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**March 15, 2004 *Harvard Crimson* Article by Matthew A. Gline
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A review of some of Harvard's student-run informational web sites

By MATTHEW A. GLINE, March 15, 2004

When a few Harvard undergraduates and some recent alums got together about five years ago to build SparkNotes.com, an online repository of short-and-sweet commentary on classic works of literature, they exhibited an entrepreneurial spirit characteristic of the late 90s dotcom boom that surrounded them. That particular wave of fervor more or less subsided when the bottom fell out of the stock market; however, it seems that Harvard's own version of the internet land-grab is still in full swing. By my best count, somewhere between six and eight unique web-based services written by and for Harvard students have sprouted up over the past year and spammed my inbox with explanations of why theirs is the tool I can't possibly live or work here without. While the sites run the gamut in terms of style and scope, they can be roughly categorized according to their intended function.

Perhaps the most prevalent genre of new arrivals has been that of the digital marketplace—sites that in one way or another seek to connect Harvard students who have books and old junk to sell with those in the market for such things. I have no respect for the best publicized of these (thanks in no small part to an aggressive email campaign and the distribution of little doorknob signs to every undergraduate dorm room), www.crimsonexchange.com, which tried to capitalize off poor college students by charging a surcharge of all those using it to buy or sell. Currently, there are about 150 items listed for sale on the site, some large chunk by the founders or obvious friends and associates, and many of these haven't been touched or bid on in over a month. The Harvard Computer Society (HCS) fielded their own similar marketplace site some years ago but it has disappeared in all but name from their web site. This leaves Student Exchange, part of www.harvardsec.org's HouseSYSTEM, which has something like 600 books and a few other knickknacks listed for sale (without commission)—a formidable number until you notice that the vast majority of the listings date back to the beginning of first semester. I'd like to see this become more popular—MIT has a great online marketplace community at mit411.com that has thousands of items for sale, and it's a fantastically useful service. I think HarvardSEC is in a good position to fill that role.

HouseSYSTEM is much more than an online flea market. It's a mishmash of attractively implemented and well-intentioned services, each unfortunately underutilized. Among these, CriticalMass was heralded last year as a CUE-Guide replacement that would allow students to express their true feelings about their courses. Apparently most people feel apathetic: the most recent posts I could find dated back to last July. The site's online message board, which would provide a virus-free and unrestricted alternative to House lists, also has yet to take off. Rounding out the services offered, the events calendar seems respectable (if sparse), but the job listings are a bit meager. Fortunately, Aaron J. Greenspan '05, the creator and primary administrator of the site, has plans to add a variety of new services including a CD-sharing network and a convenient system for communicating details about campus events, and it seems plausible that a great deal of useful functionality may appear over the coming months. What HouseSYSTEM has going for it more than any other site is the degree to which it integrates a wide variety of features, and as more people become aware of what it offers it stands to become a powerful resource. Already, the site has more visitors than the university's official portal "my.harvard.edu,"



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which receives only a few hundred unique visitors daily though it draws from the university community of 26,000. HouseSYSTEM had several thousand unique hits in the month of February and its services are geared primarily towards undergraduates.

Another substantial category of entrants into the competition for my list of bookmarks comprises sites promising me improvements in my romantic or social life (two areas in which, the creative brains behind these projects will be quick to tell you, Harvard is apparently sorely behind the fold). HarvardParties.com, now www.hahvahdparties.com thanks to some licensing issues with the College, provides what seems like valuable information—I particularly like the links to the House facebook and fast-food restaurant menus. There’s a small amount of disappointing profiteering on the part of site owners Darren S. Morris ’05, Zachary A. Corker ’04 and Paul H. Hersh ’04, who make a marginal sum of money off of whatever number of photos of drunken Harvard students they actually manage to sell to unsuspecting visitors, but that feature is primarily in place to increase site traffic (surely this is the cause for hundreds of excited emails sent back to proud relatives “look mom, that’s that girl”) At any rate, the degree to which they’ve been able to provide new content on a more or less weekly basis is certainly commendable. They see about 800 unique visitors on the busier days of week, a small but respectable number given that the content is likely to appeal only to those in the College.

On the romantic side of things, I’m not particularly offended that I haven’t been listed as anyone’s “crimson hookup” at crimsonhookups.com. The site seems to have brought the business model of thousands of other annoying dating sites quite successfully into the Harvard community—basically, you enter the email addresses of your desired partners, they get an anonymous message imploring them to do the same, and in the event of a match both parties are notified. At the very least the site must represent a substantial ego boost to those listed as the “Top 5 Most Requested” whenever those statistics are recalculated.

In the “What was that!?” department, FaceMash.com wins the prize for shortest-lived Harvard-based student venture; until it was forced down because the server couldn’t handle the massive amount of traffic, the site juxtaposed pictures of two random undergraduates and asked visitors to decide which student was the more attractive of the pair. The site’s creator, Mark E. Zuckerberg ’06, was later asked to appear before the Ad Board for using without permission the official college facebook photographs.

This was perhaps fortunate for Zuckerberg, as things went much better for him with his second attempt. Despite my initial skepticism, I’m forced to admit that thefacebook.com is for the moment an enormous success—it is better even than minesweeper at sucking up hours of my time that might otherwise be spent productively. I imagine its popularity can be attributed largely to its being low maintenance for all involved parties (even if its administrators lose interest in running it, it will continue to have value), and to the fact that it contains reams of specific and sometimes juicy personal details not available anywhere else. It also never hurts to give people a quantitative measure of their popularity.

It seems likely that we haven’t seen the end of this internal Internet boom economy. My advice to would-be webmasters of new projects: don’t do it! Or at least, try and pair up with someone who already has a site out there. The market is plenty crowded and I get enough spam as it is. Still, for the truly stubborn, note that the mantra “If you build it, they will come” simply doesn’t apply here. More than fancy photos or flash animations, more even than easy one-click credit card transactions, what Harvard students want out of web sites is content—up-to-the minute data that is at best informative and at least entertaining. Thefacebook.com may be great now (it’s one of the few projects I’ve listed here that I see any real future for), but even it will collapse under its own weight if, come the fall, no one is compelled to update their course lists or the class of 2008 doesn’t get involved. All there is to do at this point is to let natural selection run its course, and in that vein, I await with eager anticipation the day when we’ll know for certain whether the “poke” is the next great form of social interaction or simply a dying relic of 2004-dom.

Matthew A. Gline ’06 is a physics concentrator in Quincy House. His column appears on alternate Mondays.

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