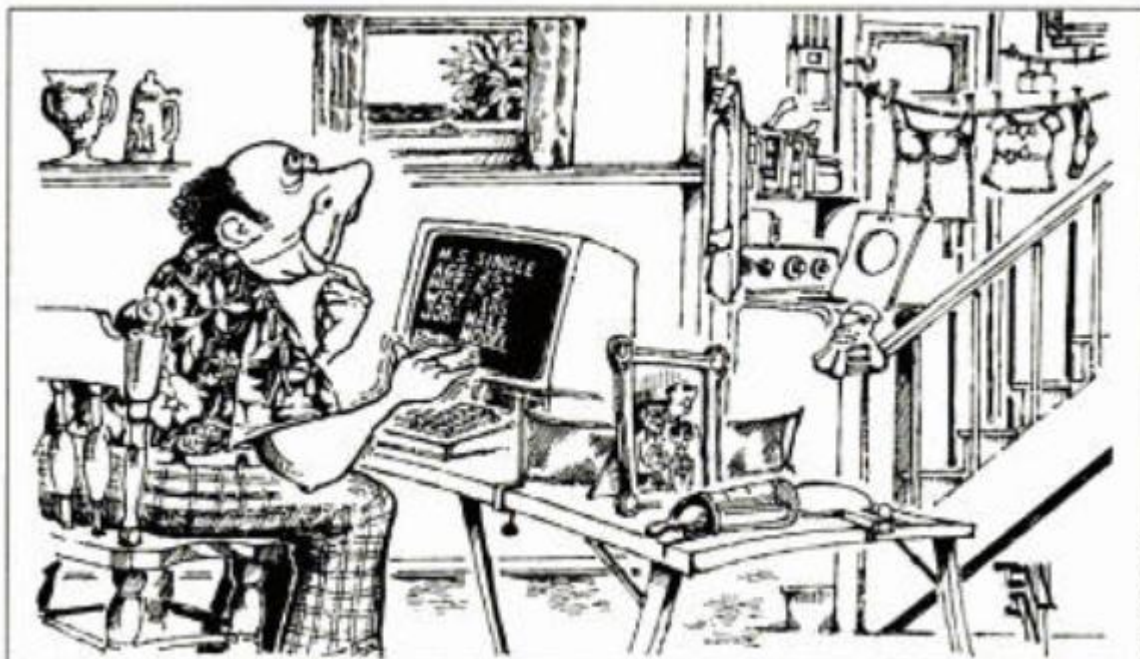


TECHNOLOGY

Old, Weird Tech: Computer Dating of the 1960s

JOHN HENDEL FEBRUARY 14, 2011

Decades before Match.com and OkCupid there existed a different sort of online interaction that millions participated in.



The 1960s gave us many gifts. Psychedelia and New Journalism, civil rights and the Velvet Underground, JFK and the sexual revolution. The last gift spawned something else entirely -- the 1960s introduced us to computer dating.

Yes, you read that correctly. Computer dating. Decades before Match.com, OkCupid, and Craigslist there existed a different sort of online interaction. The 1960s sport carried many of the same hazards and thrills as virtual matchmaking today. Computers did exist in the '60s, in some form -- not personal computers, but computers nonetheless. These machines could crunch the numbers on our personalities and spit out intimate matches. Sites like OkCupid perform a similar service now, only with more pictures, interactivity, and complexity.

But in the 1960s, what was known as "computer dating" involved no Internet and often few to no visuals. People submitted their vital stats along with questionnaires

by mail. Not e-mail, of course, but old-fashioned, stamp-licking mail. No instant gratification followed. People waited patiently for days, weeks, and months as companies processed their answers on intelligence, attractiveness, quirks, and preferences, and would perhaps find them matches ... the hope for true love. The questionnaire model dated back to the Scientific Marriage Foundation in 1957 and flourished throughout the '60s and '70s. Any time of profound social change calls for a good date.

"Inevitably, the singles game is putting technology to use," *LIFE* magazine declared back in 1967, "and the computer-dating service is growing as steadily as the price of a share of IBM." The article describes "punchcard-plotted introductions" that cost \$5 to \$150. It emphasizes the perils that, even now, many ascribe to romance via machine:

Couples who meet by computer tend to be embarrassed and even hostile. Drinking takes care of the embarrassment but not the hostility. "You needed a computer, didn't you? So what's wrong with you?" a man sneers at the end of an evening. Or the girl does. Or both do.

These services expanded along with our society's moral flexibility, technology, and the enthusiasm of young date-hungry entrepreneurs, particularly during the second half of the 1960s. In *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, journalist Gay Talese described pornographer-to-be Al Goldstein as a subscriber to a "computer dating service" circa the mid-'60s (though apparently the service was, like many during this era, fraudulent). Harvard students founded a landmark computer-dating service around the same time, and as the *Crimson* reported in 1965, "Their banner reads 'SEX,' their creed is written on the circuits of a computer, and their initial organized uprising is called Operation Match." A black-and-white video celebrates the "computer marriages" emerging from Operation Match by 1968. It cost \$3 to sign up, and more than a million romantic souls had responded during the service's first years.

These virtual matchmaking systems proved quite popular among college students who wanted to keep dating casual, according to one 1978 article. Even rock songs emerged to laud the trend. The *Crimson* shares relevant '60s lyrics:

*Well, I filled out my form and I sent it along,
Never hoping I'd get anything like this.*

...

*We put 2 and 2 together, and we came one with an I.B.M. affair.
She's my I.B.M. baby, I don't mean maybe,
She's my I.B.M. baby.*

Consider also this 1969 advertorial in *LIFE* magazine: "How To Be Comfortable With Computer Dating." The ad, promoting a dating service called Compatibility, strains to build credibility for the company, emphasizing its size, ethics, and the power of the service's computers ("The IBM 360/40 Computers that are used for us, we are told, will do more in an hour than a highly qualified individual can do in a year"). How's that for a matchmaker, right? Computer dating also experienced transatlantic popularity -- this 1972 British ad encourages you to join "Britain's most sophisticated and successful computer dating service" to "meet your kind of people." Naturally, these services wanted to give an impression of exclusivity, some pretense that they "try to weed out the obvious social misfits" as the *LIFE* ad assured. No one wants to show up and find their date grotesque, after all.



These dating services evolved quickly in subsequent decades. People began using phones and more photos, and by the 1980s, video and primitive chat rooms on the early Internet (think of New York's 50 BSS computer networks that existed around 1984, which offered 24-hour-a-day flirting right at your keyboard). The *New York Times* reported of a "Computer Dating Dance" held at Stony Brook in the 1980s. Various anecdotes confirm, however, that daters of yesteryear suffered from the same problem online daters do now -- the goods often failed to match the bill, as a 1984 article wryly relates:

"No doubt about it. There are people on the network who are plain crazy," says Pam Dunn, alias Zebra3, of New York City. "Someone will talk to you on the private line, and you'll be having a great conversation. You're chatting for 15 minutes, then all of sudden they may ask for something really obscene."

Even 37 years later, many women (and men) who attempt online dating can likely relate to these socially dysfunctional mishaps from certain suitors. Also enduring

throughout the years are problems of misrepresentation: of age, weight, attractiveness, and height, as with the man who claimed to be 6' tall and "mysteriously shrunk to about 5 feet 6 inches in person." These issues have unlikely been resolved even on today's Internet.

Explore the complete Old, Weird Tech archive.

Images: 1: Infoworld; 2. LIFE.

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