

The Golden Mean

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Live With the Internet

I didn't have a childhood. At least, not the kind that my parents and grandparents would designate as conventional. I've always been told stories about some era in the distant past called "the good old days," and I can't help but feel like there's this gap in my life where something should be. I now find myself asking: *How* did I miss out on the things that supposedly would have defined the way I grew up? More importantly, why?

I'm supposed to be entitled to my own memories of afternoons spent playing *patintero* that I can fondly look back to. Instead, those afternoons were spent playing flash games on Neopets. A huge portion of the relationships I have with my childhood friends were cultivated over the internet, because many times, we've chosen the comforts of our homes over the hassle of getting ready to go out and dealing with Manila's notorious traffic. I'll never have that high school romance composed of a series of clandestine rendezvous. Instead, I have to settle for flirts coyly exchanged over an instant messenger window while I simultaneously give a couple of close friends a blow-by-blow commentary. Indeed, a lot of things have changed because of the internet, but I can't really say whether or not they have changed for the better.

And good grief, I'm a *teenager*. The years of adolescence and puberty are bewildering enough, but now I also have to deal with the damnable evolution of social conventions, all brought about as I watch face-to-face interaction be rendered obsolete. I've been lured by the possibility of creating my ideal self within the confines of the textboxes of my profile. I've seen a lot of people whom Facebook dubs my "friends" indirectly declare their so-called nonconformity to "fit in". We've all taken the liberty of airbrushing blemishes out and tweaking

aspects of ourselves that we're not too proud of, so that we can avoid facing them. There isn't an adult out there who can definitively tell me what this guy possibly could have meant behind that colon followed by a closing parenthesis, because we're all trying to navigate uncharted emotional territory ourselves.

Add this to the ever-present, modern-day concerns of losing your privacy, psychological harassment, pedophiles masquerading as underwear models, online poker, cyberbullies, piracy, extremist propaganda, etc. and before you know it, *The Matrix* seems like a piece of cake.

Despite how convenient the Internet is in my life, as outrageous as it sounds, I sometimes find myself wishing that I grew up in an age without it. I'm constantly bombarded with distractions, so many of which lack any form of substance. I am constantly overwhelmed by a stream of information all advertised to be relevant, that in the end, leave me lost in some form of existential despair. I need some rest from all these unborn chicken voices in my head. I need some semblance of peace and quiet in an age where thousands of advertisements, tweets, and instant messages clamor for my attention all at once.

It's tempting, really, to just crawl into a fetal position in fear and listen to Radiohead's seminal 1997 album called "OK Computer" while watching more dystopian sci-fi flicks. What keeps me from doing so is this nagging feeling that I'll miss out if I don't stay connected 24/7, a potent cocktail of peer pressure, curiosity, and boredom (especially during summer vacation). It's a vicious cycle: The more you're on the internet, the more you want to use it. It's nearly impossible to stay away from it forever, too, unless you want to be seen as difficult to contact and uncool in the eyes of your peers. (Incidentally, in this day and age, in order to survive, one has to keep track of variations in semantics: My generation will probably deem "cool" obsolete soon, to replace it with "coolbeans" or "awesomesauce" or other mutations of adjectives.)

It's funny, really. Once, not too long ago, I attempted to cut myself off from the Internet for a while, cold turkey. For the first time in recent memory, I was bored. Not the anxious kind of boredom I get from constantly anticipating another update or message, but the sort of boredom of not having anything to do. That was the kind of boredom the rest of humanity had in abundance before the invention of the Internet. Ironically, that was also the boredom that became so elusive to me for most of my life. I spent my newfound free time walking around, staring blankly into space, and doing certain things I normally didn't do because I was too busy on the Internet. It was refreshing because I lived in the present, and I was *aware* of it. Without the Internet, I guess, I could've been part of several amateur bands, most of which probably would've looked like Nirvana wannabes. I might even have learned to cook, which has been a dream of mine which I've been reliably unsuccessful at. I would have done a variety of things, both beneficial and superficial, to escape the boredom, just as others have before me. (It is worth noting that during the duration that this essay was written, the Internet itself has ironically proven to be a great distraction.) My attention span certainly would've been longer, that's for sure. Life might have been better. *Might.*

However, after a couple of days, I realized that being totally disconnected was too much of a hassle, given the way people now live in this modern age. I couldn't even count how many times I had to say "I can't do that because I don't log onto Facebook anymore," at the inconvenience of the people around me within the span of an hour. I eventually had to give in and grudgingly reconnect to the Internet, because I felt bad for the co-tutor I taught with, who became a messenger between me and our volunteer program's Facebook group. And yes, that really is my honest-to-god reason. I didn't want to do it, but I had to. I realized that most of us of

this generation, myself included, have grown with nearly any form of access to the Internet as a secondary appendage, and we've grown accustomed to it. We've grown to rely on it.

There are many reasons for our reliance on the Internet, many of which are, admittedly, sound and reasonable, such as online shopping, connecting with friends across the globe, keeping up with the latest trends, all common knowledge to anyone who has used a search engine. I might be some fickle, angst-ridden teenager, I'm totally aware that the Internet is possibly the singular, most massive phenomenon to show up on the figurative doorstep of humanity, from the day the first *homo sapiens* stood erect to the latest bad metaphor. I don't take it for granted... most of the time. Somehow, I feel that my attempts at resisting this change is just me being -- well, the human that I am.

As much as the Internet is *the* black hole of my time and attention, when it comes down to it, I, more or less, brought this upon myself. Everything I've mentioned so far is the result of the choice I made to use the Internet in the first place -- that's if I had a choice in the first place, seeing as this bandwagon is something I had to jump on to out of a lack of things to do with my time, and stayed on out of necessity. Did I use the Internet because I needed it, or did I need the Internet just to use it?

At times, I wonder if things could go back to the way they were before the Internet existed. I seriously doubt it, though and in a way, it's okay. It's no use dwelling on what could've been. After all, the only way to go is forward. The internet will continue to grow and permeate every aspect of our lives. Different branches of sociology and psychology might develop around online communications. Any aspiring John Hughes will now have to update his list of archetypes to include acne-ridden teenagers with blogs as he writes the script for his next teenage drama. As for myself, I might even mature into a functional member of society and accept the internet as a

part of life. Even if I've missed out on those rounds of *patintero*, I guess that life has somehow compensated it, one way or another. I'll have to learn to cope with the changes that happen because of it, though. I'll have to learn to strike the balance, and find the golden mean between how much has changed, and how little stays the same. Then, one day, the Internet and I will sort our differences out, and I'll learn to live with it, maybe even embrace it, just the way I should.