

Michael Hewitt takes in a film and can't quite suspend his **level of disbelief** enough.

Saving Meg Ryan



Sunday, 14 February, and it was off to the UCI for the Sutton premiere of 'You've Got Mail'. The throng of fans, hoping, no doubt, for a glimpse of stars Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, were, unfortunately, to be disappointed. Last minute

professional commitments meant that neither could make it. However, this didn't stop the area's glitteratti turning out *en masse*. The cinema's foyer was a riot of colourful elegance, courtesy of top couturiers, BHS, C&A, and some guy down the market. The media was in a near uncontrollable feeding-frenzy. 'No pictures! No pictures!' roared my burly minders, shielding me from the barrage of popping flash-guns while simultaneously manoeuvring me through the scrum of *paparazzi* and on towards the popcorn kiosk.

After all this excitement, the film itself turned out (predictably, given all the hype) to be something of a disappointment. As you're no doubt aware, it's the tale of a man and a woman — Hanks and Ryan — who, though they would quite cheerfully feed one another rat poison in real life, are nevertheless conducting a sizzling email relationship online, with neither aware of the other's true identity.

Fine up to a point. However, certain aspects of the story require, not so much a suspension of disbelief, but rather that it should be allowed to levitate of its own accord. First off is the fact that neither character knows anything about the offline persona of the other, nor seems to have any interest whatsoever in wanting to know. Which, given that they're supposed to have become soul-mates online, is strange indeed. Aren't they curious as to what the other looks like, at the very least?

In the real online world, if that's not a contradiction in terms, it's become etiquette, these days, to swap pictures from the outset just to prove that neither of you is any sort of human emetic. But Ryan and Hanks are, instead, happy to stick with the *noms de voyage*, 'shopgirl' and 'ny152', and insist on a policy of 'non-specifics' throughout. The trouble with non-specifics, though, is, as one unfortunate lady found out recently, that you're online *beaux* could, in fact, be a serial murderer on Death Row. Or worse, perhaps, Meg Ryan.

A fairly trivial matter, this Meg Ryan thing, I know.

It's all down to taste and individual preference, of course. But personally, I'd try to claim damages from the ISP if I discovered I'd been unknowingly bonding with her online. Her character is so unbelievably cutesy and sugary-sweet, that the film ought to carry a health warning up front for diabetics. Then again, each to his/her own. It's quite possible that she doesn't fancy me, either.

Most unbelievable of all, though, is the mail system as depicted in the film. Whenever Hanks and Ryan log on and get the 'You've got mail!' voice, we're shown the contents of their individual mail boxes. All they contain, if they contain anything at all, are their emails to each other. Where are the 'XXXX hot teenage sluts!!!!', 'Make \$100,000 a year, tax free!', and 'Congratulations! You've won a Caribbean cruise!' junk emails that all the rest of us get?

The point is, Hanks and Ryan are supposed to have met online in a chat room. But, as anyone who's ever used a chat room, particularly a busy American one, will be aware, within about 30 seconds of entering, you start to feel as if you're on the Somme, circa 1916. Except it isn't artillery that's bombarding you, but a relentless barrage of automatically generated junk emails. These are courtesy of programs operating in the background, whose

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function in life is to harvest the email addresses of chat room participants and add them to mailing list databases.

Curiously, the chat room context doesn't seem to make any difference to their targeting. You can, for instance, be in a room called 'Catholic', chatting away to a group of Papal nuncios about the joys of celibacy, but you'll still get dozens of emails exhorting you to come along and join in some wife-swapping action.

OK, all rather a lot of nit-picking, I agree. But what are nits for, if not to be picked? As a film with an internet theme, 'You've Got Mail' isn't a total 'Johnny Mnemonic'-style disaster, but it won't make my Top Ten for 1999, either. If you haven't already seen it, don't waste £5 watching it in the cinema. Wait for it to come out on video.

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