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AN ICE BREAKING NET

Field of the Invention

5 The invention relates to a system of facilitating the introduction of strangers in a social environment.

Background of the Invention

10 It is generally accepted that the median age of the population of many countries is rising particularly in first world countries. Anecdotally, statistics suggest also that personal relationships such as marriage tend not to last as long as in the past. Further still, in the pursuit of fulfilling careers, people tend to marry later whilst concentrating on developing their careers earlier in life.

15 These three issues tend to increase the number of adults living alone or outside of personal relationships. Whether this is through the breakup of existing relationships or through others not finding the time for forming a relationship, this accounts for an increasing proportion of the population.

20 Again, anecdotally, in a person's younger years particularly at college or university, the formation of relationships would appear easier than later in life. However, with an increasing proportion of single adults living alone it is a concern that as time progresses the ease with which adults meet others becomes more challenging.

25 It is generally accepted that within the modern urban environment there are few places for single adults to interact socially so as to create new relationships. These places tend to lie in cafes and bars which are typically neither conducive nor appealing to initiate social interaction between mature single adults. Further, it is in fact an enormously stressful act to approach a stranger for the purposes of a social interaction and only marginally less for the person being approached. This is further compounded for
30 women with safety concerns as to the nature of the stranger approaching them.

It is therefore an object of the present invention to alleviate the problems of the prior art by assisting in reducing the stress of both the approacher and the approachee.

Summary of Invention

5 Therefore, in a first aspect, the present invention provides a system adapted to facilitate the initiation of social interaction between operators of said system comprising a plurality of communication devices in mutual communication with each other, each device located at a communication station, said stations arranged so as to permit visual contact between operators of the devices at said stations, wherein in visual selection of a
10 second operator located at a second communication station a first operator initiates contact with said second operator by communication through said device.

Electronic communication, such as email, has been suggested as being a factor in the breakdown of modern personal relationships. The invention, however, uses the
15 impersonal nature of electronic communication to “break the ice” between strangers and so facilitate the personal interaction should both parties wish to pursue the opportunity passed the first communication. The approacher being the first operator may make a lower stress approach to a person that they have noticed, in a way that shields emotion and lessens the detrimental effects of rejection. Further, the approachee feels less
20 obligation to accept an approach in the same way that a person may delete an email. It follows that the stress on the approachee may also be reduced. Thus, the invention facilitates initiation of the social interaction by reducing the stress to both parties.

It will be clear to the skilled person that while electronic communication is discussed,
25 other forms of remote impersonal communication are applicable, including the use of a pneumatic tube conveyance system.

The time taken in which to physically approach a person and establish whether or not a rapport exists is not insignificant. The electronic interchange through implementation
30 of the present invention, may make it possible to offer several approaches in a set period of time and so may increase the exposure and chance of success of an interaction within the same period of time.

In a preferred embodiment, the stations of the system may be located in a bar or a café. Further said stations may be tables at which operators/patrons may seek to have coffee. Thus, the dual purpose of having coffee but permitting the possible facilitation of an
 5 initiation of a social interaction may lead to an increase in the probability of the formation of a longer term relationship. In a more preferred embodiment, the communication stations may be terminals at an internet café and thus, may gain the dual effect of a casual visit to an internet café also facilitating the opportunity for the initiation of social interaction.

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In a preferred embodiment, the communication stations may include a camera whereby the communication may include a photograph or a video stream of the first operator so that the second operator may have more information before deciding whether to proceed to either to inviting a personal approach or rejecting the communication.

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In a further preferred embodiment, the communication may automatically include a photograph so as clearly identify the first operator and thus, assist the second operator in determining issues of safety.

20 In a preferred embodiment, an operator may engage the system of the present invention such as visit a café for the specific purpose of initiating a social interaction. In this case, the system may include a communication link from each station to a central screen so that a first operator may globally broadcast a communication as well as, or instead of, a direct approach to a specific second operator.

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As safety is of particular concern for electronic communication, the system may require individuals to enter their details, and possibly a password, so as to gain access to said system. Further, the system may limit any particular operator making more than a predetermined number of approaches, such as one approach, to any particular operator.

30 In this way, the system would limit or prevent harassment of one operator by another. Said system may block the number of approaches to one within a predetermined period, for instance, within a particular day, a particular week or permanently.

In a further preferred embodiment, the system may further incorporate a safety feature by providing a central server through which all communication must pass. In a most preferred embodiment, the central server may automatically, or through an
5 administrator, censor unacceptable messages such as lewd language, pornographic photographs or aggressive messages so that the system may further prevent or limit harassment on an individual or all operators of the system.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the devices may include computer
10 terminals, standard telephones, video phones, mobile telephones or PDAs. Subject to the type of device, the devices may be linked in a network in an appropriate form such as a hard wired and wireless connection for a computer terminal, hard wired video phone or for the example for the PDAs with bluetooth or WIFI.

15 It is a feature of the invention that each station be within visual contact of the other stations so that a selection of a second operator by the first operator may be achieved. An example of such an arrangement is the use of an open space providing a clear line of sight, such as a central atrium about which are located stations such as tables. In this embodiment, having a central atrium may provide a clear or perhaps relatively clear line
20 of sight between the tables.

For ease of identification of the stations so that the first operator may address his communication appropriately, the station may be numbered. In a more preferred embodiment, these numbers may be clearly visible from a reasonable distance to satisfy
25 the visual contact criteria. In a most preferred embodiment, the station numbers may be projected onto a portion of the ceiling above said station so that each table is clearly identifiable.

Previously suggested, an operator of the system of the present invention may visit a café
30 having the system of the present invention. Further, the potential operator may be attracted to the café for reasons other than operating the system such as to have a cup of coffee. Alternatively, the devices of the system may be multifunctional so as to provide

added incentive for the potential operator to visit the café. To this end, the devices may be capable of further functionality, for instance, accessing email or the internet, playing internet games, LAN-networked games or individual games, watching entertainment content such as DVD's, videos etc., or receiving a feed such that the operator may
5 watch further content. Further still, the devices may be capable of receiving a television signal or a radio signal.

In a most preferred embodiment, the devices may further facilitate the secondary functions of the premises. In so doing the devices may be further adapted to place an
10 order for food and beverages, receive an account for said food and beverages, or paying for said services through an EFTPOS (electronic funds transfer at point of sale) facility. Alternatively, the devices may be adapted to receive messages from the central management advising the operators of the availability of food and beverage specials, happy hour or closing time.

15 In a further preferred embodiment, central management may include a "DJ" and/or facilitator for introducing people. In this function, this person may "pair" people, either randomly or based on information provided by the patrons. In so doing, the facilitator may send messages to both people, either an introduction, or an instruction for them to
20 meet personally.

In a preferred embodiment, the components of the system including the devices and a central server may be transportable so as to be readily configurable for each new venue. In this embodiment, the system may therefore be set up at different venues or stored
25 when the premises are being used for a different purpose. Thus, the system in this embodiment may form the basis of a special promotional event travelling from venue to venue specifically targeting single adults so as to increase the attractiveness, and revenue, of a venue.

30 In a further preferred embodiment, the system may comprise a central server whereby patrons of the venue are invited to bring their own devices, for instance, PDAs having WIFI or bluetooth capability. In this embodiment, venues may purchase a central server

providing a widely compatible wireless network with the correct software and offer the benefits of the invention without the additional capital costs of providing the devices.

5 In a preferred embodiment, the stations may be manually or automatically driven to rotate. In this way, a second operator who may choose to decline the initial communication by rotating the station so as to have their back to the first operator. In a more preferred embodiment, in addition to rotating the station away from the first operator, the second operator may also block any further communication from the first operator.

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In a preferred embodiment, the means of communication may include a pneumatic tube conveyance system comprising input and output portions for sending and receiving messages by vacuum tube. In this embodiment, the infrastructure for communication would include tubes leading to a message router whereby messages may be
15 automatically or manually routed from the first operator to the second operator. Manual routing may include management receiving the tubes, and directing them according to address instructions, either on the tube or in a message, written by the first operator, within said tube.

20 In a preferred embodiment, the system may include an automatic, or selectable translator, whereby a message in, for instance Japanese, would be received by the second operator in English. In so doing, visitors/tourists may be part of the system without the barrier of language impeding their access. In a further preferred embodiment, the system may have a library of words, phrases and/or images which may
25 be transmitted in lieu of an originally derived message.

In a preferred embodiment, the system may provide a library of standard descriptors of people. In this embodiment, where the intended second operator is at the same terminal as several others, the first operator may select one or a range of descriptors, based on for
30 instance, hair and eye colour, clothing etc., so as to make clear to the group who the introduction is directed to. In a further embodiment, seating position may also be used to single out the intended second operator.

In a preferred embodiment, the system may include a means to capture the image of people as they enter the venue, which are subsequently shown on a publicly viewable screen. In a more preferred embodiment, the images of people already seated at tables
5 may be sequentially broadcast on such a screen.

In a second aspect, the present invention provides a method of facilitating the initiation of social interaction comprising the steps of selecting a second person at a second station, by a first person wishing to interact socially and; sending a communication of introduction electronically to the second person inviting social interaction.

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Description of Preferred Embodiment

It will be convenient to further describe the present invention with respect to the accompanying drawing which illustrates a possible arrangement of the invention. Other arrangements of the invention are possible and consequently the particularity of the
15 accompanying drawing is not to be understood as superseding the generality of the preceding description of the invention.

Figure 1 is a schematic view of the system according to the present invention;

20 Figure 1 shows one arrangement 10 of communication stations 15 of the system according to the present invention. In this embodiment, the stations 15 are represented by tables within a café attended by patrons of the café. Each table has mounted thereto a device (not shown) such as a computer terminal or perhaps PDA which in combination are connected in a network 20 through a central server 35.

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Each device is capable of transmitting and receiving a communication with the central server acting as a router to direct the communications to the correct table.

The arrangements of the tables are such so as to permit reasonably clear line of sight
30 so that a patron at each table is able to see each other patron. If the patron wishes to introduce himself to someone else of interest, he can determine the table number either

by viewing a ceiling mounted floor plan or other means to determine the table number, prepare a suitable message on the device and transmit.

5 If the second person shows particular interest the interaction can remain through the electronic communication means or alternatively, the system may be programmed so as to only permit one message and one reply and if the patrons wish to pursue the interaction further, may be required under the system rules to make a personal introduction.

10 Alternatively, if the second person is not interested, said person may reply accordingly, ignore the message or transmit a standard rejection signal. The impersonal nature of an electronic network such as found in the present invention, may have less detrimental impact on the self esteem of the first person and so reduce the stress involved by the first person in approaching the second.

15 Whilst Figure 1 indicates a hard wired network, it would be preferable if the network were wireless so as to avoid an expensive outgoing operation. Further, the system is well suited for temporary installations using devices which are portable operating through a wireless network. For example, a plurality of PDAs with bluetooth capability
20 may achieve the desired objectives of meeting the invention as well as being transportable so that system, according to the present invention, is not restricted to any one location but may move according to a predetermined schedule.

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CLAIMS

1. A system adapted to facilitate the initiation of social interaction between operators of said system comprising a plurality of communication devices in mutual communication with each other, each device located at a communication station, said
5 stations arranged so as to permit visual contact between operators of the devices at said stations, wherein on visual selection of a second operator located at a second communication station a first operator initiates contact with said second operator by communication through said device.
- 10 2. The system according to claim 1 wherein the stations are located in a café optionally an internet café.
3. The system according to claim 2 wherein the communication stations are tables within the café.
- 15 4. The system according to any one of the preceding claims the system further comprising a camera contiguous with each device said camera adapted to transmit a photograph of the first operator.
- 20 5. The system according to claim 4 wherein the camera further adapted to transmit a video stream.
6. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the communication comprises information related to the first operator such as any one or a
25 combination of the first operator's name, telephone number, email address, hobbies, occupation, photograph, table location or star sign.
7. The system according to claim 6 wherein the first operator's photograph and table number is mandatory information for at least the initial communication.

8. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein each device is linked to a central screen permitting communication from the first operator for a global broadcast to all other operators.

5 9. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the system is adapted to limit the number of communications from the first operator to a particular operator within a predetermined period.

10 10. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the devices are any one or a combination of a computer terminal, standard telephone, video phone, mobile telephone, pneumatic tube conveyance system or PDA .

15 11. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the means of a communication is any one or a combination of wired network, wireless network, LAN, WIFI or bluetooth.

20 12. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the stations are tables located about an open space or a central atrium permitting a line of sight between the operators.

13. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the stations are identified by number, said numbers being clearly visible to other stations.

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14. The system according to claim 13 wherein the station numbers are projected onto a ceiling above each station.

15. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein each
30 communication is transmitted via a central server.

16. The system according to claim 15 wherein the central server vets each communication to censor or block any communications of a lewd, pornographic or aggressive nature.
- 5 17. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the devices are further adapted to transmit or receive external content including any one or a combination of the internet, television, music, internet based games, LAN-networked games or individual games or motion pictures.
- 10 18. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the devices are further adapted to transmit orders for food and beverages and receive messages such as food and beverages specials, happy hour times and closing time or to provide a billing instructions for payment to management or electronic payment at the station.
- 15 19. The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein a facilitator selects a pair of operators to facilitate an introduction, such that the operators are selected randomly or based upon operator provided criteria.
20. The system according to claim 15 wherein the central server includes a translator
20 such that a message sent in one language is received by the second operator in another language.
21. The system according to claim 15 wherein the central server includes a library or pre-determined material for including with, or replacing, an original message of the first
25 operator.
22. The system according to claim 21 wherein the library includes any one or a combination of words, phrases, images.
- 30 23. The system according to claim 21 wherein the library includes standard descriptors for including with the original message, said descriptors used to identify the

second operator from a group of people located at the station, said descriptors including any one or a combination of hair colour, eye colour, clothing, and seating position.

24. The system according to any one of claims 2 to 23 further including means to
5 capture images of people entering the café for broadcasting on a publicly viewable screen.

25. The system according to any one of claims 2 to 24 wherein images of operators
located at each station are captured and broadcast on a publicly viewable screen.

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26 The system according to any one of the preceding claims wherein each station is rotatable such that the second operator shows rejection of the communication by manually or automatically rotating the second communication station so as to direct the second operator away from the first operator.

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27. A method of facilitating the initiation of social interaction comprising the steps of selecting a second person at a second station, by a first person wishing to interact socially and; sending a communication of introduction electronically to the second person inviting social interaction.

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28. The method according to claim 27 wherein the method is performed using the system according to claims 1 to 26.

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