

INC Zine
Full Night - The Best Romanian Internet Cafe

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**Institute of
network cultures**

THE VOID



AP.6





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FROM

THE

LAST

REMAIN

It's around 3 or 4 in the morning - and my priority right now is to make sure I open, and then close the apartment door quietly enough so that my parents won't get woken up by my sudden appearance in the house. Although it might seem like it, I didn't go out with my friends in the club or at the bar that night; I was coming back from a "Full Night" at the most popular Internet cafe chain in town.



INTIAO

As is common with post communist countries, Western trends reach us 10 years later. After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the brutal transition to the free market, Romania was a bit late to the 90's trend of Internet/ Cyber Cafes. The 2000's were instead the golden age for the Internet Cafe in Romania. For a solid decade, every teenager could have cheap and reliable access to the World Wide Web and especially to the beast that was Counter Strike 1.6.

But after ten strong years, internet cafes became extinct, almost overnight. Redditors along with old and new bloggers alike are now collectively grieving and reminiscing about the good old days of the 2000s, when the grass was greener and the internet cafes were the place to be.

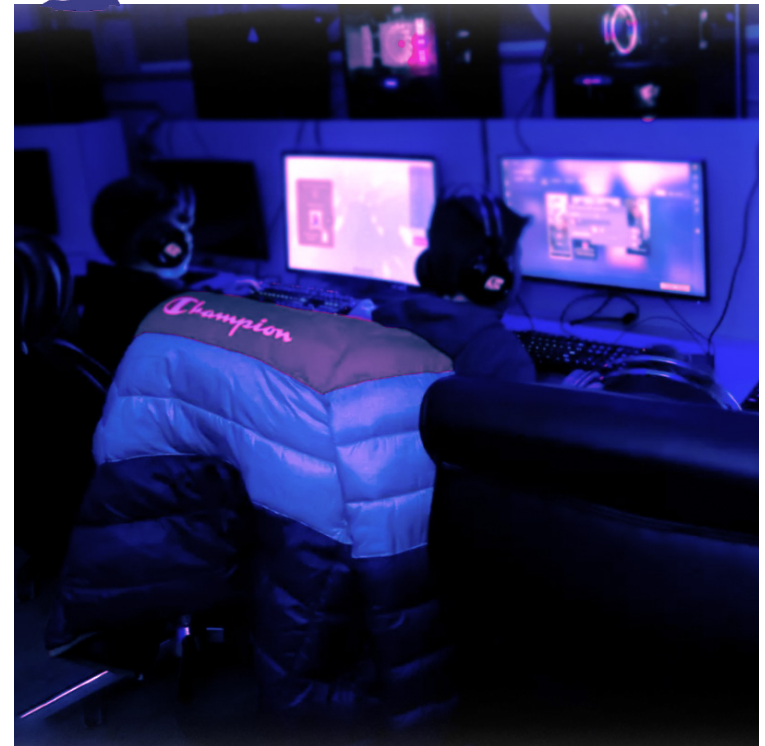
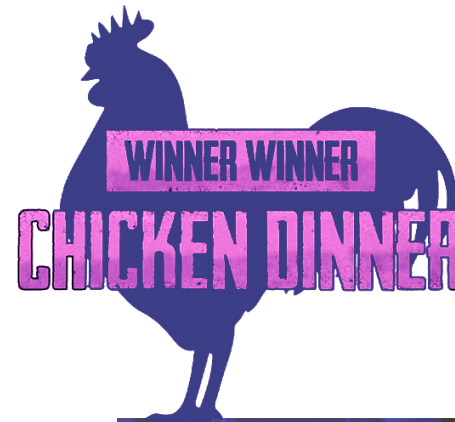
Yet somehow, somewhere, in the north-east side of the country, in a city bordering the Republic of Moldova, the Internet Cafe became something of a living fossil - thriving and surviving even today.



Although the second city in Romania, in terms of general population, size and development, Iași is the definition of the underdog. While neither as cool as the capital nor as flashy (for Western sensibilities) as Cluj, Iași has been a city blessed with a constant growth in all its sectors, including for our intents and purposes, internet cafes. At its peak, Iași was home to three internet cafe franchises along with smaller establishments when most cities in the

country could only host at most two or three locales.

No one knows what were the right ingredients for such a miracle to happen, but what's known is that since 2003, a new generation of Internet Cafes started popping up throughout the city - and slowly, but surely, they would be the catalyst for a subculture that would eventually define entire generations of local millennial and gen Z gamers.



Internet Cafes are somewhat of a misnomer.

Or at the very least, this term is now used in Romania to refer to a very specific place that has a very specific community - that of gamers.



WHAT IS AN IN

According to Wikipedia, the term "Internet Cafe" refers to an establishment whose main form of revenue/ profit is made through providing affordable access to the World Wide Web using high speed internet and dedicated hardware (usually gaming computers) to as many people as possible. As with any other private endeavors, variants can pop-up through mixing and matching different businesses: some internet cafes offer food/beverages, others might do some print jobs, and so on. The uniqueness of each internet cafe is not limited to the novelty of the business idea, as much as its associated community, which defines its unique purpose.

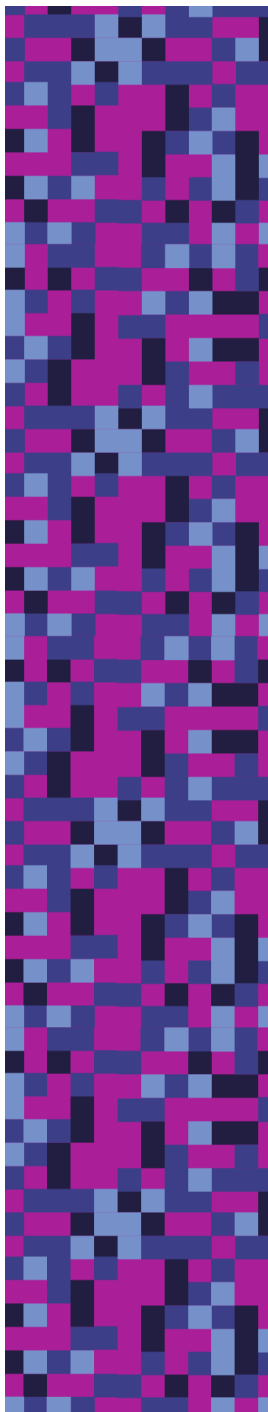
Internet cafes were originally called cyber cafes, after London's own Cyberia Cafe (according to Brits), although early variants of it have been documented ever since the 80's in Hong Kong. In the beginning, these places were often frequented by everyday

people whose needs and wants were to connect with others virtually or to surf (as it was once called) the web. To this end, the writers cannot go into more detail about the specifics or the vibes of this time and place, as both of them were too young and too into gaming to relate to a normal person's experience with the Internet.

What we do know is that these normal people with their normal needs for virtual communication would eventually be replaced by the gamers, whose appetite for new hardware, newer games and ever-shrinking wallets made these places the perfect middle, and meeting ground. And business owners were eager to welcome and adapt their locales for them. Office chairs were replaced with gaming chairs, webcams became gaming headphones, and lightbulbs turned into gaming neons. Anything to make a gamer feel perfectly at home.

INTERNET CAFE?

FROM OUR P.O.V.



EARLY HISTORY

But first, some history and international context from our Balkan Gen Z perspective:

The World Wide Web and its avatar, the Personal Computer, were the central pieces of technology that laid the foundation for what was to become the Internet Cafe. In June of 1991, SFnet was the first entity to put together the exact building blocks for one by installing 25 computer terminals throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. It thus managed to establish a working coffeehouse network.

Following SFnet's success, businesses around the area started to imitate and

improve upon the original recipe, creating cybercafes and finally, the internet cafes. In the beginning, these establishments were marketed as places that gave you access to web communication services for an affordable price. It's best to think of these places as an upgraded version of the payphone. Users would typically frequent cybercafes to send emails, browse IRC channels and do light research of current news.

This is what gamers typically call "normie" behavior.

As technology, and more specifically hardware, evolved in the 2000's, so did the scope and the clientele of some of these cybercafes. Personal Computers could now reliably run not just offline single-player games, but giants like Starcraft, Defense of the Ancients and World of Warcraft quickly became virtual staples in many harddrives around the globe. LAN parties were just becoming popular, and innovative cybercafe owners quickly realized that they could grow big by facilitating a dedicated place for not just a LAN party, but LAN party-parties.

Why go through the trouble of creating a timetable, setting up a dedicated server and cleaning your gamer cave, when someone else could do that for you? And for cheap too.

It is the writers' personal belief then that the shift from just offering access to virtual communication to including gaming in their repertoire of services is what transformed the then cyber cafes into the 2000's internet cafes.

To understand how big the Internet Cafe craze became, one must look no further than to Basshunter's hit, DOTA, released in 2006 - marking the exact turning point of this mentality shift. The music video presents three main environments considered, at the time, the three epicenters of ideal Gamer life: the Bedroom, the Club and the Internet Cafe, with the last being turned into a concert-tournament hybrid. Viewers are presented in the beginning with the imagery of the

classic LAN party, with all its ups (girlfriends) and downs (moms); to be then hit with a perplexing club scene, in which no computer is seen in sight, as the focus is on the social interactions. The glue that binds it all is eventually presented in the aforementioned Concert-Tournament Internet Cafe Hybrid - the ideal marriage between the highs and lows of competitive gaming and the social adrenaline of late-night clubbing. It is the sea of computer screens, the jungle of jumbled cables and the comfort within the concrete walls of this Mega LAN Party that many gamers consider the great Internet Cafe Utopia.

But how accurate was this admittedly very idealistic depiction in different parts of the world? Especially in the land of Dracula?

As we, the writers, were too young to experience the birth and the early life of internet cafes in Romania, we have to resort to second-hand reports. Luckily, we can get a very small but relevant overview of internet cafes in Romania straight out of 2004, in a study on Internet access in the country at the time.

It seems that 2004 had quite the downer vibe, as the writers were not so sure about the future prospects of the internet cafe. But even from their language, we can gather that they are still using the word to reference the business model as it was operating in the West. We can therefore make an assumption that the iconic gamer identity of the Romanian internet cafe came sometime later in the Y2Ks.

With the advent of the Personal (Home) Computer, access to the World Wide Web slowly started to democratize. In the West this started in the late 80's, in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, it came with the new millenia. Because of the abrupt jump to capitalism, internet infrastructure developed very quickly, as there wasn't much older tech to replace; but at the same time, access to it was disproportionately overrepresented in urban centers. In the countryside, access to the Internet is now still almost exclusively done through mobile phones.

Having a (recent) Communist past that has now transitioned to a free-market democracy, Romania has seen a rapid increase in consumer goods spending and in technological advancements. Unlike the Netherlands however, Romania only has had a few decades of experience to deal with this mentality shift in creating subcultures around consumer goods/ products.

Similar to China, Romania does have a bigger sense of social cohesion, and social activities are still a much bigger part of the everyday person's life than in NL (the weather helps a lot too). Simply hanging out on the street is much more common in these countries than in the West, where such behavior is more associated with (dangerous) teenagers and their unsuccessful helicopter parents.

Comparing liberal Western countries (what Romania aspires to be ever since 2008) to still existing Communist countries such as China

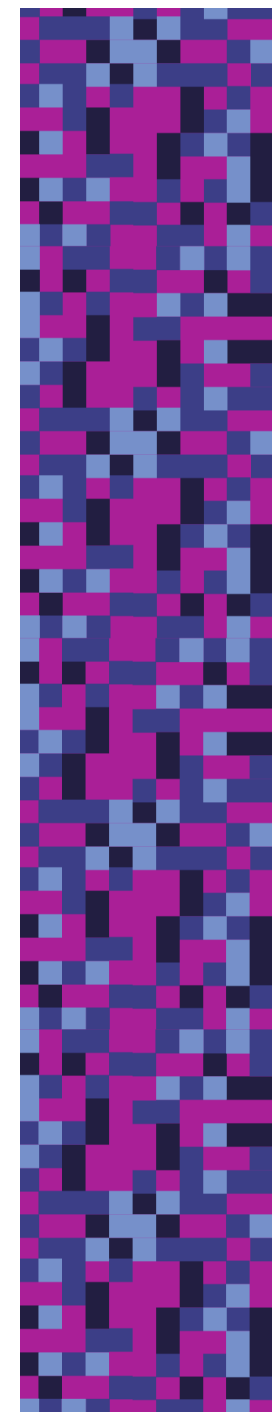
(what Romania once was), it can be understood how on one hand, democratic access to rapidly developing and affordable technology seems to accelerate the shift to gaming as a more individualistic hobby - while on the other hand, having a higher barrier of entry to certain hardware and using a middleman (or middle-space) seems to paradoxically create a stronger sense of community in gamers. By using this axis we better understand where Romania can be placed with regards to internet cafe culture.

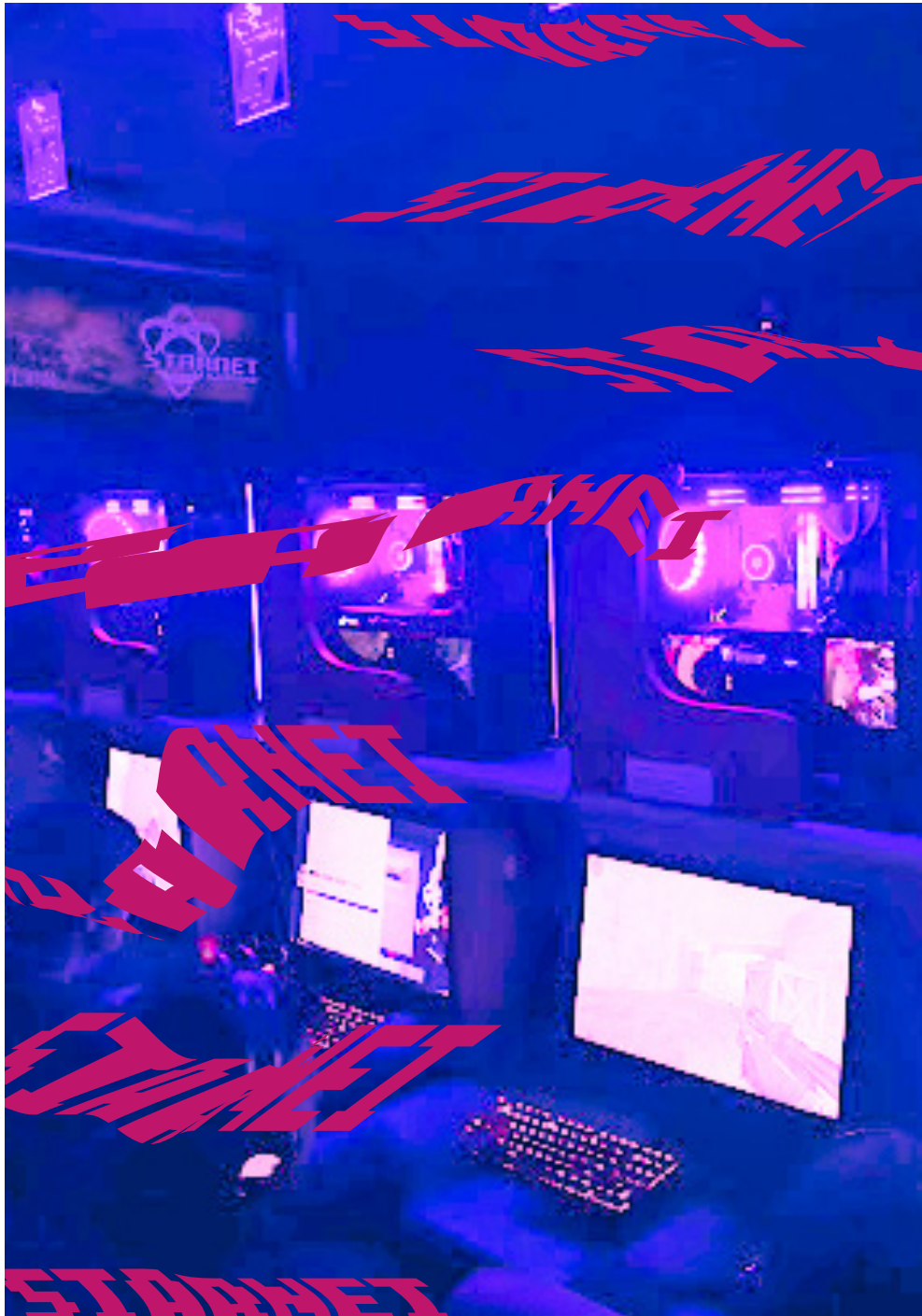
To us, the writers, internet cafes offered this unique situation where a private entity can create the ideal third place for young people who are interested in gaming to hang out through a relaxed barrier of entry, non-stop hours and affordable pricing by using recently built reliable and high speed internet infrastructure. As a new-commer to the capitalist game, Romania has made numerous enthusiastic changes to laissez-faire economic policies to contrast with its dictatorial past. Thus, the strategy of running an internet cafe had to follow this new mentality. Combine it with people's generally more social predisposition (itself a product of recent culture, soviet urban planning and challenging living conditions) and their love for nightlife, and you got yourself the perfect business.

Everyone was welcome, regardless of social status, ethnicity, gender or technical skill. The internet cafe was where competitive MOBA girl-gamers met with casual FIFA-enjoyer highschoolers and CS:GO-obsessed gang members.

WHERE ROMANIA STANDS

All internet cafes
were populated not
just during the night,
but more often
than not, during
school hours.





STARNET



Romania is a big country whose still developing highway industry makes it hard to explore it thoroughly in a short to moderate amount of time. For the purposes of this project, we will talk about the internet cafes in the city we grew up in, Iași; and we will focus on describing one specific locale called Starnet, along with mentions of other similar competitors. Starnet was and still is the biggest internet cafe (ex) franchise in the city and a general point of reference in regards to organization, pricing, services and diversity of offers.

This choice of subject matter was made firstly to honor our shared community and lived experience, making sure that we speak from the point of view of a community member and not a detached, cold observer. This comes with certain disadvantages, mainly the difficulties we have faced in

trying to go deeper into the inner workings of Starnet as a private endeavor. Business owners in Romania are notoriously paranoid and opaque about their practices, not eager to collaborate or give details into how they run their business or what their motivations are. We have resorted to interviews with other Starnet goers where our knowledge was limited, in an effort to still adhere to a vague sense of objectivity or integrity.

But beyond that, it is the writers' belief that what the city of Iași offered in terms of quality, such as service, products and community, was indeed of higher quality than the country's average offers. In the subchapters that follow, we aim to describe Starnet's history to the best of our abilities, precisely to archive and better understand the ideal building blocks for a Third Space that embraces the virtual world.



BEGINNINGS

On their website, Starnet proudly claims that in 2023 they have celebrated 20 consecutive years of successful business practice. We were unable to find any relevant information of Starnet's inception or anything dating earlier than 2014. And knowing how private the Owner is in regards to additional details meant that it would be quite hard to assemble a complete timeline for now. Business owners in Romania are in general quite reluctant to sharing too much information, as they always risk either getting questioned by the Government (which already eats up a lot of the profits through high VAT, income taxes and much more); or they might accidentally overshare unethical business practices, which is still (unfortunately) the norm.

We suspect that the establishment was indeed started in 2003, as we did find an archive of it on the local trade register (?) but the registration name is different and the address seems to be someone's apartment rather than something akin

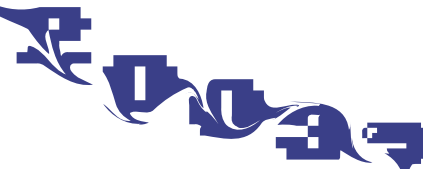
to a cafe. Beyond the respectable humble beginnings and perhaps some (possible) loopholes at play, we suspect that it took quite the time to eventually set up such a locale, as equipment was very expensive for the time, it needed to be upgraded quite frequently - and not to mention the egregious prices software companies demanded for commercial use.

What type of small business owner would be thrilled to pay for Windows, Winrar and other such expensive expenses?

For now, this is the amount of gossip we are able to entertain. For honesty's sake, we have to admit that our introduction to internet cafes was linked directly with highschool, thus around 2015-2016. Around this time is when it felt as if the Internet Cafe phenomena was gaining rapid momentum. Their positioning and identity was also quite clear: this was not your grandma's internet cafe where you log in to Yahoo to check your business email or nigerian prince scams.

This was a place for hip, dank gamers who no-scope everyday while listening to Skrillex and 420 blazing it. Internet Cafe owners knew what gamers, and especially teenagers, wanted

Looking at older, 90's locales from Western Europe & the USA such as Easy Internet Cafe, we were shocked by the clean, corporate look that these cafes sported. Starnet and it's competitors could not be any more different: rooms were dark, only lit by neon bands; the computers were slim, edgy and dark; and the walls were all decorated in gamer references, usually paintings of characters from different video games, with different rooms inside of the cafe having very thematic names like Gods, Gladiators, or Pirates.



THE STARNET

ECONOMY

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If there was one thing that Starnet focused strongly on from the very beginning, it was organization, structure and economy. The moment you stepped in as a newcomer, you were required to sign in their database. You were asked to show an ID, fill in a paper with basic contact information, and to pose for a picture.

Some might consider this a draconic measure, but this initiation ritual was spiritually meant to show how intertwined the virtual and physical are. On a more practical level though, knowing that every customer had a personal account, unique username and an overview of recent activities inside the establishment put a lot more weight on individual actions and responsibilities.

If you behaved poorly, (which is frequently the case in many internet cafes) the staff could immediately intercept and penalize you. If you were a good customer and a teamplayer, the community or staff could reward you with (sometimes under-the-hand) perks or discounts. Such manners of dealing with gaming-based communities have

been also implemented in countries like Korea, where attaching limited personal information to League of Legends accounts and/or internet cafe customers has resulted in less overall toxicity and misbehavior - no wonder it also worked in Iași...

But this initial screening wasn't done just for security's sake. If it were just for that, Starnet would have been seen not as a successful internet cafe, but as a prison. Instead, they coated this safety measure with a UI and quality-of-life improvement virtual service. Every computer in Starnet was locked behind a log-in screen. This meant that unintended use by strangers was kept at a minimum. And more than that, every Starnet computer had a custom navigation screen, slightly different from a normal Windows configuration, so that anyone, regardless of their IT skills or experience, could access whatever virtual service they wanted at a moment's notice. Users also had a whole internal economy they could manage through this UI and that really reinforced the idea that you are not using a regular computer, you are using Starnet's curated version of it.

Speaking of internal economy. After you logged in to your account, one last thing to do before playing was to, of course, buy hours. Buying hours was the main Starnet product. Customers had the option

of buying different amounts of hours that allowed them unrestricted access to the computers. You could either get a standard fee of per hour spent in front of the screen, or you could buy hours in bulk for a discount. One, three and five hour packages were usually the standard, but for dedicated gamers, even 24 hours packages could be bought.

Along with that, Starnet had their own currency, called "stars". Stars could be obtained either from unused purchased hours, or through codes that were usually handed by starnet staff directly - or by simply buying them. Stars acted as readymade discounts, every Starnet product had 2 prices: in RON, or in RON + Stars, with the latter always costing less real-life currency provided you collected enough stars.

Starnets' own UI also kept track of your money and stars through your own dedicated wallet. Users could not just hoard or keep the spare change for future sessions, but could also show some generosity by transferring money or stars to other players, further fostering a sense of beyond-virtual community.

Along with virtual products, Starnet offered real-life products in the shape of drinks, food, and more recently, even shisha (for a good price too). Bringing food from

outside was considered against the rules, although it was hard to reinforce, as even the employees themselves would bring in or order food for their impossibly long 10/20 hrs shifts. In its golden days, Starnet had a dedicated, non-stop, in-house restaurant called Stargrill, a kind of gamer canteen. Customers would usually ask Starnet staff for a Stargrill menu and after making up their mind, would walk a few meters to the restaurant desk and kitchen, shout their order and go back to their game. After 30 to 40 mins, Starnet staff would graciously visit their computer desk with a freshly cooked dish, and the customer would in turn quickly and carelessly toss the money so as to not lose the focus on their match. Stargrill offered a variety of finger foods perfectly crafted to be eaten in short, seconds-long bursts, when you were either in a match lobby, going to lane, or respawning.

Everytime you bought something from Starnet, a small receipt would be printed and handed to you. Each one started with a small message that read: "The best Romanian Internet Cafe"



THE FULL NIGHT EXPERIENCE

Beginning with 2015, Starnet would attempt to differentiate itself from the other Internet cafes by creating a stronger community with its customer base, those being mostly middle and high school teenagers. The in-house UI always presented customers with different choices of products, like the previously-mentioned bulk hours. But now they would upgrade to contain dedicated packages based on the time of day most customers would be most active.

One such product was the now-classic “Full Night” package.

This item single-handedly turned Starnet from a small local establishment to a local business giant. For the very low price of approx. 30 RON (less than 8 EUR at the time), you could sit

in front of the computer for 8 uninterrupted hours starting anywhere from 20 to 2 o'clock. Internet cafes in Romania were different from its Western counterparts for having similar working hours, and being under similar jurisdiction to casinos, which were open non-stop. With this “Full Night” product, Starnet was no longer offering a better deal just compared to other internet cafes. They were now directly competing with hostels for quick and cheap overnight accommodation; and clubs for cheap and safe social entertainment. This decision inevitably transformed the Internet Cafe into the dominant alternative night scene in Iași.

Starnet employees never did background checks. Neither were they paid enough to do that. The owner could not be bothered either.

Contrary to a (night) club, the bar for entry was nonexistent. This meant that for a minor, the Internet Cafe was their first introduction to nightlife. The laissez faire business strategy that Starnet pushed, of having a main consumer-group composed of minors, should have been a PR disaster. That was, if the authorities had been notified, or if parents were made aware of this. Luckily, most parents had no idea what an Internet Cafe was, or what an Internet Cafe did. The more helicopter types assumed that it was a casino, as the Romanian term for games (jocuri) was usually associated more with gambling than MOBAs.

Surprisingly enough, this mix of ages, backgrounds, and later on even genders, made internet cafes both the most inclusive and one of the more toxic spaces of Iași. The best way to picture oneself inside Starnet is to think of a place like 4chan or perhaps more aptly, a League of Legends /all chat, where everyone sits in the same room. Among the cacophony of mouse and keyboard clicks, curses, slurs and broken English was the norm. The occasional encouragement or sincere congratulations for carrying a match felt ten times more rewarding in this sea of

intensity. Yet, no matter the frequency of f-, c-, g- and other one-letter slurs, when it came time to have a ciggy break, everyone came outside the locale in good spirits, reminiscing about the crazy experience that was the previous match, regardless if it was a loss or a win.

In its golden days, a Starnet establishment would usually be frequented by high schoolers skipping class, young professionals who could not afford either the Microsoft or Adobe Suite, unemployed people that would use the Internet to apply for vacancies, and sometimes by the rare homeless person who had nowhere else to stay during the long and cold winter nights. Similar to Internet Cafes in Japan, Starnet acted as a temporary shelter solution for the jobless, homeless and in general, the less privileged. For them, the internet cafe was everything a hotel could actually provide in this new era of digitalization. Starnet graciously offered not just a great selection of video games, but (questionably) legal licenses for the MS and Adobe Suites, Yahoo Mail and Google Drive, food through Stargrill, and even limited printing services in some cases.

Overnight, thousands of nerdy teenagers now had to create the most elaborate excuses to get to spend the night in what their parents thought was an elaborate casino establishment.

To us, Starnet seemed to have a very simple hierarchical structure. There was the Owner, and immediately underneath him, the Starnet employee. The heart and soul of every Starnet location was its Operator, a person whose job was, on paper, to provide technical help when the PCs would act up.

But that was just the job title. In reality, the Operator would do everything:

helping people with IT problems, being a good host to the newcomers, acting as a guard when unwelcome guests would show up, doing the regular clean up, selling snacks and keeping the tab. And all of this on a 10, to even 20-hour shift (counting ciggy breaks only) on (less than) minimum wage. A Starnet location would usually have one to maybe two Operators active at a time, and no one else.

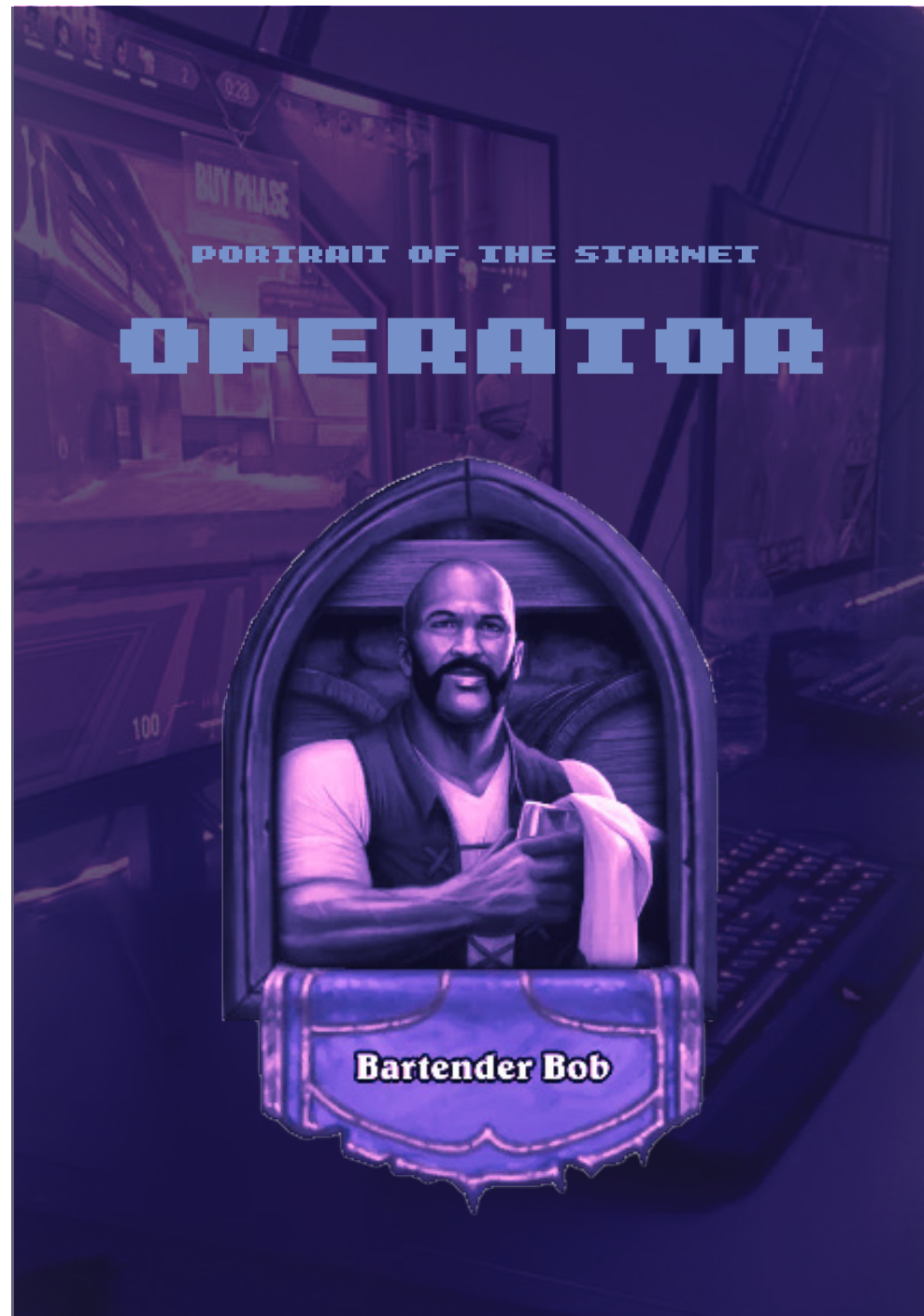
Though the job prospects were awful, the Operator was perhaps the best person you could befriend in a Starnet. The Operator was in many regards just like you; either a nerdy League player, or a more streetsmarts guy who enjoyed his CS 1.6. Throughout your "Full Night" set (and thus, during his

shift), the Operator would be right next to you, playing a round of CS:GO to slack off; bringing you a Cola while talking about how to better play your jungle main; or telling you about his break-up on a cigarette break. The Operator's mix of slight sense

The man next to the cash register always seemed bored or phased out. But the moment I say the magic word: "Operator!" - his face switches to either interest or perplexion.

of authority and relatability made him the perfect pillar for the internet cafe community, as many people likened him to the Bartender of an RPG, who introduces you to all sorts of people, stories, gossip (and quests).

To add to that persona, most of Starnet's Operators were an important part of the community even outside of their working hours, as most of them would finish their shift only to start playing as customers themselves, in turn passing the authority to the next person in charge. This shifting between employee and customer meant that every Starnet locale was deeply in touch with the wants and needs of the community - and though Starnet was a business at the end of the day, it managed to organically create a sense of community that many enterprises today could only dream of.



RISE TO FAME

Around 2016, Starnet started getting an influx of new visitors and veteran customers constantly, regardless of season, month, week or time of day. The previously mentioned laissez faire mentality that the Owner pushed for had finally paid off. So much so that new Starnet locations popped up almost overnight, in sync. The Owner had also planned for each location to have a certain specialization, or niche:

STARNET TG. CUCU

Starnet Târgu Cucu is by far the oldest and the most popular location, situated in an old, slowly dilapidating building. If the outside of the building gives off a slightly pessimistic atmosphere, the interior tells another story: old interwar architecture fuses with neon lights and slick gaming stations, painted walls depict different video game characters and the same 2hr club gaming playlist plays nonstop. The location has 3 rooms filled with computers, with the central room providing

an additional Playstation station, therefore it was seen as a less casual-friendly location and more as the place where you go to grind out ranked matches. This Starnet's highlight was by far the StarGrill business which was operating in the same building. Instead of having to order and then wait up to two hours for some gamer grub, customers only had to talk to Starnet personnel and they would get their dish of choice within half an hour guaranteed.



STARNET IULIUS

The (previously) third in size and second in popularity, Starnet Iulius was an instant hit with the local gamer community and eventually proved itself to be a successful investment for the long run. Found on the ground floor of Iulius Mall, a symbolic location where the first-ever Mall was constructed in Iași after the 1989 Revolution. Spanning over a few different rooms and even having its own entrance, outside of the Mall's working hours, Starnet Iulius Mall was especially a hit with younger

audiences. As overworked parents came to the Mall for their weekly grocery shopping, leaving their kid/ teenager sitting for 2 hours in front of a computer or a PlayStation console for the low price of 10 RON (approx. 3 Euros) seemed like the logical and safest choice.

Perhaps this choice is what ultimately led to the closing of KidsLand, the Mall's own playground, which was itself on the brink of celebrating 10 years of activity.

STARNET PODU ROȘ

Another of Starnet's most successful out of the new generation of franchises, the Podu Roș branch proved to be extremely profitable with its unconventional yet somehow intimate location. Hiding in plain sight right in front of one of the main city roads, Starnet Podu Roș boasted

a giant "PUBG or Fortnite" banner in its glory days, no doubt an ingenious trick to get people's attention and thus, new customers. Perhaps this was also the reason why all Fortnite and PUBG competitions started happening there almost exclusively.

STARNET UNIRII



The smallest branch out of all of the locations, Starnet Unirii was strategically placed right in the middle of the bustling city center. Although at first it seemed like it was the main player, and the one to hopefully bring the most revenue, Starnet Unirii was the first branch to close permanently. Being known for its polarizing effect, customers thought the prices were too expensive for the high-end machines

while the cheaper prices gave you access to subpar computers.

Today and at the time, Starnet Unirii is remembered to have managed to pull in the casual market, with the main money makers being the Playstation and Xbox consoles. That money however seemed to not be enough to keep this establishment afloat.

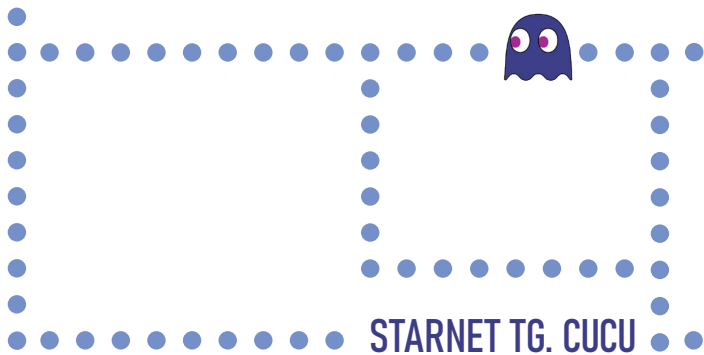
STARNET HALA CENTRALĂ

One of the more notorious of the bunch, Starnet Hala Centrală was an example in resilience, managing to outlive its Unirii counterpart in spite of its drawbacks. Not being known either for high performing tech or memorable staff, and being placed in an awkward location on the first floor of Hala Centrală commercial center, this location felt more like an afterthought rather than a focused, strategic business decision. Sharing

a location with a mall or commercial center can be both a blessing and a curse; Starnet Iulius Mall, with its own ground floor entrance, proved to be the first option. But Starnet Hala Centrală's position on the first floor in an establishment with a 12 hr opening hours schedule made it challenging to actually access the nonstop Internet Cafe inside; especially in the weekend, and at night, when most people were most eager to gather.







STARNET TG. CUCU



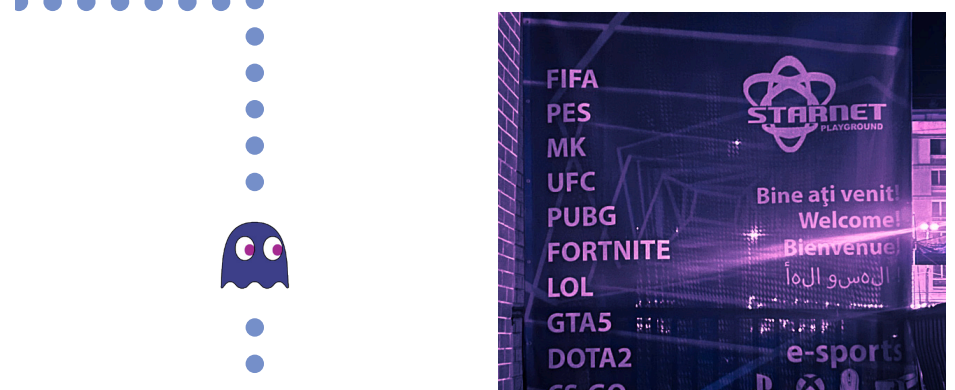
STARNET IULIUS



STARNET PODU ROȘ



STARNET UNIRII



STARNET HALA CENTRALĂ



THE DARK AGES



The rise of Starnet seemed more and more exponential, but during 2019, things seemed to mellow - locations got closed permanently and less people were coming. You could feel it in the prices that were growing, and in the avalanche of spur of the moment limited offers, discounts and packages Starnet would send on your phone.

The breaking point however proved to be March of 2020 and the worldwide lockdowns that followed afterwards. Every business got hit, but Internet Cafes were hit the hardest, as the bulk of their customers saw themselves locked inside the house for almost three consecutive months - only to be followed by more random week-long interdictions sprinkled in throughout the whole year.

In an effort to curb the huge amount of losses the business had suffered, the Owner had resorted to some drastic measures. Firstly, Starnet started operating according to casino regulations during 2021 (and 2022). This meant

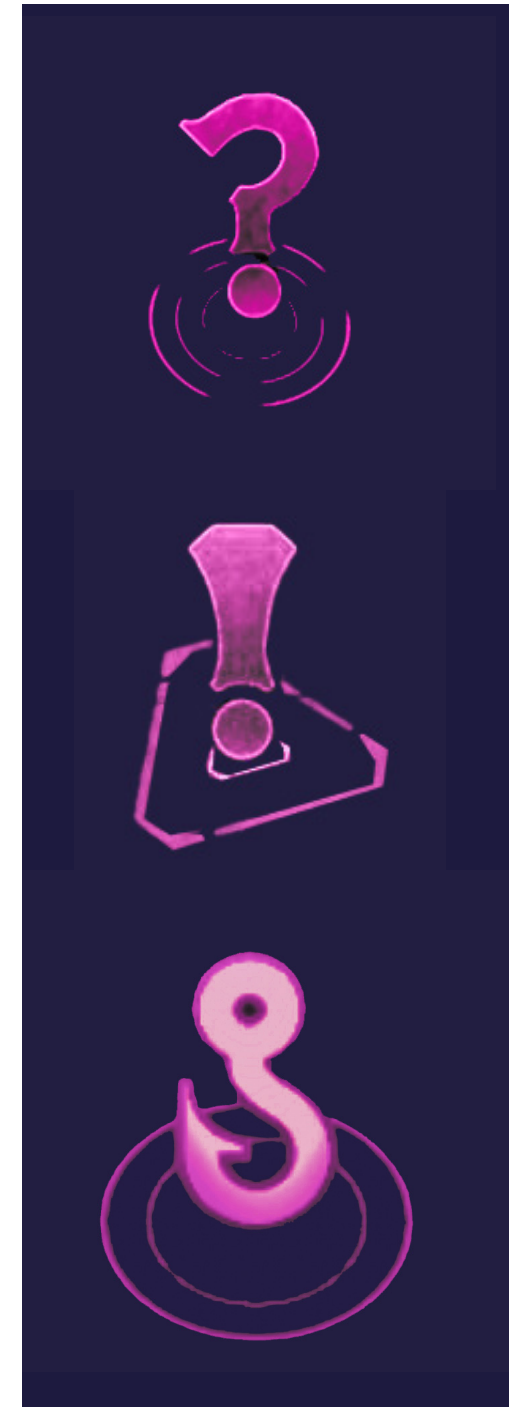
that the Internet Cafe was allowed to operate from morning until midnight on non-lockdown weeks, and to be fully closed on lockdown weeks. This rule gave both casinos and Internet Cafes an edge against other establishments like museums, clubs or restaurants, which had very strict opening schedules, with exact visiting days being planned and announced weeks or even months ahead of time; whereas the former would just open immediately after a lockdown - at least that is what the documents said.

Behind official documents and behind the vigilant eyes of the police however, Starnet was conducting business as usual. Within an old historical building, Tg. Cucu Starnet was as lively as ever, although customers and staff alike were more vigilant than ever before. Some precautions had to be taken, in order for the money to come in: gamers had to sit one chair apart from each other, effectively cutting the maximum capacity in half; masks were encouraged, but not mandatory; smoking

either inside or outside was strictly prohibited, so as to not draw the attention of the police; and exiting the building during a "Full Night" was the worst crime one could commit.

But by far the most interesting addition were the voice alerts that every computer now possessed: when staff learned that planned police inspections would take place throughout the lockdown months, they installed a customized voice announcement in each computer to alert the customers of incoming government checks. A few hours or minutes preceding the inspection, a gamer would hear mid-match a voice that would recommend customers engage in mask-wearing and social distancing while being outside their homes. The previous quick briefing by the Operator made the gamer understand that this was not in fact a kind request by Starnet staff to conform to basic lockdown rules, but a warning call that police inspections might happen in as little as 5 minutes. They knew that by the moment they heard that voice, they had to either leave the location immediately, or to wear a mask for the next few hours.

This is how Starnet managed to not only stay afloat during the worst of times, but to be more successful than even casinos, Romania's most thriving industry; subtly managing to evade the watchful eye of the Law. Subtlety was the way to go when the government called for drastic measures.



STARNET TODAY

As of 2023, the wave of bad luck continues to hit Sarnet. The inflation that followed the pandemic only made the regular customer think twice on whether or not to spend the night in Tg. Cucu or Iulius Mall. Prices kept rising, to the unbelievable 12.5 RON/hr (approx. 2.5 Euros) compared to the 5 RON/hr (approx. 1 Euro) that used to be the golden standard once.

Even so, Sarnet proves time and time again that resilience is what wins the long fight. Even with higher prices, less locations and diminished customer base, the Internet Cafe chain still seems to stay afloat for the moment. Locations seem to be continuously populated at a third or quarter of their capacity, and while the era of Sarnet championships is gone, they still proudly sponsor up-and-coming pro teams in an effort to hold their title of "Best Internet Cafe in Romania". To prove that 2023 is nothing like 2015, they have adapted to the times and are now giving extra discounts and offers to female customers in

an effort to combat sexism and to hopefully reach a previously untapped demographic. Their recent acquisition of brand new PS5 also suggests that perhaps casual players are slowly coming back too.

The second half of 2023 also proved to be of help to Sarnet, as Iași was nominated



almost overnight as the Esports Capital of the World. Thousands of esports fans, streamers and even professional teams all met up to battle it out on the territory that Sarnet called home. For a few weeks, Sarnet was no longer just a successful albeit small local attraction, it was a world-wide superstar enjoying its short but well deserved 15 minutes of fame.

Perhaps a new Golden Age era will begin for Sarnet, and in a few decades or centuries, Iași will be known not only for being the city of linden, the city of great ideas, or the city of

seven hills; but for being the city of Sarnet, evergreen protector and living museum of the Romanian Internet Cafe spirit.

That is, if we take the summer/ fall of 2023 to be a worthwhile and potent premonition.

Update: After a trip to photographically document the location, the writers were informed by the photographer that Sarnet Iulius Mall is no longer active. In its place, a VR-focused establishment was built, perhaps signaling to us the beginning of an entirely new era.



THE OTHER INTERNET CAFES IN IASI

As is usual with a successful business, Starnet spawned several imitators that hoped to attract clients by having cheaper prices or by being more convenient. If Starnet's first locations made sense when it came to busy areas of town, the newly opened internet cafes found a sustainable source of income by being located next to middle and highschools. LeVeL opened next to Hotel Unirea, thus next to the National College Iași (where the writers studied!), Gaming One, Two and Three closer to the Cantemir High School and Voodoo tried challenging Starnet the most by opening near Tg. Cucu, but ultimately closer to the Mihai Eminescu High School. Despite limiting their reach, they basically had a monopoly on the students they targeted, amplified by the fact that a lot of skipped classes used to be spent in such establishments. It's important to note that not only was Starnet more expensive and carried consoles as well as PCs, the locations were closer to universities or campuses, especially the mall location.

Even with them being more of the same, each held a different reputation, influenced by both the neighborhood they were located in and the students frequenting, and less by the quality of the services offered. G1, G2 and G3 were considered unsafe likely due to its lower prices compared to its competitors, making it an attractive place for the less privileged, especially the romani community. Due to widespread systemic discrimination, gang activity was predominant in these groups. A quick association between the Gs and criminal behavior such as drug dealing was quickly made in these circles, and thus stained the business reputation of these establishments. It is unknown if this is simply a consequence of the neighborhood or if it holds any truth, as Romania did have a drug problem (known as legale) in the late 2000s and early 2010s, especially in city highschools, either through the existence of spice shops, or in-person dealing. LeVeL



was possibly considered the nerdiest one, since it was located in a basement, however it didn't really have any stereotype attached to it.

On the other hand, Voodoo was and still is active in the competitive community, to this day organizing League of Legends or CSGO, recently CS2 and Valorant championships, independently or in collaboration with student's associations. This allowed it to be taken more seriously and probably preferred by hardcore gamers since organizing these

tournaments is seen as more passionate or legit than advertising that you carry the latest consoles or games (a la Starnet). The prizes also increased, starting from monetary compensations and now awarding video games or gaming gear for the podium placing teams.

Although the Starnet imitators did recognize that they can profit from their proximity to schools, this also came with drawbacks - limiting their clients to students only required lower prices not just for the computer or console services, but also for the food and beverages sold. This often included cutting corners by selling cheaper alternatives (commercializing the dubious energy drink Crazy Wolf for 4 RON, less than

1€, instead of the more expensive Red Bull, which sold for 10 RON or 2€ - an unbelievable price until the late 2010s), or by removing the menu in its entirety. However, for a while, not only were they packed during schooldays, but also during weekends or the summer holiday, becoming an actual appropriate third place for middle and highschoolers to spend their free time.

At the end of the 2010s, internet cafes were hit not only by the continuous rise of internet and video games access, but also by the Covid-19 pandemic. With everyone at home, many establishments chose to sell their PCs and consoles, sometimes even furniture, as they would be outdated by the end of lockdown anyway, finding a quick but

inconsistent revenue stream this way. This is also when Voodoo became even more active in the competitive community by starting its partnership with students associations and finding alternative income through the fees paid by the participants (100 RON or 20 euros/team was quite a large amount, but since no tournament would start with less than 16 teams it seems the gamers found it fair). In exchange for the promotion done by the associations, they would provide moderating and referee staff, as well as local servers for the competitions. Now that the restrictions are lifted, the tournaments take place at their location.

Long A



PERSONAL

The aim of this chapter is to paint a better picture of the atmosphere, culture and community surrounding the internet cafe in Iasi, Romania. Thus, we have conducted interviews, spoken and written, with its members in hopes of understanding the different experiences people had in their school years. This lends itself to a more casual and conversational approach to writing.

A wholesome aspect of the internet cafe culture not only we, but the people interviewed remember, is that it was common practice to ask the other Starnet go-ers, strangers or not, how their game was going on the way to your PC. Not only that, sometimes even the operators would add 10-15 minutes to your

time for free if you were playing a competitive game and couldn't leave the desk. Showing respect for video games was still not common in the early to mid 2010s, and this attitude was refreshing not only from adults, but also from other gamers. It seems that toxicity, even in gaming, is less common in real life dialogue than in online chat boxes.

STORIES

On the more teenager side of things, these places were often used for activities not allowed at home, the primary one being gaming, but also including smoking, watching, or drinking - it was quite easy to find an older student who turned 18 and pay him an extra hour in Starnet in exchange for a beer, while inside smoking and selling cigarettes by the piece to minors are only two of the more baffling realities of Romania in the early and mid 2010s. Perhaps this is what led to teens celebrating New Year's Eve in

Starnet; that, and the disconnect between the media's portrayal of house parties in

STARNET NEW YEAR'S EVE

large American homes, compared to our reality of apartments unfit for such an event. In Starnet, however, not only were there no parents to stand in your way, but you also had access to food, drinks and more than one PC - the bare necessities of a successful year-end party.

From the interviews, we have gathered that Romanian, and by extension Eastern European parents fall between one of two extremes when it comes to their attitudes regarding the internet and gaming. On the one hand, some parents were completely internet-phobic, believing until the last

WHAT ABOUT PARENTS?

moment possible that they could completely stop their children from accessing the internet, and monitoring their home activities closely - reading and homework were the only two options here. It makes

sense then why a lot of school students preferred internet cafes for after

school or weekend hangouts. On the other hand, even if parents didn't know better than to allow full, unmonitored internet access, asking them to buy or spend money on a game or console would result in a "no" at best, but most likely in a lecture - most of the times, there was no point in asking at all. From the prices to the absurdity of spending money for digital entertainment, teens knew that there was no way to turn their parents. In this case, the internet cafe was once again the ideal place for inviting your friends to a FIFA game on the new and expensive Sony PS4.

A shocking story regarding the parents' attitude to internet cafes takes place in "Săptămâna Altfel" ("The Different Week") - a school week usually before the Easter Holiday dedicated to other activities than school, but still under school supervision. A usual timetable involved a day or two for volunteering, one for alternative learning, maybe some artistic endeavors and Friday was almost exclusively reserved for board games and pizza. However, for any usual student, this was basically a holiday week, prime time for skipping the boring or cringe schedule. Obviously, parents didn't agree so the students had to

go somewhere during the school day - the Internet cafe. Imagine the disaster in thinking you

called your friend's phone but finding out it was his mother, blowing both your covers and badly lying about your location, to then thinking you were safe for around two hours of gaming, until the mother enters Starnet. Starnet's pet policy remains unknown, but it seems that this mother was able to enter with a leashed dog, remove the leash, pick the dog up and proceed to (violently) use the leash on her insubordinate child without setbacks. Afterwards, she also tried to restrict his access to Starnet by giving his name to the receptionist in hopes she will intercept his next attempt.



More careful students managed to sneak in even full nights; a successful strategy was for two friends to tell each of their parents that they were sleeping over at the other's place, but this method had limitations. What if the parents

called to check on you? The ideal way clearly was to actually go to one's house, wait for the parents to confirm and once they were asleep, remove the wired phone from its power source and embrace the full night of gaming ahead.



Speaking of Full Nights, bolder teens would aim for bolder approaches.

One classic scheme is what one could call the "Starnet Study Trip". For this plan to work, you would be required to have a great deal of acting talent, as the scheme consisted of mainly convincing your parents that the upcoming weekend, a school trip was to be organized spontaneously, and what's more, by that one teacher your parents always hated talking to. Having other friends come to confirm the validity of this trip always helped; alternatively, you could also plan this scheme before a real study trip, and hope to never be caught skipping said outing.

After carefully constructing a fake, but realistic budget, you would ask your parents for the money - as soon as you got it, the Starnet Study Trip could commence. You had two full nights and three days (Friday to Sunday) to spend in Starnet, ordering food, cigarettes and energy drinks to your heart's content. No need for sleep, you still have the hormones to keep you going.

STARNET STUDY TRIP

And while you are doing all of this, your parents are probably hoping you are coming back home from the trip still having some unspent money they could get back.



The first match of League of Legends (League) that I ever played was in a Sarnet Internet cafe in 2014 after the first days of school. Before that, I was definitely the definition of a casual gamer, enjoying single player games such as Minecraft and at most, some free MMOs that I abandoned before the 30-level mark. Through League I became very competitive in an environment that at that time, was heavily male-populated.

On one hand, I was lucky enough to catch on quickly, meaning that I cannot in good faith say that I was the target of any sexist remark from any classmate, friend or local League enjoyer. I was never excluded from Game Nights or, god forbid, assigned the support role. My mouse and keyboard were speaking for themselves, so my presence in the scene was never debated.

On the other hand, I experienced some vague reactions from my female peers, though I cannot find a reason - since it has been proven time and time again that one's League

rank does nothing for one's attractiveness; but I know that I have been called a pick-me, even if whoever knew me could instantly tell that my passion was authentic :).

Thus followed my participation in various competitive League events, from client-based competitions (Clash - where my team obtained three victories in one season) to other local tournaments initiated by school or university councils (where we also always placed in the top three). I was on a team with four friends that I got to know through gaming, so both the experience and the company were great for me. The satisfaction gained from our results, amplified by being on a carry role, does not compare to any other for me since, until now, I have never been in a more competitive environment than League, even if it was limited to the local scene; it is, after all, the most popular game in the world.

RUXANDRA MĂRGINEANU

XOXO, GAMER GIRL



The first PC I owned was at the age of seven, my parents buying it "for school", but being used completely opposite of their intention. None of them used the PC for work, or regularly. Even further, my parents haven't even bought another one for them after it broke down. During primary school, in Romania between 2006 and 2010, no one could even fathom using a PC for education, as flip-phones just started being used.

#SKILLDIFF

Thus, the "school PC" turned into the gaming PC. Because we were four members in the family, we would take turns, me and my sister would play in the morning, especially during summer holiday when our parents were at work, then mom would play in the evening. We also had a four year older family friend (middle school) who had no PC and would come over to chat on Yahoo! Messenger and help us in games.

The guy who sold my parents the PC also installed Lara Croft: Tomb Raider Legend. This game united the family for the first time! Usually, me and my sister would play, when we couldn't pass a level our mom would help, and if even she couldn't do it, dad would step in. Each time our family friend would visit, we would ask her to do the desert side quest. We would almost always play in summer, as our parents wouldn't let us during school weeks, and we would spend the weekend outside.

In third grade, all our classmates were playing Metin2, so naturally, we also installed it. Compared to Lara Croft, a single-player action-adventure game, Metin2 presented itself as the "Oriental Action MMORPG". A new

world opened itself to us! We had countless quests, we could enter combat anytime, either PvE or PvP, had classes and abilities, and above all, we were playing in a Romanian community, starting from our age to up to ten years older. The most important bit was that we could communicate with anyone, anytime, anywhere! Unlike Yahoo! Messenger, where you could only chat with your contacts, in Metin2 you had a general chat with all the players in your kingdom, alongside the regular chat. It felt like real life!

Shortly after, we made friends on Metin2. I had two girlfriends, one in fourth grade, a classmate, which lasted until we finished primary school, and one in seventh grade, a girl from Vulcan, Hunedoara county. Both left me after they fooled me to send them some of my items. My sister made many boyfriends, but the longest lasting was a 19-year old guy, who she lied she was 18. In actuality, you never knew who you spoke to on Metin2, most girl characters were probably male in real life. But this was the game's charm, you could be whoever you wanted to be!

Soon, my sister's boyfriend invited us to his guild, comprised mostly of young Romanian adults. They had a Skype group, where we were also invited, but when we were asked to use a mic and camera, the game changed again. Mom once again intervened.

Because she had a coworker with a 17-year old daughter, we asked her to use her photos for the Skype account, because the boyfriend started being suspicious that there was a

man behind the Alexia62 account. However, the various angled photos of the coworker's daughter convinced him. Since our guild mates were involved on Metin2 forums and some owned private servers, we learned a lot from them, the game evolved.

Competition! With this new knowledge, we realised we could make the top of the leaderboards. Both me and my sister, along with our mom would take the game seriously, we would play daily. Mom made friends with the younger girls in the guild, who she kept in touch with on Skype, and in the evening, when a bunch of PvP players from all kingdoms joined, we would all duel. This became a family activity where we were all emotionally involved (dad could not sleep because of us).

Being vehemently protected by my parents doing my teens, the only activities allowed after school were homework and one hour of gaming. Because my go-to game's, Metin2, numbers were dwindling after 2012, I mostly played alone on private servers. Back then, I hadn't formed an opinion on online games, I was doing as much as I had permission to. However, my parents were viewing them as a safe activity, during which they didn't have to make sure I wasn't joining questionable entourages.

Everything changed once I started high school in 2014. Making new friends, from similar backgrounds, I was once again feeling the adrenaline a team based game can bring. But

this time, the game was more competitive: League of Legends.

Life as a freshman was completely different to that of a middle schooler. I felt as if I could do anything. I started smoking cigarettes by the piece and drinking beer in bars, I was skipping school every time I felt like it; but what I liked most was that I had backing - my friend's mom that I shared these experiences with was the school's administrator so we had free passes at the gate, while others were begging to exit the school grounds.

The most frequented place for skipping and meeting after school was behind the civil registry office, where all cool kids would gather and buy and smoke by the piece cigarettes. After everyone arrived, we would go together to the closest Internet Cafe (LeVeL Up Gaming). Usually, we could gather around 3-5 boys, but there were times when we would have to split between LoL, CSGO, FIFA as teams were limited to 5 players.



Compared to Metin2, an MMORPG, where evolution would happen gradually proportional to the hours spent in the game, your performance in the MOBA LoL was directly proportional to your team's skill level. Thus, in an MMORPG you could get help from your guild to help you catch up if you were a beginner, your allies weren't competitive since we had common enemies. While you could see your guild leader as an advisor during your early levels, a new MOBA player is offered nothing!

Because my friends were playing LoL for one-two years already, they had the knowledge and skill to win games, but I felt left out as if I missed the starting gun. Moreso, I was dragging the team down! So as to not become less cool, I was sure I had to learn, so after school I was watching YouTube videos of pro players explaining how to play at a high level.

LoL became a tradition in ninth grade: we were playing everyday and frequenting the Internet Cafe once a week. The vibe in LeVeL was similar to a gamer cave, in a basement, with 0 sunlight, ventilated and cooled through industrial tubulature, lit up my RGB lights and offering cheap services. We

would buy one hour of PC access for 4RON (less than 1 Euro), but we would end up spending two or three. LoL with friends was enticing and I wouldn't feel time passing. Even if I was still not at their level, I felt integrated in the group, because I was always invited to play. I didn't see then the negative aspects of gaming, being completely engrossed in the LeVeL atmosphere. The competitive aspect of LoL sometimes brought out the most negative emotions.

If to go out I would have to ask continuously to gain permission, video games had no limit for me. If I could foresee grounding because of bad grades, the Internet cafe was the saviour.

I believe it had the same effect as a physical game. You can watch a football match on TV, but the energy and adrenaline you seek, you get only at the stadium, where others are just as excited as you. The same applies to an Internet cafe, you could play at home, but true enjoyment came in a room where we were all gaming.

At that age, I wasn't contemplating my masculinity. Maybe at university, I started seeing the effects of sedentarism. I don't think the Internet cafe had anything to do with it, because even if we were mostly boys gaming, there was nothing masculine about it. Compared to the gym or the football field, I don't think video games were considered a "boy" activity, or at least I didn't see this view back then.

IULIAN-VALERIU CIOATĂ

CLOSING

In 2023, a cosmic sign was given to us saying that this publication had to be made in one way or another.

More precisely, Iași was designated as the International Esports Capital for a short time in August of that year - our (not so) small city finally got put on the international map of gamers. Teams of competitive players from all around the world would play their finals in Romania's city of culture and of course, best internet cafes.

But behind the multitude of events like championships and celebrity concerts, news of the darker motivations behind this event appeared in the public discourse. According to some of his colleagues, the Mayor has been planning this Esports publicity stunt to launder some money for his (alleged) real estate mafia.

As the gossip goes, the Mayor tried to cash-in the 1 million Euro funds that were allocated to the event production by transferring the money to a (fictitious) foreign third-party entity responsible for event management. As is the case with European Union funds, a lot of politicians use loopholes such as third-party government companies as "partners" in production projects, and the latter's offers and services are always mysteriously charging two to even ten times the usual market rate.

Not only was the mayor thus accused of fraud through public funds - but it seems that the third party itself, which ended up being registered under one Macedonian individual, was able to get all of the money it was transferred without a trace and suffering no consequences. A classic story of a thief being out-thieved.

WORDS

What is there to learn from this?

We are not sure, but we are interested in further developments of this drama and how the public at large perceives gamer culture. The decision to organize mass public events catered around gaming marks a shift in mainstream society's now more accepting view of gamer culture and its branches, like the Internet Cafe.

Will the memory of Iași as 2023 World Esport Capital help propagate an active community for its internet cafes? Or will the behind-the-scenes politics tarnish their reputation and make the public skeptic as to the validity of such a subculture?

Only time can tell.

IASI2023
15th WE Championships

WORLD ESPORTS CHAMPIONSHIP

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TIME SCHEDULE >>



Arcane Intellect

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