

How to Internet. A guided tour through the past... | by Jenny Odell | Human Parts

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This story is part of the [Internet Time Machine](#), a collection about life online in the 2010s.

my job teaching college students, I'm occasionally mistaken for one. I've found that a good way to make students take me seriously on the first day is to mention that I remember a time *before the internet*.

Of course that's not true given a precise interpretation of what the internet actually is. But I'm certainly old enough to remember PSA-like videos coaxing the casual newbie into the exciting, if intimidating, world of cyberspace. Such videos often begin the same way, with a middle-aged man voicing all of the hypothetical questions you must be having: "But what exactly *is* the internet?" "How much will it cost?" "Will I be any good at it?"

Thanks to enterprising individuals like Andy Baio and sites like [Everything Is Terrible](#), some of these early videos and TV shows have been extracted from VHS tapes and are now available on YouTube.

Warning: one can get pretty nostalgic watching these videos, in which the internet is imagined as a neat, useful thing — not yet an omnipresent force with unfathomable effects on our economy and sociality.

You'll be cruisin' the information superhighway in no time

As is often the case when we're grasping for explanations of the truly new, the narrators of these videos compare the internet to an older structure: the highway system. Some of the opening sequences of these videos show literal highways or 3D visualizations of an "information superhighway." In one, a friendly narrator steps out into a room full of highway signs; in another, a laptop itself speeds down the highway toward a sign reading, "World Wide Web: Next Exit." I've collected some of those here:

Cruisin' down the superhighway... *whoosh*

What makes the highway metaphor sound so strange today is that it implies the traversing of space and the passing of time. It's another version of the old "series of tubes" idea, before the internet began to feel like a stifling sea of instantaneity. In the 1990s, when internet didn't live in your pocket and all around you, people with computers in suburban homes tended to have a "computer room" (at least as

I remember it). The computer was like a portal that you approached when you wanted to travel somewhere. People “visited” pages, they signed guestbooks.

They also surfed. Scattered throughout these videos is the occasional surfing montage, in which the director tries to make visiting a series of web pages appear as dynamic and exciting as actual travel. This is not as easy task, given a flat screen and a stationary surfer. The directors relied on surf music, zooming in and out really fast, and dragging windows around in crazy wiggly patterns, always making sure to include some good “multimedia,” like a 3D .AVI file.

uch as the internet was imagined as a superhighway, marketers of internet how-to books and videos portrayed its individual capacities as extensions of things we already knew: newspapers, address books, and libraries (often in icon form, shown shooting out of a computer screen). They sold an image of the computer as a handy “all in one” device where the “all” included mostly boring, practical things. This reminds me of the environment of Microsoft Bob, a short-lived Microsoft software product that imagined the computer desktop as a house with rooms containing calendars, checkbooks, a Rolodex, and a desk with pen and paper.



Your calendar is actually a calendar in Microsoft Bob

What's funny and kind of heartbreaking about this is the way in which we imagined that certain familiar things in life would simply get easier, without the entire fabric of life itself undergoing almost indescribable change. In "Using E-mail on the Internet," a man who looks like a parallel-universe Jerry Seinfeld sits in a home office and describes a luxurious lifestyle of working from home. "Telecommuting is what they call it," he says. "It's great not to have to waste time sitting in a car on the way to work. Instead I sit here with a coffee and a bagel, *getting work done*." The world is at his fingertips. Of course, this is decades before we would need terms for digital labor and the gig economy, and before Franco Berardi described such always-connected labor as "fractals of time and pulsating cells of labor ... switched on and off in the large control room of global production." Parallel-universe Jerry Seinfeld doesn't know about email yet, only E-Mail.

One last thing that highlights the newness of the internet in these videos is the occasional reference to “netiquette,” or a set of rules to help the viewer avoid making an ass of themselves on the superhighway. In *Safe Surfin’* — starring 90s kid stars like Taran Smith (*Home Improvement*), Jenna Leigh Greene (*Sabrina the Teenage Witch*), and Irene Ng (*The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*) — Olympic gymnast Kerri Strug tells us that she loves surfing the net and exploring chat rooms. But sometimes, she sees things she *doesn’t* like. “If someone says something that makes you feel unsafe or funny... leave the chat room or log off altogether,” she advises. “Whatever you do, *don’t respond.*” In CBC’s “Street Cents — Introduction to the Internet,” two teenagers explain how to use :-) and :- (and remind you not to type in all caps unless you want to sound like you’re yelling.

To me anyway, such descriptions immediately bring to mind films of yore where the viewer learns how to use a telephone:

It’s difficult to imagine the modern-day equivalent of such films. In fact, the most recent examples I could think of were the PSAs during the digital television transition of 2008. Various local channels patiently explained to owners of older TVs that they might need to buy a set-top digital converter, otherwise their TVs would not receive a signal after September 8. “Don’t let the digital revolution leave you behind,” warns a spokesman on KBTU, while the background pulses with techno music from the impending future.

How to do everything

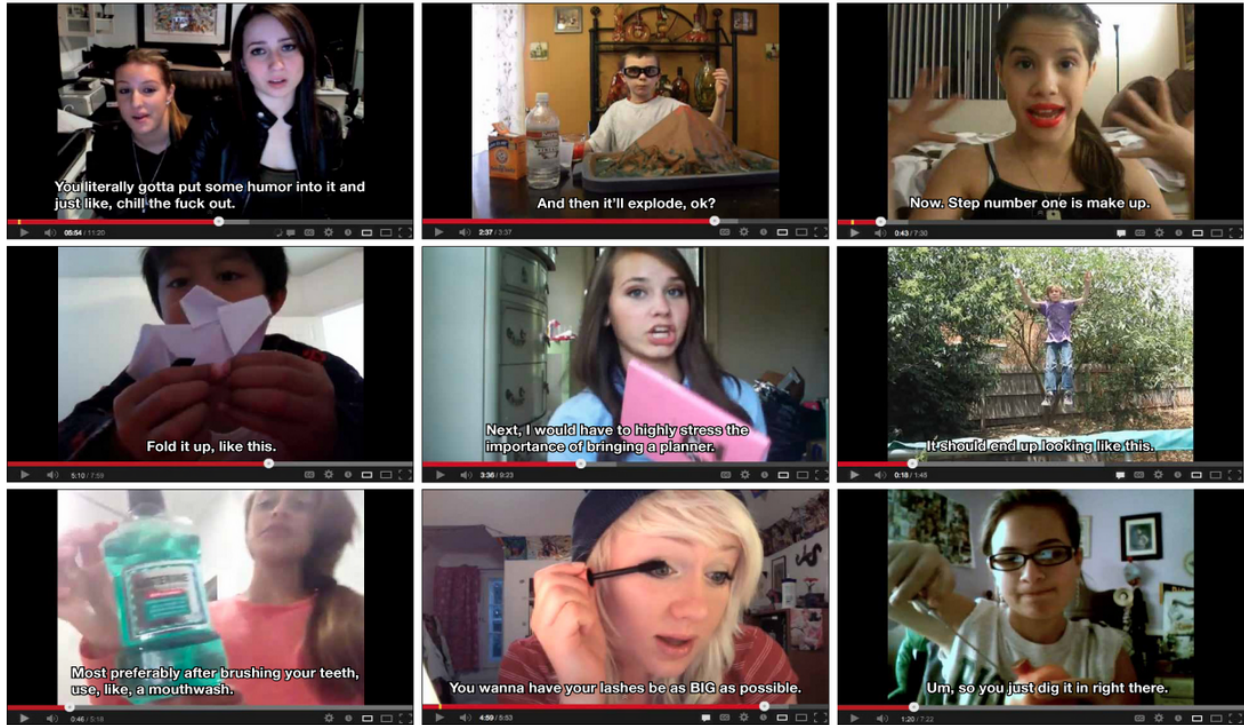
VR seems like a technology whose newness is difficult to grasp, so I thought “how to use VR” videos might fit the bill for a modern-day equivalent of those early how-tos. One of the first results on YouTube was [“How to setup and use Virtual reality VR headset with Android phones review \(sic\)” by Tampatec](#), a user who appears to be a handyman dad type in Tampa, Florida. In this video, he describes in detail how to use a regular Android phone with a VR Shinecon headset, but honestly, it’s hard to catch much of what he says without getting distracted by his bored teenage son in the background.



😞 >> 😞 >> 😞 >> 🙄

At various moments throughout the course of the video, the kid gazes at the floor, desperately pushes his hair out of his face, or stares dolefully past his dad at the camera, as if beseeching the viewer to end the video.

But the informality of this man's living room, and his bored-nearly-to-tears son (who does later get his moment to wear the headset), is a reminder that while we may no longer need videos about "how to internet," the internet is now where we go to learn how to do everything else, often from individuals like Tampatec. This is a phenomenon I'd thought about a lot in 2013, when I made a piece called *People Younger Than Me Explaining How To Do Things*. It's a collection of screenshots and captions from videos where kids and teenagers teach, encourage, and chastise an anonymous public from their bedrooms, living rooms, and backyards — often with an authoritative tone learned from TV or other videos. "Now, I see a *lot* of people doing this," says a kid, not more than 10 years old, demonstrating the wrong way to do a cartwheel.



TheRcboy88 shows you how it's done.

“You literally gotta put some humor into it and just like, chill the fuck out,” says one of two girls in a “how to have your first kiss” video. On the other hand, in “how to get her to break up with you,” a teenage boy lying on a couch tells you to “diss her, break her heart, and make her cry.”

The sponsored how-to

For my recent talk at *Internet! A Restrospective*, I tried to relocate some of the videos I'd used in *People Younger Than Me Explain How To Do Things*, but found that things have changed since 2013. Searching for “how to” videos, even (or especially) for stupid things like cleaning your room, now more frequently leads to hyper-produced videos — still with young people in living rooms and bedrooms, but with professional lighting and commercial-ready fonts and transitions. These how-tos often have corporate product placement, or their makers are hoping for some, usually listing an email address for business inquiries. Whatever trappings of informality that remain are carefully contrived, more symbolic than anything else. We could call this the sponsored how-to. Now, besides teaching me to chill the fuck out, the “person younger than me explaining

how to do things” also thinks I should check out this cool organizer from Sterilite, or this cool facial cleanser from Kiehl’s.

Why do these how-tos make me so sad? Maybe it’s because what’s happened here feels like a capsule version of what’s happened to my experience of the internet overall: the inevitable cultural process in which some weird behavior gets appropriated by business, leaving us with a shiny, unconvincing, zombie version in its place. These videos make me sad because they are so heavily mediated, and what got people excited about the internet originally was how it allowed relatively unmediated access to regular people. In his talk at *Internet! A Retrospective*, “free-range archivist” [Jason Scott](#) described the disbelief and excitement he felt early on to see words appearing on his screen that weren’t his. *Someone else was typing*. We got excited about talking to other people, especially people far away; now Target is talking to us, via a 16-year-old girl in her living room.

Of course all communication is mediated. I don’t mean to suggest that the early internet, or anything else, has ever been some neutral utopian medium untouched by corporate or government interests. But I also won’t deny that my pre-teen correspondence with randomly encountered internet pen pals (complete strangers to this day), or the discovery of someone’s GIF-ridden GeoCities home page, felt very different from subscribing to a popular YouTube channel or even accepting friends recommended by algorithms.

To give a better sense of what I mean by “relatively unmediated,” I’ll turn to a much earlier instance of a new form of communication taking people by surprise.

Holes in space

In 1980, people in New York and LA simultaneously began to notice that a screen in a shop window was playing what they initially thought was a recording of other people. There was no context, and the screen offered no explanation. In fact, it was an installation by Sherry Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway called *Hole in Space*, which created just that: a live video stream between the two cities. In the video documentation of *Hole in Space*, an interviewer finds an onlooker, an older man, standing in disbelief in front of the screen. “Who are we talking to?” he asks. “Are they actors? They look like young people in a show.” When the interviewer explains that they’re “regular people like you and me,” he exclaims, “by God!”

Gathering at the hole in space, people in the video appear entranced by the presence of strangers on the other side. Once they figure out how it works, family members who haven't seen each other in years arrange meetings; two men sing "Problems" by the Everly Brothers; a woman in Los Angeles tells a joke ("How many New Yorkers does it take to screw in a lightbulb? None of ya fuckin' business"), causing the crowd in New York to go wild. People gleefully yell out basic questions — "What's your name?" "What street are you on?" — cheering at the response, however banal.

Remembering this installation now, it suggests that what is magical in telecommunications is not the machinery itself, but the voice that is heard, or the face that appears on the other side. Even today, it still seems like all anyone has ever wanted from the internet was the same thing they've wanted all along: a connection to other people. Crucially, "people" here means actual people, acting and expressing themselves according to their own volition — not an actor, not Lonelygirl15, not a spokesperson, not an aspiring internet celebrity. What I'm trying to describe is some kind of ur-human urge, outside of follower count or personal branding, to throw a "hello" out into the void and maybe hear one back.

This is the promise of the internet that I remember as a '90s kid sitting in my parents' computer room, peering into the portal that led to unexpected encounters with *other people* ("regular people like you and me"). It's harder to find randomness or surprise online these days — but not impossible.

So random

A while ago, the writer [Joe Veix](#) told me about something called IMG XXXX. (He wrote a great piece on it for Real Future that you can read [here](#), or you can listen to [this](#) Note to Self podcast.) This activity, much of which takes place on [r/IMGXXXX](#), consists of searching YouTube for file formats like IMG, MOV, or DSC, followed by a random four digit number. The results are short videos that the uploader didn't even bother to title. They may have been accidentally uploaded or forgotten, and they have no obvious narrative structure, ending as abruptly as they began.

The screenshot shows a list of video posts on the subreddit r/IMGXXXX. Each post includes a video thumbnail, a title, the number of likes, the number of comments, and the name of the user who submitted it. The posts are:

- IMG 4972**: submitted 3 months ago by guestman, 1 comment, share.
- DSC 4956 - Bird Fight**: submitted 3 months ago by FaultyFloorboard, 3 comments, share.
- IMG 0892 - Japanese woman trains dog to only eat on command**: submitted 3 months ago by FaultyFloorboard, comment, share.
- MVI 0044 - Friends sharing a drink at the train station**: submitted 3 months ago by lapazzionale, 2 comments, share.
- GOPR3295 - A man who has a giant fan strapped to his back runs around in a windy field surrounded by his friends and family eating on a picnic table**: submitted 3 months ago by iwonsoha, comment, share.
- MOV 3295 - A cat with curly hair responds to it's owner with a meow and a yawn at the same time.**: submitted 3 months ago by iwonsoha, 2 comments, share.

The sidebar on the right contains a welcome message: "Hello, and welcome to r/IMGXXXX! Instructions and rules are in the sidebar. Enjoy your stay!". Below this is a "Video Generator" section that explains the format: "Type IMG, MVI or MOV and 4 digits of your choice into YouTube and try and find interesting videos. For example, IMG 1234 has a dog catching a frisbee." The "Rules" section lists several guidelines, including following Reddiquette, using the correct video format (IMG XXXX, MVI XXXX, or MOV XXXX), and avoiding self-advertisement, hate speech, and bots. A spoiler warning example is shown: "[Spoiler description] (#s "Spoiler")".

Reddit users sharing some good finds on r/IMGXXXX

Unlike the cheery “Hey guys!!” that now starts every well-lit, perfectly framed YouTube tutorial, these videos do not begin with an introduction or any kind of context. We’re simply thrown into someone’s life from an oblique angle that was never meant to be interesting. We find ourselves on a sidewalk in Eastern Europe, with a saucy old woman beckoning the cameraman to slap her butt. Next we’re inside, looking down at a gemstone ring while the person holding the camera loudly eats chips amidst the silence. Next we’re at a pond in an unknown location, where a turtle quietly falls off a log.

Here’s a compilation of some of my favorites. (The titles are from the people who found the video and posted it to r/IMGXXXX, not the original uploader.)

This video contains a sandwich, some frogs, and bad Spanish pronunciation. Holes in space, no. But these might be pinpricks.

I’m reminded, too, of an app I used to love called Rando (R.I.P., 2013–2014), whose sparse UI allowed you only to send a photo to a stranger and receive photos from other strangers, one for one. Otherwise, there was very little information: you could see where your photos went as well as the origins of photos you got, but there were no comments, no captions, and no likes.

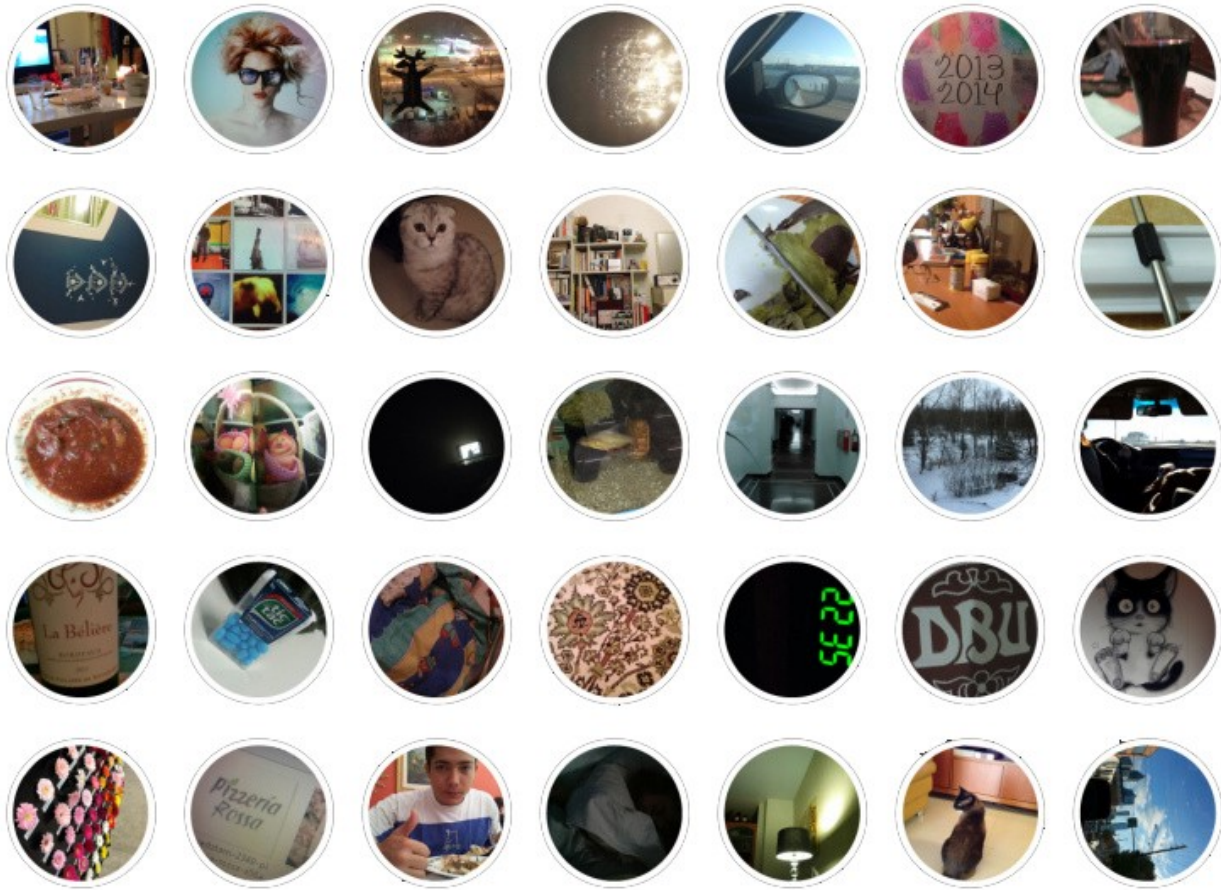
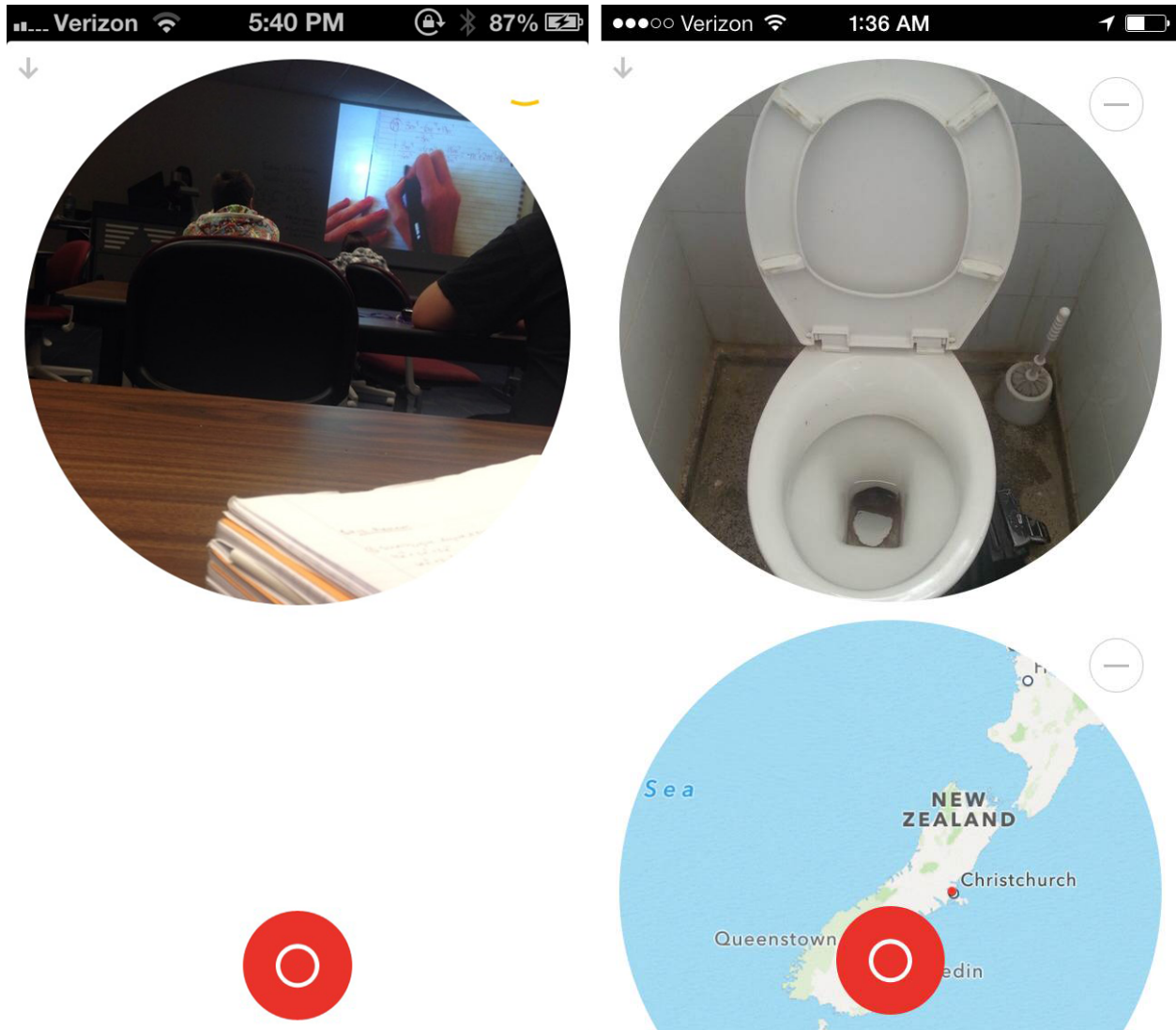


Image from “The Short, Serendipitous Life & Untimely Death Of Antisocial Photo-Sharing App, Rando”

The first photo I sent was of my coffee cup at a cafe in San Francisco (it went to Turkey); in return I received a photo of a pink purse on a chair somewhere in South Korea. Sadly, I don’t have that photo saved, having made the classic mistake of assuming an app would be around forever. But I remember it vividly because it had a completely different quality than photos I saw on Instagram or Facebook. This photo seemed somehow more *real* than I was used to. Of course it wouldn’t be hard for me to go online and find plenty of photos of purses being taken in South Korea. It wasn’t the content of the photo that made the difference; it was the idea that *a real person had just pressed a button to send this photo*, and here I was looking at it, into a room, into a life.

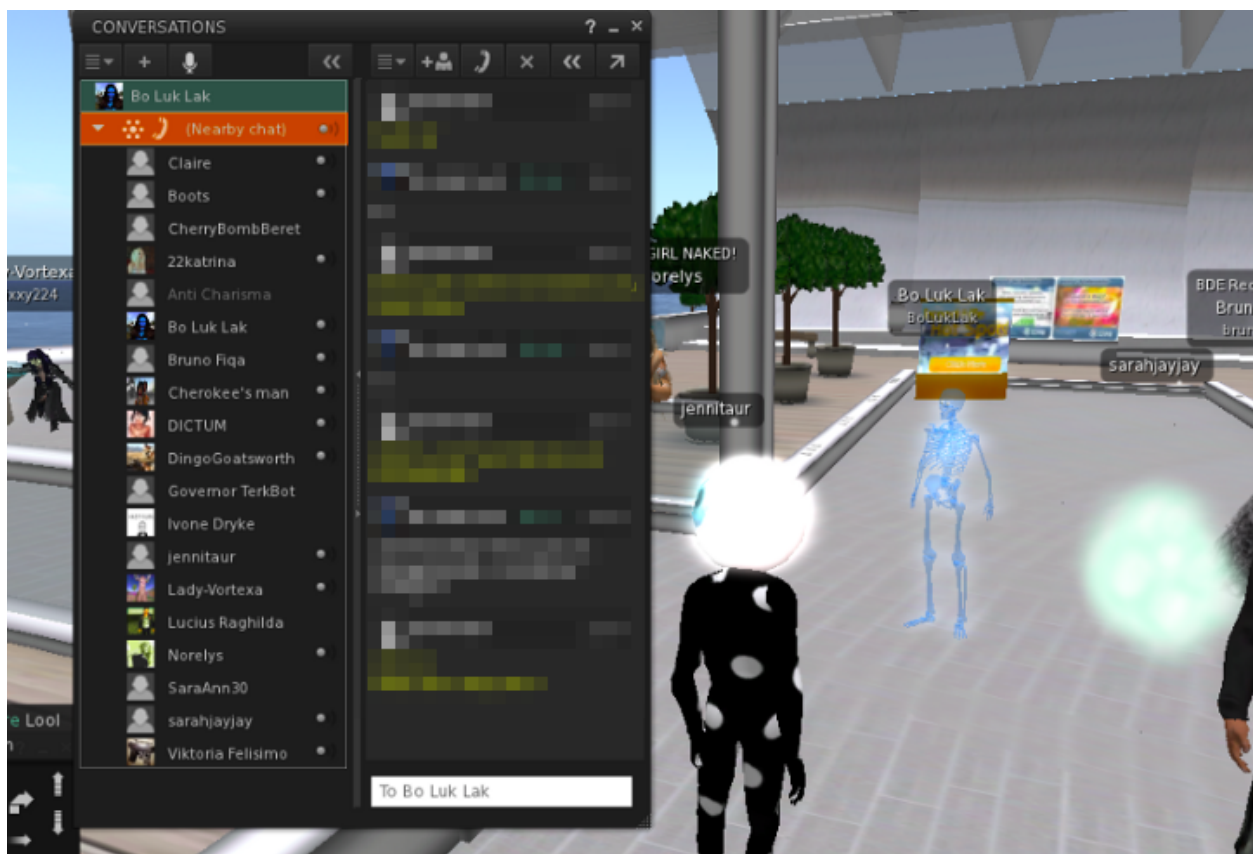
Now all I have left are a few of the images my students got when I made them use it back in 2013:



Courtesy of author.

Although the app description originally invited you to “take beautiful photos to give to others,” the photos I got, like the IMG XXXX videos, were appealing because they were not beautiful. After the purse, I got a photo of a computer screen on which someone was carefully drawing an anime pony. I saw someone’s teacher lecturing in class. I saw the top of a pint of ice cream in Ireland. I saw the inside of someone’s car. There were almost no selfies, just incidental scenes captured in moments of boredom. The photos were their own tiny holes in space, the circular shape of the photos rendering them like portholes into an alien everyday.

My last example of randomness online is from Second Life, which has emptied out since its heyday in the mid-2000s. Because I was so late to the party, I've never had great luck there; my first conversation was with an avatar whose name was also Jenny and who propositioned me on Help Island (where all avatars first materialize), saying only, "Sex?" My avatar, wearing a polka-dot onesie and a giant rotating eyeball head, mostly roamed the lands in solitude. But one day, in one of the few crowded places I was able to find, I discovered a glowing blue skeleton named Bo Luk Lak. He stood out among the mostly naked avatars wearing thongs and grotesque anatomical enhancements.



Courtesy of author.

"Hello sir," I said, apparently waking him from sleep. Our conversation was halting, because the skeleton was putting everything I said and all of his responses through a translator. Bo Luk Lak was in Russia. He talked of locations in Second Life that no longer existed, where he used to "fly by airplane, and also a sea coast." He called Russia "far, and cold," and said that it was hard to get on Second Life there. Although it was late at night and I was tired, I delayed logging

off because the connection felt as fragile as the long lost worlds he was attempting to describe. Again, there was nothing technically miraculous about using the internet to communicate with someone in Russia, but because I spotted this skeleton in the midst of a virtual crowd — because we encountered each other by chance and now someone was really typing at a computer somewhere in Russia — I felt unable to sever the connection.

Relearning how to internet

My current-day interaction with the internet seems to contain ever fewer of these portholes and chance encounters. If the internet is a superhighway, it feels like there are fewer exits, and you're expected to keep traveling to the same places over and over again, based on your past behavior (and purchasing history). In fact, the highway always seems to loop back around to your own neighborhood. Meanwhile, other people also have their own set routes, which don't share anything with yours, and you never run into each other.

Originally, I ended this piece with a story about a train trip that Joe and I went on — the Amtrak Coast Starlight from Oakland to Los Angeles — where we visited the dining car and were randomly seated across from a military vet and his teenage grandson, both from Oklahoma. It was difficult to have a conversation with them; there were many topics we had to tiptoe around, and just as much as we assumed about them (being conservative and quite probably Trump supporters), they seemed to assume about us (being some hipster couple that had of course gotten on at the Oakland station). But we made it through OK. The story was supposed to be an illustration of the importance and difficulty of talking to strangers. I was arguing for more dining cars on the internet.



Jennitaur
Amtrak Coast Starlight

33 likes

25w

Jennitaur steaks on a train (with @joeveix)

deedottiedot Where are you two headed? ✕

Jennitaur @deedottiedot LA! 😎 ✕

♡ Add a comment...

While profanely Instagramming, I realized they were saying grace. Courtesy of author.

I don't want to totally disavow that sentiment, but after the election, this metaphor sort of fell apart for me. The reason we don't have dining cars on the internet is in part because interaction online is qualitatively different from sitting across from someone at a very small table, in a confined space where you literally cannot leave. Later, when I found myself wondering how our conversation would have gone had we looked less white (I'm half Asian but it's not obvious to some people), or had we been a gay couple, the importance of the in-person element became clear. The man and his grandson would have probably still had to look us in the eye and interact with us politely, even if they didn't want to, and vice versa. In a real and physical sense, we had to acknowledge each other. Online, in the comments section of some article, it may have turned out very different.

In light of this, what I was originally suggesting — more randomness, more holes in space, more chance conversations with strangers — began to feel not necessarily wrong but naive or incomplete. That's because it leaves out a really

important factor of online interaction, which is the internet's ability to abstract and anonymize people, solidifying your own universe instead of getting you outside of it. My suggestion leaves out misogynist trolls (who, more than anyone, *love* talking to strangers) and racist subreddits (which gymnast Kerri Strug most definitely would *not* have enjoyed). It makes a lot of assumptions about the types of connections you can make, and the shared reality those connections would necessarily be based in.

Just after the election, the first reactions my students described to me were of horror: horror that the reality the internet had shown them was not consonant with other realities, and that those realities outnumbered ours. They felt like they'd been surrounded by ghosts they couldn't see. Perversely, the hyper-acceleration of a certain kind of connection has led to the deepest disconnection possible; social media in particular has created a haphazard, uneven topography across which lateral connections have become ever more difficult. As Joe put it in a conversation the other day, the "we just need to talk more" argument relies on the premise that if people just have the right information, they'll come around. But it's become clear that some of them won't come around. There are facts, and then there are beliefs. One of those is having a heyday right now, and the internet is helping.

So, instead of ending with the train story, I will end with a different example of connection. In *BANGED (the Interview)*, the artist Angela Washko negotiated a Skype interview with Roosh V, a slimy pickup artist and "the web's most infamous misogynist." Her essay on the experience describes how she'd "hoped to understand how [Roosh] and his increasingly visible community have constructed their worldview in opposition to feminism and the growing independence of women, and, in turn, ask him to have empathy for those whose experiences he does not identify with." But during the interview, she realized that this was "an unrealistic goal" and that "though mostly polite and extremely generous with his time, Roosh appeared unable to acknowledge that I might be qualified to think autonomously or be well-regarded in my field." Throughout the interview, Roosh draws upon his own sense of logic, science, and objectivity. For him, Washko is simply wrong in ways she can't even see, and no amount of debate, cajoling, or empathy will change that.

[Angela]: This is another question that I was planning to ask and it's a very huge question, but how can anybody claim to have an objective reality? I mean your reality is obviously constructed from the many different places that you've lived and the experiences that you've had and the people that you've met and all of these things. Obviously somebody who has only lived, like most of my family has lived, in one town in Pennsylvania for most of their lives — so their sort of reality is constructed very differently. But can't you say that yours is also constructed based on your experiences? [Roosh]: But it is more objective than 99.9% of the people who hate on me. I have seen and done more. I have read more. I have been exposed to more. I have been exposed to different ideas, belief systems than other people. I'm not saying I'm smarter. I'm not. I've just seen it all, done it all, read it all. I have more data and background in my mind that allows me to reach conclusions that are more accurate. That was kind of being (*inaudible*). No, I'm serious!



Angela Washko doing god's work

Roosh might be an extreme example, but to anyone who has tried to engage an opposing view on Twitter or in a comments section, this rhetoric should sound very familiar. Connect all you want, but you won't often get what you were after, which is a sense of mutual understanding, or even coexistence on the same plane of reality.

At the end of the day, people use the internet to find what they want. A queer teenager feeling isolated in the Midwest can use it to find solace and community. But a bigot can also use it to find all the "research" and "facts" he needs to bolster an opinion that was never going to be changed anyway.

In the midst of all this, I get really sad watching "how to use the internet" videos, precisely because I can still feel the glimmers of my childhood excitement about seeing other parts of the world, talking to other people, and being surprised. I still want to see the purse from Korea and the glowing skeleton from Russia. I still enjoy being thrown into the middle of a stranger's high school gym class in IMG_2956. At *Internet! A Retrospective*, with pieces like Cameron's Askin's *Cameron's World* (an ode to the welcome pages of old Geocities websites) and Morehshin Allahyari's *In Mere Spaces All Things are Side by Side* (a poetic recounting of a teenage romance via online chat between Iran and the US), I

could remember that human impulse for connection and expression, for getting outside of yourself, and for simply finding weird stuff.

I still believe that there are new forms of connectivity we could forge that aren't Facebook and aren't Twitter and that could maybe — *maybe* — let us see outside of our own filter bubbles. Perhaps we could find or create new kinds of avenues for organizing, or platforms for debate (for those who are level-headed enough to do so). The role of the internet, and of reimagining how we use the internet to talk, is as crucial as ever.

But it's a thorny path. It wasn't until now that I fully grasped the dangerous varieties of connectivity (like rapid sharing of fake news) and understood there are people who cannot be connected with in the way we would like (the Rooshes of the world). Maybe that just means I've grown up. I know less about "how to internet" than I did before. All I can say now is that doing it right will require a great deal of imagination, caution, and fortitude.