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Love Letters on the Net

What could cause Rush Limbaugh to propose marriage? And Dilbert's tie to stand straight up? *Besides* that. The answer is romantic e-mail. Just how popular is it? Last year during Valentine's Week Nando.net's Cyrano Server sent out more than 81,000 letters.

The [Cyrano Server](#) is a kind of **Mad Libs** approach to wooing. You pick a category from "poetic" to "steamy," add nouns and adjectives, and hope your beloved has the sense of humor to appreciate endearments such as, "I can imagine myself kissing your ludicrous body and slathering you with various oils and Swiss cheese."



Even though it is meant in fun, Cyrano is an apt, and sometimes appropriately tragic, metaphor for e-mail love-with an ironic, 90s twist. In Edmond Rostand's 1897 play, the poet Cyrano de Bergerac cannot escape his jutting nose. He and his conventionally handsome but congenitally inarticulate friend Christian both love Roxane. When she prefers the "himbo," Cyrano agrees to help his friend and writes the letters that win her heart for Christian.

In real life, all it would take these days is a little rhinoplasty for Cyrano to pull even. In the online world, he would pull as far ahead as Michael Johnson. E-mail love letters are the revenge of the articulate and the witty-the chance for those who never got picked for the team or asked to the prom to use typing the way rock stars use hip-thrusting.

That's the upside for the Cyranos of the world. The downside for the Roxanes is that once again you don't know who you're really getting. The asynchronous nature of e-mail means that your correspondent has plenty of time to check out the Web's online quotation collections and find the words to appear erudite (unless his/her quotes come from ["Bon Mots from the Supermodels"](#).)



Worse, the deception may extend far beyond a putative ability to write in



complete sentences. If you're not exchanging letters with someone you already know or at least have actually met, you have no way of knowing if your online lover is of an appropriate age, gender, marital status, or even species.

Someone who did experience an online love affair with a stranger challenges that conventional wisdom, and suggests that both parties can be more themselves online than in real life. Meg (not her real name, of

course) is a married mother of two. She met a single man in an America Online chat room. Although not on the Internet, her experience on America Online conveys the power of e-mail. Meg and her online lover's public flirtations in the chat room evolved into an "intense" several-month correspondence that Meg says was "an experience that will be with me the rest of my life."

Meg describes it as similar to writing in a private journal. "It was much easier for me to be more direct about who I was. You get an essence of people you wouldn't necessarily get face to face." Although, "We never did cybersex; it was just intense flirting-it was like falling in love," she was franker online than ever before. "In real life, I'm really shy, but I was just out there-you're not face to face, so you're not dealing with the consequences of writing something like, 'I want to jump you.'" Ironically, concludes Meg, despite its clandestine nature, the truth of the emotions she experienced during the affair "helped define the kind of honesty I want to put out in my life."

A further cautionary note for those who still believe e-mail isn't "real": The person is unlikely to exist who can look at their beloved's monitor and read, "Dear stinkie-poo, I desire every part of you. Cuddle-bunny," and not turn sick (at the very least at the thought of loving someone tacky enough to enjoy being called "stinkie-poo"). And for Heaven's sake, whatever you do, don't send romantic e-mail to someone at work or from your own office.

The power of words doesn't surprise Steve Waldman, a researcher at MIT's Media Lab. Waldman believes, "Meeting people online may be the killer app. A significant portion of people's personal e-mail is flirtation." As part of his graduate work he created "Evolutionary Love Letters." On the one hand, as a piece of academic research, it's "an experiment in applying genetic metaphors and algorithms to the collaborative production of text." On the other hand, and in English, by weighting the power of certain words and phrases to attract or repel, Waldman is extending the ability of computers to help humans in group projects.

Waldman chose love letters as the topic of his experiment, "because it was easier to get people to participate voluntarily than to find paid subjects willing to simulate business writing." As an unintended consequence, he discovered,



"People look for the most beautiful or the most lurid phrases, but it's not necessarily what they'd most want in real life. Some of this stuff in real life you'd say, 'I've got to get a restraining order.'" He does have one piece of useful advice, "Nobody likes stupid grammatical errors." He readily admits his results have been skewed by the small sample study (other MIT grad students) and invites [participation](#).

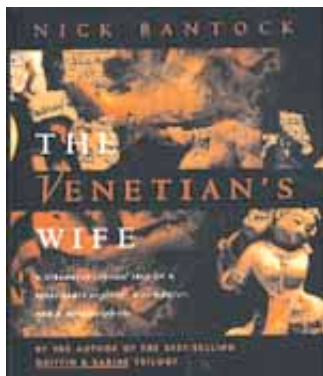


Romantic e-mail may have emotional power and academic value, but is it really the equal of that cache of letters great-grandpa sent to great-grandma from the front in WWI? Not unless you "autograph it and put comments on it," says David Redden, senior vice president of Sotheby's. "There's historical value-the value of information. E-mail between people of note will have enormous informational value. To that extent e-mail is a great advantage over the telephone, which really degraded our knowledge of the past. But it's hard to imagine how e-mail would have a commercial value-what, in fact, would you be selling? There isn't an artifact that's unique. To the extent it's printed out, you could print out millions of copies."

Redden also laments the loss of personality through the uniformity of computer typing: "When he typed, Ernest Hemingway had a strange quirk of leaving extra spaces between each word. Kafka had this spiky handwriting which was wonderfully evocative."

Chris Ott, who was inspired by letters of historic and emotional value to create the e-zine, [Letters](#), elaborates on the thought: "It's hard to get around the fact that romantic e-mail is different from traditional love letters, and one of the most important differences is that e-mail doesn't suggest the physical presence of the person you're in love with in the same way that a paper letter does. After all, a paper letter has actually been touched by the sender, handwriting can say something about a person, you can tear a letter open with anticipation, etc."

Meg poignantly agrees with Redden and Ott, "I'll always keep the one physical letter he sent me. Just knowing that he held it and wrote it made him a little realer to me-here was something tangible out of this void of cyberspace."



But Ott also brings up a point in defense of e-mail that almost makes it seem a medium of which Jane Austen would approve. After all, her characters constantly experience situations now unimaginable in our age of faxes and e-mail-they get replies to their morning letters by afternoon post! Says Ott, "Just because e-mail is different doesn't mean that it's inferior. The speed of e-mail can make it possible for two people who are in love or who are falling in love to exchange a quick series of brief

& Sabine puts the Net in *The Venetian's Wife*, his new love-letter book. Read our special report.

endearments, almost like a conversation, in a way that would take too long through the postal service."

Finally, whether you feel that e-mailed love letters have all the warmth of a Yule log video, or that they spare you the eye irritation of reading perfume-saturated illegible notes, there are several sites and software companies that offer ways to give e-mail a more personal touch (even if they won't bring your descendants big bucks at Sotheby's).

[Social Software](#) sells wedding invitation-type calligraphy fonts. Three other companies offer customizable fonts that can be created from your own handwriting: [Handwriting Fonts](#); and [Signature Software, Inc.](#) But all of that takes time, effort, and money. Far faster and equally striking, many Web sites now offer postcards you can send to your beloved. (Sending in this case often means sending a notice to his or her e-mail address that a postcard is waiting to be seen at the originating site.) The Cyrano Server itself now lets you customize your missive with flowers and other flourishes. [Virtual Flowers](#) allows you to send the cheapest roses you're ever going to find. (If you would rather impress your love with your munificence, you also can order real ones.) You can find many more of these sites under Yahoo!'s Entertainment: Humor, Jokes, and Fun: [Greeting Cards on WWW](#).

Some very striking black-and-white images by photographer Glenn Powers for e-mail postcards are at [meaning](#). They range from a group shot of cheerleaders perfect for a congratulations message to a solitary figure of a woman staring off reflectively-which I sent to an ex-boyfriend with the simple message "miss you." He wrote back a perfunctory, "Good luck on your article."

Which only proves: It ain't the medium, folks-it's the message.

Top illustration by Steve Vance



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