

People **watching people** on WebCams is all the rage. Sad or what, says Michael Hewitt.

# Who are you looking at?



Watching paint dry used to be the generally accepted benchmark against which to measure relative degrees of boredom. Today, however, now that the introduction of Dulux Vinyl Silk has, if not exactly

rendered the experience truly exciting, then at least introduced into it an element of suspense, we need a new yardstick. Thanks to the internet, I believe we may have one: watching life as viewed through a WebCam.

**Two distinct WebCam oeuvres** have emerged. In the first, the camera shows 24-hour coverage of something reasonably immobile, like a piece of scenery or a city skyline. In the second, the WebCam is mounted in a living room or bedroom and records whatever, if anything, goes on in front of it during the course of a day. The first falls down because of the current limitations of the technology. The concept is sound enough — people do like looking at spectacular views and will often spend hours at it — but it manifestly fails when combined with the internet because computers cannot deliver the requisite breathtaking vistas. Take, for instance, a WebCam I have come across which displays the Manhattan skyline. In real life, this is probably one of the most spectacular sights in the world. However, reduce it to a gimpy 3in x2in image in the corner of a VGA monitor and, unless a meteorite suddenly descends, or a largish prehistoric lizard turns up to eat a few of the inhabitants, you may as well be looking at East Croydon.

**The second type** of WebCam coverage, the fly-on-the-wall variety is, I fear, a far more worrying trend. In days of yore, if you had very little life to speak of, and that little you did have was of such stultifying tedium that, in comparison, 24 hours stuck in a lift with a Jehovah's Witness provoked a major adrenaline rush, there were just two options: either keep it to yourself, or write a column about it for *The Independent on Sunday*. Now, though, such people are sticking little cameras on top of their computer monitors and broadcasting their sorry existence to the rest of humanity. And, I am afraid, the rest of humanity, or at least a good proportion of the 80 million of them connected to the internet, is eagerly tuning in.

**The person who** started this nonsense, a 20-something American designer called Jennifer Ringley, proclaimed her "Jennicam" project to be an example of performance art. Maybe. It is also an opportunity for teenagers to log on to her site and watch her undress before she takes a shower or goes to bed. They could, of course, log on to the Penthouse or Hustler web pages and cop a view of some slightly more aesthetically packaged bodies, but that's by the by.

**Whatever, Ringley has inspired** a host of imitators. Today, it seems that there are few human activities which are not viewable via the net: birth, eating, sleeping, marriage and root-canal surgery, to cite but a small number. It was even reported a few weeks ago that a couple intended to lose their virginity on the internet. This turned out to be a publicity stunt, but I've no doubt that it will come. But when it does, it will be boring. Real life is generally boring. At least from an onlooker's point of view. That's why, whenever they make a film starring, say, Bruce Willis, they always have him blowing up an asteroid with a nuclear bomb or kicking Alan Rickman from the top of a skyscraper,

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rather than just showing him doing nothing but sipping coffee or undressing before he goes to bed.

**It's this infantile need** that many people have, to scream "Look at me! Look at what I'm doing!", to whom these fly-on-the-wall WebCams are pandering. It is the same exhibitionist urge which prompts people to jump up and down, waving "Hello Mum!" placards behind John McCririck whenever he performs his horse-racing commentaries. It is the same inner demon that drives people to appear on television's *Stars In Their Eyes* and send obviously staged videos in to *You've Been Framed*. It's pathetic. But then again, these online antics do, for the time being at least, spare us the sight of one thing which would definitely be more boring — a WebCam view of paint drying. Give them time, though, give them time.

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