<< Return to article

Love Online

Online relationships aren't virtual, and they aren't revolutionary. Shakespeare knew it, and so does my son.
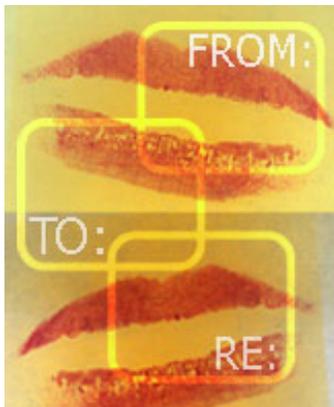
By Henry Jenkins
Digital Renaissance
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When my son Henry was fifteen, we made a trip from Cambridge to Omaha so that he could meet his girlfriend face to face for the first time. Though they met online, this is not the story of a virtual relationship; their feelings were no less real to them than the first love of any other teenager, past or present.

Image by Matthew Bouchard

When I was suffering the first pangs of unrequited adolescent longing, there weren't a lot of girls in my immediate vicinity who would risk the stigma involved in going out with me. One summer I met a few girls at a camp for honors students but our relationships withered once we returned to our own schools and neighborhoods. My son, finding slim pickings at school, cast a wider net, seeking kindred spirits wherever they dwelt in a neighborhood as big as cyberspace itself. Online, he had what it took—good communication skills.

He met Sarah in an online discussion group; they talked through private e-mail; after getting to know her a little he finally got the courage to phone her. They dated in chat rooms. They sent each other virtual candy, flowers, and cards downloaded off various Web sites. They spoke of "going out," even though they sat thousands of miles apart.

Sarah's father often screened her telephone calls and didn't want her to talk with
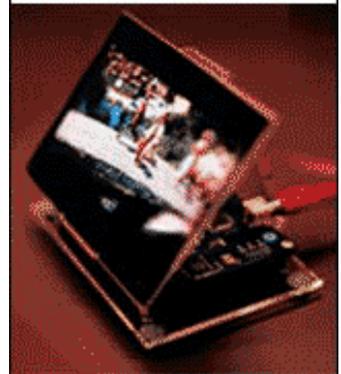
boys. He didn't pay the same degree of attention to what she did online. He quickly ran up against the difference between his expectations of appropriate courtship and the realities of online love. He felt strongly that boys should not talk to his daughter on the telephone or ask them out on dates unless they were personally known to him. Henry had to go through the ritual of meeting him on the telephone and asking his permission to see her before we could make the trip.

Long-distance communication between lovers is hardly new. The exchange of love letters was central to the courtship of my grandparents (who were separated by the First World War) and of my parents (who were separated by my father's service after the Second World War). By the time that my wife and I were courting, we handed our love letters back and forth in person and read them aloud to each other. Our courtship was conducted face to face or through late-night telephone conversation. The love letter was a residual form—though we still have a box of yellowing letters we periodically reread with misty-eyed nostalgia.

Sarah and Henry's romantic communications might seem, at first, more transient, bytes passing from computer to computer. Yet, he backlogged all of their chats and surprised Sarah with a printout. In this fashion, he preserved not only the carefully crafted love letters but the process of an evolving relationship. It was as if my wife and I had tape-recorded our first strolls in the park together.
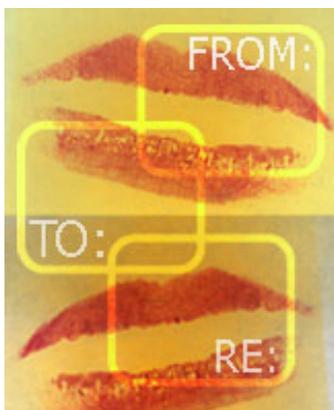

Image by Matthew Bouchard.

Henry and Sarah would not have met outside the virtual communities the Internet facilitates. But they were both emphatic that purely digital communication could not have sustained their relationship. The first time Sarah confirmed that she shared my son's affections, she spoke her words of love on a chat room without realizing that he had been accidentally disconnected. By the time he was able to get back online, she had left in frustration. Wooing must be difficult if you can't even be sure the other party is there.

The medium's inadequacies are, no doubt, resulting in significant shifts in the vocabulary of love. In cyberspace, there is no room for the ambiguous gestures that characterized another generation's fumbling first courtships. In a multi-user domain, one doesn't type, "Henry smiles. He moves his hand subtly towards her in a gesture that might be averted at the last moment if she seems not to notice or to be shocked." The language of courtly love emerged under similar circumstances: distant lovers putting into writing what they could not say aloud.

They may have met online but they communicated through every available channel. Their initial exchange of photographs produced enormous anxiety as they struggled to decide what frozen image or images should anchor their more fluid online identities. In choosing, my son attempted to negotiate between what he thought would be desirable to another 15 year old and what wouldn't alienate her conservative parents.

The photographs were followed by other tangible objects, shipped between Nebraska and Massachusetts. These objects were cherished because they had achieved the physical intimacy still denied the geographically isolated teens. Henry sent her, for example, the imprint of his lips, stained in red wine on stationery. In some cases, they individually staged rituals they could not perform together. Henry preserved a red rose he purchased for himself the day she first agreed to go steady.

Even in an age of instant communication, they still sent handwritten notes. These two teens longed for the concrete, for being together in the same space, for things materially passed from person to person.

Barring that, they cherished their weekly telephone calls. Talking on the telephone helped make Sarah real for Henry. When his friends at school challenged his inability to "produce" his girlfriend for inspection and asked how he knew she wasn't a guy, he cited their telephone conversations. Even for these teens, the fluidity of electronic identities posed threats. Once, early in their relationship, Henry jokingly told Sarah that they went to the same school, never imagining that she would believe him. The results were both farcical and tragic as she searched in vain for her mystery date.

After a while, they started to fear that they might break up without ever having seen each other in the flesh and they didn't want it to end that way. After some pleading, I agreed to accompany Henry on the trip.

Henry and Sarah first "met" in an airport. He almost didn't recognize her since she was so different from the single photograph she had sent. From the start, their interaction was intensely physical. Henry said that what had given him the most pleasure was being able to play with her hair, and Sarah punched him in the arm so many times he was black and blue. Sarah's mother and I watched two slouching teens shuffle through the terminal, learning to walk in rhythm.
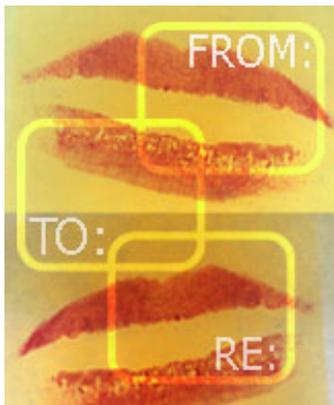

Image by Matthew Bouchard.

As would-be dramatists, they wondered what they should say at that first meeting. Sarah solved the problem by shouting "Sony PlayStation" across the crowded airport. The two of them had a running debate about the relative merits of different game systems. Their first date was to an arcade where Sarah made good her long-standing boasts and beat him at Street Fighter II before Henry got his revenge on NFL GameDay. Sarah made the state finals in a video game competition, so it was no surprise this proved central to the time they spent together. Sarah's mother purchased some new games and—ever the chaperone—brought the game system down to the parlor from Sarah's room so they could play together.

If we are going to talk, from Cambridge to Omaha, with people we've never met before, we need something to talk about. For Henry and Sarah, that common culture consisted not only of different games and game systems, but also a shared enthusiasm for professional wrestling. They met on rec.sport.pro-wrestling, brought together by a shared interest in the Undertaker, a star of the World Wrestling Federation. They both were participants in an electronic pro wrestling role-playing game. Henry brought a cardboard sign with him to a televised wrestling event, pushed his way through the crowd, and got on camera so he could send Sarah a broadcast message.

Popular culture also helped to bridge the awkward silences in my exchanges with Sarah's parents. I had wondered what a media scholar from "the People's Republic of Cambridge" would say to two retired Air Force officers from Nebraska. As Sarah's mother and I sat in the arcade, trying to dodge religion and politics, we found common ground discussing Star Trek, the original Saturday Night Live cast, and of course, Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom.

Henry and Sarah broke up sometime after that trip—not because they had met

online or because the real life experience hadn't lived up to their expectations but because they were fifteen, their interests shifted, and they never really overcame her father's opposition. Henry's next relationship was also online—with a girl from Melbourne, Australia, and that experience broadened his perspective on the world, at the price of much sleep as they negotiated time differences. Now 21, he has gone through his normal share of other romantic entanglements, some online, more face to face (with many of the latter conducted, at least in part, online to endure the summer vacation separation).

We've read more than a decade of press coverage about online relationships—much of it written since my son and I made this trip together. Journalists love to talk about the aberrant qualities of virtual sex. Yet, many of us embraced the Internet because it has fit into the most personal and banal spaces of our lives. Focusing on the revolutionary aspects of online courtship blinds us to the continuities in courtship rituals across generations and across media. Indeed, the power of physical artifacts (the imprint of lips on paper, the faded petals of a rose), of photographs, of the voice on the telephone gain new poignancy in the context of these new relationships. Moreover, focusing on the online aspects of these relationships blinds us to the agility with which teens move back and forth across media. Their daily lives require constant decisions about what to say on the phone, what to write by hand, what to communicate in chat rooms, what to send by e-mail. They juggle multiple identities—the fictional personas of electronic wrestling, the constructed ideals of romantic love, and the realities of real bodies and real emotions.

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