## The One with Netscape Navigator, the Year 1994, Jordan Catalano, Douglas Coupland, Milton Berle, Pratfalls, Linguists, and Chandler Bing

*Jennifer Cherniack, 2013*

In the fall of 1994 two cultural entities that changed the way we communicate with one another were introduced into the hearts and homes of the average North American: the hit television program *Friends*, and the World Wide Web.

*Friends*, a situation comedy about a group of New York City friends who were "all in their twenties. . . [a]ll trying to figure it out",[1] used a conventional formula for success, emulating the characteristics and spaces of the Generation X demographic but with attractive actors and toned-down angst. *Friends* premiered on September 22, 1994.

A few weeks later in October, Netscape launched its first Internet browser, enabling people to explore this new thing called the World Wide Web. Before consumer-friendly browsers, the Internet was considered a mysterious place, only for hackers, weirdos and geeks. The friends from *Friends* and the WWW were now in homes, on screens, and ready for public consumption.

*Friends* aired until 2004—ten years. The Internet lives on. But those ten years of coexistence mark an important era in our recent history. *Friends* represents the only generation whose story parallels that of the web. In a sense, *Friends* is an artifact of a time different from today; a document of the growing pains of a society adapting to a new form of communication.[2]

In 1994 I was a thirteen-year-old eighth grader. The awkwardness of puberty and adolescence set in, and my own coming of age tale began.

All these stories—the "friends" in their early 20s trying to make it in the real world, the new and exciting World Wide Web not yet fully integrated into the everyday, and of course my own common but nevertheless difficult transition into womanhood—are about instances where there are gaps between one state and another. These "in-between" events—the soft-boiled moment between the raw and the cooked—are not easy to pin down and difficult to define, because there is little vocabulary for things that fall between categories.

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[1] From the official transcript "The One where Monica gets a Roommate". Original draft, March 3, 1994, in character descriptions.

[2] We are always adapting to new forms of communication, but in this instance I am speaking specifically of the emergence of the World Wide Web in North American households.

This essay is about being "in-between". It is about how we communicate about being in-between and how being in-between is represented. It begins in 1994 and ends in 2004. The setting spans North America and enters cyberspace. The characters—the World Wide Web, a thirteen year-old girl, and Generation X, the group of young adults suffering from extended adolescence—share one thing in common: they are in-between.

**They are all, uh, "Friends"**
People who are in-between adopt a communicative style that subverts not only mainstream language, gestures, intonation or even silences, but also fashion, music and art. I call this "in-between communication". There are three major characteristics of in-between communication, which I have borrowed and adapted from French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's analysis of what they call a minor literature.[3] The first is that in-between communities feel disconnected from the majority as a group.[4] Second, people who feel alienated from a larger community gain a sense of purpose.[5] Third, this sense of purpose gives rise to a communal, rather than an individualistic treatment of communication—there is no hierarchy, or individual responsible for developing the vernacular.[6]

Think about the early adopters of the web, converging in cyberspace from all over the world, in search of communities where they felt included, a part of, connected—unlike their real lives, where they might have been perceived as hackers, nerds and outsiders. Through this virtual community, they developed a communal, distinct and ultimately influential vocabulary.

As a teenager, I was stuck in between childhood and adulthood. I felt alone, underground, and angry, and my only allies were other teenagers. I didn't know why I was angry, but in that anger came purpose: me against my parents, me

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[3] In their 1975 book Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari proposed a new way of reading the works of author Franz Kafka, who wrote in a Praguean German rather than the standard High German of the time. Difficult to translate into other languages due to the specificity of this type of German—which was heavily influenced by both Yiddish and Czech—Deleuze and Guattari introduced the idea of a minor literature referring to the language that Kafka used in his writings. "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language." Deleuze and Guattari use the example of the handling of the English language spoken by African Americans as a contemporary minor literature.

[4] Deleuze and Guattari use the term deterritorialization.

[5] Deleuze and Guattari use the term political.

[6] Deleuze and Guattari use the term collective value.

against my teachers, or . . . me against the world. I was "a sort of stranger within [my] own language."[7]

Gen-Xers were cynical, skeptical, resisted hierarchy, and questioned authority—an entire generation who felt displaced within their own reality. Generation X attempted to resist the lifestyle of the Baby Boomers in this spirit and developed their own methods of communication.

*Friends* was and remains one of the most watched shows on television. It appealed to an extremely broad audience all over the world. In using the communication devices of the emerging WWW, teenagers, and Gen X, *Friends* was able to take in-between communication and make it mainstream, because it was filtered through the standard sitcom formula. This is a story of how the in-between becomes mainstream as part of an ongoing cycle of communication. This story looks underneath the hood of *Friends* to find the communities that developed it.

Collectively, the people who constructed the show—the writers, directors, the hair and make-up artists, the actors—are not the only creators of *Friends*. There were a group of people who both made it possible to write the show and to make it mainstream. For a show to be written about a group of people who found their personal identity through friendships and not work, church, or family, there must have a been a group living this life. Somewhere out there in the constellation of young people coming up in Bill Clinton's America were Chandler, Monica, Ross, Rachel, Pheobe and Joey, waiting for someone to play them on television.

**Welcome to Planet Friends**
Concurrently the World Wide Web created its own "friends" who used in-between communication. The history of the Internet is disputed, hard to pin down, and downright complicated.[8] I blame acronyms. The Internet is a history of acronyms: from the various military and research-based organizations that funded and fueled it, to the terminology  used to describe all the technical components and equipment, everything was abbreviated. Here are a few examples from each category. Try to decipher what is what: ARPANET, DARPA,

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[7] Deleuze and Guattari, footnote from page 26

[8] I am not getting into the history here, as I am mainly concerned with web culture in the early to mid-nineties.

BITNET, USENET, NFSNET, RAND, LAN, CERN, BBN, TCP/IP, SRI, NCP, UCLA, MIT . . . and the list goes on.[9]

The acronyms UCLA and MIT are recognizable as academic institutions. University students—graduate students—were instrumental in the development of the Internet. Patrice Flichy, in his book *The Internet Imaginaire*, says: "[The university] was a world apart, separate from the rest of society. The university campus is a world of its own, a pathway for students between adolescence and the adult world, between school and the professional world."[10]

In the spring of 1989 British Physicist Tim Berners Lee sent CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) a proposal for easier information management over the Internet using hyperlinks,[11] and on December 25, 1990, the first Internet communication using HTTP (Hypertext Transfer Protocol) was made. This marks the invention of the World Wide Web.[12] And in the fall of 1994, 23-year-old Marc Andreessen provided us, for the first time on a consumer level, with the web browser that would connect us to the World Wide Web.

While Netscape became the first consumer platform to connect the average person online, existing alternative communities were already virtually connecting. BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) for example, were an early form of virtual sharing, and date back to the 70s. These early hobbyist Internet cultures ran parallel to their academic and military counterpart. But even within the academic research labs, there was room for experimentation. Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and text-based real-time multi-user games, for example, were developed by M.I.T and University of Essex students as early as 1977, and were played via ARPAnet.[13] While a certain amount of computer literacy was required, many early adopters of the Internet—the so-called hackers, computer nerds, gamers, artists, and other special interest groups—were not affiliated with government projects or graduate programs. They worked within, and outside of, the language and tools of the Internet, expanding both.

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[9] http://www.internetsociety.org/internet/what-internet/history-internet/brief-history-internet

[10] Flichy, 64

[11] A term coined by Ted Nelson in 1963.

[12] http://info.cern.ch/

[13] They didn't invent MUDs, but another MIT alum did, and they took it further, placing it on ARPAnet. Info on the ARPANET: http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aa091598.htm

With the advent of the WWW in the mid 90s came a new vernacular. This came from what Internet artist and theorist Olia Lialina describes in her book *Digital Folklore* as "the amateur web": "[I]t was bright, rich, personal, slow and under construction . . . a web of sudden connections and personal links. . . . [I]t was a web of amateurs soon to be washed away by the dot.com ambitions, professional authoring tools and guidelines designed by usability experts."[14] Today, the amateur web community is gone, but not forgotten. While we only see "Under construction signs", starry night backgrounds and "Welcome to my Home page" through ironic throwbacks or loving nostalgia,[15] 90s web vernacular is everywhere.

Some of the best examples of the amateur web can be seen in fan sites, and more specifically, *Friends* fan sites, which were in abundance with both dedicated contributors and followers. *Friends* fans were early adopters of the WWW. Today most of them are gone, or at least lost in the web. As Lialina suggests "The amateur web didn't die and it has not disappeared but it is hidden."[16] There are still a few dedicated fans out there who to this day maintain their *Friends* fan pages, but for the most part, active *Friends* fans use today's tools, such as Wikipedia or tumblr, to showcase their devotions. As for the original fan sites, they are either dead, or exist as petrified artifacts of the time. In the case of the latter, these sites are incongruent with the way we now display and communicate information online. These sites are, in a sense, barely living time-capsules representative of early 90s life and language that was in a state of technological flux.

People continue to use screen-based Internet slang in oral communications. Acronyms such as OMG, LOL (pronounced lewl), WTF, and FTW[17] started off as faster ways to type and are now common shorthand in our everyday conversations. We have even integrated typing mistakes such as zOMG[18] into our vocabulary. Today's Internet slang and acronyms are examples of in-between communications and thus divisive. And they change rapidly: if you don't keep up, you run the risk of sounding lame, out of touch or worse: old.

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[14] Lialina, 19

[15] Artists like Petra Cortright, Cory Archangel take on this aesthetic which is also widely popular on Tumblr.

[16] Lialina, 20

[17] OMG is Oh My God, LOL is Laugh Out Loud, WTF is What the Fuck, and FTW is For the Win. More info: http://www.urbandictionary.com/

[18] Urban Dictionary defines zOMG: ""zOMG" is a variant of the all-too-popular acronym "OMG", meaning "Oh My God". The "z" was originally a mistake while attempting to hit the shift key with the left hand, and type "OMG"".

Memes[19] work in a similar way, and although cats are still very popular online, LOL cat-speak is so 2006.

**My So-Called Generation**
As someone born in 1981, I am in the awkward position of being in between generations. Some studies categorize me as a member of Generation X,[20] and some as a Millennial.[21] But I am neither the post-boomers generation filled with apathy and disdain for authority, nor am I a digital native who grew up and came of age on the Internet.[22] My role models were, however, solidly Gen Xers, and my formative years were spent listening to grunge music, shopping at Value Village and wishing I was Winona Ryder.[23]

*Slate* contributor Doree Shafrir calls us in-betweeners "Generation Catalano",[24] after a character from the very popular but short-run teen drama *My So-called Life* that aired from 1994-5.[25] The show, starring Claire Danes as coming of age teen Angela Chase, was extremely popular among high school-aged people, but that popularity wasn't enough. It was rated only 116[26] in TV rankings that year, and was up against a stacked Thursday night of television, including—you guessed it—*Friends*.[27]

My *So-called Life* ended in early 1995, an adolescence cut short, but it didn't go quietly. With the WWW gaining its stride in 1995, the youth revolted, virtually. A website called *Operation Life Support*[28] was established to try to save the

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[19] http://knowyourmeme.com/

[20] From: The Dynamics of a Multigenerational Classroom and Clinical Environment. Presented by Dora DiGiacinto, M.Ed., RDMS, RDCS January 15, 2010.

[21] http://www.greenbook.org/marketing-research.cfm/millennial-cause-study

[22] Although we got Netscape Navigator in 1995, I didn't get my own email address until I was 18. The Internet was new enough that it wasn't ubiquitous.

[23] Free Winona!

[24] http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2011/10/
generation_catalano_the_generation_stuck_between_gen_x_and_the_m.html

[25] Again, the years 1994 and 1995 appear as important moments of cultural change.

[26] http://fbibler.chez.com/tvstats/recent_data/1994-95.html

[27] Friends ranked at #8 that year—its first year on air. Seinfeld was #1, followed by ER and Home Improvement. http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,692296,00.html

[28] This website is no longer functioning, but is talked about in this article: http://www.well.com/~srhodes/tvstory.html

show "and [was] the first such effort conducted mainly in cyberspace, with fans using the Internet and major commercial online services to make their feelings for the show known."[29] Roughly 11,000 emails were sent in support of the show.[30] This is negligible compared to today's online activity, but for a form of communication that was just starting out in the public eye, 11,000 emails is a significant number, especially when you consider the cause to have been a largely youth-led initiative.

I watched *My So-called Life* during its all too brief time on air. Like most suburban kids in their early teens, I saw myself in the characters, especially Angela, the smart girl from a good family who just wants to fit in, and can't explain her oscillating emotions.

Angela and her friends sounded like me. The language of *My So-called Life* shows how English was pushed and pulled through 90s youth culture. In the pilot episode Angela says: "Something was actually happening, but it was too actual."[31] The repetition of actual shifts the meaning of the word, taking us into the ethos of a teenage girl. This simple, casually-written line gives new meaning to the word *actual* without defining it. It represents a feeling, a space, that only a teenager or a person coming of age can inhabit. The second iteration of the word *actual* challenges Angela's own sense of  the reality of her suburban teenage life, suggesting that her new persona is somehow more real than her life at home. But the sentence also suggests that it might all be "too" real in the sense that her fantasies of real, adult situations are more than she can actually handle.

The characters of Angela and her boy crush Jordan Catalano (played by teen heartthrob Jared Leto) resembled my Gen X role models and crushes: Winona, Linda Perry from 4 Non Blondes, Lisa Loeb, Eddie Vedder, Johnny Depp. They wore flannel and baby doll dresses and had long hair (both men and women), but they were my age, coming of age for the first time, alongside me.

**The Second Coming . . . of Age. Gen X and the age of extended adolescence**
Before Generation X, people generally came of age once. It usually occurred during one's teens, in a junior high or high school setting. Some even waited until university to, you know, figure stuff out. Prior to Gen X, there were certainly youth-led movements and communities of 20-somethings, such as the

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29 http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-01-26/features/1995026098_1_so-called-life-life-support-angela-chase

30 Compared to nearly 150,000 letters sent to ABC http://www.mscl.com/angelasworld/0101_introduction.html

31 My So-Called Life, Pilot Episode

hippies, who decided to challenge the social norms and conventions of the time. This in itself is nothing new. Gen X was, however, the first generation to suggest an entirely new timeframe for growing up. In addition, unlike the hippies and beatniks who were considered to be subcultures and political movements, "Gen X" refers to an entire generation of people that happened to be born within a certain (but not too certain) few decades.

The term Gen X was popularized by Douglas Coupland in his "groundbreaking novel"[32] *Generation X*. This fictional but all-too real story followed the lives of three young adults struggling, albeit somewhat apathetically, through life, and it became a cultural text for the youth of the day. It was also appropriated by managers, educators, marketers and adults, who tried to figure out what to do with these youth who didn't follow the rules like they did. Everyone was trying to figure this group out, trying to pinpoint what made them tick.

The characteristics attributed to Gen Xers by mainstream culture include some, if not all of the following descriptive terms: "Cynical. Skeptical. Independent (Latchkey Kids). Problem-solvers/resourceful. Defy Authority. Reality driven. Distaste 'touchy feely'. Technology Competent. Resist Hierarchy. Multitasker."[33] Mainstream media adopted the term and then played to Gen Xers, focusing for the most part on cynicism and aversion to authority. This worked well for both sides. The older generations (media, educators, authority) could pass much of this off as teenage behaviour, and Gen Xers could revel in their own apathy.

What Gen Xers introduced, along with a second coming of age, however, was self-reflection. Not only did they question authority, they questioned their own actions, sometimes even expressing this with self-loathing.

Gen X is being talked about a lot lately in the media, no doubt because Gen Xers have finally come of age. I think it is also because, as rapper Jay Z says, we're already "onto the next one"[34]—the Millennials. Mat Honan, a senior writer for *Wired Magazine* and blogger, responded to an article[35] about the professional struggles of the Millennials: "Generation X is tired of your sense of entitlement. Generation X also graduated during a recession. It had even

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[32] Los Angeles Times

[33] From: The Dynamics of a Multigenerational Classroom and Clinical Environment. Presented by Dora DiGiacinto, M.Ed., RDMS, RDCS January 15, 2010

[34] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM1RChZk1EU

[35] http://nymag.com/print/?/news/features/my-generation-2011-10/

shittier jobs, and actually had to pay for its own music. (At least, when music mattered most to it.) Generation X is used to being fucked over."[36]

Of course, all generations—even the ones without a real title, like mine—have it easier, tougher, weirder, etc., than their predecessors and their current incumbents. The Millennials do, and will have it tough. As Honan reminds us, however: "[Generation X] didn't invent the Web, but it largely built the damn thing. Generation X gave you Google and Twitter and blogging. . . . "[37] Ultimately, Gen Xers are now in the position they most feared—the role of authority, dismissing another youth culture.

**Sub goes Pop: Gen X goes mainstream**
Back to the nineties. The year 1994 was the last year the idea of Gen X was still being defined. By 1995, Gen X had become mainstream—an easily recognized set of archetypes that could be emulated through clothing and catch phrases.

For example, the label of "alternative music" began as a description for music that couldn't be relegated to a certain genre, but by 1995 "alternative music" became a genre unto itself, with recognizable characteristics. 1994 also saw the loss of Kurt Cobain, but the popularity of his band exploded in early 1995, when Nirvana's *Unplugged* album sold over 6.8 million copies, almost doubling its previously top-seller *In Utero*.[38] Perhaps even more significantly, 1995 was when indie music label Sub Pop sold out to Warner Bros., who bought 49% of the company.[39]

In 1994, movies like *Reality Bites* and *Clerks* represented Gen X as outsiders challenging mainstream culture, but by 95, *Clueless*[40] presented a caricature of many of the stock characters of Gen X (slacker, valley girl, homie, etc). It was no longer a thing to be born into but something which you put on, an affected air that lasted as long as your crush on a cute boy.

In 1994, the WWW was slowly becoming a household tool, but there was still fear and skepticism. Take for example Clifford Stoll's article in *Newsweek* entitled "The Internet? Bah! Hype alert: Why cyberspace isn't, and will never

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[36] http://www.emptyage.com/post/11591863916/generation-x-doesnt-want-to-hear-it

[37] http://www.emptyage.com/post/11591863916/generation-x-doesnt-want-to-hear-it

[38] I most definitely bought the tape of *Unplugged* in 1995, having never previously owning a Nirvana album.

[39] http://www.subpop.com/about

[40] *Clueless* captures the mid-90s in a wonderful surface and archetypal manner. Refer to characters Travis for archetype of "stoner/grunge" kid and Tai for her shifting identity of "grunge girl" to "valley girl".

be, nirvana."[41] The article, written in early 1995, essentially tells us that the Internet isn't all it is cracked up to be, and that it's all hype, with no lasting influence. Yet December of that year *Newsweek* declared 1995 "The Year of the Internet" stating: "Remember when surfing was something you did outdoors, in a bathing suit? That was 1994. Now it's what you do on the Internet—the worldwide network of computers that in 1995 was embraced as the medium that will change the way we communicate, shop, publish and (so the cybersmut cops warned) be damned."[42]

**Chandler meets Bill in Windows 1995**

If 1995 was the year of the Internet, it was also the year of *Friends*, with its first season wrapping up in May. So it seemed to be a good idea for Microsoft—which at the time dominated the personal computing market—to marry the two. To launch their latest operating system, Microsoft created *The Microsoft Windows 95 Video Guide*, hosted by none other than rising celebrity sensations Matthew Perry and Jennifer Aniston. The video featured three sections: features, FAQs and the world's first "Cyber Sitcom". The cyber sitcom is introduced as "an adventure in computing that takes place in the office of Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates. Along the way [Jennifer and Matthew] meet a wacky bunch of propellerheads and are introduced to the top 25 features of Windows 95."[43] These wacky "propellerheads"are a slew of Gen X archetypes: Chipster, the Internet geek, the Slacker chinese food delivery guy with potential but no drive, Joy-stick Johnny, the skater-dude, Tim, the grunge-rock band leader clad in a flannel shirt, and his bandmates, a stoner dude and a rocker chick.

In its attempt to appeal to 90s youth culture, *The Microsoft Windows 95 Video Guide* alienated its very target demographic. If you were to watch the video today, you might mistake it for a spoof on 90s culture. In the video, the framework is mainstream (a major computing company using celebrities to sell their product), but both what they are trying to communicate and how they are communicating constitute usurped in-between communication.

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[41] http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/1995/02/26/the-internet-bah.html

[42] http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/1995/12/24/the-year-of-the-internet.html

[43] The Microsoft Windows 95 Video Guide

## From Goldbergs to Gellers

While *The Microsoft Windows 95 Video Guide* tried and failed to create a new genre of "Cyber Sitcom", *Friends* is clearly part of the mainstream standard sitcom.

Situation comedy emerged from the Vaudeville era, with Jewish stand-up comedians such as Milton Berle, Jack Benny and Burns & Allen.[44] They then went on to play the Catskill circuit (the Borscht Belt), and entered America's homes through the radio play, and then television.

Deleuze and Guattari use the language of the eastern European Jews, Yiddish, as an example of a minor literature. Yiddish is the language of Jews in exile that they used to tell stories—fantastical folk tales that are over the top, full of pain and suffering, and told with a humour and hope that keeps you coming back for more. Applied more broadly, the same three characteristics I have adapted from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature—displacement, purpose and communality—can be applied to Jews and Jewish humour in North America.

The history of the sitcom cannot be told without considering Yiddish and Jews. There would be no sitcom without eastern European Jews. It was not the Yiddish language itself, it was the way it was spoken, the intonations, the silences, the spirit, all of which found their way into the sitcom. Yiddish was an oral language until the 1850s, and the way the story was told was just as important, if not more important than the words used.[45]

One of the most popular shows to make the switch over from radio to television was *The Goldbergs*, a sitcom about Jewish immigrants navigating their way in their new world of America while holding onto their old world values. Gertrude Berg produced, wrote and starred as the lead character, Molly, mother to all.[46] The story of the Jewish diaspora speaks to displacement, loss, suffering and overcoming life's great obstacles. And wile there are very few Yiddish speakers today, the sitcom is robust.

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[44] Sedita, 7

[45] My grandmother often spoke of a ten-minute Borscht-Belt sketch which consisted of two people using only the word nu (so), accompanied by intonations, silences, gestures, and shrugs, to convey a complete narrative of their lives.

[46] "Every American is entitled to a Jewish mother, and for those who can't have one, there is Molly Goldberg." She was, says Hoberman, "the Jewish mother of us all."" (From You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother by Joyce Antler, 47, 49)

As sitcom writer, producer, casting director and actor Scott Sedita says, the sitcom speaks to two things that everyone can universally relate to: family (kin or otherwise), and pain.

> It is a fact that many of yesterday and today's top comedians and comedy writers come from generations of disenfranchised and persecuted people, be it for their cultural differences, beliefs, philosophies, whatever. The history of the world is made up of groups of people who have faced oppression at some point in time. And one way to deal with it is with a strong sense of humour. The idea is either "You die or you laugh about it." (*The Eight Characters of Comedy*, Sedita, 4)

There is a long history of Jewish influenced sitcoms on television, from the writers, to producers to the characters on screen, but as Vincent Brook explains in his book *Something Ain't Kosher here; the Rise of the Jewish Sitcom*, the 90s were an unprecedented time for Jewish protagonists on television. *Seinfeld* of course comes immediately to mind, but look back at your TV guide from almost any year of the 1990s: *Dharma & Greg*, *Mad about You*, *Will & Grace*, *The Nanny*, and of course *Friends*, were all front-running sitcoms.

*Friends*, like *Seinfeld*, embodied the "Jew York" lifestyle, and both featured Jewish (and Jew-ish) characters. Part of Ross and Monica Geller's narrative was their Jewish father. Rachel Green was what Vincent Book identifies as a "Conceptual Jew"—written as Jewish, but not part of her larger narrative or named as such. And of course we had the recurring gag of Janice Litman, the quintessential Jewish American Princess. Yet even if Monica wasn't neurotic, or if Rachel had never had her nose job, *Friends* would still be, and still is, connected to this rich history.

**Use the Paints that Are Already in the Tray**
If you do the research, analyse the language, look at the structure and the story arcs, watching a sitcom—especially one that has a traditional four-camera, fixed set, studio audience and laughter and applause—is like watching a well-crafted dance or an excellent play in sports. Once you know the rules—and there are many of them—you can break the sitcom down to its smallest parts.

The sitcom has a language of its own, full of rules, codes and meanings. This language, this formula, is what keeps sitcoms universal, consistent, on message (to make people laugh and to keep them coming back for more) and relatively timeless. Television writer Sheldon Bull reminds us in his scriptwriting guide

*Elephant Bucks* to "[u]se the paints that are already in the tray."[47] The most successful sitcoms use the standard formula.[48]

The format of nearly all sitcoms[49] is built around advertising. From the beginning when sitcoms were still radio plays, corporate sponsorship was key. Currently, the sitcom is built into 30 minute segments, with 22 minutes of sitcom, eight minutes of advertising. With this, all sitcoms take on the following basic format: Credits, Story (Teaser/Cold Open), Commercial, Story, Commercial, End of story, Commercial, Tag, Credits.[50] This formula has had a major influence on the way the sitcom tells its story.

Then there are the characters. Scott Sedita says that in all sitcoms, there are only eight character types. These archetypes can be identified in all successful sitcoms, from *I Love Lucy* to a contemporary sitcom like *Happy Endings*—and of course, in *Friends*. Sedita's archetypes are: the Lovable Loser, The Logical Smart One, The Neurotic, The Dumb One, The Bitch/Bastard, The Womanizer/ Manizer, The Materialistic One, and The One In Their Own Universe. Within *Friends*, we can easily identify six of these characters within the ensemble cast, although at various points in the series each character takes on different roles depending on the storyline (Even Phoebe sometimes steps up to the role of The Logical Smart One).[51]

Finally, we have the script. This is where things like storylines, A plot, B plots, stakes, obstacles and goals are determined. And of course, there are the jokes: buttons, blows, call-backs, character jokes, sight gags, pratfalls, slow burns, classic triplets, extended triplets, over-extended triplets, turnarounds, spit-takes, sarcasm, and even funny sounding consonants (hard consonants are funnier than soft ones).[52]

Format, characters and script are the elements of the communication of humour in the sitcom. Making people laugh means using the rules. *Friends* implemented all of these rules quite successfully, but the influence of the in-

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[47] Bull, 35

[48] Many of the cult sitcoms, such as *Arrested Development* and *Bored to Death* break slightly from the mold, which may endear them to a fringe audience, but prevents them from being on the major networks or from prime time slots.

[49] A small portion of comedies, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, are able to break from this format because they are on a network that has different advertising rules.

[50] Sedita, 8

[51] I'll let you figure them out!

[52] Sedita, 35

between communities—the WWW, a sense of coming of age and Generation X—cannot be ignored.

What interests me is how all these in-between communications broke through the structure to form into a unique vernacular.

**Y'know, y'know?**
I mentioned before that the sitcom is a relatively timeless genre. When the paints that are already in the tray are used, the sitcom works. Obvious factors however, like broadcasting and film quality, fashion, and technology, date any given sitcom. And even though the language of the sitcom is controlled, it is hard to curb linguistic trends and tendencies.

*Friends* was so popular that it even led to several linguistic studies.[53] These scientific studies deal with word trends and usage. I am interested in something much broader than that—the communication between the words. *Friends* is full of *ums*, *y'knows*, and other casual bumbling inflection. Moreover, the use of repetition in *Friends* is where words achieve a new dimension. In "The One Where Everyone Finds Out", for example, *know* takes on new meaning simply through repetition: "They don't know that we know they know we know!"[54] Repetition is indeed a comedic device, but this goes beyond humour and into a bizarre twisting and turning of common words into a dense, coded language.

**Who could afford an apartment like that in Manhattan? Where Gen X went to die, but the Internet went to live**
Many shudder at the idea that *Friends* is representative of a Gen X demographic. Sure, the characters in *Friends* lived in Manhattan, some had jobs, and they were all good looking. And it was anything but counterculture. It *was* culture for ten years. But there was no hiding the Gen X malaise, no matter how much Hollywood got in there. A group of friends, all in their 20s, all trying to figure it out. The "friends" fit in neatly with the eight characters of comedy, and none of them wore plaid or jeans from the thrift store, but when you really break it down, what did they stand for? What did they do? None of them ever seemed to be working. Their parents didn't understand them. They listened to the radio, read magazines and didn't leave their house much, except to go to the coffee shop to hang out. Even its creators worried about the Gen X vibe of the show. "*Six of One* was the name of the show during the

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[53] So weird; so cool; so innovative: The use of intensifiers in the television series Friends, linguists Sali Tagliamonte and Chris Roberts; Television Dialogue—the sitcom Friends vs. natural conversation, by Paulo Quaglio

[54] Friends, Season 5, Episode 14

pilot. Then Kauffman and Crane came back with *Friends*, which we thought was such a snore. Some people thought the show was too Gen X, way too narrow."[55] *Friends* was Gen X, a safe-for-TV watered-down Gen X.

*Friends* was also an early adopter of the web—not only through its fans, but also on air. Chandler was Internet dating by 1996. The scripts didn't shy away from talking about technology, however antiquated it would soon become. "So how's your date with your Cyber-Chick going?"[56] Off the air, *Friends* fans would be some of the earliest adopters of the World Wide Web, creating fan sites, fan fiction and even creating a database of transcripts for other fans to read. In *Top of the Rock: Inside the rise and fall of MUST SEE TV*, Lisa Kudrow is quoted as saying: "When we were on Oprah, I think that first summer, she showed us all of these people in Internet Cafes. People were online talking about the show, which was the first time that people were using the Internet to connect with each other, like the new water cooler."[57]

**The One With Gen X, the Web, Teenagers, and all the Friends**
And so my narrative begins and ends with *Friends*. The advent of the World Wide Web, my own teenage years, the extended coming of age created by Generation X: all these narratives share the commonality of being in-between, and with that comes a certain form of communication.

*Friends* is a place for all these forms of communication to function together. I have approached *Friends* in many ways, from historical, linguistic and cultural standpoints, but when all these come together, something new happens: and we begin to understand how the cycle of in-between communications becomes mainstream.

So take a seat in Central Perk—but not the sofa, that's where Rachel, Ross, Chandler, Monica, Joey and Phoebe sit—and channel the teen spirit while you take in another episode of *Friends*.

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[55] Burke, Karey. From: Top of the Rock: Inside the rise and fall of MUST SEE TV, Warren Littlefield with T.R. Pearson, 272

[56] Friends, Season 2, Episode 24

[57] Kudrow, Lisa. From: Top of the Rock: Inside the rise and fall of MUST SEE TV, Warren Littlefield with T.R. Pearson, 287-8