

**TWENTYSOMETHING
ESSAYS
BY
TWENTYSOMETHING
WRITERS**

EDITED BY

MATT KELLOGG AND JILLIAN QUINT

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Between the hours of 10:00 A.M. and 11:59 P.M. on November 24, 2005, the inbox of 20by20essays@randomhouse.com was inundated with more than one thousand e-mails. Was it spam? A virus? Were people finally responding to our Match.com profile? No, we still couldn't find a date or a good deal on Viagra. It was simply the deadline for the *Twentysomething Essays by Twentysomething Writers* contest, and as it turned out, nearly everyone—two thirds of the total contestants—had waited until literally the last minute to submit.

According to our colleagues, this meant we were a generation of procrastinators, too busy blogging about our recently diagnosed ADHD or watching the first season of *The OC* on DVD to get our act together and turn something in ahead of time; the contest had run for a full six months, after all. And they had a point. But the more we thought about it, the more we realized that this procrastination wasn't necessarily a generational fault but rather an indication of how today's world works. In an era of text messaging, online shopping, and movies on demand, why would anyone do anything more than a day or two in advance? It's not that we're lazy or bratty or glib; it's just that we're fast. We know how to access all kinds of information, and we have absolute confidence in the tools at our disposal.

In fact, it was precisely because of this technological immediacy that the contest attracted such a large, wide-ranging pool of writers. When we first launched our website, we had two listings on Google;

ROCK MY NETWORK

THEODORA STITES

I am trying desperately to be a celebrity in the network of my own digital world.

I want to have more Friendster views than anyone else. I need a blog that other people read daily. My iTunes list is shared. I live for smiles on MySpace, winks on Match.com, and pokes on Facebook. Dodgeball messages clog my cell phone every night. Why, you wonder, should I be obsessed with making fifth-hand connections with virtual people? Because I'm voyeuristic, and you are, too. We love personal information; Internet communities are a popularity contest, and it is no longer chic to be mysterious.

I've had more than two hundred Friendster views in the past week. Beat that.

Every morning before I brush my teeth, I check my phone for text messages and sign in to my AOL instant messenger. I need everyone I know to know I'm awake. Thus begins another day of micro-incremental social climbing. Do I have any new e-mails, messages or views, bulletins, invitations, or friend requests? Do I have recent comments on my blog or mentions on my friends' blogs? My celebrity status is uncomfortably quantifiable.

I flip open my phone and check for last night's Dodgeball mes-

sages. Dodgeball is definitely the most personal and invasive network I belong to. It links my online community to my cell phone, so when I send a text message to nyc@Dodgeball.com, the program pings out a message with my location to all the people in my Dodgeball network. Acceptance into another person's Dodgeball network is a very personal way to say you want to hang out. I flip through the messages to see where and when my friends went last night, tracking their progress through various bars and noting the crossed paths. I check the MapQuest map that displays their locations and their proximity to one another. I note how close Christopher and Tom were last night, only a block away, but see that they never met up.

I log on to my Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, and Nerve accounts to make sure the mail bars are rising with new friend requests, messages, and testimonials. Most of the people I know in one community exist in others, and we are constantly firing invites back and forth to new networks. Not a day goes by when I don't send out or accept a new friend request. It's a beautiful example of mutually assured popularity.

I live for testimonials and solicit them incessantly. Testimonials are the ultimate social currency, public declarations of the intimacy level of friendship. The degree of cheekiness expressed is directly related to personal comfort, like signing a yearbook. I click through the profiles of my friends to the profiles of their friends of friends and friends of friends of friends, always aware of the little bar at the top of each profile indicating my multiple connections. A girl I know from college is friends with my friend from college's best friend from Minnesota. They met at camp in the seventh grade. The boyfriend of my friend from work is friends with one of my friends from high school.

I note the connections and remind myself to IM them later.

On Facebook, I skip from profile to profile by clicking on the faces of posted pictures. I find a picture of my sister and her boyfriend, click on his face, and jump right to his page.

Pictures are extremely necessary for enticing new friends and fans—the more pictures, the better. I change my pictures at least once a week.

There are hidden social codes in every image. Shadows and promi-

nent eyes: not confident about their looks. Far away and seated in beautiful scenery: want you to know they're adventurous. Half in the picture: good-looking but want you to know they're artistic, too. Every profile is a carefully planned media campaign. I click on the Friendster "who's viewed me" bar to see who has stumbled upon my profile over the last day, week, or month, and if people I don't know have checked me out, I immediately check them back. I get an adrenaline rush when I find out that a friend of a friend I was always interested in is evidently interested in me, too, and wants to make a connection.

Just imagine if we could be this good in person. Online, everyone has bulletproof social armor.

Finding the perfect online community is not as easy as it looks, especially when they are all in such constant population flux. Some are too small. Dodgeball is so tiny, it's almost too personal. It takes constant attention. Not only does my online profile need to be tended to and updated regularly, but the text messages demand a prompt response. In order to stay in the loop, I even occasionally have to meet up with the members of my Dodgeball network in person.

Some networks are too large. MySpace is so big that I can't seem to find a place to start my own mini-network and branch out. I have ten profiles but not nearly enough friends. It's just so difficult to find people on MySpace who aren't in a band, because the site allows people to link MP3s to their profiles. This immediately caught on with indie bands who realized they could debut new tracks to hardcore fans and groupies at absolutely no cost. But now it has just become a huge marketing machine, not a way to actually find people and connect. You know what I'm talking about. Band profiles linking only to other bands' pages. The site has even started a record label; buying a CD from the MySpace label gets you an extra picture posting on the site. Groupies rejoice.

I spend the majority of my time searching the Internet for new communities and ways to connect. Are there enough people on

Plazes.com yet? Is it worth it to make a profile on Consummating? Am I hip enough for Nerve? It doesn't bother me that Friendster and Consummating started as dating sites; now they are just networking spaces. Can I be a part of Geocaching.com without having a GPS? Are the people on Fark.com my kind of people, and should I spend my time and energy making a profile?

Fark.com members apparently opened their homes to other Fark.com members who were stranded after Hurricane Katrina. This makes their community seem beautiful and touching. Definitely worth starting a profile. Plazes.com is based on posting your GPS address on Google maps and finding people not just through interests but through exact location. Though it's still in beta state, it definitely has potential. I, of course, have a profile and log in every day. But I don't know anyone else on it yet, so I'm not sure I'm ready to tell my friends.

Why, you ask, do I have to be a part of just so many online communities? Isn't one enough? Isn't it hard to keep track of them?

But I have no choice. I need to belong to all of them because each one enables me to connect to people with different levels of social intimacy. The closer I am to someone in the offline world, the more easily accessible they are online. Don't know you but think I might want you to be part of my network? I'll contact you through Match.com or Nerve. Just met? I'll look you up on MySpace. Known each other for a while but haven't been in touch recently? Friendster message. Friends with my friends, talked at a few parties, and want to get to know you better? Dodgeball or Friendster. Good friends and want to connect more often? Dodgeball. Really good friends? Instant message. I have to admit, I now think of most people by their screen names, even when I see them in person.

Through IM, I talk to my friends in Japan and Jamaica as often as I do the friends I see every weekend. Likewise, I have friends on my buddy list who live in my neighborhood, but we only talk on IM. We would never dream of hanging out in person. We have enough con-

nection online for our degree of closeness and don't need to enhance our relationship by spending time together offline. As Friendster puts it, some people are just second- or third-degree friends.

I also use instant messenger as a tool for keeping track of my exes. I know when they sign on, and I read their away messages. I can keep track of what's happening in their lives without their ever knowing I still care. Good or bad day, sick or asleep, I see what they're doing. I know at all times if and when they're on the Internet. Sometimes they get smart, though, and click the little eye in the instant-messenger bar that makes them "invisible." A much less aggressive move than simply not responding to a message.

After I have checked the status of my communities, I move along to the blogs. Blog content is so niche; if you like a blog, then the people reading it must be just like you. Or you know the blogger. Blogs are the most notorious, easiest, and best way to gain celebrity status and online fans. They are free and simple to start, and growing an audience is as easy as sending out a link to all of your other networks, instantly connecting to form an instant audience.

It is no surprise, then, that the most common blogs are about celebrities. There are over thirteen thousand about Britney Spears alone. Celebrity worship is so rampant that even the writers of these blogs have become celebrities themselves. Celebrities by association.

For instance, Trent, the author and editor of pinkisthenewblog.com, was a kid interested in celebrity magazines. He started a blog and had his friends send him links and pics of their celebrity sightings. When Trent mentioned he was sick, my officemates and I drafted a group e-mail expressing our concern and hopes for a healthy recovery. Eventually, as his website grew, random fans—and publicists—began supplying pics in the hopes of being featured on his blog. Trent started showing up in the pictures with the celebrities. Recently, Nicole mentioned him in her new book. Britney said that she knows her new baby will make Trent happy. Lindsay took press pictures with him.

Trent doesn't write back anymore.

Every homepage wants to feel like a community. More and more, they are trying to extend into the offline world. Sites such as Flavorpill, Dodgeball, and GeoCaching.com encourage and facilitate real interactions between their respective members. Flavorpill throws monthly parties for the subscribers in their network, which have become so prominent that when the Guggenheim cosponsored a party, they reported record ticket sales. The line to get in was two avenue blocks long, and hundreds of dancing hipsters were crammed into the main hall, bobbing heads poking over the walls of every ascending level.

I honestly don't know why anyone wants to socialize in person anymore. It's so difficult to concentrate on talking to just one person at a time. Eye contact isn't all it's cracked up to be, and facial expressions are so hard to control.

I was sick of being in awkward social situations I couldn't log out of, so I joined SecondLife. Every member is given an avatar—a 3D body with a choice of clothing, hairstyle, body type, and gender. Members of SecondLife have SecondLife jobs, families, and friends. The population is more than two hundred thousand, and there are over \$120,000 U.S. exchanged daily between members. It's amazing how much real money people are willing to pay for virtual objects. After all, one does need to have a good-looking avatar, and stylish SecondLife attire can get expensive.

The people in SecondLife stand around and talk to one another in small, intimate gatherings. They spend the day gossiping, shopping, fighting, making fun of the flying people, and giving one another tattoos. Oh yeah, in SecondLife, you can fly.

Learning how to fly and fly well is key. Making conversation and gaining friends is tough when you suddenly shoot up in the air twenty feet and kick someone in the head. The veterans are definitely at an advantage because they can stay put long enough to establish relationships. I have been placed initially on a lush tropical island to learn how to maneuver. Once I get better at virtually sitting, walking, jumping, and picking up things and moving them, I'll be moved to the main city.

But I've been called a newborn enough times to know I'm not ready yet. There are no flaws in SecondLife. You don't have to eat, and no one gets sick. All of the members choose their body type, so no one is unattractive.

I can't wait to log back in.

Hanging out in the real world one weekend, I went to a Flavorpill party. I'm well aware that knowing and connecting with online celebrities in the real world validates one's celebrity status in the virtual universe. I was sucking down a cigarette with the head of Flavorpill, decidedly a celebrity in many online worlds, when our cell phones rang at the same time. We both flipped them open to see who was contacting us. He turned to me. "Dennis? He's really got to go someplace new."

I looked down at my screen and noticed that Dennis had sent out a Dodgeball message that he was at a bar on the Lower East Side—the fourth such message that week. I turned to the Flavorpill guy. "I didn't know you were in Dennis's network."

Dennis started Dodgeball.

He nodded. We laughed. I quickly exclaimed, "You aren't in my network, why aren't you in my network?" I couldn't believe it. Here we were in person, both in Dennis's network, but not in each other's. That almost never happens.

Without looking at me, he responded, "Rock it."

"Rock what?"

"Rock my network."

EULA BISS

For me, New York ended as soon as it began. The day I moved in to my first apartment, I discovered that the reason the kitchen had looked so big was that there was no refrigerator. I also discovered that water didn't flow out of any of the taps. Sal, the plumber who scolded me for letting him in before I asked if he was the plumber, stood in the doorway to my bedroom after he fixed the sinks. I was staring at a wall, holding a paintbrush and a can of paint. He asked, "Did they teach you to paint like that in college?"

So Sal painted my room while I listened to the story of his life and the story of my neighborhood. It had been Finnish when Sal moved there from Sicily as a young boy, and then it was Italian and then Jewish, and now it was Puerto Rican. After he finished painting my room, Sal drove around looking for used refrigerators, found one, fixed it, put it on my front stoop, rang the bell, and drove away. By the time I got downstairs, the refrigerator had already been stolen.

But that is not the way it really happened. That is how I learned to tell the story of my life in New York. I learned to make my experience of being young and new to the city sound effortless and zany. It was not.

I didn't mention that I couldn't go down to get the refrigerator Sal found because it was impossible for me to carry it up four flights of