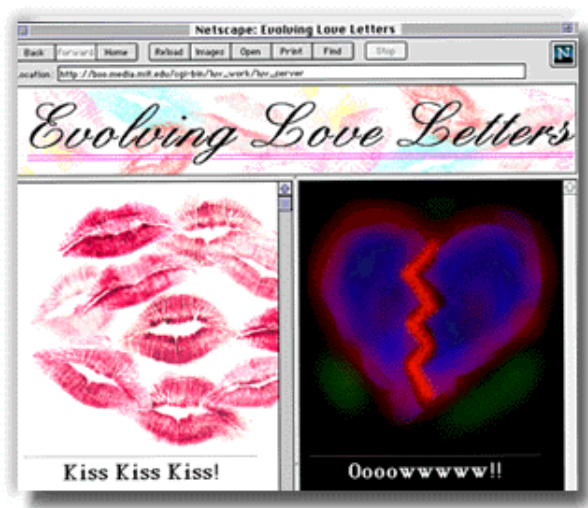## INTERNET RESOURCES for Friday, February 14, 1997

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SITE OF THE DAY

Evolving Love Letters

"Dearest love of my life, you mean more to me than chocolate itself," reads one letter.

"Madness! [Love] boils the blood and rends the emotions," says another. "Who would want such a thing? Why do so many seek it?"

Steve Waldman doesn't claim to know the answer, but his Evolving Love Letters site on the World-Wide Web invites the romantically inclined to choose the love notes that "most perfectly woo" them -- all in the name of research about the communications potential of the Internet.

Mr. Waldman, a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, seems quite serious when he says the Internet has been developing along the lines of

existing media: A relatively small number of "content providers," as they are known, attracts large audiences. He wants to know whether new technologies could involve much larger numbers of people in editorial decisions, which then would no longer be the "privileged" right of media elites.

The love-letters project is designed to test whether computers could coordinate such an editing process, in which many individuals would make decisions more or less in parallel. The model Mr. Waldman chose for the editing process is biological evolution.

Each visitor to the site is presented with two love letters, and is asked to pick the better "suitor." The winning letter is showered with kisses, while the other is left with a broken heart. The visitor can then rewrite either or both of the letters. Another part of the site challenges visitors pour out their most passionate prose -- and they do, from the sappy to the erotic.

The site, which may not work with some browsers, then follows a simple genetic model. Each time a visitor picks one letter over another, the winning letter becomes more likely to be offered to the next visitor: Its contents, or its "genetic code" in evolutionary terms, have won a primitive contest in natural selection. And each time a visitor submits a new version of a sentence in a letter, the M.I.T. computer treats it the way the evolutionary process would treat a new version of a gene: The computer tries it out on future readers to see if they think it makes the letter better or worse.

So far, the biggest contenders are mostly "sappy, you're-the-queen-of-my-life letters," Mr. Waldman says.

"I'm really interested in text, and whether you can have text in which a whole population is the author, instead of an individual," says Mr. Waldman, who designed the site as a project for M.I.T.'s Media Lab. "So the question becomes, How can you get thousands of people to collaborate on a document, and how can you get it to come out perfect at the end?" The first challenge, however, was getting visitors interested enough to write. And what better topic than love to lure "hapless Web surfers," as Mr. Waldman calls

them, into a large-scale experiment?

Activity on the site really picked up as Valentine's Day approached, with about 20 new love-letter submissions each day. Altogether, there are about 20,000 distinct letters in the gene pool, he says.

"I think people like writing love letters, but they don't usually get a chance because in real life it's too scary," says Mr. Waldman, who has written a few of his own but has yet to find the perfect letter.

"When I write love letters, I sort of take on a character and don't have to worry about it," he says with a laugh. "You can play a part -- passionate, silly, dark, suicidally in love, or whatever. I'm constantly amazed, sometimes because they're so beautiful, and sometimes because they're so trashy."

- World-Wide Web:
  http://boo.media.mit.edu/cgi-bin/luv_work/luv_server

--Karla Haworth

Previous sites