

The future of the pub

Ian Pearson, Futurologist, Apr 2007

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Pubs provide a multitude of roles. They are places to eat, drink, socialise, participate in group activities such as watching sports events on a big screen, to entertain friends or business associates, or simply somewhere to go just to get out of the house. If the pub is a good one, it is somewhere that regulars can feel at home and relax in a friendly atmosphere. The availability of good beer is important but is usually several items down the list in terms of importance to the customers. Atmosphere, location, familiarity and friendliness are more important to most people.

With mobile phones, wireless LAN technology, and cheap laptops, many people are happy now to work in pubs just as they are in coffee shops. They are a 'third place' to hang out, the home and office being the first two. Pubs obviously have to balance the interests of the groups who come there to work and those going there to get away from work.

Technology is already affecting how customers will pay. Near future payment options will include using Oyster cards and mobile phones as well as more traditional means. Members can have an RFID chip (radio frequency ID) implanted in their arm to act both as a 'membership card' and as a payment device. However, this is unlikely to catch on in most places simply because most people won't want implants where a membership card would do just as well. Pubs don't generally have members and many customers are not regulars so it is unlikely that this will become appropriate for most pubs. One area where RFID chips might become more useful is in the implementation of tabs. Some pubs near here have wooden spoons with table numbers written on them, and other quaint innovations. RFID chips could easily be implanted in these to increase security and improve options, such as storing meal orders. A bar code reader or RFID scanner could identify different options on a menu and store them on the device before taking it to the bar to order, and this could even assist in later tallying who had what in order to avoid disputes over bills, or to provide individual receipts.

Sometimes people go to pubs to meet new people, find dates and flirt. Messaging and dating technology is really moving ahead now. Soon we will have directional

messaging in phones, so that you can point your phone at that nice girl at the bar and send her a text. Better still we will also soon have wearable wireless web servers. These will appear as electronic jewellery. Even a lapel pin is big enough to house a wireless web server in a couple of years time. These devices will radiate your personal web site into a couple of metres radius of your body. Someone in the vicinity can therefore see your site. Big deal huh? Well yes, we aren't talking business sites here. If your site is being checked out by someone who fancies you, who wants to find if you are in a relationship, free, what your personality is like, where you live etc, then it is a big deal. Such information can be encapsulated in such a way that it is only available on a reciprocal basis by negotiation between two such devices. The electronic jewellery items can talk to each other. If you are mutually compatible with someone else nearby, it will introduce you and establish electronic communication between you. Ice broken, date almost in the bag! Meanwhile, digital bubble technology will filter out all the people's sites that you aren't interested in, so you won't be plagued by inappropriate introductions.

Augmented reality and games technology will also have big effects in future pubs. Augmented reality is the overlaying of computer generated graphics into our field of view on our head up displays, which will be as commonplace in 5 years time as Bluetooth earpieces are today. This will allow our Blackberries to display emails right into our eyesets, let us overlay computer games into everyday environments, and even more interestingly, enable dual appearances. That means you can be looking at something and see a digitally enhanced or altered appearance. Advanced positioning technologies will enable overlays to be millimetre accurate, with the final tweaking done by image recognition. So in the far future, the pub will look like whatever you want it to be. It will have dual architecture and interior décor. All kinds of computer generated characters could be introduced into your field of view, livening up the pub atmosphere. Different customer groups could see different themes. One customer might see oak beams while another sees girders in a space station. And with new computer interfaces such as the one used for Nintendo's Wii, people will be quite accustomed to interfacing to computer programmes by means of free-space gestures instead of being constrained by keyboards. You just will have to be doubly careful not to knock over your pint!

Dual environments can also be used to create virtual environments where people can meet, enhancements on the 'Second Life' style environments that many people frequent today. These can be brought into a pub so that you can still go out with your friends even though you are thousands of miles away on a business trip. The physical pub environment can seamlessly blur into the virtual on-line environments, which of course can be infinite in both size and variety.

So what will the pub look like in the future? Whatever you like, mate.