

The Swintons of Tildeverse

Drinks, Nerds and public.html

(version 0.1)



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The Swintons of Tildeverse is a report on the numerous free shell providers that appeared in the wake of [tilde.club](#). Maybe it will help non-swintons understand this whole issue a bit better. Maybe it is a nice thing for swintons to keep after the last tilde server went offline. But certainly it is fun to write it.

You are reading version 0.1 of the work. The most recent version can be downloaded [there](#).

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**To ~ford, ~calamitous, ~vilmibm and
all the other admins and users.**

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Chapter 1

Genesis

There was a time before big players like Facebook, Google or Twitter hoarded users on their servers. A time before those virtual mega cities existed.

A time in which small-ish UNIX servers made up the web and users logged in on their servers on a command line interface to write and host their personal websites there. But with the rise of blogging sites and social networks, most people chose the easy way.

Many didn't even know of these [antique social networks](#) of the eighties and nineties, much less of the existence of such a thing as the command line.

The world wide web had become an easy to use, colorful, graphical adventure and left its text adventure times behind, with only enthusiasts (and, of course, admins) knowing the ways of the past.

When Paul Ford read [this article](#) in september 2014, it was the ~ sign that caught his attention. Following a short mention on his twitter account he got a little insight on what he had stumbled upon.

tildes are only ever properly used in front of usernames on shared hosting.

– [@mathowie](#), 2014-09-29

Apparently, it took Paul only a few moments to do a bit more research on this matter and register a domain name for his new project based on this finding, because seven minutes later he announced the creation of [tilde.club](#) and invited users to join him on the server.

[@mathowie](#) YES also i just registered <http://tilde.club> and will given anyone a shell account who wants one

– [@ftrain](#), 2014-09-29

Short time after, other twitter users began to ask for accounts. As Paul himself said, he had 100 requests when he woke up the next day. He set up the accounts and watched his server grow until it reached its capacities and he had to queue new requests on a wait list.

The outcome was [tilde.club](#), a remote server people could log in on via SSH. The possibilities were numerous. Most users used their `~public_html` directory to create web pages. Others used the tools on board to create games, write fiction et cetera. More than just a few started blogging.

It was humans interacting with humans. It was people playing around, experimenting.

– [Ben Collins](#), 2015-02-12

Servers of this kind existed long ago and have been available to this day, like the time-honored [SDF Public Access UNIX System](#), [st0rage.org](#) and [dozens more](#). They worked the same way, they offered the same functions and they, too, did not (necessarily) cost the users any money. So what made [tilde.club](#) so special?

Perhaps because was the fairly strong difference to the web that exists today. Tilde servers are by far not as polished and easy to use as modern social networks while also being more playful and exciting than the established shell providers. Well-tried Linux users and rookies alike could explore the remote machine with eyes shining with joy and build things without pressure or competition.

In the days and weeks after the creation of [tilde.club](#), other people followed the idea and started their own servers. These are, according to [~nossidge](#) and [~pfhawkins](#), the 38 tilde servers that appeared until now in alphabetic order:

- [bleepbloop.club](#)
- [botb.club](#)
- [catbeard.city](#)
- [club6.nl](#)
- [Ctrl-C Club](#)
- [cybyte club](#)
- [drawbridge.club](#)
- [german tilde](#)
- [hackers.cool](#)
- [hypertext.website](#)
- [losangeles.pablo.xyz](#)
- [matilde.club](#)
- [noiseandsignal.com](#)
- [oldbsd.club](#)
- [palvelin club](#)
- [pebble.ink](#)
- [perispomeni.club](#)
- [protocol club](#)
- [remotes.club](#)
- [retronet](#)
- [RIOTGIRL.CLUB](#)
- [rudimentarylathe.org](#)
- [Scary Spooky Scary](#)

- [skylab.org](#)
- [squiggle city](#)
- [sunburnt.country](#)
- [tilde.camp](#)
- [tilde.center](#)
- [tilde.city](#)
- [tilde.club](#)
- [tilde.farm](#)
- [tilde.red](#)
- [tilde.town](#)
- [tilde.works](#)
- [tildesare.cool](#)
- [totally nuclear club](#)
- [v3ctor.club](#)
- [yester.host](#)

By the way, club6.nl [claimed](#) to be the public access UNIX system accessible only via IPv6.

Chapter 2

Signing up

The first users applied via twitter, responding directly to Paul Ford. Later, he set up a Google Form for people to use.

Other servers took up this method, some also allowed requests via email.

The Google Forms usually asked for the desired and an alternative username in case the first was already taken, required an email address and demanded approval of the the server rules.

While there is a full blown [code of conduct for tilde.town](#), most servers went by the simple rules of being kind to one another and imperative of thinking about what the users did. Again inspired by Paul Ford, this rule was summed up in the words NO DRAMA, an explicit reference to [No More Drama](#) by Mary J. Blige.

Plus, sometimes, it was requested to not hack the gibson.

Some forms also ask for the SSH public key, creating a first obstacle for people not so fond of computers, but usually link to [documentation](#) on this topic.

Additional fields, though not required, include but aren't limited to:

- gender (riotgirl.club)
- twitter handle (dito)
- plans and interests (tilde.town)

Creation of the account includes the setup of the public.html directory including the first index.html file, usually asking to be edited after login.

After the the account is created, which, depending on the server, might last only hours or never happen, the respective admin usually sends an email out to the new users, welcoming them on the server.

Either on that occasion or at login, by means of the [motd](#), users are pointed to the servers FAQ or a primer of some kind, like [how to tilde](#) on tilde.club.

Chapter 3

Users

3.1 The tilde sign

It is the users that make a tilde server what it is.

On UNIX and derived systems like GNU/Linux, the `~` sign always points to a users own home directory, which is the place on the machine where their personal files and configuration are stored. On web servers, the tilde may be used to indicate that the content being displayed belongs to a user.

Usually, all files stored in `/home/username/public_html/` are served to a web browser when it accesses `www.example.com/~username`. However, this is a matter of configuration and is not necessarily the case.

`remotes.club`, for example, made user pages available at `username.remotes.club`, entirely setting the tilde aside.

Since computer people are somewhat lazy, `~gschueler` wrote some JavaScript to [autolink usernames](#).

3.2 Swintons

In search of a succinct name for the users of tilde servers, `~cortex` came up with the term Swinton (because tilde and `Tilda` do sound somewhat similar).

The term 'tildenizens', as proposed [here](#), did apparently not meet approval.

Since tilde users usually are quite knowledgeable about the internet and the web, terms like `netizen` or `internaut` might also apply, with swintons as a subcategory.

3.3 Meetups

I know of two cases in which swintons met up, in both cases in October 2014 and related to [tilde.club](#), while meetups pertaining to other servers seemingly did not happen yet.

The [Minnesotans](#) ~ met on [October 15](#) at Brit's Pub and even took a photo.

A photo was [taken](#) by ~agray and ~cortex, too, when they met at 33 Acres in Vancouver on October 20.

3.4 .plan

Each user may store a file called `.plan` in their home directory. This [dotfile](#) may contain arbitrary information about the user, like an external email address, a twitter handel, URLs for other web presences et cetera.

The program [finger](#) may then be used to gather information about any user on the local machine and read their plan file.

In theory, `finger` may be used via TCP/IP to request plan files and information on users on remote machines, but the required service does not seem to be activated on any tilde server.

3.5 Maps

Fellow swinton ~bear was busy creating maps of user locations on different servers, e.g. on , [tilde.red](#) and [tilde.town](#).

He released the code used to collect the data, store it in `.json` and make up the actual maps in a [GitHub repository](#).

A similar thing was done by ~eric on [tilde.club](#).

Chapter 4

Tools and toys

Swintons tend to be people that create tools for themselves and share them with others once they are finished or at least usable, thereby conforming to [hacker ethic](#) in the first sense of it. From the creativity and hands-on mentality on the different servers, more than a few projects and hundreds of lines of code resulted.

4.1 pre-installed

All the servers came with a variety of programs already installed and at the hands of users. These included IRC client (e.g. `irssi`), mail clients like `mutt` or `alpine`, several text editors (`vim`, `emacs`, `nano` to name a few).

~jstg of `ctrl-c.club` [listed packages installed on said server](#), which serves as an example.

4.2 Games

While a collection of games was already installed on several (if not all) tilde servers, many users created their own. Those are of all kinds. ~cortex lists a text maze, a text adventure, a platformer and more on [the tilde.arcade](#).

On `squiggle.city`, ~zinefer created another arcade.

4.3 Webrings

[Webrings](#) are remnants of the WWW from the nineties. Since tilde servers aim to bring back the fun of past times, it did not last long until this technique was re-invented.

~harper on tilde.club began work on [a webring](#) in October 2014 and [shared the code](#) like a good swinton. A user count seems not available.

The [tilde.town ~ring](#) was initiated in December 2014 and has [71 members](#) as of 2016-09-08. The source code building this ring was shared [on GitHub](#), too.

germantil.de appeared to have a webring, but it is [gone for good](#).

On tilde.club, [~notjosh](#) took this whole thing to extremes by writing an actual 3D webring in HTML and JavaScript.

4.4 Blogs

Multiple users on different tilde servers also noticed that CLI blogging tools were either not installed or just did not fit them right, so they took matters into their own hands approached the problem in different ways.

- ~minerobber wrote a [blog generator](#) in Python for his tilde.town site
- on totallynuclear.club, ~schlink created [Radiation](#) using Ruby
- ctrl-c.club's ~philips wrote [bake](#) in C, later re-implemented it in C++
- tilde.center had ~papa scripting Stream Of Consciousness in sh, which was slightly edited by ~pgadey on ctrl-c.club (Official source code not available.)
- tilde.town offers [ttbp](#), coded by ~endorphant
- on ctrl-c.club, again, ~gauntlet wrote [gmb](#), using bash

4.5 Polls

~philips [wrote about](#) a bash script that allows to create polls on tilde servers. Directory-based and to be used on the CLI. Simple. Source code [on GitHub](#), of course.

4.6 Activity

Multiple users have found one way or another to display the activity on the servers.

- [size of public.html per user](#) on tilde.town

- [pages updated in the last 24 hours](#) on [tilde.town](#)
- [recently updated pages](#) on [ctrl-c.club](#)
- [chat logs](#) on [ctrl-c.club](#)
- [average of logged in users](#) on [ctrl-c.club](#)
- [pages updated in last 24 hours](#) on [tilde.club](#)

Another example was [Alice](#). She gained health points whenever users edited their web pages, but lost 12 points per hour. After activity on [tilde.club](#) began to cease, Alice eventually died.

4.7 Overview

There are lists of public readable projects on [ctrl-c.club](#) and [tilde.town](#).

Chapter 5

Communication

Tilde servers are communities, and communities only grow and stay alive by means of communication and information interchange. Naturally, methods were established on all the servers to allow users to chit-chat, seek help and create new stuff.

5.1 Mail

With either pine or mutt installed, swintons are able to communicate with one another on their local machine. Hardly any server allows to send mail outwards or receive any from the internet.

In case a mail is received, the shell will inform the user after login.

5.2 IRC

The ancestor of today's instant messaging services and somehow still alive and well. Programs like scrollz or irssi allow to join the conversation right from the command line. Some classic shell providers even require their users to parttake in IRC as to keep the community connected.

5.3 wall

wall is kind of a large scale baseball bat that will indifferently strike anyone logged in on the server right in the face. Whatever the sender writes, the other users will see appear in their STDIN. As this is likely to mess up carefully edited scripts or ASCII art, wall is hardly used.

Chapter 6

Content

6.1 Style

The home page of [tilde.club](#) is all amber and black, a reminiscence of old times when computers were slow, loud and by far not as colorful. It is free of images and uses a simple, table style design.

Other tilde home pages like [botb.club](#), [ctrl-c.club](#) or [germantil.de](#) borrowed design ideas from this page, sometimes altering the colors to green or purple.

Sites like [tilde.red](#) or [riotgirl.club](#) had their own approaches, being either way more simple or way more colorful.

[tilde.town](#) was even mentioned on a web site about [web brutalism](#), representative for just about all tilde servers.

Ugly and hard to use is a description that might apply to a few index pages and more than just a few user pages. Some swintons, however, dug deep into CSS and HTML and created beauty.

Others, not so much, and many pages are black on white with blue hyperlinks and more often than not in a monospace font.

6.2 Collaboration

The [tilde.town zine](#) is a great example of the collaboration between tilde users. Even though activity is seemingly remaining static, the first issue shows the degree of creativity and and vigor in your average swinton.

The report at hand will, as I hope, turn out as another example.

6.3 Art

6.4 Dark Tilde

~_ [wondered](#) about stuff on tilde servers that is not linked to from the tilde server and in which degree this might qualify as a Dark Web equivalent. So, is there a Dark Tilde? It usually does not last long until new projects are linked to, but sometimes they happen in the filesystem on the tilde somewhere off the areas a web server can access, so they may only be mentioned and will stay invisible for anyone without an account on the respective system. Dark Tilde, in a way.

Chapter 7

Vanity

Tilde servers tend to disappear. If they do – or rather, when they do – t all the content the local swintons created and uploaded will vanish, usually for good.

When totallynuclear.club disappeared, it took with it the juke box made by ~maze.

retronet is gone as well, and so is ~qqwy's tilde-wide search engine.

Sometimes, at least the index page of the server is archived, like in the case of germantil.de. Most user pages are lost, unfortunately.

Take part

Email me your suggestions

Spread the word

And thank you for reading this!