Episode Book

EPISODE #5700

Did the Internet's Pioneers Know What They Were Building?

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SYNOPSIS

Vint Cerf's answer to whether the pioneers knew what they were unleashing is the most honest one on record: "we didn't," he says, and it's also not honest to claim they had no idea what they'd done. This episode traces how that ambiguity played out — from TCP/IP's deliberate indifference to what it carried, to the counterculture compost that produced the WELL, to a global internet cafe boom that peaked at over 200,000 licensed cafes in China alone. Then the hard part: one camp argues platformization killed internet culture outright, another finds 88% of young people insisting subcultures still exist, just as niche-within-a-niche-within-a-niche. The research doesn't settle it, and that's the point.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's what Daniel wrote this time. He's still chewing on that episode we did about the internet's origin, the true technology-and-prototype era, and the question he left hanging was whether the people in the room at that extremely early stage had any awareness of what they were about to unleash.



Herman

Big question.



Corn

It gets bigger. He remembers the subculture that formed around the early heavy users, and his window into it was internet cafes in high school, still a real thing then, and that scene was tangled up with gaming, which came with its own fashion, its own language, its own whole thing.



Herman

Right, the whole package.



Corn

And then the observation. Something happened so quietly it was impossible to notice while it was happening: online moved completely into the mainstream, to the point that being an internet user isn't an identity anymore. In much of the world it's just part of being human. To the extent internet culture still has pronounced edges, he says it might live in places like Reddit, which ironically still carries a lot of that gamer stereotype.



Herman

That's the interesting one.



Corn

So, four things. Did the pioneers know. How did that subculture actually emerge, to the extent you can point at it as a distinct human culture. Is it less homogeneous than his impressions and maybe than most people's. And does it still exist, or has it just been mainstreamed. And I'll say up front, the research does not settle this one. It's a genuine disagreement.



Herman

Good. Those are the ones worth doing.



Corn

Let's start where Daniel started. The people who were actually in the room.



Herman

So Vint Cerf, co-author of TCP/IP, answered this exact question, and his answer is the most honest one anybody's given. He says, people often ask, how could you possibly have imagined what's happening today? And of course, we didn't. But it's also not honest to roll that answer off as saying we didn't have any idea what we had done, or what the opportunity was.



Corn

That's a careful sentence.



Herman

It's doing real work. Two claims at once. We didn't foresee the specifics, and we knew exactly what we were doing. Because what they were doing was building for scale, and they did that on purpose. He describes the protocol as a bag of bits as far as the net was concerned. It didn't know how the packets were being carried, and that was the entire point. He says, I'm not surprised at all that IP beat everything, because we designed it to do that.



Corn

Future-proofing by refusing to care about the future.



Herman

Exactly that. And he's explicit about the social theory too. The idea was that if you just specify what the protocols look like, anybody who wanted to build a piece of internet would do it and find somebody willing to connect to them. Then the system grows organically because it has no central control. And that is precisely what happened. So the honest answer to Daniel's first question is: they didn't know, and they did, and the reason both are true is that they optimized for organic growth rather than a specific outcome.



Corn

Which is the least glamorous version of prescience. It's not vision, it's architecture.



Herman

Very well put. Well, it's accurate. The timeline backs it up. By mid-1973 they already had two years of experience with email, and Doug Engelbart's system at SRI was for all practical purposes a one-computer world wide web. Hyperlinks, the mouse, all of it, on one machine. The design gets formally published in May of 1974. The first big public demonstration of ARPANET is October 1972. And the internet launches as operational on January first, 1983.



Corn

So by the time most people heard the word internet, email had already been routine for over a decade.



Herman

Longer. And that's the point. There's no moment where somebody flips a switch and the world changes. There's a long, quiet period where a small number of people are living in the thing that everyone else will eventually be living in.



Corn

Which is the subculture. So how did it form?



Herman

This is where the research gets fresh, and I think it'll surprise Daniel. There's a popular image of early internet users as apolitical techies. Fred Turner basically torches that. His argument is that there is no way to separate cyberculture from counterculture, and his word is compost. Cyberculture grew out of its predecessor's compost.



Corn

Compost.



Herman

Compost. The WELL, the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, grew directly out of Stewart Brand's Whole Earth Catalog network, which was itself rooted in Haight-Ashbury counterculture. Merry Pranksters, the whole Bay Area scene. The first big online community was built by people who had been communes-and-back-to-the-land people a decade earlier. And when they got online, they brought the ethos with them.



Corn

That is not the origin story anybody tells.



Herman

It isn't, and it's documented. And it lines up with the academic periodization. Foundations at MIT through the fifties and sixties, peak in the late seventies and eighties, and the whole thing originating in American hacker subcultures. There's also the European cracking scene of the 1980s, which is a completely separate lineage, documented alongside the bulletin board systems and the MUDs, the multi-user dungeons. David Bell proposed the MUD as the archetype of cyberculture.



Corn

Archetype is a strong word for a text adventure with other people in it.



Herman

It's the social form, though. That's what he means. Persistent space, shared world, identity you construct. Kevin Driscoll wrote an entire book on this, The Modem World, documenting bulletin board culture fifteen years before the internet was commercialized. The social internet is older than the web. And Howard Rheingold coined and explored the phrase virtual community on the WELL, and he's been called the first citizen of the internet.



Corn

So you have at minimum four things running in parallel. Bulletin boards. MUDs. The cracking scene. The WELL. Different norms, different ethics, different people.



Herman

Some of them adversarial to each other. The crackers and the academics were not the same culture. The WELL's back-to-the-land humanism is nothing like the cracking scene's outlaw ethos. So on Daniel's homogeneity question, the answer is a clean no. Early internet culture was not one thing that got diluted. It was several things, some of which didn't like each other, and the impression of a single unified early web is partly a retrospective flattening.



Corn

And where does the flattening come from?



Herman

I think from the moment it became legible to outsiders. If you're a journalist in 1996 writing about internet culture, you're not distinguishing between a MUD player and a WELL user. You're writing about these people, as one group, and the grouping sticks.



Corn

So the subculture existed, and it was plural, not singular. But where did it actually live? For a lot of people, including Daniel, it lived in a specific kind of place.



Herman

The internet cafe. And the founding fact is clean. Cafe Cyberia opened in London's West End in September 1994, first internet cafe in the world. The term cybercafe was coined a few months earlier by Ivan Pope for an arts-weekend event at the ICA.



Corn

Then it goes everywhere.



Herman

It goes everywhere, and this is where the scale surprised me. Sri Lanka's first two cafes, spring of 1996. Kuwait's first, sixteen machines, same year. A 1999 travel guide lists two thousand cafes across a hundred and thirteen countries. Ghana had over a hundred within a couple of years. And China had north of two hundred thousand licensed internet cafes by 2002.



Corn

Two hundred thousand. Say that again.



Herman

Two hundred thousand plus, licensed, in one country, by 2002. That's not a niche. That's infrastructure. There's a historian, Margaret O'Mara, describing the ethos behind it, and it's pure post-Cold War optimism. The idea that sharing the internet was going to bring different people in different cultures together in mutual understanding.



Corn

And the coffee?



Herman

Very few people ever bought coffee at internet cafes. That's a direct line. They were paying for the connection, not the cappuccino. The cafe was a pretext for the room.



Corn

I like that a lot. The beverage was a fiction everyone agreed to.



Herman

And then the gaming turn, which is where Daniel's memory of the gamer stereotype actually gets its teeth. South Korea's PC Bang, the LAN cafes, were central to the emergence of esports in the mid-nineties. That's the origin point. Government built cheap high-speed infrastructure, and the cafes filled with people playing competitively in the same room.



Corn

Which is a fundamentally different activity from browsing. It's loud, it's social, it's physical.



Herman

Completely different. And the model spreads across Asia. Taiwan, Japan, China. China's wangba became formative youth spaces, reading blogs, playing games, messaging on QQ, and somewhat importantly, escaping your parents. Vietnam's early-2000s cafes functioned as what one paper calls a thirdspace, blending physical and virtual social life.



Corn

So that's the answer to where the gamer stereotype comes from. Not the West.



Herman

Largely Asia. It hardened in the PC Bang and the wangba. The Western memory of the internet cafe is a row of beige machines and somebody's dad checking email. The actual global reality is a gaming hall with a queue outside.



Corn

And the decline.



Herman

A 2004 Guardian piece predicted that 3G would make cafes an increasingly rare sight, which was correct, and early. iPhone plus cheap data finished them off. India lost more than half of its two hundred thousand cafes between 2005 and 2016. A Rwandan owner watched daily customers drop from two hundred to ten by 2013. Covid wiped out most of the survivors. Ricardo Gomez at the University of Washington described what was lost, and I think it's the line that matters most for Daniel's question. He says what was lost is the gathering space for in-person gathering and hanging out. The communal sharing of food, sharing a dream, being together in the same space.



Corn

So the place wasn't a place to access the internet. It was a place to be together, and the internet was the excuse.



Herman

Which means when we ask whether internet culture got mainstreamed, we're partly asking whether the physical container got removed and the culture went with it, or whether the container was just where it happened to be sitting.



Corn

Okay. Stage the disagreement, because you said it's real and I believe you.



Herman

It is. Matthew Hughes, last year, published a piece called The Death of Internet Culture, and his argument is tight. He believes there was once a thing called web culture, and that the platformization of the internet has effectively killed it. His line is, we've gone from being an internet of posters to an internet of lurkers. Algorithms homogenize what gets seen. Financial incentives reward outrage. And generative AI slop delivers the final blow. And he preempts the obvious objections, nostalgia, it never existed, it just changed, and rebuts all three.



Corn

That's a confident piece.



Herman

It's a good piece. And then the other pole. Dazed surveyed over three thousand sixteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds in 2023, and eighty-eight percent of them believe subcultures still exist. But the framing was that they now exist as niche within a niche within a niche. A curator named Samutaro says subcultures won't ever die, they just exist differently now. Alexander Fury describes them as being like fruit flies, more aesthetic, lower commitment. And Ari Versluis says something darker, that so much of subculture to youth now is nostalgia, a yearning for the past and previous subcultures.



Corn

So one says dead, one says alive and unrecognizable, and a third voice says the thing that's alive is mostly a memory of the thing that died.



Herman

Three positions, and they're not reconcilable. And one of the survey respondents said the cleanest sentence in all of the material. Is the internet a subculture?



Corn

Hm.



Herman

That's the whole question. Because if the internet is the water everybody swims in, then being online can't be a subculture. But the fact that somebody's asking means it doesn't quite feel like water yet.



Corn

What about the Reddit piece? Daniel specifically says Reddit still carries the gamer association.



Herman

I want to flag this honestly, because I tried to substantiate it and there's no dedicated source that says Reddit specifically retains gamer stereotypes. The search didn't turn one up. So treat that as Daniel's impression, a good impression, and one worth discussing, but it's not a researched claim.



Corn

Fair. Does it hold up as an impression?



Herman

Partially. The Reddit origin story is adjacent to gaming forums, the structure is still pseudonymous and subreddit-fragmented, and the karma-and-moderator system is a descendant of forum culture rather than social-feed culture. So it feels more like a holdover than the rest of the web. Whether that reads as a gamer stereotype specifically, I think that's downstream of the fact that Reddit is one of the last large spaces where the unit of organization is a community rather than a feed.



Corn

And the historical hinge. You said the research surfaced a dateable pivot.



Herman

Eternal September, 1993. That's the moment Usenet's culture got overwhelmed by mainstream newcomers, and the name stuck. If Daniel wants a single date where the thing he's describing starts, that's the candidate. And there's a Hacker News comment from 2023 that states the classic position almost perfectly. The early web was great because it was a subculture, driven by a niche population that was more technically savvy and prone to create rather than just consume. Today's web is poor because it is now the mainstream culture, driven by a wide population of casual, unsophisticated users.



Corn

That's a thesis about who people are, dressed as a thesis about technology.



Herman

It's the strongest version of the nostalgia argument, and it's also the one that's easiest to poke at, because a cafe in Accra in 1998 was not populated by technically savvy creators either. The niche-versus-mainstream line has always been doing more work than it can carry.



Corn

I'm not sure it can be carried at all.



Herman

And that's where the disagreement actually sits. Whether the culture moved, or whether the culture was always just a phase of the medium.



Hilbert

Two hundred thousand is the licensed number. There were more.



Corn

What was the unlicensed number?



Hilbert

Nobody knows. The ones that mattered didn't have a license. I priced one out in ninety-seven, down the road from a laundromat. Twelve machines, one line, air conditioning I'd have had to install myself. Fourteen thousand dollars.



Herman

And you didn't buy it.



Hilbert

I didn't buy it. The man who did lasted about three years. What killed him wasn't the internet. It was the air conditioning and the fact that a game cafe's real business is selling time in a chair that stays cool for fourteen hours while a fourteen-year-old plays the same round.



Corn

So the cost center was never the connection.



Hilbert

Never was. You charged by the hour, and what you were actually selling was a chair. Half the customers didn't open a browser. They were playing something on the local network and eating instant noodles at the machine. The noodles were the second business. That's why so few of them sold coffee. Coffee takes a machine and someone to clean it. Instant noodles take a kettle.



Herman

The whole economics of the space were built around sitting, not browsing.



Hilbert

The sitting was the product. And you can't sell sitting at home, which is the part nobody put in the business plan. Anyway. I remember the smell more than the money.



Corn

The smell.



Hilbert

Kettle steam and burnt dust off the back of the monitors. Twelve CRTs in one room and no ventilation, and you knew which machine had been on the longest by the smell of it. The headset never sat right, with the snout. But the noodles worked.



Corn

That brings us back to the question we started with, and maybe a better sense of why it doesn't have a clean answer. Did the pioneers know? Cerf's answer is the only honest one, we didn't and we did, because they built for organic growth and got organic growth. Was early internet culture homogeneous? No. Bulletin boards, MUDs, the cracking scene, the WELL, different lineages, some of them hostile to each other, and the compost runs back to Haight-Ashbury, of all places. And does it still exist, or has it been mainstreamed? Hughes says it's dead, the Dazed numbers say eighty-eight percent of young people think it isn't, and the two don't reconcile.



Herman

I'd add the part Hilbert put on the table. If the culture lived in a chair in a cool room, and the room is gone, then the honest question is whether it moved or whether it was always going to dissolve into the water once everybody had a chair at home.



Corn

Which is where the Dazed respondent's question lands, and I think it's the one to leave people with. Is the internet a subculture?



Herman

If it isn't, that's new. Every medium before it had outsiders.



Corn

If it is, it's the first subculture with no outside. And if subcultures now exist as niche within a niche within a niche, then the next generation of online spaces is going to be built by people who never experienced the internet as a place at all. Which is a strange thing to hand them.



Herman

It is. That's one worth sitting with.



Corn

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who is still at the desk and still on the clock. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you've got a minute, a review helps other people find the show. We'll be back soon.