

BROCK'S BANTER: Turn off, tune out, drop in

By Brock Weir

For the past few years, there's been videos floating around the internet in various forms designed to tap into any nostalgia that might be lingering within people my age.

They are different sound bites, each encompassing a second or two of music, video game pings, and various other things designed to make people who grew up in the 90s mistier for what might now, in hindsight, be considered a simpler time.

Segments include a tag that was at the end of every episode of the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, the celestial sound that echoed through the house every time you turned on ? or turned off ? a computer programmed with Windows 98, the haunting pre-and-post-Celine soundtrack to Titanic, themes from Friends and The Teletubbies, tinny background music from early iterations of Super Mario brothers, to the ?shh!? sound that still remains at the end of every new episode of The Simpsons, nearly 30 years after its initial debut.

I never progressed, as far as video games are concerned, beyond the first generation of Super Nintendo (although I understand that that particular console is now considered vintage, back in fashion, and retrofitted for the current demos), and wasn't particularly beholden to the Titanic album after the first week of its initial release, but the sound that really did take me back was the electronic cacophony we used to endure for the simple pleasures of going onto the internet.

For those of my particular generation ? I was born in 1985 ? we're in that strange little world of being old enough to remember a time without internet but too young for it not to have had an important influence on our formative years, so those early days seem even more distant than they are, almost foreign.

When dial-up came to town, I imagine the excitement was akin to the circus rolling in back in the days before a multi-channel universe and, you know, those pesky concerns about animal welfare. It was a big deal and I clearly remember going with my dad to an information session in the hall of Newmarket's Royal Canadian Legion to get a primer of all the weird and wonderful things you could now do on your computer.

I mean, there were sites where people could write whatever they wanted and post it as plain black text on an equally plain white background. (It was revolutionary, kids. Trust me.) And, if they were especially tech savvy, they could figure out, with very complicated code, code indecipherable to newbies, how to embed a small, grainy photograph or clip art into the text.

It was a brave new world and this info session put me in good stead for the time internet finally arrived at my elementary school?on one computer in the library, the chair for which was invariably occupied by the school's principal who, once the school was connected to the world wide web, was rarely found in his office.

On the rare occasions we got to use that computer, even a year or two later when this one computer expanded to a computer lab for 20-or-so on the second floor, it was decidedly a treat. The sky seemed to be the limit to what we could do.

As long as those white comets in the Netscape logo continued to fly. And, if they stopped, you were basically shafted, and had to go through the whole arduous process of dialing up, logging on, and finding your way back to where you left off.

Simpler time? Like hell.

The point is this: once upon a time, being connected seemed like a treat. Perhaps we can chalk that up to the naivet  of youth as we were usually only let on to ?surf the web? (how quaint that phrase seems now) for a particular lesson or, on snow days, to keep us occupied when there was nothing else to do. We never would have imagined being connected to the system at all times. It was a Utopian ideal at the time, but the very idea that we could be connected with just about anyone in the world, at any time, with the mere swipe of a finger, seemed part of the very distant future, not a mere decade or two later.

Yet, here we are.

We're in a world where community organizations like the Healthy Kids Community Challenge are encouraging kids and parents alike to power off just for a little bit of time to actually reconnect with each other and reconnect with the world around them.

Delving into their slate of upcoming programs at the end of last week, I considered the very concept of powering off, thinking it would be a relative cakewalk. After all, all you need to do is swipe in a different direction.

On first blush, the idea of going a day, or even a whole weekend (any longer would simply be impractical because, you know, ?adulting?) being disconnected from a smartphone, computer, or any other type of screen seemed instantly liberating and relaxing. Then, a peculiar feeling of claustrophobia kicked in.

Those what-ifs.

That sense of ?what if an important world issue popped up and I'm late to the party??

What if someone important to me in parts far-flung marks a personal milestone and I can't be a part of it?

What if I see something in my disconnected travels that just needs to be captured for posterity and I have to sit on my hands lest I reach for the iPhone to take a photo or video?

Those what-ifs might have induced a bit of claustrophobia, but proved to me that one of these days I really do need to accept the challenge.

The reality is, however, it is going to take a lot of lead time to psych myself into it ? and that, in itself, is alarming.

But who else wants to give it a whirl?