

On-Line with PlayNet

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Computerized on-line utilities are not solely devoted to business and professional activities. Networks such as CompuServe and The Source offer interactive communications services that are enjoying immense popularity today. Entrepreneurs, noticing this trend, are now making their own debuts with on-line utilities devoted exclusively to socializing and entertainment, but at lower per-hour costs than the larger general interest on-line utilities.

These on-line utilities deliberately avoid the serious side of life, concentrating instead on evening and weekend socializing and game playing. More and more home computer owners are using their computers for on-line entertainment, and telecommunicating for fun is becoming a primary focus.

This growing national pastime goes way beyond just being a large cocktail party, however, because it's open to anyone and everyone, regardless of age, sex, race or economic level. Also, you don't have to be invited. These traditional roadblocks to successful communications are eliminated by the computerized medium. People know you only through your words and ideas.

Two on-line services that are totally directed toward socializing are PlayNet and People/Link. They are both national networks, easily within reach of any Commodore owner with a modem.

PlayNet

PlayNet gives home computerists an opportunity for on-line socializing and game playing, weeknights from 6:00 PM to 7:00 AM and around the dock on weekends. Initiated under the auspices of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, PlayNet was offered to local residents of the Albany-Troy area on an experimental basis in early 1984. It quickly became so popular that by October 1984 it was entering homes across the nation.

PlayNet was developed specifically for C-64 owners. This choice was a smart mass-marketing move based on the fact that there are more C-64s than any other computer in American homes. (New

C-128 owners can also access PlayNet in the C-64 mode.) This year, PlayNet plans to broaden its computer compatibility to include non-Commodore computers.

PlayNet is different from other on-line utilities in several ways. It has color graphics throughout its system, including both its communications options and its game sections. Even when you are in the Talk mode with other users, there are colorful screen displays.

To use PlayNet, you need special software: a system disk, which holds a customized terminal program for PlayNet, and two separate game disks. Once you're within the system, the PlayNet options are loaded into your computer from these disks.

The system is totally menu-driven; you don't type in any commands. Menu selection and movement throughout the system are handled by the function keys, which are labeled for quick reference by an overlay provided by PlayNet.

You access PlayNet through your local Telenet phone connection or by calling the network directly. The log-on procedure is one of the simplest you'll find. Once you have connected your modem and are receiving a carrier signal, just press the return key and wait. If you've made a successful connection, PlayNet will prompt you to enter your account number and password.

You will see a brief news section and then a colorful graphics display that features eight large blocks encompassing a central PlayNet logo. This is the main menu, a far cry from the usual text displays of many other services.

From the main menu you may select one of the following: Electronic File Transfer; Update PlayNet Disks; People, Games and More; Bulletin Boards; Accounting and Billing Information; PlayNet Information Center; PlayNet Shopping Center; or Sign Off.

The most frequently used option is the People, Games and More section, where you socialize in one of many reception rooms. You can stay there and chat with others in the room or choose a partner and leave for any of the 13 colorful, interactive games. You also can

create your own room, to which you can invite others for private conversations or through which you can send electronic mail and on-line messages to other subscribers.

Games offered by PlayNet are Backgammon, Boxes, Capture the Flag, Checkers, Chess, Chinese Checkers, Contract Bridge, Four-in-a-Row, Go, Hangman, Quad 64, Reversi and Sea Strike. During game play, you can chat with your game partners. This interaction makes for a more natural setting.

PlayNet uses windows for temporarily holding your words and phrases whenever you are chatting with someone else. They are sent only after you have finished composing your thoughts and signaled PlayNet to display them on the public screen. This feature makes communicating in a shared room much easier; as your typed phrases are not haphazardly broken while another person types his or her words.

In the Electronic File Transfer area, you can send disk files to other PlayNet people. There is a small download fee, but all uploading is free. You'll find this area valuable for trading noncommercial software programs.

The Bulletin Board provides a forum for traditional classified advertisements as well as club activities. The main topic menu for the Bulletin Board offers current events, arts and entertainment, hobbies and sports, computers, software information, classified ads, PlayNet updates, club activities and games.

The PlayNet Shopping Center and the Information Center were not completed on any of my visits in late April, but should be available by the time you read this article. The Shopping Center in particular, will be attractive, as more and more people are starting to take advantage of the convenience of on-line shopping. The Information Center will contain news items on various subjects.

There is a \$39 subscription fee to PlayNet, which will give you the three disks, a manual full of colorful screen shots and 90 free minutes of on-line time. There is also a \$8 monthly service fee, which helps handle PlayNet's costs for

newsletters, updates and product development. The hourly on-line fee is rock bottom at \$2, including Telenet charges.

You can purchase the PlayNet package of disks and the manual at a computer store, and then make a phone call to receive your account number and password. Or, you can phone PlayNet first and order their package, which will arrive by mail with your account number and password inside.

It's a good idea to call PlayNet before buying their software, just to make sure your particular modem will work with their terminal software. Most C-64 -

compatible modems should work, but it never hurts to check first.

Bridging the Gaps

There's an extra benefit to joining one of these inexpensive on-line networks. You could join simply to avoid the long-distance telephone rates. If you'd like to keep in touch with friends or relatives by more enthusiasm occasional letter or phone call, then try PlayNet.

If you happen to have a Telenet or Tymnet connection, which is toll free, you would only have to pay for your connect time. Instead of a traditional

phone call, you could make it a real visit by playing games and chatting at the same time. It's worth looking into.

The inherent benefits are those derived from social interaction with a wide variety of people. This is a great opportunity to meet people from all across the nation and to share ideas and opinions with them. Your home computer can broaden your horizons by giving you this chance to travel beyond your own hometown.

For more information, contact Play Net, Inc., PO Box 587, Wynantskill, NY 12198, or call 1-800-PLAYNET.