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GALLIC SYMBOL

Only a combination of patriotism, sex chat and stubbornness can have kept France Telecom's Minitel system alive in the age of the internet

In the beginning was 'the box', Or rather 'la boite', since Minitel belonged to France Telecom. I remember the odd little machines perched beside the phone during summer trips to the Alsace in the early Eighties. Every once in a while, the family I was visiting would wander over to the clunky contraption, peck away awkwardly at the tiny keyboard, squint at the wee screen, scribble notes, then return with an address or a phone number.

Even compared to the primitive arcade games of the time - Galaga, Pac-Man and Karate Champ - the blocky white letters on the Minitel's screen made it seem antediluvian. But appearances deceived. After Minitel's 1981 launch - more than a decade before the web caught fire in the States - one European country had a widespread information economy, complete with digital millionaires. Bureaucratic, backward France, where much of the country didn't even have phones until well into the Sixties.

This precursor of the web hinged around the Minitel box, handed out free by France Telecom and constantly connected to your phone line. 'Very quickly, Minitel became part of mainstream French culture,' recalls Philippe Cornouailles, who worked for several Parisian tech companies during that period. 'So, for us, Minitel represents part of the internet's paleontological past.'

Fittingly for France, sex played its part, Huge billboards touted the famous *messageries roses*, erotically charged online chat rings - the most amusing of which had the Minitel address '3615 CUM'.

By the late Eighties, teens using the chat services nearly bankrupted many a Gallic family. In fact, every time you logged on to Minitel, France Telecom went to the bank, because they owned the boxes and the phone lines and they set the rates for using the various types of services. In a country famous for its ludicrously centralised social system, people just accepted the steep tariffs (often around 30p per minute and sometimes three times that sum). Eventually, there would grow to be an estimated 25,000 different services, racking up a cool C650m for France Telecom, which split the take with the content creators.

There was a certain amount of hand wringing over the state profiting from all that digitised sex talk, yet even today the *messageries roses* far outnumber any other sort of service. But you can also find stuff such as financial tips (3617 INVESTIR), health tips (3617 NOSMOKING), horoscopes (3615 ABRA) and condoms by mail (3617 COUVRETOI) - in short, a full gamut of the stuff net companies struggle to make money from today.

By now, one might reasonably expect the French to have thrown Minitel overboard for the internet. After all, Minitel operates essentially the same way as it did two decades ago - the interface is as gawky and hideous as anything you

might have grappled with in 1989. The search engines remain time-consumingly ill-conceived. And of course, Minitel is almost completely Francophone, making it useless for anything beyond the country's borders.

Yet Minitel lives on. It helps that France Telecom added e-mail via Minitel a few years back, giving people one less reason to switch to internet; today, 400,000 people have such accounts. Also, more than three million 'internauts' now use Minitel over the web, accessing the system's services by employing programs that emulate the Minitel interface on personal computers, Download one and you're taken to a world so simplified that it induces nostalgia for the time when the online universe seemed easily navigable.

'There's been an infinitesimal drop in how many people use the actual Minitel boxes,' explains France Telecom's Francoise Quelen. 'But in 1999 we had a million more people connect via the internet. Minitel is fast and practical. If I need to research a trip, of course I'll use the web. But if I just want to buy a ticket to London, I'll use Minitel.' Likewise for tasks such as transferring money between bank accounts or looking up a phone number, Minitel's the easy option - no need to dial up, log on or wade through interfaces choked by Flash illustrations and banner ads.

Of course, there's also a healthy dose of French patriotism at work here. Minitel's defenders have long framed the internet as an overhyped Anglo-Saxon attack on a perfectly decent, fully functional, totally French, system. And while the net has surged to prominence in the rest of Europe, explains Cornouailles. 'Many French people have said, "Why buy a computer and pay connection fees for the internet, We already have Minitel."' Just how strong does Minitel remain in France? Consider this: even America Online has a Minitel service.

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