

Grinding our bums, flashing our boobs: the Internet is making juveniles of us all Martha Gill, *The Guardian*, May 19th, 2024

How will technology change us as a species? In Silicon Valley, all prophecies seem to have converged into one: that it will usher in some sort of planetary Buddhist revolution. To read its mission statements and watch its Ted Talks is to hear phrases such as “connectedness”, “common understanding” and “overcoming barriers”.

5 In the face of such predictions, I give you the Portal: interactive sculptures set up in New York and Dublin with a live feed between them, so that passersby in the respective cities can see one another in real time. It was named like a sci-fi fantasy and made to look like one: a hole in the space-time continuum big enough to step through. According to the group behind it – Portals.org – its aim is to act as a “bridge to a united planet”, and to “invite all of us to meet above borders and
10 differences”.

How did humanity react to this lofty concept? Within hours of going live on 8 May, a “very drunk” woman in her 40s was led away and arrested on the Dublin side after repeatedly “grinding her bum” on the portal for 20 minutes. Another arse-flashing “incident” from the Irish soon followed, and then a Dubliner took things a step further by brandishing his phone showing footage
15 of a plane crashing into the twin towers.

“Portal to hell: live video art installation already bringing out the worst in people,” lamented the *New York Post*. “Why did they put it here? At night-time it’s like *The Purge*,” a Dublin native told a newspaper.

Is the Portal not a parable for the internet itself? Here might be the real answer to how hi-tech
20 “connectedness” changes us. Offered a “bridge to a united planet”, we react by flashing, making rude signs and ganging up against each other. Far from pushing humanity into a higher level of sophistication, it causes us to regress into adolescence.

The evidence has been pretty much there from the start. In *The Psychology of the Internet*, published in 1999, Patricia Wallace noted that online life was doing something strange to us. “One
25 of the first surprises for researchers investigating online behaviour was how disinhibited people sometimes became, and how their tempers seemed to flare more easily as they interacted with others,” she wrote. We know that even small amounts of physical separation can radically change behaviour: road rage, for example, boils up in the isolated container of a car.

Future anthropologists might observe that the behaviour of adults online very much resembles
30 that of children offline. Some call the internet a town square, some a wild west. In fact, it’s a playground.

On the internet, nostalgia fits here too: fantasy role play, video game characters, comic book culture, superheroes, all of these flourish. No surprise there: online life is infused with the morality of a children’s storybook: good and evil, and nothing in between.

35 How will technology change us as a species? Humans once took adult wolves and arrested their development, turning them into childish dogs. It’s called neoteny: it’s how we domesticated them. Are we, in our turn, being domesticated by the internet? In the demand for content – silly, aggressive, playful, childish – are we gradually being turned into adult children?