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### NEWSPAPER

March 28, 2002

## As the Web Matures, Fun Is Hard to Find

By LISA GUERNSEY

**G**LENN DAVIS, the founder of the once-popular online destination Cool Site of the Day, used to be so addicted to the Web that he called it his "recreational drug."

He started Cool Site in 1994, after discovering the thrill of happening upon an especially interesting Web site and telling his friends what he had found. Within a year, more than 20,000 people a day were visiting the site, and Mr. Davis became a Web celebrity, giving interviews to online magazines and fending off gifts from Webmasters who were desperately seeking his recommendation of their sites.

Today, Mr. Davis has not only kicked his Web habit but also almost completely given up the medium. The Cool Site of the Day still exists, but it is no longer run by Mr. Davis, who has also lost his enthusiasm for trolling for new pages.

"We lost our sense of wonder," he said. "The Web is old hat."

Just 11 years after it was born and about 6 years after it became popular, the Web has lost its luster. Many who once raved about surfing from address to address on the Web now lump site-seeing with other online chores, like checking the In box.



Gary Hallgren

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What attracted many people to the Web in the mid-1990's were the bizarre and idiosyncratic sites that began as private obsessions and swiftly grew into popular attractions: the Coffee Cam, a live image of a coffee maker at the University of Cambridge; the Fish Tank Cam from an engineer at Netscape; The Spot, the first online soap opera; the Jennicam, the first popular Internet peephole; the Telegarden, which allowed viewers to have remote control of a robot gardener; and the World Wide Ouija, where viewers could question the Fates with the computer mouse. The Web was like a chest of toys, and each day brought a new treasure.

"I remember sitting there for hours thinking it was so neat," said Jason Gallo, an office manager in Washington who discovered the Web in 1994. He said he would often get lists of favorite sites from his friends, which he called "quirky islands of fun."

"I don't see that anymore," he said.

Lisa Maira, a computer network administrator at the University of Buffalo, designed the Mr. Potato Head site with colleagues in 1994 (the name was later changed to Mr. Edible Starchy Tuber Head to avoid trademark infringement). It allowed viewers to dress up an online version of the toy. The site attracted thousands of visitors and a dozen "best of the Web" awards.

"It was just amazing," Ms. Maira said. Now, not only has the site fallen into disrepair, with broken links and missing game pieces, but many of the sites that gave it accolades are also out of business.

That kind of Web activity "doesn't impress people anymore," Ms. Maira said, adding that she counted herself among the disenchanting.

The problem facing the Web is not that some of these particular



Stephen Rose for The New York Times  
**LOST LUSTER?** Glenn Davis created Cool Site of the Day, showcasing destinations like Mr. Edible Starchy Tuber Head and the Coffee Cam. He says he has lost his enthusiasm for the Web.

## Net Decline: Is the Web to Blame?

*The length of the average online session has decreased...*

**MINUTES**

**90 TO 83**

MARCH '00 MARCH '01

*...along with the percentage of users who say the Internet helps them "a lot" in learning new things.*

**PERCENT**

**50 TO 39**

MARCH '00 MARCH '01

Source: Pew Internet and American Life Project

The New York Times

sites have come and gone there are, after all, only so many times anyone can look at a coffeepot, even online but that no new sites have come along to captivate the casual surfer.

Bob Rankin, the co-editor of Tourbus, an electronic newsletter, frequently sent his readers to innovative pages. Now the newsletter is more likely to provide information about online charities and antivirus software. "I have a harder time finding the oddball sites that I like to highlight," Mr. Rankin said.

The lack of compelling content may be contributing to a decline in the amount of time that people spend online. In March 2000, according to a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in Washington, people averaged 90 minutes per online session. A year later, when the same people were polled, that number had dropped to 83 minutes. According to the report, those polled said that they were using the Web more to conduct business than to explore new areas, aiming to get offline as quickly as possible. The toy box has turned into a toolbox.

Web sites also face stiff competition from other online services. Music programs like Morpheus, a Napster alternative, allow people to download files using a piece of online software instead of clicking from one site to the next. Instant messaging has grown exponentially, and many users say they would rather chat with their friends than spend their time surfing the Web.

Even without new technologies crowding the spotlight, the Web today seems to be less than inspiring. About half of Internet users in 2000, for example, said the Internet helped "a lot" in enabling them to learn new things. A year later, when the same group was polled, only 39 percent made that claim.

"For fun Internet activities, users report little or no growth in having gone online for hobbies, game playing or just to seek out fun diversions," the Pew report said.

Even for newcomers those who might be most likely to surf around for kicks growth is tepid, the report added.

There are other signs that all is not well in Webville. For the first time, the number of expiring domain names outnumbers those being registered or renewed, according to SnapNames, an industry research company in Portland, Ore. Although the SnapNames report theorizes that many of the expired domains were simply unused placeholders for existing companies, like those who wanted a .org version of their .com site, there is no counterbalancing rush to build new sites.

In addition, researchers at several online measurement companies have found that the rate of growth in new sites and unique visitors has slumped in recent months. And about 20 percent of public Web sites that existed nine months ago no longer exist, according to a

sample studied last week by the Online Library Computer Center, a nonprofit library group in Dublin, Ohio. Separate research shows that of the sites that are still operating, a large number have been taken over by pornography.

How did the Web arrive at this juncture? Some people say that the rush to make money, in which profits mattered more than passion, was a significant driver. Mr. Davis, for instance, said he did not design Cool Site of the Day with profit in mind. The site, which was housed on servers at Infinet, the Internet service provider for whom Mr. Davis worked, was taken over by the company when he left in November 1995. In 1998, Infinet sold the site to Mike Corso, a businessman in Chappaqua, N.Y., who charges \$97 to those who submit a site for "priority express" consideration, plus \$19 a month if the submission is selected and added to the archives.

The Web's commercialism dismays many longtime surfers. "Everywhere you go someone is jumping on you to buy something," said John Walkenbach, an author in San Diego, who has written books about software. "It's like walking down the streets of Tijuana."

Other users say they are less inclined to hunt for innovative sites because many of them require plug-ins or browser updates that force users into bothersome downloading. Entertainment sites, for example, usually require a program like QuickTime, and even if Web surfers take the time to download a copy, they are likely to be cajoled later into downloading an updated version.

There are still islands of innovation and creativity on the Web. For example, iFilm .com shows eclectic video clips posted by Web users. Among longtime Web surfers, personal online diaries, known as Weblogs or blogs, are often cited as the last bastion of interesting material.

Lee deBoer, former chief executive of Automatic Media, believes that the downturn in the Web is temporary. In the summer of 2000, his company bought Feed and Suck, two popular online magazines, and started Plastic.com, a Web site that allows users to filter interesting Web content for one another. After just a year, Mr. deBoer's company was forced to close its doors, killing both magazines and relinquishing Plastic.com to a group of investors. (The site still exists, run almost entirely by volunteers.)

Even after the bruising taken by his company, Mr. deBoer is not prepared to declare the Web dead. "We've taken a pause," he said, citing a tough advertising climate, a lagging economy and a seriousness that has infused society since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. "But I don't think it's much more than a pause."

Mr. Davis said he believes that the Web's malaise is more permanent. He is building an online gaming company that uses the Internet but bypasses the Web.

"I'm a frontiersperson, and the Web is not a frontier anymore," he said. "It is simply a place."

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