DIALED BACK

the Retro BBS Scene 2025+++

By Rob Sherman AKA Amis

BBSing isn't just a technology. It's a *mood*, a *rhythm*, a *ritual*. It's the clack of keys as you type `ATDT` into your terminal. It's the hiss and chirp of a modem shaking hands, even if it's just simulated now. It's watching a welcome screen unfold one line at a time like a download in X-Modem passing by in a packet of bytes awaiting the final confirmation of success.

In the '80s and '90s, our boards were little kingdoms run on beige boxes, CRTs, and the willingness to tie up the family phone line for hours. Today, the hardware mix is wild — a blend of real iron pulled from storage, high-fidelity emulators, and modern servers pretending to be their ancestors. But the soul? That hasn't changed.
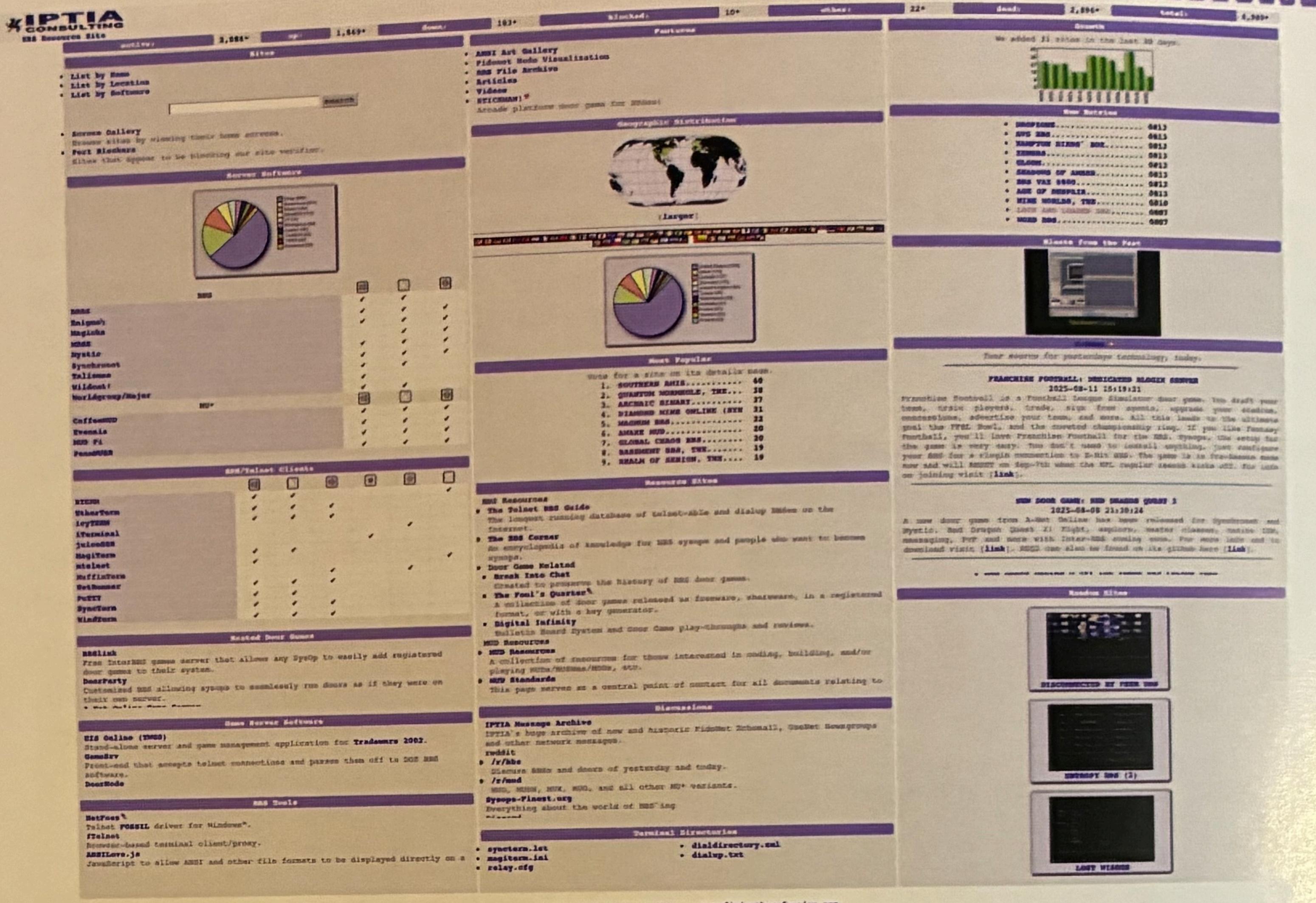
We're not just preserving the old haunts. We're repainting the walls, upgrading the doors, using modern + retro tools at our disposal and sometimes, like with Basement BBS, we're rebuilding the whole thing as an Office Space style corporate dystopia.

The Pulse of the Scene: By the Numbers

One of the biggest shifts from then to now is that we can actually *measure* the health of the scene in real time. Thanks to I Ping Therefore I Am (IPTIA)

https://www.ipingthereforeiam.com/bbs/

the days of relying on rumor or "Sysop says" numbers are over. You can see in the ranking who is the best and access to all kinds of BBS and MUD information.

Recent data paints a lively picture:

The pulse of today's BBS community is visible on IPTIA, where systems are tracked, tested, and counted. The latest sweep shows **4,972 total entries**, of which 2,072 (Globally) are active and responding. Nearly 1,900 of those are "up" at any given moment, with only a small fraction down or blocked, while 2,900 are recorded as retired or dead.

The activity leaderboard reads like a who's-who of modern BBSing. Southern AMIS currently sits at the top, followed closely by The Quantum Wormhole and Archaic Binary. Systems like Diamond Mine Online, Magnum BBS, Global Chaos, The Basement BBS, and The Realm of Serion all report steady call traffic with each of these communities drawing double-digit logons day after day.

Variety is the rule when it comes to platforms and software. The site catalogues *Mystic, Synchronet, Enigma½, Magicka, BBBS, MBSE, Talisman, Wildcat!,* and *Worldgroup / Major* systems, alongside active MU* servers like *CoffeeMUD, Evennia, MUD Pi,* and *PennMUSH*. On the user side, modern terminal clients such as *SyncTerm, MuffinTerm, WindTerm, icyTERM,* and *MagiTerm* ensure that callers can enjoy the correct graphics and colors whether they're connecting from vintage hardware or a modern laptop. Access to these programs all provided in direct links on the site.

Beyond the raw numbers, IPTIA doubles as a community hub. There's an ANSI art gallery, a Fidonet node visualizer, a deep BBS file archive, and a growing library of articles and videos documenting the culture. Sysops can tap into hosted Inter-BBS game platforms like BBSlink and DoorParty to add door games without complicated installs, and new releases like Franchise Football and Red Dragon Quest 2 keep the competitive spirit alive. It's part directory, part museum, part playground — and for anyone who cares about the present and future of BBSing, *it's the best single window into the scene's scope and vitality.*

One of the more fascinating views on IPTIA is its trend analysis chart of new boards coming online. Rather than a flat or declining curve you might expect from a decades-old technology, the graph has a steady heartbeat —. Each spike represents not just a single Sysop firing up a system, but the start of a new community, whether it's a one-node Atari running restored AMIS code or a multi-node Synchronet host with a fully themed ANSI world. *The past 30 days alone have seen 23 new boards appear on the radar,* underscoring that in 2025, the lure of new or former Sysops spinning up their own BBS **is as alive as ever.**

The Sysop Creativity: The Themed BBS

If the BBS was the original social network, then the theme was the Sysop's calling card — the personality of the board, distilled into screens of **ANSI, ASCII, PETSCII,** or **ATASCII,** and reinforced through every menu choice, message base name, and file area. It was how you stood out from the sea of generic *"Welcome to My BBS"* logons. In a world where local calling zones defined your audience,

the right theme could mean the difference between a ghost town and a nightly party line.

Themes were competitive tools. Sysops would prowl other systems, take notes, and go home to tweak their own boards to one-up the competition. Every tweak, every inside joke, every art swap was part of a long game to make your system the one people kept dialing into — even if it meant juggling multiple phone lines to handle the rush.

Some '80s boards became legends because of how powerfully their themes and Sysop personalities intertwined. **The Iron Curtain** on Long Island, NY, for example, wasn't just an Atari FoReM XL system with a sharp Atascii Iron Fist Logo. It was a *digital underground speakeasy,* cloaked in Cold War paranoia, where the menu structure itself felt like infiltrating a secure network. Even its file sections and message bases were named to fit the narrative, creating a persistent sense of place.
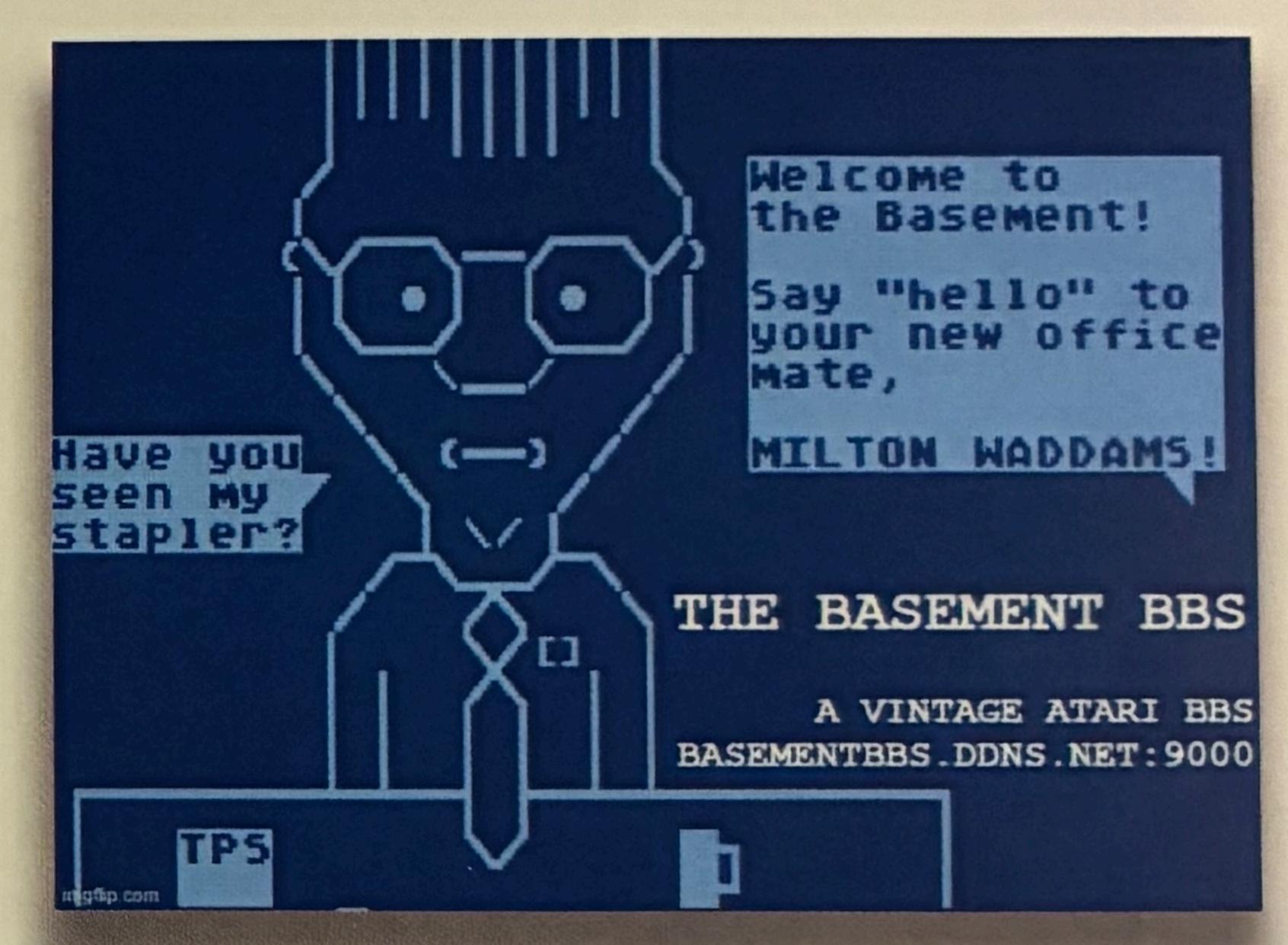
In Ohio, **Rusty & Edie's BBS** blended a friendly *"neighborhood hangout"* vibe with an astonishing depth of content — one day you might be greeted with lighthearted ANSI doodles, the next with satirical menus tied to current events. The personality of the Sysops bled through in every interaction, and regulars felt like they were logging into a friend's den, not just a text-based service. Oh and the litigation which made the board famous!

On the West Coast, **The Safehouse** catered to the *hacker and phreaker subculture,* pairing tight, encrypted message boards with espionage-themed ANSI art. Even the door games were curated to match the covert-ops aesthetic. You didn't just log into The Safehouse — you "breached" it, with every menu
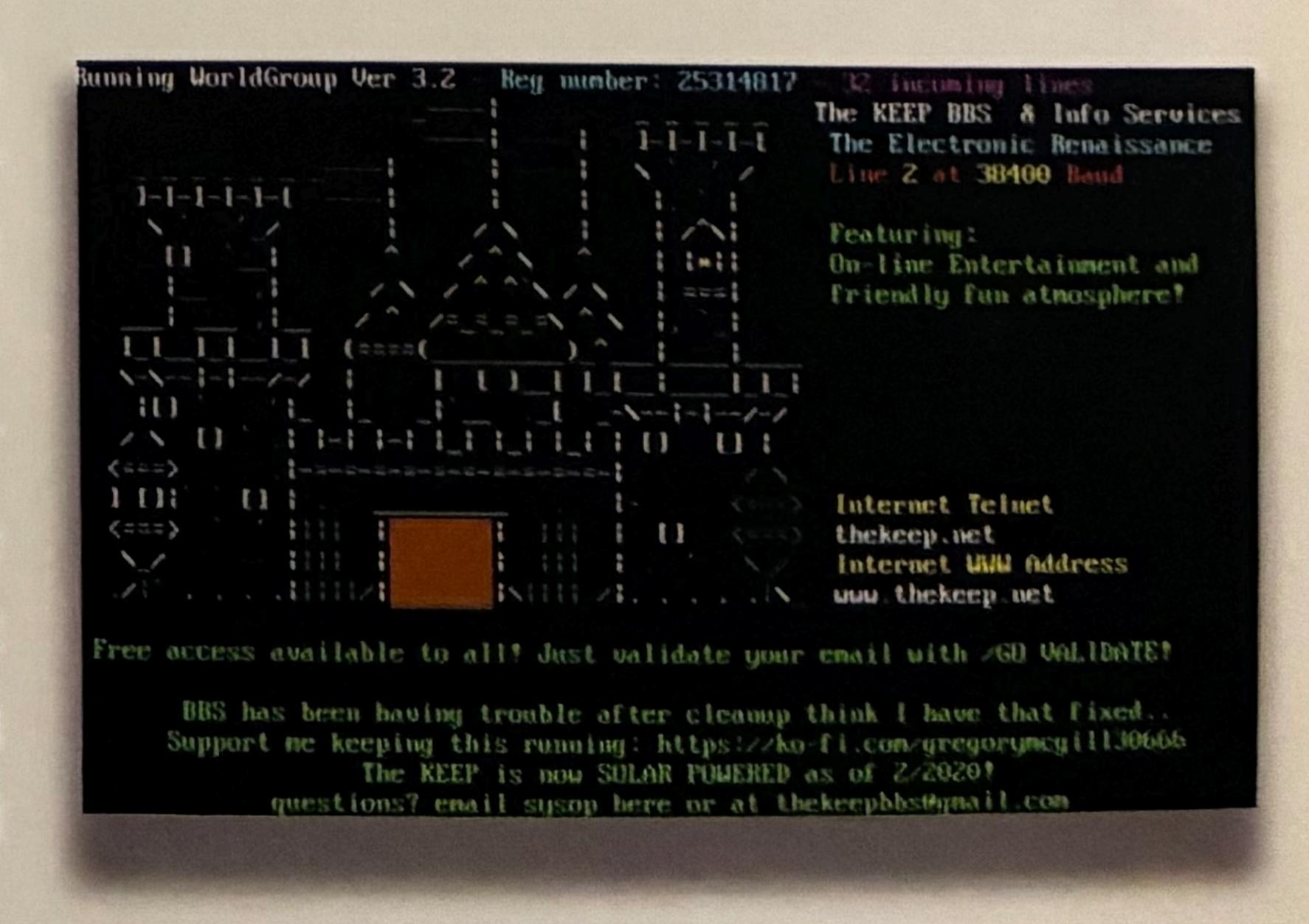
change reinforcing the fantasy.

These boards were more than utilities; they were living, evolving worlds. *The Sysops weren't simply administrators* — they were hosts, world-builders, and ringmasters, shaping a nightly experience that kept callers coming back for the atmosphere as much as the content. That same philosophy drives today's themed boards, from Basement BBS's cubicle-farm satire to Taco Pronto's take on getting you a taco without a wait. The tools have changed, but the art of turning a BBS into a place you want to visit, laugh, and admire the creativity still remains.

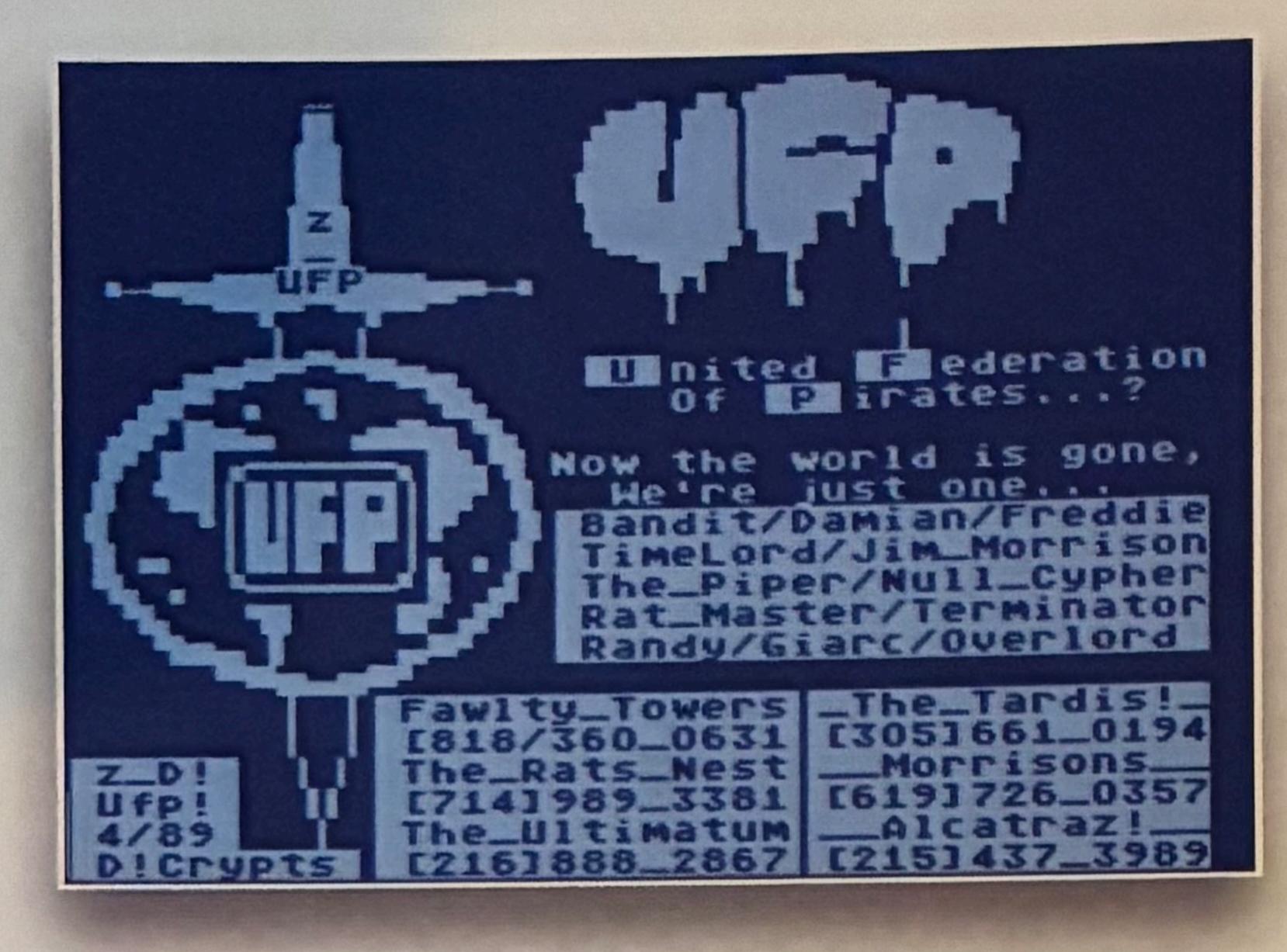### Basement BBS – Office Space

Possibly the most "inside joke turned immersive experience" you'll ever see in text mode. The login screen? Looks like a faxed memo. Menus? Bureaucratic forms. Message bases? "TPS Reports" and "Breakroom Banter." Even the door games get corporate reskins. And yes, Lumbergh will "swing by" to nag you about your cover sheets.

The Keep – Fantasy Tavern Vibes

A classic ANSI castle environment. You're greeted at the "Great Hall," wander into the "Guild Quarters" (message boards), visit the "Vault" (file areas), and embark on weekly "quests" — door game tournaments with in-game rewards.

Alcatraz BBS – Pirate Haven Reborn

Among Atari 8-bit enthusiasts, Alcatraz BBS stands out not just for its vintage routing but for its flavor — it branded itself as a United Federation of Pirates board during the mid- to late- 1980s under Sysop "Giarc The Warden." This legendary system was resurrected in 2017 and found a new home online, giving enthusiasts a rare chance to revisit its storied legacy.

Legends We Still Talk About

BBS history is full of giants, and their echoes still bounce around the scene today.
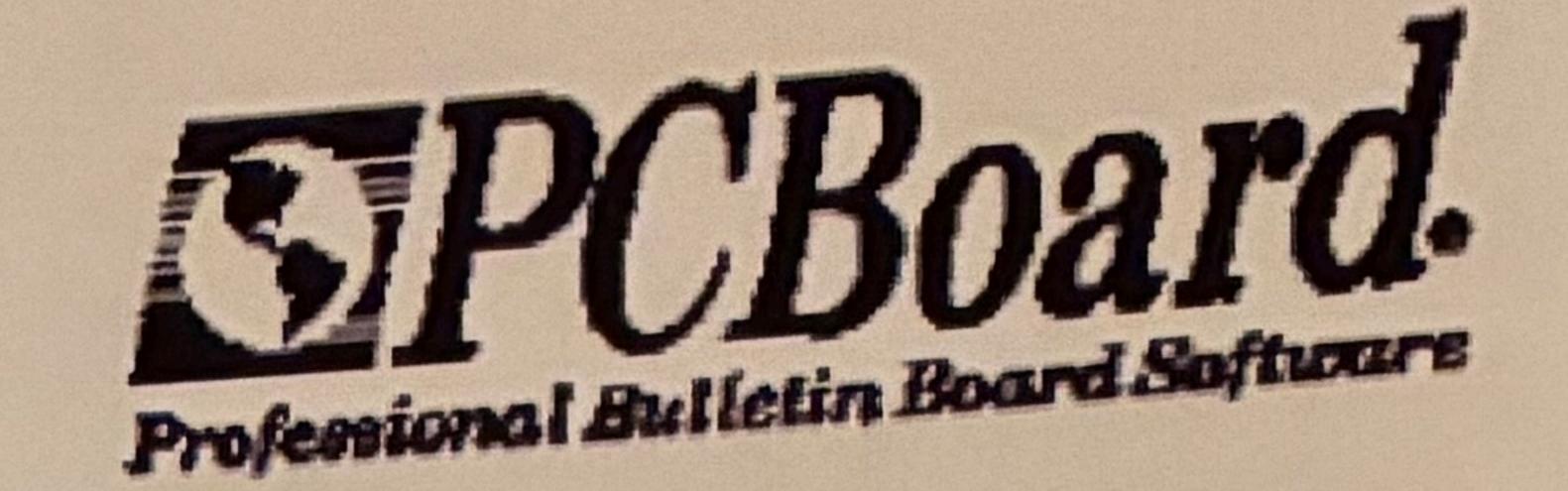
Iron Curtain – Long Island, NY
A titan in the BBS era, *Iron Curtain* ran in the mid-to-late '80s with an intensity and customization level that made it legendary. Massive file libraries, heavily tweaked menus, and a local user base of hackers (or a fight club, depending on the thread).

Clockwork Orange - Los Angeles, CA
From 1980-1993 this BBS had 6 nodes, big for this era. Sysop (Nemo) created a multilevel BBS where dialing one number would provide access to either Clockwork Orange or The Time Machine.

https://www.computesgazette.com/

PCBoard.
Professional Bulletin Board Software

Heavyweights
PCBoard itself was the Ferrari of its time — expensive, multi-line, with a scripting language (PPL) that let Sysops create nearly anything. If you logged into a premium PCBoard system, you knew it. The slick menus, the instant chat, the high-ASCII banners — all part of the experience.

Others Worth Remembering
Boards like The **Sound Barrier**, **Dr. Debug's**, and **The Bandits Hideout** carried unique vibes — from hacker-leaning tech boards to roleplaying havens. Many Sysops running boards today cut their teeth on these classics.

The Art That Binds It All Together

The art scene is where nostalgia and innovation meet. *ANSI, PETSCII*, and *ATASCII* aren't just artifacts — they're skilled creations and artistic mediums.

PETSCII (C64) — Perfect for blocky, color animated menus; often used for dramatic logon sequences.

ATASCII (Atari) — Crisp lines and fast draw speeds, making even simple screens feel snappy and animation used to express a theme or make the art pop.

ANSI (PC/Amiga) — Deep color palettes and shading for elaborate logos and themed backdrops.
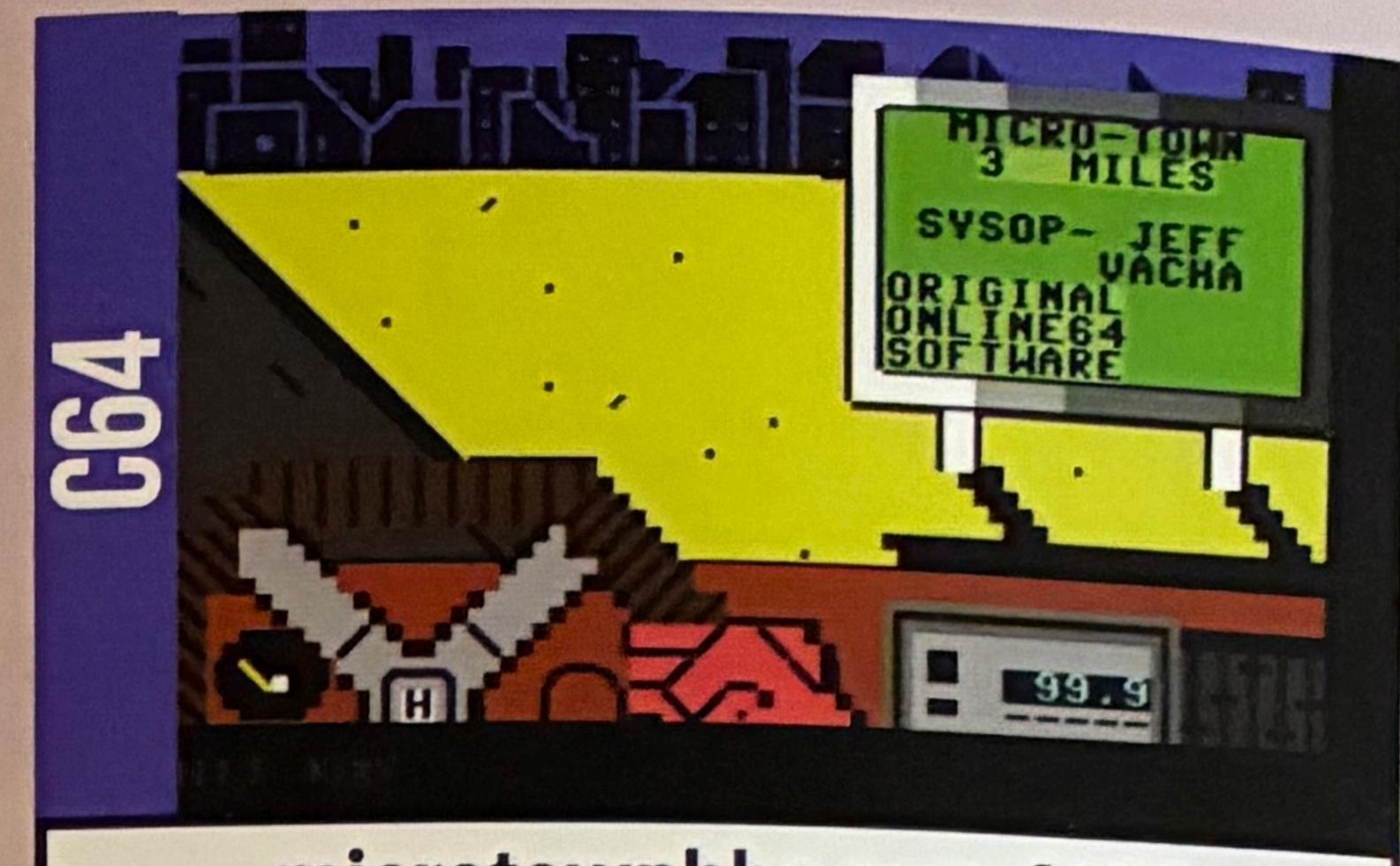
ANSI Boards

20 For Beers: Active with a great retro file collection and regular events.
The Realm of Serion BBS: Known for its active community and hosting the LORD tournament.
Diamond Mine Online BBS: Features

Monthly BBS List

Microtown BBS
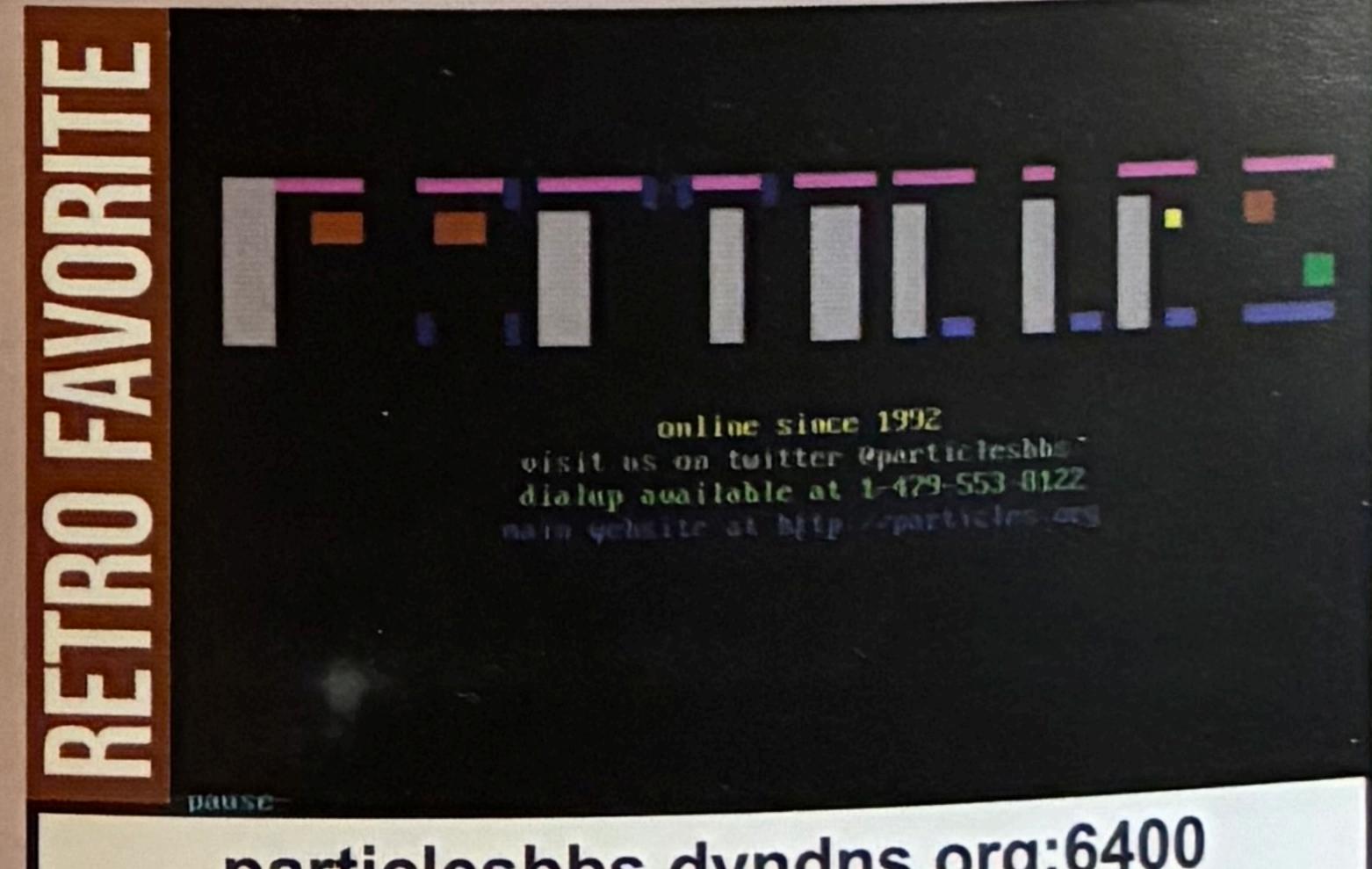

microtownbbs.com:6400

Basement BBS

basementbbs.ddns.net:900

Guardian of Forever
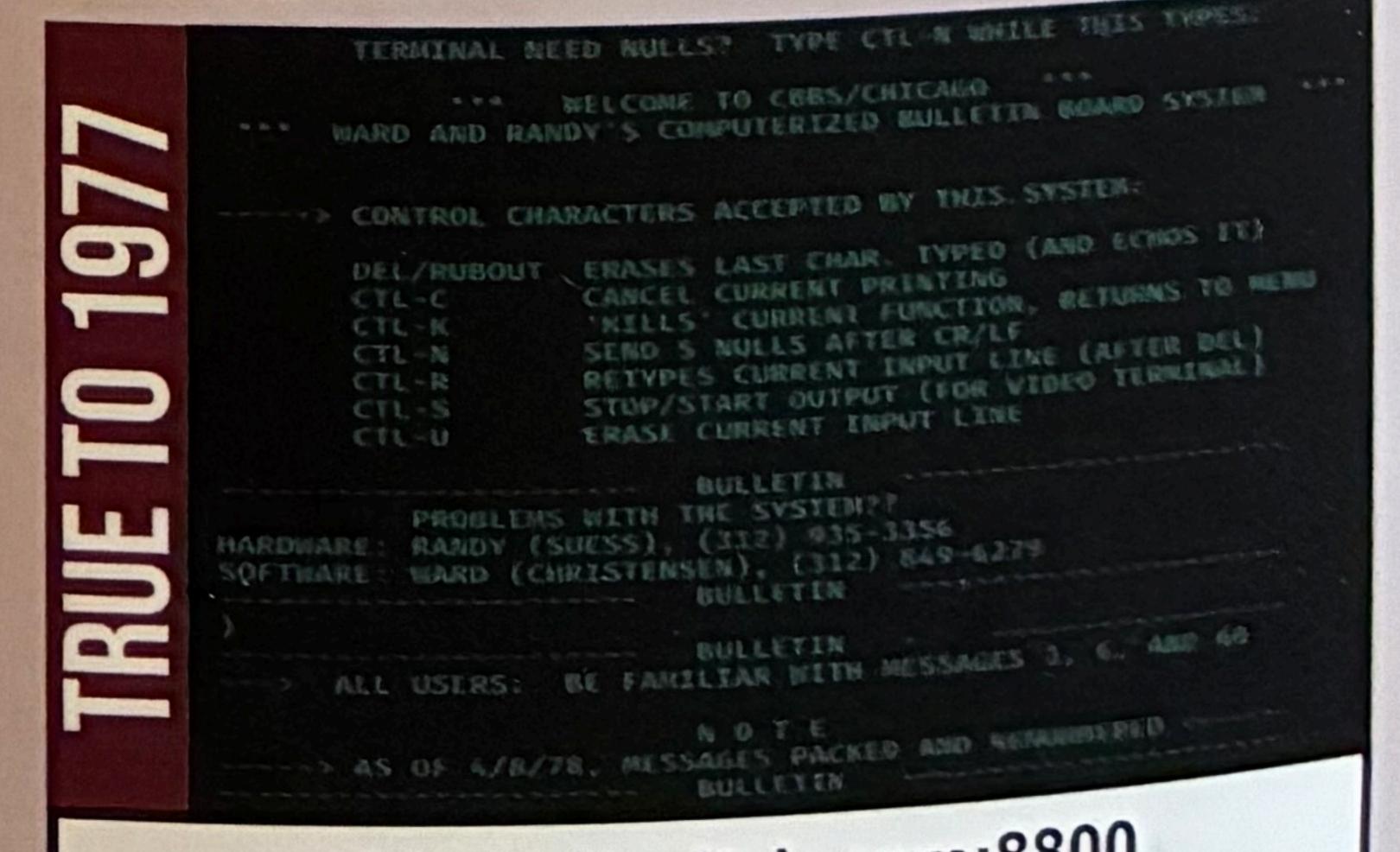
guardian.synchro.net:23

Particles BBS

particlesbbs.dyndns.org:6400

CBBS

cbbs.mitsaltair.com:8800

over 30 local games and 200 games via BBSLink and Door Party.

Xibalba: Active and unique, serving as both a BBS and a game.

Niche and Specialized BBSes

undercurrents.io: A modern take on BBS with a sleek interface.

Atari BBSs: Active with a dedicated community. www.southernamis.com/atari-bbs-list

CIA Amiga: For Amiga enthusiasts.

Danger Bay BBS: Known for its extensive collection of door games.

vintage.thcbbs.com: Like stepping back into the 90s.

Microtown BBS: Runs on Commodore 64 and supports ASCII or PETSCII.

Why We Log In

Social media gives you followers. A BBS gives you neighbors. Every call is intentional, every message is written for someone who shares the same retro hobby you do.

BBSing is history, hobby, art, and community all rolled into one. The past gave us the blueprint; the present gives us the bandwidth to make it wilder, stranger, and more personal than ever.

The line is still open. The welcome screens are waiting. And somewhere, in a corner of the net, your favorite BBS still echoes — not in uptime stats, but in the culture it helped create. ◙

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How to connect to a BBS today:
https://bytecellar.com/bbsing/
https://www.southernamis.com/how-to-connect
https://www.telnetbbsguide.com/
https://github.com/mkrueger/icy_tools
https://fujinet.online/
https://syncterm.bbsdev.net/
https://muffinterm.app/
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Hayes Modem Commands
ATZ   Reset modem to default settings
+++   Escape from online mode to cmd mode
ATH   Hang up
ATA   Answer incoming call
ATDT  Dial using tone (e.g., ATDT bbs.example.com:23)
ATDP  Dial using pulse dialing
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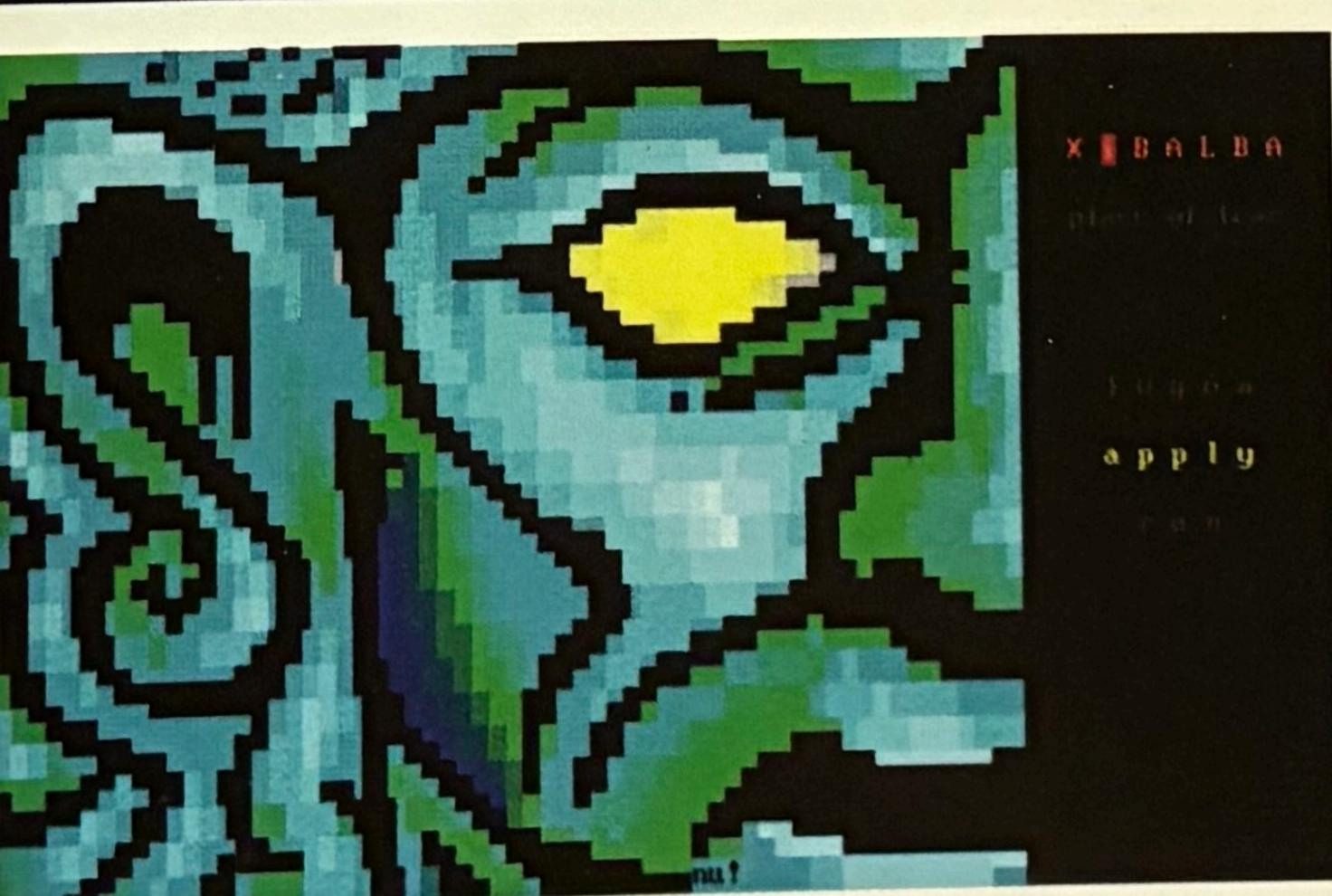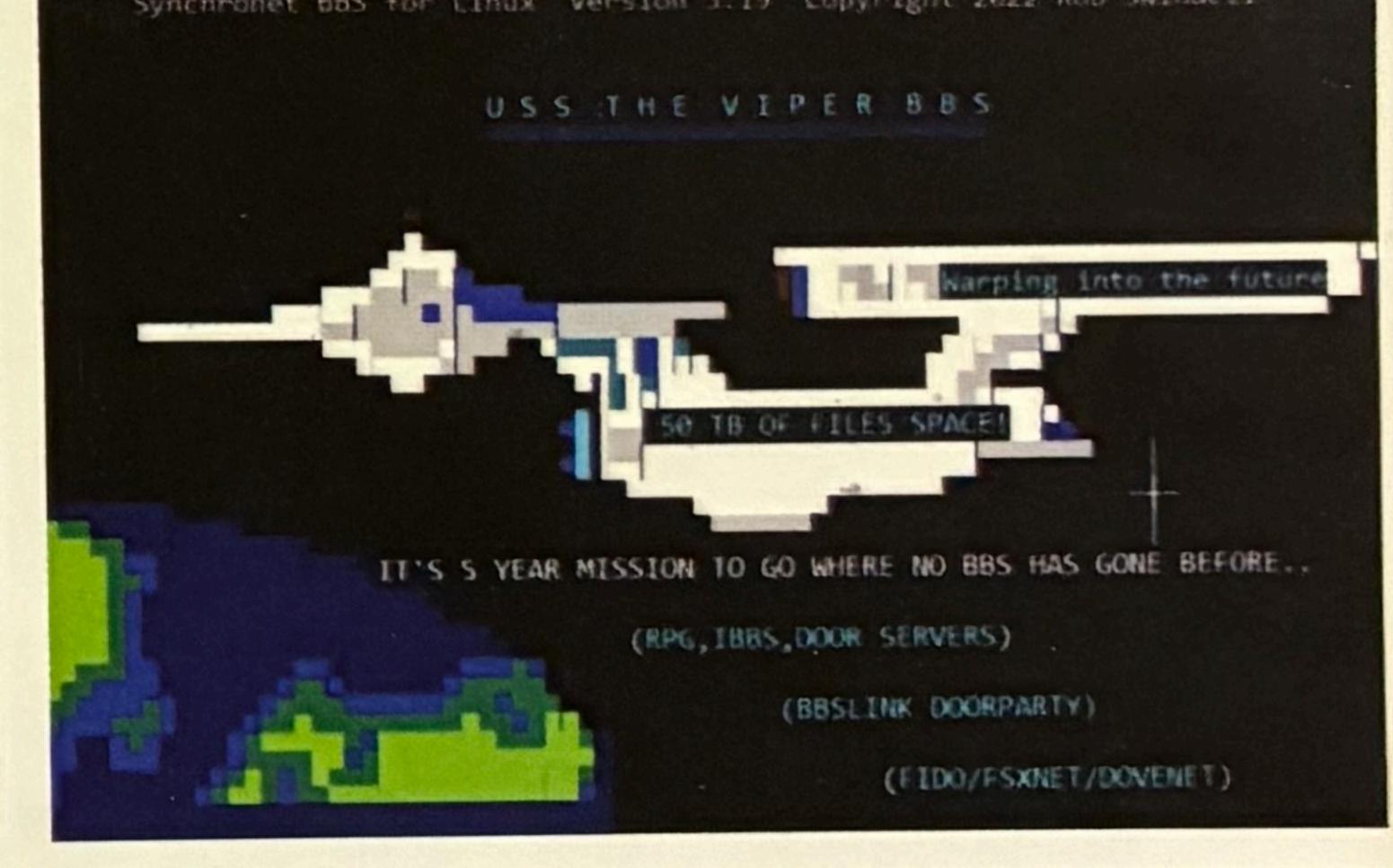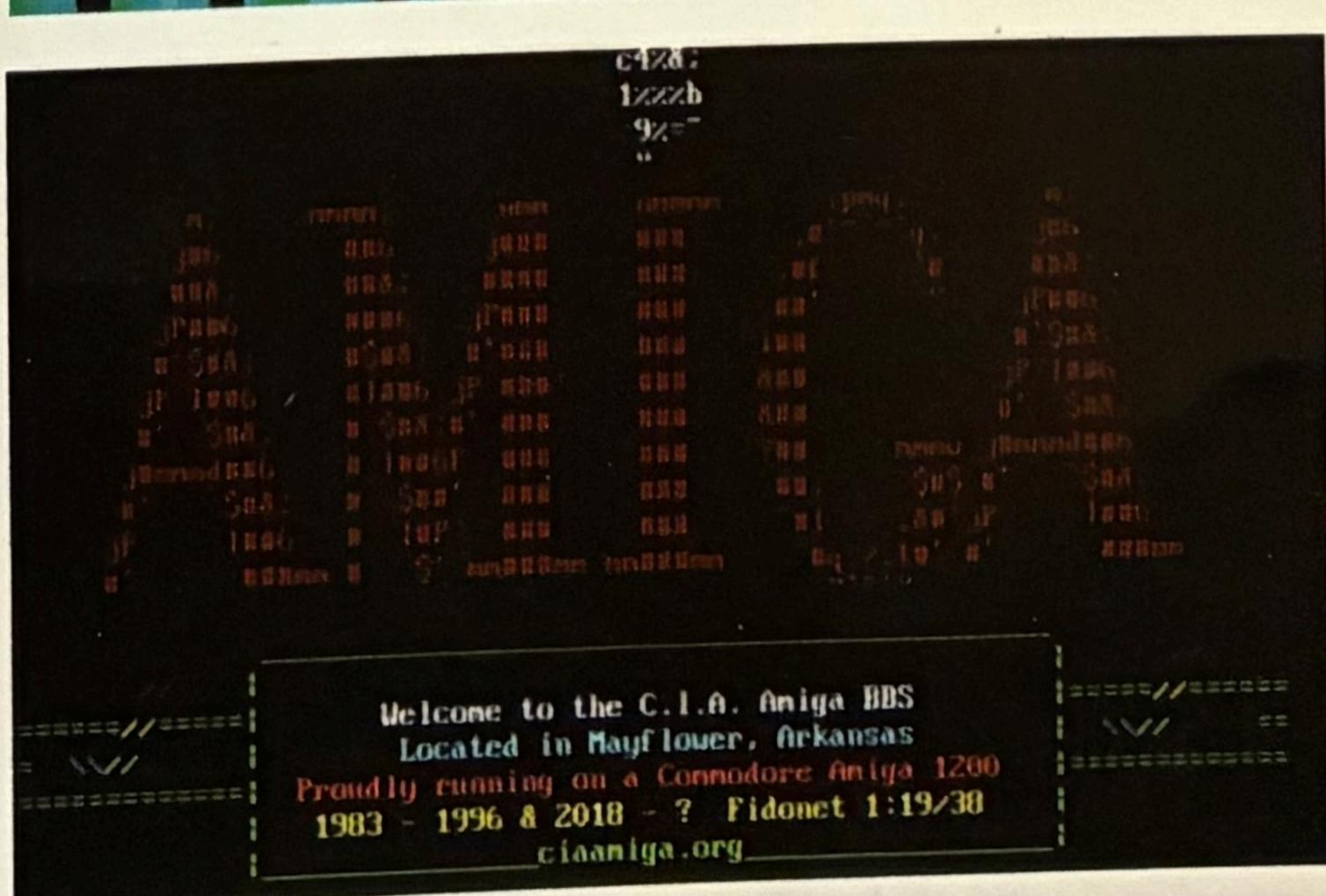

Rob Sherman is the founder of Southern AMIS Project, a digital archivist, Sysop, Atari BBS restorer, and lifelong retro computing enthusiast. He contributes regularly to the BBS scene through bbs restoration, community documentation, preservation, and system hosting.

"Today's BBS scene is truly a labor of love. The era of 40 to 50 calls a day may be long gone, but what remains is a close-knit community of like-minded folks who share a genuine passion for the hobby. A BBS is like a welcome rest stop off the Internet superhighway. It offers simpler interfaces, zero pop-up ads, and down-to-earth conversations you just don't find elsewhere"
John Polka - Sysop, Basement BBS