



# A Million First Dates



Solving the Puzzle  

of Online Dating 



# Dan Slater



"Slater considers all these issues in an intelligent, edgy, thought-provoking way, His book is worth at least a speed date."  
—Washington Post  
previously published as *Love in the Time of Algorithms*

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CURRENT

## A MILLION FIRST DATES

Dan Slater contributes to *The New York Times* and *Fast Company* magazine. He is a former legal affairs reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, and his work has also appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *GQ*, and *Men's Health*. Slater is a graduate of Colgate University and Brooklyn Law School. His favorite date remains dinner and a movie.

# *A Million First Dates*



SOLVING THE PUZZLE OF  
ONLINE DATING

**DAN SLATER**

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS *LOVE IN THE TIME OF ALGORITHMS*

  
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Portions of this book first appeared in *GQ* magazine.

#### *Author's Note*

This book attempts to be a factual inside account of the development of an industry, and a chronicle of how that industry has affected the lives of the people whose stories I've told. The casual nature of online interaction, however, required taking liberties with some of the secondary material quoted—namely, the conversations, profiles, and messages pulled from online dating sites and the Phantasy Tour forum. Occasionally, I relocated or transposed a sentence or paragraph, adjoined remarks written by the same person at different times, removed words or phrases from quotes without inserting marks of ellipsis, and cleaned up spelling and grammar. None of these changes are intended to alter meaning or make the material more interesting, but rather to privilege clarity and narrative flow over fidelity to the precise original. Also, the names of most online-dating users have been changed to protect their privacy.

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*For G & G*

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The Internet did not develop in order to facilitate relationships, any more than newspapers were invented to publish personal ads. Like the panda's thumb, evolution, whether natural or technological, takes unexpected directions.

—Monica Whitty and Adrian Carr, *Cyberspace Romance*

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## PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION



### STRAPPING IN

I met my wife in the most modern of ways: a yoga class. After a week or three of hemming and hawing, I collected my courage and asked her out. I was thirty-one, licking the wounds of a recently failed relationship, and about to be laid off from my job. Who wouldn't want to date me?

Yes—believe it or not—she declined this incredible opportunity. She had a boyfriend. Rats.

So I began dating people, some of whom I met online, and started working on this book. Time passed. Then, one sunny day, my wife-to-be popped up in that right-hand column on Facebook as “A Person You May Know.” As it turned out, the boyfriend had since been banished—much to my delight!—and eighteen months later we were married.

Hardly any of that was predictable or formulaic, particularly when you add those other relationships that came before. Were those other relationships—with all their joy and scarring—necessary for this one to work out?

When this book was published, the most common question I got was: Why a book about online dating? I'd explain that the book was really about modern relationships and how they're affected by all this technology we're using to find new relationships and keep old ones going. Okay, fine. But why? And the answer I never gave, maybe because it seemed so unsophisticated, but would like to give now is this: I wrote a book about relationships because I never understood books about relationships.

Not novels. I love a good romance. I'm talking about all those “how-to” books, the ones with lots of peppy lists and cheery chapter titles. They tell you what you're doing wrong, how to improve your appeal, and are general enough to apply to pretty much anyone. A lot of the advice makes sense. For instance, brush your teeth before a date. That's helpful. But once you get past the common-sense stuff, these books' usefulness sort of ends. Why is that?

My opinion is that relationship manuals fail because they start from the premise that finding a good relationship is reducible to a formula of dos and don'ts—one that worked for the author or for the author's friends and is guaranteed to work for you, too, if only you can learn to do it right.

The reality of dating, of course, is far from formulaic. It's more like riding a rollercoaster, blindfolded, while the track ahead is still under construction. The original plans for the track were abandoned, and now the engineers are working with whatever materials they can get, hoping to finish the next loop-the-loop before you fly off into orbit. Your stomach drops when you're plunged into a

horrifying encounter one day and you scream to be let off. But wait. That memory is quickly erased when the dating rollercoaster rockets you up to a moment of hopefulness the next day, a peak of joy that was so unforeseeable but makes perfect sense! Except . . . maybe it doesn't make sense. Because another plunge awaits, the worst kind of sinking feeling: that no call back (or text back) after the date that seemed to go so well. You swear you'll never ride that fucking rollercoaster again. But you will.

I think the rise of online dating heightens the impression that finding love is a formula, that love is literally a matter of filling out lists and doing a bunch of mechanical things on your laptop or phone. You'll know you've mastered the formula when your dating site spits out the perfect mate.

The dating rollercoaster is moving fast these days, along with the other aspects of life that have been accelerated by the Internet. A new mate is always, potentially, a click away. But it's not all sunshine and rainbows. This unprecedented efficiency in the dating market solves some old problems and raises many new ones. If it's become easier to move on from relationships, should you? If you can use the Internet to meet people in foreign countries, should you? If dating sites promise to find you the perfect mate (if only you follow their formula!), should you believe them? If you can monitor a new boyfriend 24/7 on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and Match.com, should you? How can you make this new efficiency work in your favor?

My goal in *A Million First Dates* is to provide hints, clues, and even some answers to these questions. Not in a checklist format or in a formula, but rather through the lessons of the online daters and online-dating entrepreneurs whose stories I tell.

As you'll see in the mix of uplifting, cautionary, and downright pathetic tales that follow, online dating doesn't make the rollercoaster any less harrowing. But if you know how the ride works and how others have traveled it well and traveled it poorly, then maybe you can come up with a formula of your own—one that, in hindsight, makes all the sense in the world.

In the meantime, enjoy the ride.

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## INTRODUCTION



# *Liquidity in the Market*

## THE iDATE AWARDS

It's January 2011, and Sam Yagan and Markus Frind are trying to chat casually by the pool behind Miami's National Hotel. Their reflections shimmer in the water as a humid evening breeze shakes the palm fronds. The two men, both in their early thirties, are dressed identically in blue button-downs, navy blue blazers, and khakis. But these similarities belie their true relationship. They are stiff competitors, and the presence of the other unnerves them both. Yagan and Frind shift on their feet, beers in hand, waiting for the other to speak.

"Why didn't they ask you to give the talk on free dating?" asks Yagan.

"Because," says Frind, "I hate public speaking."

This is true: Despite running what's believed to be the largest online-dating site in the world, Frind is loath to appear on television or radio. When he does, he speaks of "programming languages" and rattles off statistics. In a 2009 appearance on a Toronto-based talk show, Frind said the average online dater "needs about 3.8 dates for a relationship."

Yagan, meanwhile, has been a media fixture since college. Cable, newspapers, magazines, tech-news sites, investors, Silicon Valley—they all love Yagan and he loves them right back. His question to Frind barely conceals his excitement that his rival was not asked to speak.

"Then why not get one of your illustrious team members to do it?" responds Yagan, his quip divided evenly between mockery and jealousy over Frind's entourage of beautiful female executives, all of whom are mingling a few feet away. Some tension is released as Frind and Yagan gaze appreciatively.

Yagan is a slender man, about five feet eight inches tall, with a narrow chin, an aquiline nose, thick eyebrows, a broad forehead, and cropped hair that's gone prematurely gray. With friends Yagan is intensely congenial but turns quickly to disgusted and derisive when a subject or viewpoint arises that conflicts with his agenda.

Frind is taller, paler, more reserved. He tends to press his chin in while casting his bespectacled eyes down, as if expecting an insult or a punch to the face. His look, wrote *The Globe and Mail*, is the

of a “true coder,” his style reminiscent of men “twice his 33 years, boomers whose only exertion is to toddle to the first tee.” Frind uses his fame to surround himself with attractive women, including his new wife, Annie, a charming and radiant blonde.

They’ve come to Miami to attend the iDate Awards dinner, the featured event of the online-dating industry’s annual conference in South Beach. Yagan, a cofounder of OkCupid, and Frind, the sole founder of Plenty of Fish, are celebrities in this place where relationships are the business, a very lucrative business that has reached \$2 billion in North America, with billions more being made abroad, as millions of customers join, and return to, dating sites every day. From New York, Los Angeles, Quebec, Vancouver, Sydney, Moscow, Kiev, London, and Rio de Janeiro, the one hundred dating executives who turned up at the conference are here to show their faces and shore up their interests in an industry that has arrived at a crossroads, saturated with players and facing an uncertain future. The online-dating industry may service thirty million of America’s ninety million single adults, but momentum is slowing. Following a period of explosive growth between 1998 and 2005, the Facebook-led rise of social networks began stealing market share. Meanwhile, popular matchmaking sites like eHarmony and Chemistry face attacks from academics who say the science behind their algorithms is bunk.

For three days, the dating execs have been cutting advertising deals, buying and selling dating sites, and arguing over the future of the industry. Now they’re ordering drinks, posing on a red carpet and waiting for the awards dinner to begin.

Yagan, the son of Syrian immigrants and a graduate of Harvard and Stanford Business School, is CEO of OkCupid, a dating site known for its community of urban-creative types. Frind, a Canadian who comes from German-farmer stock, attended a vocational school before starting Plenty of Fish. Frind’s site is thought to attract a certain kind of customer, one who feels at home among grammar-free profiles comprised largely of text-speak and emoticons—a sizable population, as it turns out: Frind owns 20 percent of the world’s online-dating traffic.

Yagan says Plenty of Fish, because of its unmanageable size, is infested with “romance scammers,” people who create fake dating profiles to wring money from the desperate. Frind dismisses Yagan’s OkCupid as a “niche site” with a limited following among “the writer-slash-hippi slash-whatever crowd.” Frind says Plenty of Fish grows an OkCupid a day. All sallies are partially correct: Plenty of Fish is much larger than OkCupid, and therefore more vulnerable to infiltration by scammers.

But as antagonistic as they fancy themselves, Frind and Yagan are aligned when it comes to one key element of the business: They both believe online dating should be free. Yagan’s anger over not being asked to give the conference talk about the state of free online dating is palpable. He campaigned to give the talk. When the conference organizers refused him, citing the need to let others in the industry speak, he nearly boycotted the conference, agreeing to make the trip from New York only after the organizers hinted that OkCupid would receive several honors at tonight’s ceremony.

That Frind and Yagan are two of the savviest entrepreneurs in an industry that markets human relationships is, to put it mildly, totally bizarre. Both are married. Neither has dated online. Yagan often jokes that he and his OkCupid partners know nothing about dating. They are business-minded, unemotional math guys. Dating, relationships, and love, on the other hand, are irreducible products riddled with variables

Or are they?

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My phone buzzes with a text: “Just walked in. You here?”

When I asked the conference organizers about the possibility of bringing an online date to the awards dinner, I expected some pushback. The one-hundred-dollar-per-head event was sold out, after all, and I was lucky to get a last-minute press pass. But instead of resistance, my request met with universal encouragement. I was in Miami for three days and had lined up a date through Match.com. This, I suppose, was precisely the kind of dating adventure their business models encouraged.

I walk through the hotel’s foyer and find my date standing patiently beneath the chandelier. I don’t know much about RedPepper—her online-dating nom de plume—other than a few dating vitals: thirty years old; a Jew of Dutch descent; Michigan-raised; the director of marketing for a global ice cream brand. Two weeks before my trip to Miami, she’d written to me via Match’s messaging system:

So, you’re probably thinking: Why is this girl from Florida e-mailing me on Match? Well, I was sitting here alone in South Africa on a business trip in the middle of the night and talking to my best friend in Brooklyn. She said why don’t you switch your search parameters to Brooklyn and see who shows up. You showed up first, we match on all the green bubbles, and you made me laugh. Anyway, you should write me back. What have you got to lose?

There was something serendipitous about getting this message so close to my trip. South Africa, Florida, New York: What were the chances? Yet after nine months of online dating from my home base of Brooklyn, the situation didn’t *seem* that unusual. I’d become conditioned to the message-in-a-bottle randomness of it all, having received queries from London, Hanoi, San Francisco, and even the Upper East Side.

RedPepper is tall and slender, with large blue eyes, a cheery disposition, and long frizzy hair that is almost platinum. We greet in one of those slapstick ballets of mistimed lunges and errant cheek kisses. The awkwardness contains itself, and we make for the pool. “I’m always up for an adventure,” says RedPepper. “But I did wonder why you didn’t respond to my second message asking what brings you to Florida.” Indeed, I had needed some time to figure out how to ask an online date to an online-dating conference.

While RedPepper and I wait for the awards dinner to start, we sip our drinks beneath the palm fronds that wrap around the pool. Nearby is Markus Frind’s entourage, led by Kate Bilenki, Plenty of Fish’s chief operating officer. Doe-eyed and porcelain browed, Bilenki gets hit on by pretty much every heterosexual male at iDate. Particularly relentless is a team of British dating executives, one of whom boasted that he was flying Bilenki to England in the spring to take her to “the polo.” When he said this I wondered if he was referring to a business meeting or a cross-continental date of some kind. But this was the point. Nowhere else in corporate life do work and play merge so shamelessly as they do among these dating mavens.

Whereas prior to RedPepper’s arrival I was an interloping reporter with too many questions and uncertain motives, I am now part of a couple, one half of which is inarguably attractive. As such, we begin drawing dating execs to our area beneath the palm fronds. A Chinese American man introduces himself as Jason Du, the founder of MillionaireMatch, whose members include “professional athletes, beauty queens, fitness models, and Hollywood celebrities.” The actor Charlie Sheen, he says, was an early customer. Du also runs PositiveSingles, a dating site for people with sexually transmitted diseases. “Because of privacy concerns, it’s very tricky for people with STDs to date,” he explains. “So on the site we have a button labeled Quick Exit for those times when your pesky boss walks by.”

A post-forty-five-ish blonde drifts over. She's Julie Ferman of Cupid's Coach, an offline matchmaker. Ferman flashes a toothy smile and looks like a cross between Julia Louis-Dreyfuss and Glenn Close. "It's very hard to find good guys for my great women," she laments. "These are women who live in great million-dollar homes, have great careers, and just need that great special someone, that great relationship with that great stable guy."

"Like what's an example?" asks RedPepper.

Ferman purses her lips, happy to be asked, and relates a recent conflict: "I matched up a client in L.A. with a great guy. But then the client went out of town. When the client returned, the guy was not calling her. So the client called me, and I told her she had two options. Either she could wait it out, or she could take the situation into her own hands and call *him*."

When RedPepper realizes this is the sum of the facts, she becomes slightly hostile, asking Ferman whether it's "problematic" that a forty-year-old woman is paying thousands of dollars for advice that "seems kind of basic." Ferman turns to me and says she loves to take care of her friends in the media and that she recently arranged a very successful date for Dr. Phil. This name drop piques the interest of Jason Du, who appears to be envisioning Dr. Phil as MillionaireMatch's next celebrity dater.

After Du and Ferman leave, RedPepper says, matter-of-factly, "Me and my friends, we're well-educated and successful and all that. But I guess we focused on other things after college. Career stuff. Now it's hard to find anyone. Some are already resigned to waiting for a divorcee to pop up. Or just marrying guys they're not very excited about."

The gist of what RedPepper describes happens to be highly relevant for the online-dating industry. The ascension of women at work and their rising financial status, the lagging prospects of men, the ebb of the marriage rate, and the ever-rising marriage age—these are societal trends that have dovetailed with, and been a boon to, online dating in recent years. "My friends think I'm crazy for being on Match," she says. "They tell me I don't need it. But quote unquote need isn't really the point, is it? It's about taking control."

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On and off, for the last nine months, I, like RedPepper, had been taking control. Three events accounted for my foray into online dating: I turned thirty-one, got out of a long-term relationship, and then lost my job. I was single at a point in life where all my friends were married or settled down, and I suddenly had a lot of free time on my hands.

Then, a few months into my online-dating adventure, a fourth thing happened. A package, sent from my father, arrived, containing a stack of old letters and postcards dated 1966 and addressed to him at Harvard University, where he'd gone as an undergraduate. The correspondence had been written by my mother, a student at Mount Holyoke College, during the early months of their courtship. My parents had separated in the eighties, when I was three. I'd always just assumed they met at a dance, or were introduced by a friend, but I'd never bothered to ask.

Among the materials was an annotated cartoon booklet given to my father on his twenty-second birthday. On the first page, adjacent to a drawing of a girl and her dog, my mother had written, in her neat tight scrawl: "Thank you, you old mathematically-minded-can't-mind-your-own-business-mass-production-post-card-instigating-work-of-art-in-stainless-steel computer. Thank you."

What computer could she possibly have been thanking, and why?

Flipping through the rest of the pile I came upon a questionnaire entitled "CONTACT Personality Preference Inventory."

“Oh yeah. You didn’t know?” my father said, when I called to ask him what CONTACT was. “Your mother and I met through a computer dating service. These days they’re all over the Internet. I think they’re mostly for desperate people though.”

There were a few flops in my online-dating experience. But most of the people I met were, like RedPepper, the kinds of people I might’ve pursued had we run into each other “IRL,” in real life. The main difference was that I no longer had to rely on real life. From the convenience and privacy of my laptop (or cell phone), I could browse through hundreds or thousands of people I would likely never meet otherwise. In the past I’d had to rely on my social circle—family, friends at school and work, friends of friends—or the occasional chance encounter in the subway or on the street. But even at my most outgoing, opportunities to make a connection were limited; potential partners, rare.

For virtually all of human history the search for a mate has been predicated on scarcity: One met only so many people in his or her lifetime. They optimized their options within a circumscribed pool, chose someone, settled down, and, in the best of cases, found something they called happiness. Even when women’s lib came along, and the legal and cultural restraints surrounding divorce began to ease in the 1960s and 1970s, making it easier to leave failed relationships, many chose to stick with the devil they knew because of scarcity, believing it was better to be in a so-so relationship than no relationship at all.

Today, however, companies in the online-dating arms race are building ever more efficient, “frictionless” systems for bringing together people who are likely to like each other. By posing hundreds or thousands of questions and quizzes—or asking nothing at all—these sites offer endless choice, combining to form a vast mate-seeking arena I came to think of as the “date-o-sphere,” not a physical construct but not an entirely virtual one either, a special category of social media that yokes together enormous online communities for the purpose of offline relationships. So in 2010, when I discovered that thirty million single adults in the United States—about one-third of all American singles—had an online-dating profile, and that I couldn’t sit through a dinner party without meeting, at least one couple, if not several, who’d met online, I became hooked by a simple question: What does all this connective technology mean for the future of relationships?

This isn’t a book about me, or my parents. It’s about how online dating—as both a revolutionary medium and a quirky, virginal industry—is remaking the landscape of modern relationships. It’s about a man in Oregon whose plans to settle down took a detour when he discovered how easy it was to meet new women online. It’s about a young woman in New York whose compulsion to broadcast her online-dating adventures in social media seemed to foil her offline relationships, and about another online dater in San Francisco whose Facebook monitoring had become the enemy of her new relationships. It’s about an asthmatic in Atlanta who realized, thanks to a cutting-edge algorithm, that he could be happy with a smoker; and about a cancer survivor in southern California whose isolation inspired her to start a niche dating site for people, like herself, who can no longer have sex. Authenticity, deception, commitment, intimacy, paranoia, sex, and trust—technology is changing all these aspects of relationships. Those changes are what this book is about.

It’s also about how, over the last half century, a bunch of geeks reengineered romance and serendipity, redefined our values around meeting and mating, and fought through a heavy societal stigma in the process. Beginning with the early computers of the 1950s and 1960s, the video cameras of the 1970s, the bulletin board systems of the 1980s, the Internet of the 1990s, and the smartphones of the last decade, every new format of electronically intermediated introductions has faced a stigma of some kind.

Only recently has the discredit that’s dogged traditional online-dating sites like Match.com begun

to dissolve, only to pop up elsewhere in the date-o-sphere. Today, more risqué incarnations—from sites that facilitate marital affairs to those that connect Western men with women in the developing world—are hoping to travel a similar path toward wide acceptance. The profits made by these companies tell a fascinating (and, for some, disturbing) story of shifting sexual mores, as easy access to hitherto unimagined liaisons slowly erodes the taboos that surround them. This, too, is the subject that *A Million First Dates* explores: how these new means of connection are threatening the old paradigm of adult life.

My journey took me to the headquarters of dating sites around the country, where I saw dating executives struggle with how to balance their business interests with the interests of their users; into the private lives of dozens of online daters across America; and then abroad, to England, France, Russia, and Colombia, where Latin women, many of whom don't own a computer, use online dating to meet men from North America.

I also went back in time, to understand how technology has influenced our relationships throughout history. As it turns out, this is not the first time that technology has upended the old ways. In the past these changes have been fueled by the personal ad, the bicycle, the car, the movie theater, and contraception. Today it's the Internet. In all cases the narrative is similar: One generation considers its social norms around meeting and mating to be inviolable, only to see them disregarded by the next.



When the awards dinner begins, the emcee, playing to the supposed proclivities of his audience, tells a series of jokes featuring his mother and sister in outlandish sexual scenarios. RedPepper and I laugh. Nothing will come of our date. She's great. But the chemistry isn't quite right. Sparks would really need to fly to pursue a long-distance relationship with someone in Miami.

For the moment, however, we're still on a date, and seated next to Sam Yagan, who's treating the event as a kind of companion-media to his smartphone, which he thumbs furiously while at the same time telling us how much he dislikes his rivals. A special hatred is reserved for Match, the oldest and largest online-dating site in the paid category. Yagan claims Match has built a business around bamboozling its customers. But his contempt masks the truth about his own business: OkCupid, in spite of its loyal following, hasn't performed very well in terms of revenue. Without the enormous traffic of Plenty of Fish, it's hard to be profitable as a free site, depending wholly on advertising to make money. With around 1.5 million paying subscribers, and many million more free users to fill out its database (more on that later), Match makes nearly \$350 million a year in revenue. OkCupid makes less than \$5 million.

For the last year, Yagan has been quietly courting potential buyers, including AOL, MSN, Google, Yahoo, Viacom, and the Hearst Corporation. Viacom's MTV and Hearst's magazines are all about relationships and sex. AOL owns the domain name Love.com but doesn't use it. A dating site, he's tried to convince these companies, would fit perfectly in their empires. But no luck. "The idea is interesting enough for them to talk to me for thirty minutes," says Yagan. "But the conversations end the same: 'no thanks.'" The only major acquirers of online-dating sites are other online-dating sites, namely Match, the company Yagan and his partners have made a sport out of slamming publicly.

He's called up to accept OkCupid's first award of the night, for Best Up and Coming Dating Site. "Seven years in business and we're still 'up and coming,'" he mumbles on his way to the podium, where he graciously accepts the award.



Next up is offline matchmaker Julie Ferman, who wins for Best Matchmaker. Ferman remarks that the award—a long, arcing glass statuette—looks like a giant dildo, which it sort of does, and then proceeds to frog hop off the stage while pretending to ram the award into her rear end.

During a lull, I ask Yagan a version of the same question I'd posed to other dating execs: "If dating through the Internet becomes more and more popular, and sites become more efficient, what do you think will happen to commitment when people discover how much easier it's become to find new relationships?"

"That's really a point about market liquidity," Yagan replies, "which I like."

His answer is technical but not surprising. Even though Yagan and his Harvard pals created one of the industry's top dating sites, he distances himself from the notion that they're relationship gurus. Yagan married his high school sweetheart. His OkCupid cofounders are also married. "We're a bunch of math guys," he told the *Boston Globe* in 2007. "We don't know anything about dating."

OkCupid wins four awards, including Best Dating Site—the iDate equivalent of a Best Picture Oscar. At the podium, Yagan thanks the conference organizers and bows to his industry colleagues. "What I like most about this business," he tells the crowd, "is that all of us here are committed to helping people find love."

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## CHAPTER ONE



# *Your Pleasure Is Our Business*

## THE BIRTH OF THE ORIGINAL SOCIAL NETWORK

It is clearly the most unusual entry on the resume of Judge Douglas H. Ginsburg, President Reagan's nominee for the Supreme Court.

According to a spokesman, Judge Ginsburg left college for more than a year in the mid-1960s and founded a nationwide computer-dating service known as Operation Match.

—“Nominee Left College to be Matchmaker,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1987

**B**efore he achieved notoriety for his crazy handlebar mustache and film criticism on the *Today show*, Gene Shalit was a journeyman culture reporter for *Look* magazine. A general-interest publication and a runner-up to *Life*, *Look* was trying to stay on top of the computing revolution when, in 1965, it spotted a good story coming out of Boston. Some industrious Harvard students were putting computers to novel use. *Look*'s editors dispatched Shalit, then twenty-nine years old, to investigate.

It was still several decades before Facebook and the phrase “social media” would come into vogue, but the earliest pioneers were still aware of the computer's social implications. In 1959, two Stanford engineering students who were known to throw epic parties, complete with home-brewed beer and nurses from the veterans' hospital in Menlo Park, designed a class project around using the IBM 650 to match up the people in their readymade mating pool: forty-nine men and forty-nine women. Jim Harvey and Phil Fialer called their project Happy Families Planning Services and wrote a questionnaire asking about age, height, weight, religion, hobbies, and personality traits. They programmed the IBM to measure differences in their respondents' answers. But the pool was small, making for some odd couples. Although the project received an A, and even produced one marriage, never moved beyond the classroom.

In the early sixties, some colleges used computers to optimize the meeting potential at dances. In 1963, Ed Lewis, a psychology professor at Iowa State University, served as “personality consultant”

an initiative to match up one thousand students. Answers to a lengthy questionnaire were transferred onto punch cards and fed through an IBM. Short on females, the university had to bus in nursing students from Des Moines. The value, said Lewis, was simply pairing people up; the question of why they'd been matched was a good icebreaker. There was also scientific value. Iowa State professors squeezed in some research, and the results surprised them: Men tended to fall in love more quickly and less deliberately than women; men also reported feeling more romantic attraction and were more optimistic about the prospect of marriage. One or two happy couples emerged. *Time* published a story. *Life* planned a big spread for its November issue but had to scrap it to cover the JFK assassination.

Back then, computers occupied entire rooms and were prohibitively expensive, and therefore were owned mostly by universities and corporations. Harvard had owned computers since 1944. Weighing in at ten thousand pounds, the steel frame of the Harvard Mark I was fifty-one feet long and eight feet high. The machine used five hundred miles of wire with three million connections: 3,500 multipole relays with 35,000 contacts; 2,225 counters; 1,464 tenpole switches; and tiers of 72 adding machines. The Mark I's dizzying complexity tended to obscure its function. It could perform long computations automatically. Basically, it was a giant calculator.

Even while more companies, such as Xerox, entered the computing market, the potential of computers remained a matter of speculation in the sixties, making them a subject of sci-fi fantasy. In the fall of sixty-five, when *Look* sent Gene Shalit to Harvard, the film director Stanley Kubrick was starting work on what would become his most enduring film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The story starred a sentient computer named HAL 9000 and even featured a tabletlike device. As for the Internet, it was still in seed form. In sixty-three, a Defense Department employee named J. C. R. Licklider had sent a memo to the nation's top computer scientists ("Members and Affiliates of the Intergalactic Computer Network") in which he suggested it might be "interesting and important . . . to develop a capability for integrated network operation."

But how interesting or important was it? How different might this integrated network be from telephones or wireless transmissions?

Of course it was quite different. By merging these old technologies with a new search-and-discovery tool, the Internet would endow users with a degree of control and decision-making power unprecedented in the history of the communication and information industry. It was this idea of control that interested Gene Shalit. At the pre-Internet Harvard of sixty-five, the computer's human-augmenting effects were finally being revealed to the masses. Two rival companies, both student-run, were making money hand-over-fist by using what Shalit called the "Great God Computer" to help college students find dates.

The concept had taken root at Harvard earlier that year, when a junior math major named Jeff Tarr decided he was fed up with coming home alone from the same mixers with Radcliffe, the women's college across the way. Despite Tarr's towering stature in the math department, he was, at five feet seven inches, less than a heartthrob. Tarr's eureka moment, like that of so many innovators before and after him, reflected the desperation of a guy who couldn't get a date. That he could also make a fortune by expanding the mating pool from Wheaton to Wellesley, from Pembroke to Mount Holyok was an afterthought. His primary goal was meeting girls.

Tarr raised \$1,250 in start-up capital, and recruited classmate Vaughan Morrill. Tarr wrote a matching questionnaire that asked students to answer seventy-five questions about themselves and another seventy-five about their "ideal date," and passed it around. Feedback was good. Then the plan hit a snag: Tarr knew nothing about computers. He was just a math guy; computer science did not yet exist as a major. So he paid a friend one hundred dollars to program an IBM 1401 to match up the

responses to the questionnaire. Tarr and Morrill distributed the questionnaire to Boston-area colleges. Students filled it out and returned it with a three-dollar subscription fee. Tarr then paid “punch-card ladies” to transfer the answers from each questionnaire onto Hollerith punch cards—similar to voting cards—which were then run through the 1401, which was a little smaller than a library bookcase and could be rented from an IBM subsidiary across town in Roxbury. Within days the student would receive a sprocket-fed computer printout with the names, phone numbers, addresses, colleges, and graduation years of six people. Tarr and Morrill gave their parent company a scientific-sounding name: Compatibility Research Inc. They called the dating service Operation Match.\*

In March, just weeks before the official launch, a science editor and future Pulitzer Prize winner at the *Boston Globe* received a tip from his alma mater. Timothy Leland ('60) rushed over to Tarr's corporate headquarters—dorm room G-35, Winthrop House—where he was greeted by a sign on the door: **YOUR BUSINESS IS OUR PLEASURE. YOUR PLEASURE IS OUR BUSINESS.** Half naked and shaving when Leland barged in, Tarr improvised. Operation Match, he jested, had done a study on which kinds of women prefer which kinds of aftershaves.

“And?” Leland asked.

Tarr explained that Old Spice attracts the All-American ladies, while Royall Lime gets the preppy types. Fascinated, Leland jotted this down and put it in the *Globe* article, the first in-depth piece ever produced on the computer-dating industry, which ran under the front-page headline, “2 Harvard Men Replacing Cupid With Computer.” The breathless Leland wrote that Tarr was “masterminding the cleverest business enterprise since J.D. Rockefeller invested in oil.” The computer, Leland explained, would “analyze all the personality profiles and match the couples up scientifically in less time than it takes to blow a kiss.”

“A computer,” Tarr told Leland, “can find the right date for a person in a split second, when it might take him or her three years to do it alone.” Leland wanted to know if Tarr planned to run his own questionnaire through the computer. “Darn right I do,” said Tarr. “Two or three times at least. That’s the beauty of being a company president.”

The idea, to use modern parlance, went viral. Tarr had tapped into a vein of loneliness and frustration at single-sex schools in the Northeast, and beyond. Operation Match hit colleges across the country.

“This is the greatest excuse for calling up a strange girl that I’ve ever heard,” wrote a computer dater from Williams in a letter to the company.

“No dogs please!” wrote another from Dartmouth.

“The girl you sent me didn’t have much upstairs,” wrote a third, from Northwestern, “but what a staircase!”

A female computer dater from Connecticut College suspected “that boys don’t level” on their questionnaires. “I was honest with mine,” she told Shalit, “but I wonder if some guys fill out theirs to see if they can get a first-nighter.”

By the fall of sixty-five, six months after the launch, some ninety thousand Operation Match questionnaires had been received, amounting to \$270,000 in gross profits, about \$1.8 million in today’s dollars. Not bad for a scholarship student from small-town Maine. Tarr would need a bigger staff. He pulled in another classmate, a chemistry major named David Crump. Then, walking through Cambridge one day, Tarr struck up a conversation with a dropout from Cornell University named Douglas Ginsburg. A pot-smoking free spirit looking for a cause, Ginsburg was not yet on his way to becoming a Harvard Law School professor and Supreme Court nominee. “A computer-dating service?” laughed Ginsburg, whose friends called him Fug. He signed on right away.

Profits aside, Gene Shalit wanted to know the same thing as the rest of the world: Did it work? Did the computer really make good matches? Was Operation Match a gift from the Great God or mere technogimmickry? “I approve of it as a way to meet people,” said an Operation Match subscriber from Yale, “although I have no faith in the questionnaire’s ability to match compatible people. The machine has no way of telling whether or not the girl has pizzazz!” By pizzazz, the student referred to that mysterious aspect of romantic connection, chemistry. How could such an elusive quality be quantified and commercialized?

Tarr made no claims. “We’re not trying to take the love out of love,” he told Shalit, “we’re just trying to make it more efficient. We supply everything but the spark.” It was an honest response, one rarely heard from today’s online-dating companies, which like to differentiate their brands based on scientifically groundbreaking algorithms.

Operation Match might get ten thousand questionnaires returned from any given geographical area. Tarr and his partners would then do a series of “sorts”—sorting the questionnaires, for instance according to age, then height, then religion, etc. After five or six sorts, the pools would become too small to further differentiate. The vast majority of the 150 questions never came into play. Computer dating was about *more* dates, not better dates.

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Harvard being Harvard—a place where students have historically evaded traditional career paths by creating their own jobs—it didn’t take long before Operation Match met its first competitor. In the summer of sixty-five, an MIT graduate named David Dewan was preparing to enter Harvard Business School. Having followed the success of Operation Match as it was chronicled in the pages of the *Harvard Crimson*, Dewan thought he could steal some market share.

Over the summer he drafted his own dating questionnaire and taught himself how to write matching code for the Honeywell 200, a car-sized contraption that, at around three o’clock in the morning, could be rented for thirty dollars an hour from a small Boston-based mutual fund company called Fidelity.

Unlike Tarr, whose main interest in computer dating was as a means of self-help, Dewan came to the business with a seriousness that Harvard people associate with their more buttoned-up geek rivals at MIT. Dewan played the part: A rich kid who wore Brooks Brothers and drove a Jaguar, he borrowed ten thousand dollars from his grandfather to start his own computer-dating service. He called the service Eros and its parent company Contact Inc.

Shalit called Dewan “a brilliant math and engineering student” and “a frugal man” who “runs deep in the black.” With no full-time employees, Dewan operated Contact out of his grandparents’ home near Cambridge. In one distribution of questionnaires, he drew eleven thousand responses at \$4 each, or \$44,000 in gross profits, about \$250,000 in today’s dollars.

Dewan entered the fledgling market with guns blazing, telling the *Crimson* that Operation Match’s questionnaire was “less sophisticated, appealing to the big, Mid-west universities.” In truth, very little distinguished Contact from Operation Match. Operation Match sold its questionnaires for three dollars while Contact charged four dollars. The questions reflected the politics and preoccupations of the era. Both offered three options for race: Caucasian, Oriental, or Negro. Contact’s questionnaire was more straight-laced, seeking daters’ opinions on whether civil rights laws should be strengthened, whether censorship of students is justifiable, and, prophetically, whether the computer is invading too many aspects of personal life. Dewan asked daters to correlate qualities in themselves with the qualities the

desired in a date, such as sociability (friendly versus reserved), conformity (conventional versus eccentric), role in the group (center of attention versus spectator), and sexual history (limited versus experienced).

Operation Match took a more playful approach with its questionnaire. Question 69 posed this dilemma:

Your roommate gets you a blind date for a big dance. Good looking, your roommate says. When you meet your date, you are sure it's your roommate who is blind—your date is friendly, but embarrassingly unattractive. You:

- 1) suggest going to a movie instead.
- 2) monopolize your roommate's date, leaving your roommate only one noble alternative . . .
- 3) dance with your date, smiling weakly, but end the evening as early as possible.
- 4) act very friendly the whole time and run the risk of getting trapped into a second date.

"If there's some chick I'm dying to go out with," Tarr told Shalit, "I can drop her a note in my capacity as president of Operation Match and say, 'Dear Joan, You have been selected by a highly personal process called Random Sampling to be interviewed extensively by myself . . .'"

Tarr may have been a jokester, but he wasn't going to stand by while Dewan cornered the industry that he had pioneered. In retaliation for Dewan's trash-talking to the *Crimson*, Operation Match alerted authorities that Dewan intended to paper Harvard Yard with questionnaires for Contact. Things got ugly, fast. On September 29, 1965, campus police collared Dewan for the dubious crime of "distributing questionnaires without a permit." The next day the *Crimson* splashed the news across its front page: "University Police Eject Man from Winthrop House."

"Funny," an Operation Match employee later recalled. "The last I heard you didn't need a permit to distribute questionnaires in a dorm. I think our guys were messing with Dewan."

Dewan's enthusiasm was unmarred. "The way I envision things, in 50 years computers may well have reduced our work week to zero hours," he told the *Sarasota Journal*. "We'll date through computers, mate through computers, select our home with the help of computers, and plan our recreation with computers. It will be a fantastic time and my company and I hope to be a large part of it."

Going back to the Newtonians, Dewan's exuberance echoed earlier eras of intellectuals and scientists who believed man's innovations would liberate him from pain and drudgery. Today we can laugh about the zero-hour workweek Dewan predicted. What an idealization to think the machine would supplant the workaholic in us rather than accentuate him! But even while Dewan turned out to be a visionary (everything else he predicted came true, after all), his first taste of utopia was bittersweet.

"Back then I was going out with a girl from Wellesley," he recalled four decades later. "I gave her a free questionnaire, because she helped me distribute in the dorms there. When we ran it through the computer, she and I matched. That was exciting! But I forgot that she also received five other matches, including a guy from Amherst, whom she later dumped me for."

Somewhere in there lurked a lesson about the relationship between technology and the people who use it. Did the machines remain ours to control? Or did they control us?

Meanwhile, on campus, a political science major named Gerry coasted through his last months in Cambridge, pondering his own relationship future. Gerry kept himself busy with bartending jobs, membership in the Hasty Pudding Club, and a term paper about the psychology of speech impediments. Gerry stuttered. He'd come to Harvard via boarding school, where he was mocked

savagely for the way he spoke. Despite good looks and charisma, he was, by his own admission, a late bloomer when it came to girls. He tended to seek out self-esteem and identity through friendships with professors.

So when David Dewan swung by Adams House with questionnaires for Contact, Gerry carefully answered all one hundred questions. Accuracy of self-assessment varied. Gerry ranked himself as assertive and said he was looking for someone who was more submissive. He said he was uninhibited and wanted someone more restrained. He preferred security, as opposed to risk taking, and was looking for the same. He was sexually experienced and wanted his date to be similarly experienced. He thought of himself as particularly perceptive, considered himself highly self-confident, and said he appreciated “the aesthetic experience.” When asked about verbal fluency, the inveterate reader marked himself inarticulate. He returned the Contact questionnaire with the four-dollar subscription fee.

On Halloween, Gerry received a computer printout in the mail: “Dear Gerry,” it began, “My name is Eros. I’m the Contact computer. In the last minute I have introduced you to 4,122 people. Here is your first group of computer matched dates.” The list included six Boston-area coeds: Mimi of Wheaton; Ellen of Simmons; Pamela of Wellesley; Romana of Pembroke; Hinda of Boston University; and finally—just for good measure, it seemed, given the distance—Nancy, a nineteen-year-old English major at Mount Holyoke, an all-women’s school located ninety miles west of Boston.

Gerry went out with Pamela and Hinda because they were nearby. Both dates were unimpressive.

He set his Contact sheet aside and returned to his studies. In December, as final exams approached, he received a one-line postcard from the sixth girl on his Contact sheet. “Dear Gerry,” she wrote, “Do you exist?”

Intrigued, Gerry poured himself two fingers of Prunier, a hard-to-get cognac he enjoyed, and sat down to compose a response.

Dear Nancy:

First let me say that I think it was ingenious of you to write postcards to the negligent boys on your Contact list. I confess that because Mt. Holyoke is so far away, I probably would not have pursued your name. However, your postcard really impressed me. Either you are a very inventive, outgoing girl, or the social life in South Hadley is horrible. Whichever it is, I will look forward to meeting you.

Ten days later, a reply:

Dear Sir Gerald:

How are you so sure you weren’t the only guy privileged with receiving a post card? As a matter of fact, you’re right. I sent them to everyone, except for 3 names that had already “come to life.” “Flop” is a good word for two of them. The other was successful enough, but nothing special. “Contact” seems to have been pretty much a failure for everyone—except for one girl in my dorm who is now pinned, thanks to Eros.

After weeks of correspondence, Gerry drove to Mount Holyoke for a Saturday date. Nancy wrote

to him the day after: “I did have a very nice day—and want you to know that I appreciate very much your having driven  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way across the state and back again! Thanks for showing me around my home town area. Hope you didn’t find it all unbearably bucolic.”

If he did, the correspondence didn’t say. But he enjoyed himself enough to return the invitation, responding that when Nancy visited him in Cambridge, she should be prepared to do “some horseback riding very early on Sunday morning.” Pulling out all the stops, he added: “I usually follow that up with bagels and lox in some Jewish restaurant.”

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Sure, people debated whether Operation Match and Contact worked, whether the chance of meeting someone you liked “via the punch cards” was any better than trolling at a mixer. On campus there was a little embarrassment or shame. Odd, given that thirty years later online dating would encounter a strong stigma; to “date online” suggested an inability to meet people in real life. But in the sixties, when Jeff Tarr and David Dewan brought the first incarnations of computer dating to college kids, stigma didn’t surround the medium as it later would.

For one thing, a celebrated singles culture was emerging outside Harvard’s walls. In urban areas across the country, the energetic young were spending disposable income in “singles bars.” Maxwell Plum, on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, was one of the first bars that “respectable” single women could visit alone. (Dorrian’s Red Hand, more familiar to today’s UES singles, opened in 1960.)\* City papers announced upcoming singles events. The *New York Review of Books*, known for its highbrow readers, began its famous personals column in 1965. Developers constructed youth-oriented apartment complexes. Guidebooks helped the unattached navigate the scene.

In some ways this world of urban nightlife and go-go courtship resembled the post-World War II era, when young people took to cars and movie theaters and other commercial amusements. The Roaring Twenties and the Freewheeling Sixties shared an enthusiasm over new technology. Again, though, a taboo greeted one but not the other. The youth of the 1920s “had elicited pity, scorn or fear from the middle class who sought to control their behavior and made them the object of reformation efforts,” wrote John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. By contrast, in the 1960s “young adults of the middle-class were glamorized; they embodied the unspoken fantasies of a consumer society extended to the sphere of sex.”

Rebelling against their parents’ suburban sprawl and soulless conformity, youth of the sixties saw staying single as an exciting adventure for those up to the challenge. The new singles culture, said one commentator, was regarded as a “privileged, spotlighted, envied group.”

As for computer dating, it’s possible that whatever stigma existed at the time was outweighed by the medium’s novelty, a coolness factor that comes with being in the know about new gadgetry, particularly for a generation that was reveling in the first film adaptations of Ian Fleming’s James Bond series, featuring colorfully blinking walls and programmable computer boards, as well as a dashing Sean Connery carousing his way through a world of killer fountain pens and sports cars with ejector seats, not to mention an endless stream of beautiful women.

“I wanted people to see Operation Match as a novelty,” Jeff Tarr remembered, “something neat. I advertised it as a social experiment.”

Certainly it was a social experiment. But finding dates via the punch cards was a much different proposition than today’s online dating. The pool to which computer dating provided access had know



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