

Hello, stranger: the ups and downs of Chatroulette

February 28 2010, By BARBARA ORTUTAY , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- A new Web sensation called Chatroulette feels like a throwback to the early 1990s, when online chat rooms brimmed with lonely strangers looking for meaningful connections, meaningless sex, or something in between.

But this time, there's a twist: Everyone on the site has a webcam. Chatroulette randomly links users with strangers who could be anywhere in the world. If you don't like the person who pops up on the screen, just click "Next." Repeat.

The result can be unpredictable and raw, like a slap in the face, but also refreshing, a peek into someone else's life. It's far from the sanitized worlds we create for ourselves on sites such as [Facebook](#), where we mainly connect with friends, family and people with common interests.

"Chatroulette is stark because it feels like television. It's like sitting in front of the TV flipping channels, except the people are real," says Hal Niedzviecki, author of "The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors."

A quick spin the other night yielded a pair of rejections - swift and brutal - from two male users, their faces popping up briefly before they moved on.

Next up was a blur of flesh-colored mass. A blanket? A person? It didn't seem worth it to stick around and find out. To be clear, Chatroulette

bans "obscene, offending, pornographic material" and says it will block users who violate these rules, though that does not seem to trouble some people.

Then, a young woman wearing headphones popped up on the screen. Would she hit "Next," like the others before her? She didn't - she typed "Hi." She said she was from China, studying [computer engineering](#). The conversation went something like speed-dating, a little choppy at first but kind of intriguing. She was eating a bag of potato chips.

Chatroulette's setup is simple: Two boxes on the left side of the page are for the webcam videos - one marked "Partner" and the other "You." A larger box to the right is where you type messages to the stranger staring back at you. To start, click "Play," and the site connects you to a random person until you, or the other person, hit "Next."

You can also enable audio. Some folks have used it to play music to their chat partners in hopes of getting them to dance.

People don't need to register to use Chatroulette, though the site asks they be at least 16 years old. It's free to use and has just one understated, text-only advertisement on the bottom of the screen.

The creator of Chatroulette did not respond to messages from The Associated Press. The New York Times identified the creator as a 17-year-old Russian teenager named Andrey Ternovskiy.

The site is no more than a few months old - its domain name was registered in November - yet it drew nearly 1 million unique visitors in January, more than 100,000 of them from the United States, according to comScore. At any given time, tens of thousands of people may be logged on, taking their chances on a finding a meaningful connection, just like a game of roulette.

As Chatroulette takes off, so are copycats and Web sites that collect screen shots showing the best, worst and grossest pairings of people. Some people record video of their sessions and post them on YouTube. A recent search yielded more than 1,200 "Chatroulette" results.

Niedzviecki says Chatroulette is yet another iteration of how we are slowly replacing scripted material with other people's lives as entertainment. YouTube, Twitter and even reality TV let us cruise through a real person's world instead of watching "anointed celebrities entertaining us through their `talents.'"

But when we do, some troubling questions arise. Chatroulette, after all, is not TV. One widely circulated black-and-white image from the site shows what looks like a man who hanged himself. In some cases, people set up their computers to show prerecorded video rather than a live webcam feed, possibly to witness a stranger's reaction to, say, a man slapping a woman so hard she falls out of her chair.

"When you come across someone with a noose around their neck, and it looks like they are dead, you don't have the protection that this is a story, fiction filtered through a board room," Niedzviecki says. "On Chatroulette, that person waving a swastika flag may really be a Nazi trying to recruit you."

The concept of Chatroulette is not entirely new. Sites such as Omegle.com and gettingrandom.com connect strangers for one-on-chats, but without cameras. Justin.tv, meanwhile, lets users broadcast their own live video channels to anyone over the Internet.

And so the troubles that come up aren't new either. Justin.tv came into the spotlight in 2008 when a college student committed suicide with people watching and egging him on. While some viewers called police, it was too late to save the 19-year-old.

Chatroulette, like so much else on the Internet, is not for kids. Sit in front of it long enough and you probably will see a naked person. For people who don't normally seek explicit content on the Internet, this may even be one of the site's appeals, says Robert Thompson, pop culture professor at Syracuse University.

"It's like getting a 'Joker's Wild,' getting a 'Bankrupt' on 'Wheel of Fortune,'" he says.

As for meaningful connections? Chatroulette is kind of like striking up a conversation with a person next to you on the bus or in a bar. You'll probably never see him or her again, but that doesn't mean the talk was worthless.

"There is a great short story to be written about that," Thompson says. "Someone meets the person they were meant to be with ... and they accidentally hit 'Next,' never to find them again."

More information: <http://www.chatroulette.com>

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