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The Uncanny Valley

The communities in Silicon Valley have undergone historical change throughout the last century, morphing from what were once the wide and anonymous orchard towns of Los Altos and Palo Alto into the booming tech powerhouse of the world. With its sky-high prices and dead, discolored fields stretching as far as the eye can see, Silicon Valley's gilded image attracts and repels hundreds of people a year. It is both famous and infamous for its prestige and intense competition.

The Valley became recognized nationally for the development of silicon processors in the 1970s ("History of Los Altos"). Since then, big business and affluence have flooded the once small and desolate California Valley. Companies like Apple, Google, Tesla, and Meta are nestled hardly a freeway apart from each other.

In spite of Big Tech's claim that it is making the world a better place, the system is beginning to cause problems larger than itself. Its growth has caused a major division between the priorities of the economy and the urgent issues that need attention, but are being swept under the rug. While the world focuses on Elon Musk and the fall of Silicon Valley Bank, the environmental, industrial, and academic emergencies caused by Big Tech's unmonitored expansion are in the process of spiraling out of control.

All around Silicon Valley, individuals work to protect the beauty and Silicon Valley's humble roots that have been overshadowed by big business. (cite) In the 1980s, Microchip developers contaminated the water of silicon Valley, the consequences of which are felt over 40 years later. Developers like IBM and Fairchild have denied involvement, and other companies who have attempted some cleanup work state candidly that the cleanup will take decades. The Google campus has resided upon a Superfund Site since 1989, which is "a designation the EPA gives some of the most contaminated or polluted land in the country." Santa Clara County has the highest number of Superfund Sites in the nation at 23, all of which were the result of the chemicals used in computer manufacturing being released into the water. (Schlossberg) Gary Hedden, a fifty-year resident of Los Altos and 2022 "Los Altan of the year" shares his experience working to preserve the already debilitated environment of Silicon Valley, and finding the beauty here. Since retiring from his job at *Syntex* pharmaceutical company in 2009, he has done large amounts of environmental work for his community, and prides himself on his volunteering contributions. A specific accomplishment of his was the construction of an exhibit for the Los Altos History Museum, which was coordinated alongside a colleague of his in the Environmental Commission. Hedden also works with the local Green Team, Boy Scouts, and Green Town.

The community-run program Green Town, located in Los Altos, is dedicated to environmental education, advocacy, and conservation. Hedden, among his many other contributions, is a past president of Green Town. His goal is to eventually plant 500 trees all around the Bay Area. "I saw all the dead and dying trees about four years ago and decided that was a perfect project for Green Town," says Hedden. "We're up to 372 now." The natural beauty in Silicon Valley truly exhibits its hidden charm, and there's no better way to preserve that than

with a tree. Not only are they beautiful, but they can provide a cool and peaceful natural shelter from the California heat. “It's just amazing what a big tree can do,” Hedden adds. He also shares that, although his project is thriving, he often experiences difficulty when trying to communicate the importance of this cause to the people around him. “Probably the biggest frustration that's common to any endeavor really is communication,” Hedden shares. “And it's not that they maybe aren't trying, but it's just you come from a different angle or maybe you don't understand what the other person is thinking.” When presented with contentious issues in town, Hedden often steps back and asks himself, “What could I do to help them understand each other?”

The Silicon Valley workplace is both divided and impenetrable. Instances of labor union strikes have risen in frequency, but the results have fallen short of expectation. In September of 2022, approximately 60,000 Caltrain workers, the California coast's most reliable high speed railway, went on strike. According to an article written by abc7 news, the workers protested in a strike for better benefits, salaries, and more time off. Because the Caltrain is critical to interstate trade, government officials and higher ups feared that the strike could lead to a countrywide food shortage (Larson). In the bigger picture, it exposes that the value of unskilled labor is reliant upon the lack of value attributed to the people who provide such labor. It seems unreasonable for companies as vast and critical as Caltrain to mistreat their employees to a point where they refuse to work. However the historical nuance of labor unions in the United states hints less at Silicon Valley's inability to solve it, but their lack of a desire to try.

A similar contemporary development, but more discrete in its execution, are the recent layoffs at Google, Microsoft, Meta, Zoom, Amazon, Netflix, and Twitter. On the morning of January 20th, 2023, 12,000 employees at Google received an email at 3 am that notified them of their unemployment. According to the Silicon Valley Index, current tech employment rests at

29%, rising from the steady 25% it maintained over the last years. In terms of individuals, that adds up to approximately 867,500. (Shankland) Returning to Mr. Hedden's anecdote about communication barriers, both of these subjects demonstrate the dichotomy between Silicon Valley's leaders and its workers, communication eerily absent in a world almost entirely run by instant messaging.

Communication proves to be a primary barrier in the academic world as well. The increased amount of academic pressure that restricts a student's ability to be well rounded paired with the influx of technology driven social circles creates a highly competitive and cut-throat environment. Students are preparing themselves to enter an economy where the annual income required to buy a house is about 330k, and the average income is a whopping 93k. ("Silicon Valley Salary"). A setting of this intensity reflects strongly in the mental health of students, and is brushed under the rug by congressional power. In the last several years, high schools in Silicon Valley have been struck by increasing rates of suicide amongst students. A survey conducted by the Mountain View Voice gathered that "between 14 and 17 percent of local high school teens reported that they 'seriously considered' attempting suicide in the last year." and "11 percent of high school juniors reported binge-drinking in the last 30 days, and a growing number are illicitly using prescription medication." (Forestieri) The attempts to establish adequate mental health resources that go beyond a single school counselor are dramatically inhibited by the lack of affordable living in the area that many healthcare professionals are unable to afford. (Silicon Valley Community Foundation)

Jenny Munro, a former teacher at Henry M. Gunn High School in Palo Alto, shares a new perspective on the challenges she faces in her efforts. Munro, originally from England, moved to Redwood City in the 60s when she was 15 for her father to pursue engineering-related work

opportunities, and remained here to raise her 2 children. She attended and graduated from Stanford University with a degree in English Literature, San Francisco State for a graduate degree, ultimately attending San Jose State for a teaching credential. Her teaching career lasted 32 years. Munro frequently spends time in her garden, swimming at the Palo Alto Y, or walking with her dog, Robbie.

Her extensive work with Bay Area youth and her personal connection with traditional learning provides unique insight into the tech revolution that is currently underway within modern education. Munro believes that “It just would be awful to get rid of all the real life things like libraries and real life books and just do it all online.” Through the emergence of artificial intelligence and the impact of COVID-19, the funding allotted for libraries as well as other domestic programs is significantly lower than what many had hoped for. (Kromer) The competition that is reflected in Silicon Valley high schools mirrors the authentic Silicon Valley fashion taking more permanent roots, filtering out the values that don't align with it. According to a Silicon Valley census, approximately 90% of UC attendees are California residents, and approximately 70% of that number chooses to stay in California post graduation. This shows the possibility of a circular trend, where California citizens give birth to California citizens, unbroken by a non Silicon Valley mediator. Although this is widely seen as and proven to be a positive shift in demographic by creating a diverse and driven populace, the formation of what some call the “Bay Area Bubble” is infamously detrimental to the mental health of young students.

Munro lived in Portland for 3 years before COVID -19 hit in March of 2020, and she believes that the atmosphere of Silicon Valley is very different. “...Portland was just more relaxed and not so focused on succeed, succeed, push, push, push. More and more and more”.

Working in Palo Alto, she had a window into the culture that was being built among the youth in light of this shift.

According to Purdue Online, technology has made education more accessible, involved, and innovative (“How Has Technology Changed Education”). However, according to a study conducted by Western Governors University, technology can impede young children's ability to connect with the people around them and build social skills. “I think it cuts them off from real life connections like I often see young people who seem to be on their computer, on their cell phones, headphones all day long, and they don't really talk to other people. They just seem to have most of their relationships remotely, which I think is very unhealthy psychologically,” Munro states. She is a staunch believer in the preservation of libraries; “They're not only a place where you check out books, they are places where there are lots of events and programs that connect people, places to go and meet up with people, take children.”

Munro is currently the president of the Friends of the Palo Alto Library, which is a volunteer organization which conducts monthly book sales to raise revenue for Palo Alto's 5 public libraries. She says that younger people are encouraged to volunteer with the friends of the library. “I feel as though I'm doing something valuable” (Munro).

Ultimately, however impressive the net positives of Silicon Valley are, the sacrifices made in the process are significant. The culture of Silicon Valley is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has shaped the landscape of technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the modern world, and will continue to do so. The impacts of the rapidly developing technology in silicon valley are still blurry, but can be seen in large ways such as these. Industrial prosperity being paired with educational equity and environmental protection creates a tough surface for community workers like Munro and Hedden to penetrate.

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