, once you stash away the fact that it's all a Fig Newton of your imagination—once you accept the premise of MUD—it's all over. You're yammering away with the fantasy personalities of strangers as if they're block captains of the local homeowner's association. Your neighbors are people with names like Digital Blade and Doktor Nuke, and it all seems completely normal.

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SOME LIKE IT HOT

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Tracy Trautman, who is a volunteer firefighter in rural Pennsylvania, once watched from a half block away when a gas station fire blew up like a bomb, dusting her with cinders. "It looked like the whole place just flew up into the air and came right back down," Tracy says. With four women and 18 men in her all-volunteer department, she feels right at home. "We're like a big family," says Tracy, who lists her occupations as barmaid and volunteer firefighter on official forms. "There's a bar set up right here in the firehouse to help raise money for new equipment."

Amy Jorgensen, from Washington, spent a year on a Hot Shot crew, an air-mobile squad that choppers into the heart of the worst blazes in Alaska, Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. These fires take days to beat. Hiking out after one 36-hour shift on a smoky, pine-dotted hillside, Amy tore ligaments and cartilage in her knee when an embankment gave way under the weight of her 60-pound pack.

For most people, it would have been easy to quit after such an accident. Not for Amy. That would be like keeping her off skis or her mountain bike. A natural athlete who juggled varsity volleyball, basketball and tennis in high school, she graduated to the flames. "It's all part of an attitude of adventure and fun. I'm constantly seeking new challenges," she says. Amy likes seeing her colleagues emerge from their firecoats black with soot. After the fire, the crew goes bar-

hopping. "We work hard and we play hard," she says.

Traci Jai Isaacs, who comes from a family of firefighters "with the safest house on the block," started as a volunteer in a fire company at the age of 17 because she thought it would be interesting. That was seven years ago. "I've gone through floors," says Traci. "I've been on roofs that were wavy, and I've been punched in the face by a drug addict. I've worked on a hostage situation." In a burning-building exercise, the air got so hot it boiled the water sprayed from the hoses on the concrete floor.

The male firefighters can be another obstacle: "You must prove yourself over and over again," says Traci. "It doesn't matter how many years you've been there. It's still a boys' club."

Heather Ashli, another Florida firefighter, craves the excitement her job offers. "I live on the edge and I like to take chances. I have found my niche in life."

Heather says fire alarms give her a warm feeling. "Your adrenaline gets going. It's great," she says. A vegetarian who pumps iron, Heather finds her job's physical demands undaunting. For practice, she executes a rope rescue, which requires her to climb out of a four-story building in full gear using only a rope and an entrenching tool.

There is a word in the dictionary that defines these women and it's not one of the obvious ones, such as luminous or radiant. The word is annealed: strengthened by flame.



INTERNET JUNKIE

(continued from page 80)

I don't know whether MUDs are inherently more addictive than the rest of the Net, or whether they just attract more addictive personalities. But I have known heroin addicts who are less dependent on smack than hard-core MUD junkies are on MUDs.

"You wanna see addiction at its finest? Log on to a MUD," types a member of Mudders Anonymous, an on-line support group. "Over the summer, this was my schedule:

"Wake up at 2 P.M. (Sometimes later. No later than 5 P.M. though.)

"Boil water.

"Hop on the MUD.

"Convert water into coffee.

"Play MUD for the rest of the day with occasional coffee break, possibly Cup-o-Noodles. Continue playing MUD. Go to sleep at 6 A.M.

"And the sad (happy!) thing is that there are many people like me on the MUD. Some keep slightly different schedules, but there's an array of Net addicts who play 12, 15, 20 hours a day."

MUD junkies are the worst. God, they're the walking dead.

This from someone who gets off the Usenet wire at 4:30 A.M.

It's a classic pot-and-kettle situation. Usenet news worms look down on IRC junkies, who look down on MUDheads, who look down on people who MUD more than they do.

Welcome to the wonderful world of Internet 12-step culture.

As it happens, there are three or four Internet addicts' support groups on the Net. And while it may be somewhat unhealthy to hash out your Net habit in an on-line forum, at least the people there know what you're talking about. It's also good to know that there's always someone who spends more time on-line. Even those addicts know people who Net harder than they do. Everyone in a support group has some zombie acquaintance he can point to and say, "See, I'm not so bad."

There is, of course, considerable pressure to top the last guy's story, which is why Net junkie news groups walk a fine line between confession and braggadocio. Frequently, they degenerate into all-out bragging sessions in all-caps mode.

This is what happens when you hold a wellness meeting in a crack house.

Actually, I'm on the fence about the whole Net addiction/disease debate.

On one hand, I'm not sure that a few hours a day on the Net is worth worrying about. I mean, a lot of the time I spend on the Net is time I don't spend watching television. No one can argue that the Net is more idiotic than the idiot



"OK, step over there with the other huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

box, and look how much people tune in to that. Look at how involved they become in the latest twist of *Melrose Place*. At least Net is interactive. At least you can use it to communicate with people. Software millionaires use the Net. Certain businesses couldn't function without it. I'm hooked on Net in the same way that we're all hooked on telephones. So I get a little antsy when I can't pick up my e-mail. Big deal. I see an awful lot of cellular phones in restaurants these days, and that's pretty fucking compulsive, if you ask me.

On the other hand, Net can interfere with your life. It's not so much the fatigue or how it irrevocably bends your worldview. It's just the hours it absorbs. It's unbelievable how time flies when you're on the Net.

"Please tell me all the clocks are wrong and it isn't really 4:30 A.M. and I haven't been on for three days straight," types Tex in New York. He's asking for it.

"Sure," types Drow, a self-described "Insane Entity" in Colorado. "The clocks are wrong and it isn't really 4:30 A.M. and you haven't been on for three days straight. :) World time has been altered by space aliens using their graviton flux capacitance rays, so it is really 4:30 P.M. of March 3, 2034, and you have now been on for over 40 years straight. Your phone bill is something over \$25 million, most of which will be covered by life insurance, since you died sometime last week. Oh, yeah, and the Cubs won the World Series last year, and you missed that, too. :) Better?"

Net is a black hole for time.

Sometimes, after a few hours of mass media flotsam and cyberpunk apocrypha piped directly to my brain, a kind of intellectual tinnitus sets in. This is the point when I sit back, my mind ringing with *Blade Runner* trivia, and ponder the ethics of nanotechnology experiments on household pets. I squint, rub my temples and groan with the agony of mental indigestion.

Aaarrrghhhh, my brain hurts.

I rub my eyes until I see pink hearts, green clovers, yellow moons, purple stars and blue diamonds.

Time for a nice bowl of Lucky Charms, a few Nodoz and a little IRC.

Ah yes, the cereal thing. Netting, like any habitual pastime, has its own set of rituals and paraphernalia. One of them is snack food, perhaps because the Net itself mimics the empty calorie high of gas station candy and Circle K microwave fare. On alt.cyberpunk, a snack food debate raged for months, drawing dozens of netters into a bloody flame war between the Ding Dongs contingent and a band of militant ramen devotees.

Stimulants are another hot topic of conversation. Their effects are cata-

logged and celebrated with an attention to detail that veers between science and poetry. Net is one of the few places where an exact comparison of caffeine content in instant, drip and espresso coffees, Twinings English Breakfast tea and Mountain Dew is not considered comprehensive. Netters wired on Chinese bark extracts have to chip in their two cents. Prescription diehards lobby for vasopressin. ("No letdown, just instant wakey-wakey. Does dry out your nasal cavities, though. Bummer.") This kind of discussion continues till dawn. He who stays awake longest wins.

Of course, all this requires energy. It doesn't hurt to be under 25. This hood is pretty wrinkle-free. It's not a total playpen—there are plenty of academics and industry types on the Net, as well as a cadre of aging cyberhippies—but the high school and college posers definitely make their presence known, especially in virtual communities that consider themselves on the edge. On Mindvox, a hacker-heavy board in New York, the resident curmudgeon is a 22-year-old medical student named Galt (I'm a month older than he; I feel like Mrs. Robinson). Smarting from accusations of crustiness, Galt broadcast what he thought was a rhetorical question: "Do I really sound so old?" He got back a volley of replies from kids too young to buy alcohol. "Yes!" (Silly rabbit, Net is for kids).

Sometimes, late at night, long after the middle-age, mortgage-paying nine-to-fivers have dozed off, the Net takes on a special, mutagenic charge. This beautiful, sprawling, crackling, mammoth spiderweb thing is now in the hands of basement dwellers, insomniacs and teens with bedroom lights off and computers on, and it feels like the ground floor of rock and roll. Net may reek of hormones and artificial preservatives, but it's a place where young people can ponder a collective identity. It's a place where "we" actually means something.

A bloodshot sense of solidarity congeals out of the chaos. I keep scrolling down through endless kilobytes of youthful disenchantment and roily Net vernacular ("If you have a dumb li'l kid who is gonna set your freakin' house on fire, don't let him watch a show, man. All of us are getting punished because of some silly parent, man. I hope someone important reads this message, like an MTV rep or something. Without fire we would be nowhere. Fire kicks ass . . . fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire.")

For teens, there's a bonus: Parents don't understand Net so they fear it. What if Junior uses it to break into Ciubank or, worse, download naked GIFs of the Swedish Bikini Team? And what about all those people on the Net? You don't know where they've been. (Mom wrinkles her nose. "Honey, I don't want you hanging out with all

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those cyberpeople.")

"My mother has this notion that everyone on the Net is a child molester," writes a 16-year-old hacker named Cable. When his mother found out that Cable was planning to meet a group of other (mostly teenage) netters, she overreacted with typical maternal terror and banned him from the Net. To his credit, he managed to stay off-line a whole two weeks before sneaking back on while his parents were out of the house. "Finally," he says, "they let me back on under the agreement that I use it at a set time during the day, don't call or meet anyone on it and get good grades in school."

As long as Net freaks out parents, kids will spend countless hours on it. There's nothing like a good old-fashioned generation gap. In fact, creaky technophobes are infinitely preferable to the bane of Net life, the dreaded boomer cyberpunk wanna-bes who crash through the Net making idiots of themselves. Running into one of these people is like confronting the proverbial dad in plaid who snaps his fingers, flicks up his wide lapels and claims to be "with it." It's creepy.

I once consulted an executive about Internet. From his voluminous leather swivel chair, he dialed up America Online and was reading his e-mail when a phone call interrupted our meeting. He picked up the receiver, grinned and said, "Hey, you'll never guess what I'm doing right now. I'm surfing on the Internet." He looked at me. "This is really cyberpunk, isn't it?"

I blinked, mustering all my will to keep a straight face.

I let him down easy. "Sorry to break this to you, sir, but there aren't too many cyberpunks on America Online." I re-

spect the guy. I couldn't let him go on like that.

Cyberpunk is the Net's acid test. It's like jazz: If you have to ask what it is, you'll never understand. And no real cyberpunk ever, ever claims to be one.

No cyberpunk point-and-clicked his way through cyberspace, either. In fact, few things frighten Net-heads more than all this talk of megacorporations and Uncle Sam "improving" the Internet. If you have the brainpower to learn a teeny bit of Unix, the Net ain't broke, much less in need of windows, mouse-driven menus and nifty animated screen icons. Having to use a "cleaner" Net sounds suspiciously like having to tidy up your room or else no car keys. Making the place idiot-proof just guarantees that more idiots will use it. Great. Now, that would cure my Net habit.

Not that I or any of my strung-out Net-addicted ilk will have any say in the whole digital superhighway project when it happens. So why not netsurf another hour? Tomorrow the all-night waffle house may be razed to make way for a multiplex.

I didn't realize how accustomed I was to the Net, how attached I was to the idea of its always being there, until the following quote flashed across my screen:

"We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no goo [sic], it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it."

John Steinbeck. *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was part of an electronic signature.

In one freaky second I realized that so many characters I've known exist only

on the Net. There are real people behind them, sure, but only on the Net do spores of human personality develop into this particular stew of pirates, poets, clowns, superheroes, villains, armchair psychologists and armchair psychopaths. If all the Net's a stage, then a good number of its lead roles have been lifted from comics and sf pulp fiction.

Case in point: Murdering Thug, commandant of a forum on computer crime, letter bombs, anarchy and Thug's daily exploits. Of his detractors, Thug writes, "Fuck 'em. I'm glad they are offended that all-out anarchy is coming to cyberspace. I'm glad that I'm turning their pristine, lily-white academic and business on-line existence into uncertain chaos and maximizing the entropy of cyberspace."

Thug impressed me from word one. Here was a man who knew what to do with 2000 pounds of ammonium nitrate, fuel oil, a 64K-processor CM5 and a few blasting caps. Thug spoke his mind. Thug flamed his critics with exuberance. He even had a certain roguish élan I might have found attractive had it not been for the raging Net rumor that he was, in fact, a frumpy Long Island housewife with too much time on her hands. Never take an anonymous Net persona at its word.

Without Net, there would be no Murdering Thug. Characters like that are born, live and die in cyberspace. And even if the Net is no good, in a way it does belong to them.

But the Net is good. It is also goo.

It is goo because once you get used to it, once you establish a presence in your favorite corners of the Net, you can't really extricate yourself from it. Net changes the way you think, just with the knowledge that there's a world buzzing through phone wires, past the houses and office buildings of oblivious multitudes. Net is a reminder that there's more going on beneath the surface, and that just because something is invisible doesn't mean it's not real.

Sometimes (OK, often) it's difficult to tear myself away. For one thing, inertia is not on my side. Not only is it easier to just keep reading, but messages start piling up the minute I log off. The Net has no mercy in this regard. It will bury me under a mountain of information if I neglect it. For some netters, this fear of falling behind turns into a kind of paralysis. "I'm caught up. I'm afraid to hang up because I know I'll fall behind again," writes a netter stuck like a fly in amber. "I just keep telling myself: 'You can log off, you can log off, you can log off.'" In high traffic, the Net can become a digital Roach Motel—netters log on, but they don't log off. Posts drift through the gray matter like krill through a baleen whale, and you're trapped.

Log on. Make feeble attempt to feed 200 kilobytes of arcane bullshit through



"And do you, Linda, solemnly swear to hold on to your job for as long as you both shall need the money?"

a brain in stump-shredder/meat-grinder mode. Log off.

Log on.

I flash back to a childhood Saturday morning. Cartoons are on, naturally. Sylvester stands outside a door that separates him from a full-throttle 40-piece orchestra. He opens the door to a musical shock wave and then closes it. Silence. And then—this is the part I love—he opens and closes it again, three or four times, staring at the camera with an expression of snaggletoothed dementia.

Log off. Go to fridge and open it in hopes that something new and zany has spontaneously materialized.

It hasn't.

Go back to computer and log on in hopes that something new and zany has spontaneously materialized.

It has.

Take another sip of stale cola and read the latest. Mmmm. . . . Net.



Occasionally, a hardware problem or glitch in the system forces me off the Net for hours or even days. Withdrawal is not pretty. If a favorite bulletin board is down, it's not uncommon to find a whole pack of netaholics hovering outside on an IRC channel:

"I can't get into the system. What's happened?#-!*"

"System's down. We're locked out."

"What's wrong?"

"Is it serious?"

"When will they fix it?"

"This sux."

Meanwhile, I keep trying. The system doesn't want to cooperate, doesn't know me and couldn't care less about my pressing need to collect e-mail and catch up on the Computer Underground Digest. Nevertheless, I continue to dial frantically until the hedonistic-rat-pushing-button-for-cocaine-at-expense-of-food image kicks in and I finally give up in disgust. The malevolence of the universe is self-evident, and a bitter funk permeates my immediate surroundings until the system is back up, at which point birds burst into song and the world is once again a happy place.

This is merely minor-league withdrawal. The d.t.'s happen when Net access is lost entirely and indefinitely. It's a fate that strikes terror into any denizen of cyberspace—something that can't even be called worse than death because it is death, in a way. Net death. If, for some reason, you lose access to the Net—your account is canceled, you run out of dough, or you move to a telecom backwater—you die, as far as the Net's concerned. You just disappear. Fade out. From the Net exile's perspective, an entire world disappears. Gone, like in *The Day After*.

I had to confront the prospect of Net

death when I graduated from college. My student computer account was terminated, stranding me in a Netless world that seemed hopelessly slow and boxy. Regular mail? Come on. Geographical limits? Yikes.

I began a nerve-racking quest for Net access in the telecom desert of Miami. I found it, but not before scrambling through a number of creative phone experiments and a string of accounts from Florida to Boston to California to New York. One thing was certain: Net death was not in the cards.

Looking back, I laugh at how I couldn't imagine getting off the carousel. I was really infatuated with it. I hadn't OD'd yet.

Net overdose is the trip into cyberspace that, for some reason, goes horribly wrong. It took me completely by surprise. Threeish in the morning, I was at my computer, happily snacking on a bowl of Count Chocula, when suddenly the Net stopped looking like a digital playground and started to seem like a kind of Sartrean hell. There were just too many voices, too many people. It wasn't a stadium-type Seurat canvas of indistinguishable pin-size blips. On the Net, those constituent blips are in your face expressing an opinion, and you can hear them all. Imagine being able to hear every sideline conversation at a rock concert or a basketball game. That crashing tide of voices is heavy in a way that the roar of an anonymous crowd never can be. You realize, like never before, what "a lot of people" means. It is a nightmare.

I once asked William Gibson, the science-fiction author who coined the term cyberspace, about his staunch refusal to use the Net, even for e-mail. He said that the thought of it gave him agoraphobia. "I feel like I'd be crushed to death," he said.

I didn't get it then. I was young, bouncing from news group to news group, still reeling with a sense of discovery. Now that I'm a hollow shell of a 22-year-old, strung out on Net, I know what he meant, how you can feel trampled by a disembodied crowd. Some nights I don't know why I bother with this whole Net existence. Sometimes Net death doesn't seem like such an awful option (to die, to sleep, perchance to dream. . . . Aaah, REM cycles). Anyway, I could always come back to life, like Jason in *Friday the 13th*.

God, it really is late, and my box of Trix is down to dust.

I think I'll draft a suicide note announcing my impending Net death >8-).

Maybe I'll become famous by helping netaholics Net-kill themselves.

The "Kevorkian virus" has a nice ring to it. Muhahahaha.



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