



Blogging, e-mailing, chatting: the Web makes all of this possible. And a lot more. You can form deep friendships, join communities of like-minded people, share your joys and sorrows. Internet encounters and diversions lack nothing in comparison to their real-life counterparts.

## It's a Wonderful Online Life by Claire Ulrich

original title *Plus belle ma vie en ligne*, for *Le Monde 2*, November 17, 2007  
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I have two lives. One, in the real world – or IRL (in real life) as video gamers say – is remarkable only in its ordinariness. The problem with IRL, once you're over 40, is that persistent feeling that you've seen this movie before; in the news, in your personal and professional life... Fortunately, I have another life online, a happy and fascinating one. I discovered the Web in 2003, with many preconceived ideas and aliases. Today, I exist in PDF, RSS, JPEG and MP3 format, in HTML and over wi-fi. After four years of anonymous exploration, I made the leap. I checked the "Make Public" box on my profile on the online social network Facebook. My first and last names, my photo, can now be seen by the 48 million human beings who are members of the network. I'm no longer afraid. I'm a big girl, now. What was I so scared of? My online life has brought me nothing but happiness. If, one day, I were forced to make the choice, I'd choose to be a citizen of the Internet.

At any time of day or night, I can wake my computer and dive into the turquoise waters of my Windows XP screen. I pass through the pixel curtain and into my online life. I open the shutters

of my digital cottages. My four e-mail accounts, my three blogs, my community on the photo site Flickr, my profiles on various social or professional networks. I haul in the nets filled with messages, while waiting for the windows of the instant messaging programs Skype (green) and MSN (pink) to connect to my contacts with a dreamy little "gling." Who's online? Mohamed in Casablanca just came online, at the same time as Jean in Almaty (Kazakhstan). Kristin in San Francisco tells me it's pouring rain. Pamela and Vincent in Paris are already working at their computers, in pajamas, in their living room. Their Chinese and American clients see nothing wrong with this. They see nothing at all, for that matter. John's icon, in China, shows that he's "offline." He must be sleeping. Daniel, from Brussels or Hong Kong, has shared five new contacts with me on LinkedIn, our online professional network. Through my 98 contacts, I have access to 13,200 people. I pop in to Facebook, my social network. I see that Jean-Sébastien and a guy named Olivier are clinking virtual beer glasses in celebration of their reunion. Gling... An electronic payment just arrived in my bank account through PayPal. I've

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never seen my employer, a man named Karl, who lives in the Dominican Republic, nor have I ever signed a contract with him. He could have ripped me off. But he didn't. All is well. My day on the Internet can begin.

In 2005, the billionth human connected for the first time to the Net. Web statisticians hypothesize that it was a young Chinese woman of 27. In 2006, Internet search engines indexed 40 billion pages. But in fact, the "deep" Web, those abysses missed by indexing robots, contains between 470 and 700 times more. The statistics are endless, and all as dull as discussing the price of real estate in Paris. One billion Google searches a day. Seven billion pages viewed every month on the Wikipedia encyclopedia. All of this mind-boggling data reveals nothing of the beauty and pleasures of my online life.

At first, Web surfers marveled at the novelty of being able to perform, with the help of a little technological plumbing, miraculous feats that were considered impossible outside of Harry Potter. Traveling effortlessly through space, being invisible, walking through walls. With a click, I spy on lions drinking at waterholes in Kruger Park in South Africa, thanks to Webcams hidden in the trees. At night, on the Slooh site, I explore our galaxy, live on my screen, via the Tenerife Observatory in the Canary Islands. Yesterday I was in a Bollywood mood. I surfed the Indian Web, stopping at a wedding site for the high castes, to look at the brides-to-be. Then, with a flutter of digital wings, I was in Canada listening to wolves howling at the moon, thanks to an MP3 file that a hunter of sounds had attached to a Google map.

The greatest joys of online life come from meeting people, from impassioned conversations and friendships built around blogs with human beings who are no longer hindered by convention, age, physical appearance and hormones, time zones and distance. This is no small thing. No one takes online friendships seriously, but I know, with a confidence that has yet to be betrayed, that if I need them, they will cross the pixel curtain and that, without ever having met face to face, we will know each other.

### In Praise of High-tech Love

The recipe for online love is the same as IRL. Patience, the passage of time, shared affinities, fits of laughter. I met Vincent and Pamela – two real pros of online living – on the Internet before we carried our conversation into real life. They understand me. "If it weren't for the Web, we would NEVER have become a couple. Period." Pamela, an American, read Vincent's blog from California, and was beginning to wonder if she wasn't falling in love. Fireworks confirmed her intuition when she visited Paris, but that was not the only miracle. Pamela had to leave. For six months, the Technology Fairy kept their passion alive. Unfortunately, no poet has yet found the words to sing the praises of high-tech love. Pamela meticulously kept track of some numbers. "In six months, we exchanged 3,000 e-mails – that's about 21 a day. We had 100 instant message conversations using Skype,

each one lasting several hours, and when I had to take a road trip, Vincent talked to me on my cell phone for three hours and followed my progress on Google Maps, thanks to GPS." Vincent adds, "When you have no choice but to talk for three hours a day with a potential girlfriend, you get to know her and reveal a lot more about yourself than you would IRL." They now live and work together in Paris in the soft, blue glow of their twin iMacs.

I'm often asked, "What's the point of all these blogs, these chats?" I silently allowed myself to be suspected of having some social disorder or having a secret pornography addiction. That is, until the day I met Danah Boyd during an excursion on the Net. Danah is a highly educated researcher in information technology and anthropology (MIT, Berkeley, Harvard) who is studying how young Americans behave on online social networks. That such a brain admits on her blog that she's a fan of cat photo sites doubled her credibility in my eyes. And, thanks to her, it all became clear. "Unlike everyday embodiment...[o]ne cannot simply "be" online; one must make one's presence visible through explicit and structured actions. [D]igital embodiment requires writing yourself into being," she writes in her essay *None of this is Real*, excerpts of which are available on her site, [www.danah.org](http://www.danah.org).

So the more than 110 million humans who have created blogs on cooking, politics, or Celtic witchcraft are not simply 110 million repugnant egos on public display. After our exploratory phase, we simply needed, at this point in our online youth, to create identities in order to exist and connect with each other. Then we built up our circles.

"If [MySpace] were a country, it would be the 10th biggest in the world, just behind Mexico," according to the British daily *The Guardian*, on November 4th, 2006. Since then, only India and China are still ahead of the social network MySpace and its demographic explosion of 200 million members. A single visit to MySpace and its French counterpart Skyblog convinced me that I wasn't in the right age group. One look at all the piercings and spelling mistakes and I quietly closed the door. It took some time and about 20 test memberships in virtual communities before I found any that suited me. I didn't like SecondLife either. I borrowed an avatar to try it out. But a world where there are already Adidas stores and Nissan ads is not for me. My avatar's blond wig, floating between two patches of fake, bluish grass, is probably all that remains of me there. I fled Freehugs, the cartoonish virtual city where adults go for a few minutes a day to exchange hugs and chaste gestures of affection. The idea appealed to me. But when a stranger who looked like a Playmobil character threw himself at my avatar to kiss me without even introducing himself, it was a distressing violation of personal space, even if it was virtual.

The virtual communities I prefer are those that came into being by chance, without a business plan, around an ordinary person wearing, perhaps, a moth-eaten sweater. Frank Warren is a soft-spoken American who inadvertently created an immense community around a theme: secrets.

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One hundred and three million Internet users have visited his site, PostSecret, keeping the appointment he sets for them every Sunday. In 2003, Frank was making photocopies for his small company when the idea to create a box of secrets came to him. "As a child, I was haunted by family secrets that I couldn't identify. There was also the problem of suicide. I lost an uncle and a friend that way, I was a hotline volunteer, and let's just say that I've had problems myself." At first, he distributed 3,000 postcards in the Washington subway asking passers-by to anonymously reveal a secret that they wouldn't dare to tell anyone, and to send it back to him. About a hundred strangers took him up on it. "That was the end of my project. But the cards kept coming, from everywhere. People were making them themselves and doing spontaneous art therapy with their secrets. So I decided to create a blog and publish ten or so of them on Sundays." Each card is a voice, depositing in his ivy-covered mailbox a loveless childhood, a secret love, a betrayal, vengeance, regret, or a declaration of love – always anonymous. Frank has received 175,000 cards, which he stores at a secret location and still selects himself, by hand, at his coffee table. He has never accepted any advertising on his site. And he has given up trying to understand how he, a regular guy, could have provoked this worldwide wave of human empathy sought by the one million weekly visitors to his site. But it doesn't trouble him: "I find it comforting that technology can bring 100 million people to read the secrets of others. It means we all share these secret landscapes and that they are familiar to us."

I am equally proud of Tim Spalding, a Latin scholar who, in 2005, created the site LibraryThing, so that bibliophiles could catalog their book collections on the Internet. The site was not supposed to expand beyond university walls. However, because you can see every member's bookshelves, read their notes, and converse with readers who share your interests, it has become an enormous living room/library filled with 20 million books and visited by 288,000 members. Volunteers soon created French, Italian, and German versions. At my suggestion, three people read a 1,000-page Indian novel that is on my bookshelf. I never would have read Samuel Pepys, a 17th-century English author, if it hadn't been recommended by a Swiss geophysicist from Grenoble. The recommendation of an invisible stranger whose library resembles your own is a powerful thing. This is why our communities are so coveted. Why else would Google have paid 1.6 billion dollars to buy YouTube, if not for the invaluable millions of members?

### Micro-patrons for Micro-entrepreneurs

As for Kiva.org, I'd like to point out that I joined before Bill Clinton, who has since incorporated it into his foundation. Matt and Jessica Flannery, both barely 30, launched Kiva in 2004 on a server they rented for \$20 a month. Their community is dedicated to micro-credit. There

is nothing new about helping a Bulgarian bicycle repairman or a future beautician in Quito get started. But before Kiva, no one had used the Web to put lenders and borrowers in direct contact with each other. Forty-eight of us gave Maria, in Mexico, the \$1,000 she needed to open a photography studio in her home. It's touching to see ourselves on Maria's Web page around her photo and project log. For reasons you can understand, Iraqi micro-entrepreneurs are quick to find patrons on Kiva – from America. Matt Flannery, for his part, only supports projects in Eastern Europe. "Because they are the least popular borrowers on the site and they often get overlooked by our lenders. I don't want them to feel overlooked."

I'm not completely virtuous. When Facebook, the other social networking phenomenon founded by Mark Zuckerberg for college students, decided to admit members over 23 (the founder's age), I jumped at the chance. As Google Earth does for our planet, Facebook offers a fascinating birds-eye view of our "social topography;" of the activities of each member, of their moods, hour by hour. Better yet, it offers 3,000 digital group games and activities that devour our days. Work productivity lost because of the Facebook drug has already been estimated at 30.8 billion Pounds Sterling (about 44 million Euros), and that's just in the United Kingdom. There again, Danah Boyd makes me feel less guilty. "Exploring these new forms of individual or community interaction can be terrifying and very exciting. [...] Children play in order to understand and place the boundaries of social norms. Because the [online] network requires that members reevaluate social boundaries, it's not surprising that the game should become an essential aspect of participation."

Employers, please bear with us. Facebook is our sandbox. After all, most of us are barely three years old in this new world. Soon we'll move on, probably to social networks designed for mobile phones. Even our online video silliness is redeemed by exquisite little miracles. I saw one unfold before my own eyes. An elderly gentleman, a widower in England with the username Geriatric1927, had the crazy audacity to introduce himself one July day in 2006 on YouTube after filming himself with a Webcam. For his debut, he had put on his best shirt and had a blues record playing softly in the background. With a cracked voice, he offered a few memories of the London Blitz, talked of his passion for vintage motorcycles, and very politely took leave of the "youtubers" before turning off the camera. In the comments area, a strange silence set in. Then, from everywhere, video responses made with Webcams poured in. Faces, some young, some worn, with an infinite variety of wallpapers and real-world living rooms in the background, appeared suddenly to respectfully greet Geriatric1927 and to welcome him, face to face. Then came video questions from the youngest of them. What was the war like? Then, from an Indian doctor, a tattooed rocker, a lady with tears in her eyes: "I've never done this, but I wanted to say..." Tens of thousands of Web surfers found a grandfather who, once a month, tells them about the old days. It was no fad. For his 80th birthday, his new family

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flooded him with best wishes by video. On that day, with his usual humility, he thanked his faithful for the extraordinary year he had had, thanks to them. The strongest emotions don't need the real-life seal of approval.

## Deepest Sorrow and Greatest Joy

In 2006, a Silicon Valley blogger abruptly lost his wife, at 3:00 in the morning, to a stroke. The time stamp on his blog shows that three hours later, he announced his loss to the world. Shocking, and almost suspicious. I understood his reaction when I lost a very dear friend whose death it was pointless to publicly mourn IRL because she was a cat. Like him, dealing with such acute grief, I sought shelter on the Internet. The next day, 13 strangers' messages were waiting for me, palpable in their kindness and compassion. Tom confessed to having taken time off from work to mourn for his dog. From Korea, a Buddhist veterinarian confided that a cat he had as a child had decided his vocation, and he assured me that his religion promised a "good reincarnation" for cats. On the Flickr photo site, Julian guided me, without asking any questions, to the Rainbow Bridge group, where photos of beloved, departed animals are displayed. Lucie is still there, in the form of a few pixels that are much more real than her ashes. She has had 3,000 visitors.

Go ahead and laugh. But the deepest sorrow, like the greatest joy, flows naturally, today, towards the Net. The Facebook profiles of the victims of the Virginia Tech massacre were the first places their friends gathered. A father goes every day to spend time on the MySpace page of his deceased daughter. Gathering on the blog of a friend on the anniversary of his death is already a common social ritual. Friends leave messages on the last entry, in the comment

space already invaded by splogs (spam left on blogs) that no one can delete, because the password is unknown.

What will become of my online life when I die IRL? JD Lasica introduced me to archive.org, which strives to preserve the memory of the Web by saving as many of its pages as possible every year. Without them, who would remember Microsoft's home page from 1996? JD answered my e-mail from the airport in Toronto. I've depressed him, I can tell. "Personal media are so young that we haven't even thought about it. Yahoo! and Google had to deal with this problem when the parents of a deceased teen tried to get into his e-mail account. They had to go to a judge to gain access to it. We can assume that our free blogs will survive us for a while, but sooner or later, our paying accounts, like hosted sites or online photo albums, will be closed unless arrangements are made to maintain them." The best thing to do would be to donate our online lives to the *Bibliothèque nationale* [National Library], to a collection that doesn't exist yet. "Early 21st century, France, digital daily life, miscellaneous."

Traces of virtual life are already starting to show up IRL. My neighbor in a rural area of France hinted that my roof might be of use to him. Google satellites and others record every centimeter of the Earth from space. He read somewhere that it's only a matter of time before we start advertising on rooftops. His business relies on tourists, and his roof, unlike ours, is not very visible from the stratosphere. Why shouldn't we put giant ads on our roofs, to finance our future solar panels? I went to the Moon to reflect further on this, thanks to Google Moon. So far, there are no little red arrows directing you to the nearest pizza place up there. But after all, why not?