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- [The Web](#)
- [Slideshows](#)

:: [Computers](#) :: [Miscellaneous](#)

The NABU Network

The Internet before the Internet.

In the same year that "The Computer" was named Man of the Year and Pacman was eating 25-cent coins by the millions, a group of Ottawa developers took the first brave baby steps into the world of cyberspace.



• Author

Jim Ducharme

PCworld.ca

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Despite this commercial failure, the work of Bruce Hempel and his colleagues left very tangible footprints in cyber space, long before most

Back around 1982 I spent quite a bit of time hanging out at my friend Ernie's place - primarily because Ernie had the **NABU** Network. No, this wasn't a BBS for Star Wars fans. The **NABU** Network was the Canadian forerunner of the Internet and probably the first attempt at interactive online entertainment. Ernie and I spent many hours playing such games as "Kiddy Park" and "ATC" (Air Traffic Controller), which made it obvious to me that jumping over logs and landing planes just wasn't as easy as it looked.

I developed the same addiction back then for the **NABU** Network as I did for the Internet 10 years after. Instinctively I knew this was something special - this was a door to another world, another dimension (no Twilight Zone pun intended). I still recall that feeling I would get when we would turn on the set-top box and connect to the network - the anticipation as I saw the title screen come up and the feeling that I was about to explore "Aladdin's Cave". All balanced, of course, by the knowledge that Ernie played the thing a lot more than I did and he would pound me into the ground.

Based on the far seeing concept of Bruce Hempell and John Kelly, **NABU** debuted in 1982 via the Ottawa Cablevision system and featured dozens of programs available to subscribers who bought a PC TV set-top box for \$950.00 and paid about \$8.00 to \$10.00 a month for the service. Most of the content available consisted of games, but **NABU** broke new ground by developing such services as online financial, shopping and entertainment applications.

The heart of **NABU** (which stands for Natural Access to Bi-directional Utilities) was the z80A processor chip (running at a lightening fast 3.57 MHz) and the cutting edge TI 9918 video chip. The TI was, in fact, able to produce some very good graphics when you consider this was over 20 years ago. All served up via a Gould SEL mainframe.



The major weakness of this network was the strictly one-way connection as it was implemented on Ottawa Cable. The cost of upgrading the existing cable infrastructure to a true bi-directional network (**NABU** was bi-directional but the cable network couldn't support this) was, according to former **NABU** developer Mike Slinn, "a show stopper" because the demand just didn't justify the investment - a prime example of the "chicken and the egg" conundrum.

Simply put, the **NABU** Network failed not only because it was ahead of its time, but also because it was ahead of the marketplace it served. Aside from the daunting technical issues, which included questions about data security, people were not ready for it or its hefty price tag. It was hard for most consumers to imagine TV as anything beyond a passive appliance. Thus, even forays into the U.S.A. and an installation in Japan could not prevent **NABU** from going offline in 1985.



Despite this commercial failure, the work of Bruce Hempell and his colleagues left very tangible footprints in cyber space, long before most of us ever dreamed of it. Slinn even categorized **NABU** as an early example of "convergence".

However, the **NABU** Network does live on at the York University Computer Museum (YUCoM), where you will find not only the set-top box but also one of the game development rigs. The museum features over 300 computer artifacts and a large collection of documents and photos. YUCoM welcomes about 500 high school students each year and is available to researchers and the public by appointment only. You can visit YUCoM online

at: www.cs.yorku.ca/museum . Zbigniew Stachniak, curator of the museum, has plans to actually recreate **NABU** via an Ethernet LAN, as opposed to its earlier cable form.

Whenever that happens, I'll be among the first in line to try it out again. Now, I just have to find Ernie's number. It's payback time.

(Photos courtesy of YUCoM and The Museum of Science and Technology)

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NABU Network

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Hey! I had a **Nabu** Network system at my house too. We didn't pay \$950 for it, we tried it free for a month. But man, what a month! I still remember Dad setting it up and my brother and I playing the games! I don't think my parents did any online banking or shopping...I'm pretty sure they brought it home because Ottawa Cablevision was getting people to try it for free for a month before deciding whether or not they wanted it for \$10 a month, and my parents wanted to see what it was all about. At the time **Nabu** came out, my brother was 6 or 7 and I was 2 years old. But I still remember playing **Nabu**! I just have a really great memory. I'd love it if **Nabu** came back--it would be so nostalgic! **Nabu** had great games back then.

Written by: **Katherine**, from **Ottawa**

The NABU Network

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...That's me as the dad and Tyly Ross as my son... this came out shortly before it folded!

Written by: **John Koensgen**, from **Ottawa**

The NABU Network

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...hai my nick name is **nabu**.....and am intered to know more about this network...and also nedd a link to this network from orkut.....

Written by: **Nbeela.kh**, from **malappam,Kerala**

The NABU Network

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I just did a Google on **NABU**, and here I am. Well actually . . . here I am again, as I was first alerted to this article a couple of years ago by Jim Ducharme, author of this article, who contacted me through my son Eric in Ottawa. So . . . this is my second time reading it, and still brings tears to my eyes. Those were heady days. Every one of us involved in developing the **NABU** Network were on cloud nine, so alive and full of piss and vinegar. This time around I noticed the comments, so just thought I would leave a note and contact info. I am retired now, living in Brooklyn NY as a photographer. My website is leobruce.com. I note that Zbigniew Stachniak at YUCoM would like to re-create the **NABU** Network. This task might be greatly simplified if the person who bought the demo server at the Almonte garage sale would check in here, lol. Really appreciate your article Jim

Written by: **Bruce Hempell**, from **Brooklyn, NY**

The NABU Network

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It was so ahead of its time! I remember getting up every morning rushing to turn it on to see what new games were online. Fantastic!

Written by: **Chris Miller**, from **Toronto, Ontario**

NABU Network

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We subscribed to the **NABU** Network from the beginning and watched it develop. Our kids were 8 and 10 in 1982, and loved the entertaining games - Kiddy Park and a tank driver game were favourites. Sadly, **NABU** only lasted a couple of years, but it gave us a taste for what became the full-blown Internet.

Written by: **Gary Ansell**, from **Nanaimo, BC**

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