Date: 2002/03/27 Wednesday Page: 019 Section: SOMERSET Edition: HUNTERDON
Size: 738 words

PLAYING THE GAME

Cyber cafes find new ways to survive

By **GABE STEIN**
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

A group of young adults morph into computer assassins, blasting thousands of bullets into each other at the Unreal game tournament on Monday nights at Spraga.com in downtown Somerville.

"We've tried to create a fun atmosphere where people can work on high-speed computers to do e- mail, download songs and movies or receive Internet training," said Michelle Schultz, who owns the 5-month-old cafe with her husband, Dennis.

The cafe turned to the games to survive.

At one time, offering access to the Internet would have been enough of a draw for customers. But as high-speed computers, Internet services and cable modems have made their way into more and more homes, many cyber cafes have been shuttered. The remaining cafes have had to find other ways to attract customers, including offering interactive gaming and Internet birthday parties.

Dennis and Michelle Schultz incorporated Spraga.com last May as cyber cafes were dropping like flies.

"We knew it was risky, but we wanted to own our own place and this was a perfect fit," said Michelle, a former career consultant at Computer Learning Center in South Plainfield.

The couple created a partnership with Sanctuary Coffeehouse on Main Street in Somerville so they could focus solely on the cyber cafe, while the coffeehouse could focus on selling books and serving beverages and desserts.

In addition to spicing things up with the Network game tournaments, the cafe rents its facilities out to businesses for computer training and presentations, at a rate of $70 an hour.

The New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners recently rented the cafe for an Internet training seminar.

"We needed specific training and we had to find a way that eight of us could be trained together in an environment friendlier than a library," said Nancy Connor, president of the Somerset chapter of NJAWBO.

"It can be very intimidating if you're not too computer-savvy, but Spraga.com was very helpful and they offer a great environment."

It's the establishment's laid-back atmosphere that attracts 23-year-old Areia Daphaia from North Brunswick, who enjoys the live music and surfing the Web with her friends.

"It's a different feeling than being at home on your computer," she said. "This is much more communal."

Cyber cafes are sanctuaries for individuals who don't have computers at home, such as Samantha Reddell, who used to go to the Somerville library to log onto the Internet. Now she has a student membership card that gives her four hours online for $20.

"I'd rather go here than the library because you don't have to be quiet here, and I can hang out with my friends," she said, as she downloaded punk music from the Web.

The first cyber cafes opened in 1994 as the computer craze spread like wildfire, but the trend did not stick. In 2000, Newark, Jersey City, Bayonne, Bloomfield, Hackettstown, Manahawkin and Brick Township all had cyber cafes that have since closed their doors.

The main attraction at the Surfer'z Café & Deli in Raritan was meant to be the Internet cafe, but it didn't take off. "It's a good idea for someone who wants to come in and use the Internet," said Eddie Ray, who runs the everyday operations for the owners, Joe and John Sorrentino.

"But we couldn't afford to survive with just the Internet, so we decided to open a deli, too."

The deli-style cyber cafe, open since August, features four high-speed computers and a game room with 10 computer workstations used for birthday parties.

Toward the front door, four computers allow users to access e-mail, surf the Web or download music at a cost of $5 per hour.

Twenty-one-year-old Raritan native Dina Bartolucci stops in to surf at the cafe at least four times a week. "I don't have Internet access at home and the library only lets you use the Internet for a half-hour," she said, her concentration wandering back to the computer screen.

Cyber cafes are satisfying a need, but they are going to have to carve a stronger niche to keep customers, some said.

"I think you're going to see more cyber cafes opening up, but it's going to be more along the lines of a slot machine at a gas station in Las Vegas," Ray said.

"The Internet is going to be more of a gimmick, but not why people come out."