

net.love

by [Sara M. Carlstead](#)

Rush Limbaugh did it. Chances are good someone you know has done it. What am I talking about? Finding love on the Internet. With the Internet playing a larger and larger role in our lives, it's not surprising that the Internet has become an electronic matchmaker. I talked to a number of students who have experienced love on the Internet to find out how and where it happens, the differences between Net relationships and more traditional relationships, and how successful Net relationships tend to be.



How do they meet?

Most people I talked to said that you can't go looking for love on the Internet. V.J. (all names have been changed) explains, "The minute you start looking you won't find it. It just happens." Even so, there are [lots of places](#) on the Internet that are set up for people to meet each other, often with romance in mind. Many Usenet groups exist for meeting people: [alt.romance](#), [alt.personals](#), [alt.personals.ads](#), and [alt.soulmates](#). Samantha posted to alt.soulmates jokingly looking for a biker with a Ph.D. Bill responded with the same type of tone; the two have been talking ever since. There are also a multitude of places on the World Wide Web where you can post a personal. One of these, [The Virtual Meet Market](#) lets you create a short graphical page telling others about yourself; people who find you interesting can reply via anonymous e-mail the service provides.

Although there are plenty of ways to formally meet potential mates on the Internet, most of the people I talked to found their significant others (SOs) through accident or common interest. Where they found them reads like a guide to the Internet; it seems you can meet people on every part of the Internet. Usenet newsgroups in the "rec" and "alt" hierarchies seem popular, as do music groups. V.J. and Christie met after he posted a message to rec.humor saying his plan file was funny. She fingered him, sent him mail asking about him, and it went on from there. Other people meet through real time communications. According to Tina, when she and Mark met, "It was one of my first days on the net, and I was still learning the ropes. I had wandered into a channel called #nicecafe, where there [are] a lot of friendly people chatting. He and I started talking, and flirting; the sparks began to fly." Another popular place is on-line interactive games like [MUDs](#) (Multi-User Dungeons) and [MUSHs](#) (Multi-User Shared Hallucinations). As Julie told me though, they are "admittedly a dangerous way to meet someone, because you're already assuming a different identity." The MUSH on which Julie met her SO, though, was "a social MUSH where you don't really assume a character."

There are some even more unconventional ways to meet people. Jennifer gets email daily about her homepage on the World Wide Web. Sam met his fiancée in an atypical manner: "We met when I was using my best friend's account, and she mistook me for him. In the process of clarifying my identity to her, we got to talking, found lots of things in common and became very close friends."

How do the relationships develop?

After meeting each other, most net relationships go through a couple of stages that let those involved get to know each other better. Most couples begin by sending casual friendly email a couple of times a week, which usually escalates to a couple of times a day. They then begin to talk to each other in a private talk session or a private chat channel. After becoming comfortable with each other and deciding the relationship is worth pursuing they will call each other on the phone and talk "voice." At some point after this a face-to-face meeting is planned. Because so many of these relationships span states or even continents, this usually requires a lot of planning and sureness on the part of the couple. If the relationship has lasted through this point (usually at least 6 months) the couple continue their relationship using the Internet and might eventually plan on moving to the same geographic place, getting married, or both.

Every relationship is different, though. Julie says, "The relationship progressed rather quickly. At first we just exchanged information such as physical appearance, family background, school info, etc. We only met and talked on the MUSH for a few weeks. Then we exchanged email addresses and started sending email two or three times a day up to present. Most recently I just returned from meeting Dale in person. I went up to where he lives, over 3000 miles away, and stayed for a week over spring break."

Tina and Mark's relationship developed over more than 6 months and spanned from the United States to Australia. They are planning their wedding for October of 1996. According to Tina, "At first, we were just friends. We would talk casually... this lasted about a week or so. Then we started getting to know one another, and we both realized that we clicked. We then left our public meeting place and ventured into a private channel. We would spend literally hours on end just talking, learning about each other, learning about each other's cultures, our lives, our goals, our dreams. After a few weeks, we realized that we were destined to be together, and that fate had brought us together, and we declared our love for one another. We have always had a very strong line of communication, whether it be on the net, by phone, or by mail. I made him a video tape of me, and my friends/life here, and he sent me photos. The phone calls went from once a month, to twice a month, to once a week, and from 10-20 minutes a call to over an hour a call."

Advantages and Disadvantages

As with any type of relationship, there are lots of advantages and disadvantages with an Internet relationship. From a practical viewpoint, Internet relationships let people communicate over long distances for a small price. From Tina: "Isn't the Internet a great thing... it allows people to

communicate all over the world." As Sam says, "I hate telephones, so it's nice to not have to use one." The other practical appeal of net relationships is the wide variety of people you can meet with similar interests and compatible personalities. Jennifer explains, "I'm so picky I'd never find someone who was what I was looking for."

The Internet also allows people to get to know each other without basing their like or dislike of the person on superficial things. As Tina says, "One of the main advantages of 'net relationships' is that you don't judge people on physical appearance. Society today is so concerned about looks and physical well being. The net overrides that and allows people to get to know each other based solely on personality and mental aptitude. You are able to learn about the person from the inside-out, instead of the outside-in." Another advantage the net provides is the ability for people to communicate more openly. Julie says, "People can be more open because they have a barrier, the computer, and don't face rejection in person." Tina observed, "You're also liable to communicate more freely when you don't have to look at people face to face."

Although this can be seen as a benefit, it can also be a detriment. Tina explains, "The computer acts almost like a fog though sometimes. It's hard to judge someone's real reactions and I think you lose a lot of communication in body language, facial expression, and tone of voice." Sam adds, "It's easier to misunderstand people when all you 'hear' is their electronic text. Communication crucially involves inflection and other audio-visual cues, so it takes a lot more work on both ends to make up for that loss. I, in particular, tend to speak tongue-in-cheek a lot without any verbal indication that I'm doing so. That can be dangerous; and it has to do with electronic communication in general, whether between SOs or others."

The practical disadvantages of a net relationship are pretty obvious. It is quite easy for another person to lie to you and it is very hard for you to find out the truth. Other people, according to Julie, "fall in love over and over again only to be disappointed each time." From a practical viewpoint, long distance relationships are difficult to maintain. As Julie says, "a lot of people who meet on the net can't afford to travel long distances to meet their SO." She concludes, "I enjoy my net friendships very much, but I know that you have to keep it all in perspective and not get so caught up in it that you miss out on real life."

Do they work?

It's probably obvious by now that it takes two lucky and dedicated people to find and maintain a relationship via the Internet. As V.J. puts it, "They require a special, patient, talkative person who types fast and knows how to write a lot of email." Tina says, "It takes very special people to make net relationships work. They must be people willing to sacrifice a lot of things, as well as be able to put a great deal of trust into the other person." Internet relationships, like most, require good communication skills, a lot of patience, and a lot of hard work. But "In the end," according to Tina, "They pay off tenfold."