

# Bloggging

## Report and Illustrations by Mark Frauenfelder

*The first approximation of an innovation goes only halfway to realizing its full impact. Two generations ago many people imagined a horseless-carriage, or automobile. However, very few imagined the second-order disruption of this horseless carriage—parking lots and traffic jams. And virtually no one foresaw the third-order consequence of this second-order disruption (car plus parking lot) which was suburbia.*

*Hyperlinking—the foundation of the Web—had long been prophesized by visionaries like Ted Nelson and others. In fact their descriptions of how hyperlinking would work were very prescient. But neither Ted Nelson, nor anyone else involved in pioneering hypertext (including we who worked on the early hyperlinked version of the Whole Earth Catalog in 1986) ever imagined the most profitable (to date) use of hyperlinking, which is to sell junk on eBay.*

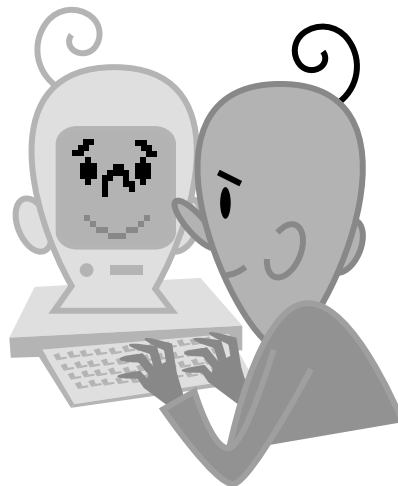
*The following report is an early look at another unexpected use of hyperlinking, another one that escaped anyone's prediction. It is hard to tell whether this is a trivial exploitation of this technology, or profound. The author, Mark Frauenfelder, has a great track record for uncovering street uses of technology that later play out large. Mark, in fact, was the first person to alert me to eBay, when it was still just a small-time Bay Area flea market for collectors and Beanie Baby fanatics. Mark once published a popular zine of street trends called Boing Boing, and was an early Wired editor.*

*I grabbed this report which he had circulated to several magazines after they rejected it because it was too "fringe." On theWeb, fringe is front and center.*

—KK

WHAT CAN YOU WRITE ABOUT A WEB SITE, BESIDES "IT'S COOL," OR "IT'S NOT COOL?" wondered Jorn Barger. But when you link to an interesting article within a site, there's plenty to write about, and if you're smart, funny, or outrageous, eventually you're going to get a following of regular visitors—as Barger does, in his extraordinary and eclectic Robot Wisdom ([www.robotwisdom.com](http://www.robotwisdom.com)), one of a growing breed of self-expressive Web sites for which Barger coined the term "weblogs."

Weblogs (or blogs, as the blogging inner circle sometimes calls them) are different from "favorite site" lists, which are typically just a bunch of links to the front pages of sites. Weblogs link to specific pages, otherwise known as "deep links." The purpose of a Weblog is not just to recommend URLs, but to opine on them as well. Think of a weblog as a journal of one person's explorations as he or she cruises uncharted sectors of the Net, reporting on the interesting life-forms and geological formations.



The people who publish weblogs are like pre-surfers, or tour guides. There's a blog for every taste. The best are published by opinionated, perceptive people who write about sites you might never find on your own. A blog's links reveal the blogger's worldview. "They're an online extension of yourself," explains Cameron Barrett, a Web designer from Ann Arbor, Mich., who publishes [www.camworld.com](http://www.camworld.com).

Weblogs are as different as the people who publish them. Some are close to being headline aggregators, such as Robot Wisdom, which consists mostly of links, short descriptions, and excerpted sentences from news stories he finds—"Detailed critique of MacOS-X's new Aqua interface," "Michael Gross on the fashion-model-agency sex scandals." Others are more like online diaries: Paul Perry's [Alamut.com](http://Alamut.com) is light on links, but heavy on personal introspection—"It was a month ago, on the 26th of December, that the fundament of my earthly kingdom, the love of my life, announced the end of our seven-year

relationship.” Occasionally, blogs end up delivering too much personal info, like this example from RiotHero.com, maintained by a 15-year-old boy: “[4:45] Oh shit. Lyda is coming over now, and I’m going to take a shower before she comes. (We’ve been dating only 4 months... so I’m still trying to impress her with my ‘fresh’ scent.)”

Does Lyda know what’s in store for her?

Weblogs aren’t just all fun and games. Some, like Xblog (<http://www.xplane.com/xblog/>) should be required reading for anyone involved in digital design. Companies are increasingly getting in on the blog action. Vincent O’Keeffe, a “user experience architect” for Octagon Technologies, a Web development company in Dublin, Ireland, says he maintains a weblog “to keep track of net flotsam and jetsam that I think is interesting to me and to the rest of the team in relation to projects we’re working on.” O’Keeffe uses a free Web-based weblog creation tool from Blogger.com to publish his internal weblog. Blogger.com, and weblogs, he says, are “a complete paradigm shift in the way I browse and learn—like a limb I never knew I missed until I found it.”

Sean Carton, co-owner of Carton-Donofrio Interactive, a Web advertising agency in Baltimore, Mary., says public weblogs will start showing up on more commercial sites, too. “Everyone’s trying to build bogus ‘community’ sites with bbs software, but they don’t always work so well. Weblogs succeed because they combine commentary with content—always a nifty combo.” Carton points to Streettech.com, a hardware and software review site that his company owns. Carton says the addition of a weblog to Street Tech has resulted in a “rapid increase in traffic” to the site.

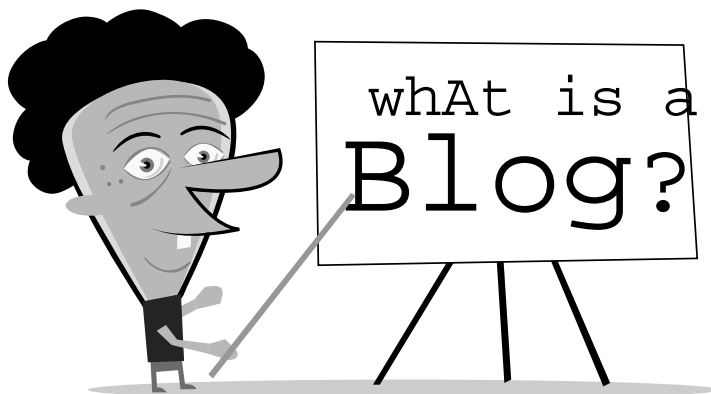
Blogging has exploded. Last year, there were fewer than twenty self-described weblogs. Today, there are probably close to a thousand. Look for at least ten times as many next year. Why is blogging so popular? First, it takes some time for any infectious idea to incubate before it erupts on the Web. (eBay was just a hangout for Pez collectors before it took off.) Second, the Web has long been home to tens of thousands of different cultures, but there hasn’t been a culture for the Web; not until bloggers came along. Now that the phenomenon has a label, people recognize blogs as a new form of Web-enabled literary self-expression, and the urge to start one is irresistible. Third, as the Web gets bigger (one billion pages and growing) it’s only natural that new ways to dig up the good dirt will be invented. Search engines are fine if you already know what you want. But what if you don’t know what you want, other than to be surprised or inspired? You could try a randomizer,

like uroulette.com, but you’ll have to endure lots of “this domain for sale!” and “file not found” pages before you land on something even mildly interesting. Weblogs, on the other hand, are serendipity search engines, run by humans, returning treasures that you could never have found yourself.

In the same way that Tripod and GeoCities made it easy (some snobs would say too easy) for anyone to put together a home page, sites like Blogger.com, Manilla.com, Pitas.com, and Groksoup.com offer one-stop-blog-making tools. Blogger, the most popular, lets you add a site to your blog by right-clicking

on a Web page and selecting “Blog This!” from the menu.

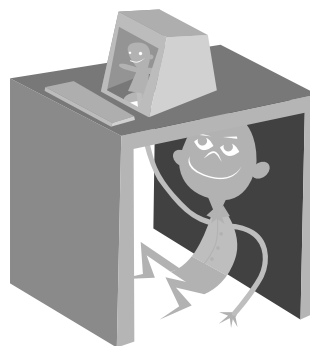
A form pops up that lets you add comments, and the whole thing is instantly published on your blog. Because it’s so damn simple to use, Blogger is responsible for a number of ultra-low-grade weblogs. What’s needed is a blog that reports on the best blogs—a metablog. Of course, there already are a bunch, like Metablog ([www.well.com/user/gtk/metablog.html](http://www.well.com/user/gtk/metablog.html)). There are even metametablogs, but our heads will pop if we go any further down that trail.



Some clueless media companies—terrified of losing their precious banner ad revenue—have threatened webloggers not to link directly to articles in their sites. They don’t want visitors to skip by the ads hanging on the front door and head right for the article. For example, Spin.com has a posted policy that reads, in part, “Any link must not frame the Owners’ site and must be to the entire site rather than to a particular page or graphic. Owners reserve the right to request any linking site to remove such link to any Owners site. Any linking site agrees to comply with such a request within 24 hours of receipt of such a request from Owners.” Universal Studios recently sicced its lawyers on Jean-Pierre Bazinet, who runs Movie-List.com, for linking to the studio’s movie trailers. Universal wrote Bazinet, “You are not permitted to link to other sites that contain our copyrighted material without our authorization.” Bazinet’s service provider, Simplenet, agreed with Universal’s demands, explaining “You are not a registered search engine.” (Simplenet didn’t even supply poor Bazinet with the contact information for the Intergalactic Search Engine Registration Authority, either!) What kind of Web would we have if everyone needed to get permission to link to a site, cry webloggers? A broken one. Many bloggers say they’ll simply “boycott” the companies that enforce such a ridiculous policy. That’s the allure of weblogging, you have the power to decide what to serve your readers, who depend on you to filter out the junk.

Why start a weblog? Most bloggers explain that they were already sending frequent e-mail to friends about interesting things they’d come across, and figured a weblog would be a

better way to share. Others say publishing a blog is a way to make them feel as if there's a purpose to their meandering through little-known corners of the Web. Still others incorporate their weblogs into their work. Dan Gillmore, the technology columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, has been publishing his weblog, eJournal (<http://weblog.mercurycenter.com/ejournal/>), on his newspaper's site since October 1999. In his blog, Gillmore occasionally tells readers what he's working on in an upcoming print column, even asking them for their ideas. "It's almost a liberating idea," he says. "It's not something that journalists ought to be afraid of." Of the three columns Gillmore writes for the print version of the *Merc* each week, one consists of the best items from eJournal.



To blog is to be part of a community of smart, tech-savvy people who want to be on the forefront of a new literary undertaking. In the spirit of camaraderie and self-promotion, Bloggers swap tiny banner ads with each other, using a free service offered by scripting-guru Dave Winer at [www.weblogs.com](http://www.weblogs.com); they send fan mail to each other, they cite other's blogs, and they participate in a half-dozen forums, including mailing lists, message boards, and collaborative blogs (blogs maintained by communities of bloggers, which usually lack the quirky snap of a solo blog).

It's not all buddy-buddy in blogland. Last August, several webloggers became flustered and argumentative when Jorn Barger—the inventor of the word “weblog”—posted a list of other people's blogs that he found too “overdesigned,” “garish,” or “database-y.” And in January, Camworld complained that Wetlog was copying Uselt's page design. “It's hard to tell if this is a parody, or blatant theft,” Cameron Barrett posted on his blog. “Maybe it's a cry for help from someone who feels he needs to pull a stunt like this to draw attention to his site.” The comment ignited a blog brushfire. The next day, Oneswellfoop launched Scamworld, a parody of Camworld. Weblogger Mike Gunderloy got in on the action, posting to Larkfarm: “Some folks need to take a deep breath and repeat ‘it's only a Web site’ a few times,” and pointed out that “Uselt's own copyright statement says explicitly ‘You are welcome to copy my CSS style sheet.’” Then, a bunch of bloggers went over to Metafilter to discuss the events. Cameron, too, joined the fray at Metafilter. He admitted he's got easily-pushed “hot-buttons” and vowed to sweep the issue under the rug. Currently, people are pissed off at Dlog (<http://andy.newdream.net/dlog/>) for daring to critique the designs of other people's weblogs.

Webloggers write a lot about what it means to be a blogger, much in the style of rock bands that play songs about living the rock 'n' roll lifestyle. But what do you expect? This is vanity press, a well-known stomping ground for giant egos. Blogging is a get-noticed-quick-scheme of the attention economy. “Like most of the writers I know, I want to be rewarded

for being self-indulgent,” says Ray Davis, the 41-year-old publisher of the Hotsy-Totsy Club ([www.kokonino.com/pubs.html](http://www.kokonino.com/pubs.html)), a highly-amusing blog that covers everything from vintage Viewmaster reels to Internet industry news. Davis enjoys the fact that he's got an audience, but he's a realist—he doesn't expect his server to shut down anytime soon with readers flocking to his site. “I know the readers who'd enjoy my crypto-cornpone ill-tempered conscience-ridden style are a small minority,” says Davis, a computer programmer and Web designer. “I just want as many of that minority as possible to get a chance to enjoy it.”

## WEBLOGS SITES AND SOURCES

A large number of weblogs focus on Web design issues, since many bloggers are designers. Here are a few of the best:

Uselt.com ([www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)) by Jakob Nielsen, formerly Sun Microsystem's Web usability guru and now a user interface consultant, is a fast-loading text-only site with daily items about the wisdom of simplicity in design.

Xblog ([www.xplane.com/xblog/](http://www.xplane.com/xblog/)) is a daily list of links to graphics and design articles.

Kottke.org is the “Home of Fine Hypertext Products,” maintained by Web Designer Jason Kottke. You're just as likely to find a hysterically right-on timeline of the evolution of portals as you are instructions on how to opt out of DoubleClick's tracking cookies.

Other blogs cover razor-thin niches:

The US President Biography Project ([biography.edittthispage.com/](http://biography.edittthispage.com/)) links to articles on the Web about what else?—US Presidents.

Mozillazine ([www.mozillazine.org](http://www.mozillazine.org)) covers the latest news about Netscape's open source browser project.

Scripting News ([www.news.userland.com/](http://www.news.userland.com/)) is Dave Winer's blog about programming-related news articles that appear in online tech publications. He also hosts a site called [weblogs.com](http://weblogs.com), full of tools and tips for bloggers. Over 300 people have registered their weblogs on his site.

Larkfarm ([www.larkfarm.com](http://www.larkfarm.com)) is maintained by an old-time zine publisher and reviewer who hasn't been able to resist the enticement of weblogs. Mike Gunderloy, who published the incredible *Factsheet Five* (sort of like a blog for self-published magazines) in the 1980s, now reviews other weblogs, in addition to finding and commenting on the sites he comes across.

Blog Portal ([www.eatonweb.com/portal/](http://www.eatonweb.com/portal/)) attempts to list and categorize hundreds of blogs out there. The publisher, Brigitte Eaton, says that the number of new blogs popping up every day has made it difficult to maintain the portal.