For this week’s additional design discussion, I wanted to go back in time to the early days of the World Wide Web, circa 1993, and as a technology historian, indulge that aspect as well. The Internet, like me, was brought online in the glorious year of 1968, however it remained the domain of scholars and governments for over two decades before becoming available via the World Wide Web to the riff raff public and its clammy tendrils (by the way, ‘Internet’ is always capitalized, regardless of what the Oxford English Dictionary says). Remember also that the Internet and the WWW are not the same thing; the Internet is the technologies, hardware, software and protocols on which the web sits – the Web didn’t come online until around 1990. Getting back on track, to say design was at its nadir at that point would be a severe understatement; while interaction methods had been developed and attempted over the years (light pens, for example), that was by specialists in specific domains, and when I say specialists I don’t mean interaction specialists, I mean engineers and programmers, but now it was about to be attempted by everyone.

When everyday people began to experiment with what the Web offered, they did so from an adventurous, new, exciting perspective. Interaction methods, organizing elements, color, layout, usability, nobody cared about this stuff, we were amazed at the accessibility of it all. We hadn’t even learned it was bad form to hotlink images! Almost none of the technologies, platforms, infrastructure, anything, really, we have today was available back then other than base protocols, and even those have evolved significantly. But one thing we did see, very early on, was a foreshadowing of the idea of a web 2.0, in which user generated content and communities guided the growth of one particular website far beyond what anyone expected. Before the design disaster that was MySpace, anyone who was anyone cut their teeth on GeoCities.

Everyone knows GeoCities was the equivalent of a design traffic accident with its animated gifs and auto-play MIDI tunes (and was the inspiration for the landing page for this very course), but that’s looking at it through the-opposite-of-rose-colored glasses. We know that \*now.\* Back then, the ability for anyone to have a presence online and represent yourself immediately all over the world was almost too much to process. No one cared about design, they just wanted to create. As anyone now looking at a GeoCities page could tell you, design would come later. Much later.

GeoCities divided their content up into towns, each of which represented a particular interest. Whether it was fantasy, health, sports, the arts, or whatever else, there was a neighborhood for it where a community of like-minded individuals could set up a shingle, as it were, and have a presence…perhaps even make some new acquaintances or even friends with the same interests.

The site’s growth and eventual buyout by Yahoo and unavoidable death is beyond the scope of what is intended to be a design history, however it is a fascinating story and very interesting if you get the chance – you can read about it on this Computer History Museum page.

Instead, this long narrative is to let you know that you can still experience GeoCities in all its poor-design glory thanks to the project known as ReoCities. They have archived millions of pages from GeoCities, and while the usability leaves a lot to be desired, it is a fascinating look at web design back then, and looking back through time at these pages I feel like an astronomer looking back in time at a star. It gives a frozen-in-time glimpse into not just where we were, but how far we’ve come. I used ReoCities for all the screenshots in this post.

I have to be honest, some of the pages are difficult to view, the design is that wacky. In terms of expression, in terms of digital explorers mapping out a new, unexplored land, however, it’s mesmerizing. I can’t tell you how long I spent not only exploring the myriad pages archived by the service, but seeing how many of the external links still worked (not many, although some GeoCities page redirect to a proper hosted site; very smart), and even doing some research to see if any of the people or organizations are still around and updated their web presence. It was a pleasant surprise to see some of them actually had!

It’s a really fascinating time capsule not just of early web design, but also of where the web was its infancy. Seeing how design has changed, what was considered acceptable design back then versus now when we have so many rules and standards and guidelines is enlightening. And if, on the off chance, you have a link that points to a GeoCities site that they’ve archived, a simple letter change can update your link!

I’m a big fan of historical preservation of digital property (archive.org is another glorious monument to what was). Start your wayback voyage to GeoCities over at ReoCities (https://geocities.restorativland.org).