

BBS's : Social Media and File Sharing in 1987

The most dramatic "future" I ever lived in, was 1987. There was no public accessible internet.

No WiFi. Laptops were suitcases. If you had a computer, you were one of the few. And that few used computers to load the totally awesome original "California Games". I was one of the few. But like Neo on his search for Morpheus, I knew there was more. I needed to expand my reach on the tech grid in its infancy. Selling my second computer, a Tandy TRS-80 Color Computer 3, I went mainstream and bought a used Commodore 64. It came with a box full of pirated 5.25" floppy disks and a 300 baud modem. 300 baud means painstakingly slow. You would use the modem to dial into other computers through the telephone land line. After you hear the audible handshake of computers in a fury of staticky computer tones, you watched the text stream in front of your eyes.

That's data streaming through copper wires at roughly 500 bps. Electronic sounds played through the telephone line so that a modem can translate into digital input that the computer could understand.

- 500 bps - bits per second
- A character on your keyboard will simply take one byte - it takes 8 bits to create 1 byte
- Doing the math, that's 62.5 characters per second
- Factor in error correction, old copper lines, and latency - you were getting nowhere near even that speed

At this very second, I am averaging 25 Mbps, or 25,000,000 bps, on my home WiFi.

So you can see, things have changed a little.

Just imagine the amount of data that had to stream through that 300 baud connection to download a game. It often took all night - just to fill a floppy disk. Or if it spanned multiple disks, we would use a new technology called zipping. Zipping compressed the data to make for faster downloads. Of course we know zipping today, its built into the OS and have all seen WinZip tell you you have used their program 10,232 times without paying. But back then, you had to search for the zip software across multiple BBS's - and hope you had enough *credits* on that particular BBS to download.



What's a BBS? An electronic Bulletin Board System. Once you dialed into another computer, the BBS provided a text based interface to interact. It had had things like Email, chatting (though most only allowed chatting with the system operator - or SysOp), and file sharing - the main reason we dialed-in. File sharing meant, to us, free games. There were even forums and online gaming - text gaming. Still, they were a heck of a lot of fun at the time.

With the BBS file sharing came a new level of piracy. Software piracy. We looked at code in a hex editor and could figure out how to hack any copy protection that was there. One hacked, we would proudly make the game display our handles (user names) as the game loaded. It was hightech crime - theft and digital graffiti. We had a language our language for our hacks: Elite, Warez, 0 dayz hacked - even -2 dayz meaning it wasn't even on the market. It was a game, and who was the best.

It was very sci-fi feeling at the time. An alternate universe opened before me that very few were part of, and you had to have the "know how". I felt power and knowledge, and on the brink of a world about to go digital.

-Adam