THE SCENE SETTER

uWink at Hollywood & Highland

Machines that know how to take orders and entertain.

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EATING AT the new uWink in the Hollywood & Highland complex is the closest you'll get to dining aboard the Axiom spaceship in the Disney film "Wall-E." In the movie, obese humans float in hover chairs slurping liquid food with blaring computer screens in front of their noses. At uWink, people sit in cushy booths munching on fatty foods while playing with touch screens that flash in front of their plates.

Looked at one way, the restaurant -- which has interactive gaming consoles at each table that allow customers to both order their food and drink and play dozens of droll trivia and strategy games -- signifies that technology has advanced to an ominous stage; one that strips us of the opportunity to engage in the most basic of human interactions: mealtime conversation.

Looked at another way, eating at uWink can be downright fun. The American comfort food consists largely of greasy burgers, heavily sauced pastas, expensive but tasty entrees like boneless short ribs and pan-seared salmon, and artery-thickening appetizer platters laden with huge chicken fingers and tender sliders. But the food isn't really the point. It's the gaming.

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Who cares about soggy salad when you're involved in a heated round of Zillionaire? (Zillionaire follows a similar formula to that of the once wildly popular game show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire.")

Other addictive, entertaining games include uSketch, which functions a bit like Pictionary; Phraze Amaze, based on "Wheel of Fortune"; and an oddball little game called Bubble Wrap 1, which displays bubble wrap on a screen that you jab at with your fingers.

The mastermind behind uWink is Nolan Bushnell, who, as the founder of both the Atari Corp. and Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza Time Theatre, is a bona fide gaming and interactive dining legend.

"I wanted to create a place where people could enjoy each other's company, facilitated by technology," says Nolan, adding, "I believe in social game play." He uses the example of pre-computer-era board games like Monopoly, which brought families together around the table.

"I really thought video games had taken that away and I just wanted to give that back," he says.

This sentiment is most apparent in Nolan's favorite uWink game, the group trivia. At allotted times, diners at all tables are asked via their consoles if they'd like to join the game and, before you know it, a lively competition is happening between groups all over the room with questions and answers displayed on large screens above the tables.

Relatively cheap and stiff drinks make the process even more riotous. So does the fact that the spare, modern restaurant is located in the heart of Hollywood's most commercial and bustling district.

If you want intimate conversation and attentive, human service, uWink isn't the place to go.

But if you're looking for cheap fun and goofy conversation starters (such as the Truth or Dare game), then uWink is much more entertaining than the Axiom's Cupcakes in a Cup. **6801 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood & Highland, (323) 466-1800; also at Westfield Promenade, 6100 Topanga Canyon Blvd. 2310, Woodland Hills, (818) 992-1100**

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