

Digital coffeehouses — cyberspace for the masses

The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Take a sip of espresso. Drop a quarter in the slot. In a flash of orange, the screen comes to life. You've just joined the SF Net community.

Three years ago, founder and system operator Wayne Gregory had a vision — to create a place where people of every background and persuasion could meet and talk freely, creating a community which went beyond the boundaries of age, race and class.

In times past Gregory, 35, might have founded a utopian community or a church. Instead he started SF Net, a computer bulletin board which allows users to join in real-time conversations with everyone else who happens to be logged on.

"On a computer there are no faces or accents — people were judged solely on their words and their ideas," he said.

But what really makes SF Net different are the coin-operated computer terminals Gregory has installed in 15 San Francisco area coffee houses.

"Anyone who wants to can drop a quarter in the machine, hop in and give it a test drive," said Gregory.



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"Kat Eyes" flirts via computer at the Horseshoe coffeehouse.

At the Horseshoe coffeehouse on San Francisco's Haight Street, a blend of everything from punk skateboarders to tattooed neo-primitives share carved-up tables, overflowing ashtrays and two computer terminals.

A handful of quarters and 15 minutes on one of SF Net's two on-line Chat Tables asking for interviews brought 18-year-old Kat Eyes. . . from a friend's terminal are Visual Mindsight,

apartment a few blocks away, where she'd logging in for a bit of netting.
"The first time I logged in I put 'Kat Eyes' as my first name and then when it asked for my last name I just put dots, so now my net name is Kat Eyes. . ." she explained.
All netters get to choose a nickname when they log into the system. Gathered around the terminal are Visual Mindsight,

aka 22-year-old photography student Zoe Nauman, and 26-year-old Rude Dawg, who answers to Leroy when pressed.

When prices for computers started to fall, Gregory, who had worked as a computer programmer and salesman, had a breakthrough.

"I realized they were cheap and disposable enough that we could design something and put it out in a public place." About 1,000 people are active on the Net any given month, both from the coffee house terminals and computers at home.

The net is a village common where people stop to chat, a parish where everyone looks out for each other and a place to go for everything from the address for a good party to suggestions for homeopathic cold remedies.

When Kat Eyes . . . was thinking about whether to go to college, she went to the Net for advice.

"My parents told me things, but on the Net all kinds of different people gave me their life experiences. It's like virtual reality. You get to test a sample of everyone else's lives."

College could wait a year, she finally decided.

Kat Eyes . . . met most of her

friends on the net. She spends a lot of time at a communal household composed of a genetic engineer, an accountant, a community organizer, a photographer and three computers, all of whom she met on the net.

"It's great. I don't come across many genetic engineers in my normal life," she said.

Another important thing netters do on-line is flirt. Kat Eyes . . . found a few boyfriends through the net, but says it doesn't always work out.

"On the net you can find a total mental attraction to a person, but then sometimes when you meet them it's like, 'Eek!'"

Rude Dawg takes the seat after Kat Eyes . . . logs out. He immediately launches into a rapid-fire on-line flirtation, but gives up 10 minutes later after failing to convince a netter who caught his fancy to pay him a call.

"She's over across the Bay and doesn't want to come to see me," he laments, draping himself across two chairs as he lets someone else take a turn before trying again.

Netters develop their own customs. Users put stacks of quarters on top of the coin mechanism to mark their place in

line. An unwritten rule says you can only use a terminal as long as your quarters hold out. No getting up for change.

Netters, says Gregory, are not necessarily intellectuals, but they're intellectually inclined whether they have education or not.

"In a society that's becoming more and more illiterate, where else do you find people who still read text?" he asked.

While most computer networks get larger rather than smaller, this year Gregory pulled computer tables out of several Berkeley cafes. He felt SF Net had gotten too big and unwieldy. He'd rather see localized networks in each community, not huge national systems where people never meet.

He recently created a new company called Digit Design, which will market public-access terminals to people who want to create networks in their own cities.

"There are already 30 people committed to buying terminals," he said. "You're going to see community access networks all over the country in the next two years."