Sneaking a peak

Internet voyeurs can catch Calgarians exposing their lives 24 hours a day

Jasmine Demarcos, Calgary Herald

Will I catch a peek of someone in the shower?

Or will I just find people snoring on their couches, working at their computers, and doing the boring things I do myself every day?

These are questions I ask myself as I surf the Net, looking for live Web-cam sites of Calgarians. These are people who put their lives on display in front of a camera the size of a tennis ball that is hooked up to a computer. Their live images are uploaded onto the Internet for anyone to see, and the masses are eating it up.

More and more of these sites go up every day, in every corner of the globe. Some (but none of the Calgary sites highlighted here) are pornographic in nature. But most just show average folks who happen to enjoy putting their most mundane activities on the Web while they go about their routines.

Andrea Chism is one such person. The 21-year-old Calgarian is a Web-page designer who put herself on display for a year-and-a-half. When Chism began this experiment, it was still a novel idea, and she had upwards of 10,000 people checking out her site daily. For her, this wasn't just a chance to make her face famous -- it was an opportunity to get her name out there on the World Wide Web.

The gimmick paid off. She estimates 50 per cent of her business has come from people who caught her on camera. Her personal life didn't suffer, either; she has dated guys she met through her cam site. And she has ambitious plans for the future of the site.

"Now that everyone and their dog, literally, has a Web cam, it's time for me to do something different," says Andrea.

Chism is now working on a concept that will see her interacting with her friends on camera and filming segments all over the city. She compares it to MTV's Real World, a television show in the States where a few twentysomethings are thrown together and audiences get to watch them work out their differences on camera.

"I think I became a little boring, just me at my computer," she says. "This way, it's a bit more exciting."

Because Chism has her own server, she doesn't pay anything to keep her Web cam on the Internet. However, most people must turn to a company like Cadvision to host their Web site, which charges $40 per month for the average home-based "hobby" site, and $100 per month for a business or someone who receives several thousand hits a day.

The cameras themselves can be basic $100 models or fancy $1,200 ones that zoom, pan and tilt with the click of a button on a Web site.

Marianne Helm, Calgary Herald / Bruce Whitehead goes online for all the world to see, working in front of a Web cam that sits on top of his monitor.

Craig Klem, Calgary Herald / Matthew Dunne, Jolene Dobson, Andrea Chisholm and Gerrard Lewis-Steer (left to right) broadcast on Andrea's and Jolene's website.

(A Web-cam)

There is much more than a crush of humanity on the Internet's cam sites. Pets are getting into the act. There are Fish Tank cams, Guinea Pig cams, "Peace Keeping Turtle" cams, and more. But why stop there -- those with the interest and time to spare can check out sites where inanimate objects are presented for observation, like the Ashtray cam, the Candy dish cam and the Canon Fiery Printer cam.

The problem with many of these sites is that there's a lot of waiting for very little reward. You don't get a continuously moving picture like you would watching TV. What you see is a still image that gets refreshed every so often.

Five seconds between image changes doesn't sound like much, but it can seem like an eternity.

Even worse, some Web cam images don't change for five minutes, 10 minutes, half an hour, or longer -- which makes them about as exciting as watching paint dry. But this apparently has advantages for some viewers. One mother e-mailed Grant Hutchinson, who keeps a Web camera trained on himself at his Calgary office, to relate that she asked her young son to watch the computer and tell her when the picture changed. This kept him occupied for a long while, providing almost as good a babysitter as regular TV.

But even her obedient kid eventually tired of the exercise, as did I. Hey, I'll take my TV over a Web cam site any day -- Ally McBeal might not be real, but I'd rather watch Ally and her colleagues break into a dance routine in their law firm's unisex bathroom than to catch Joe Blow lounging around in his boxers via the Internet.

Hutchinson, a 35-year-old Web designer, explains that he didn't set up the camera because he wanted people to watch him.

"That would have been way too self indulgent," he says. "I just wanted to prove how easy it was to do -- plug, click, boom."

As Hutchinson runs his site off his company's server, it doesn't cost him anything -- on the contrary, he stands to make money, if anyone clicks on his link to books at www.amazon.com and makes a purchase.

"I'll make between five and 15 per cent of the sale," he says. "No one has bought anything yet, but it could happen."

Web cam sites can be a voyeur's dream come true. Watching one can feel like spying on someone -- especially if you catch them while they're in the buff.

When I first checked out Bruce William's Live 24/7 (Mostly) Bedroom Cam, all I saw was his neatly made bed. Later I saw him at his computer, and then, all of a sudden, his naked backside behind a clear piece of plastic. No, his is not one of the pornographic sites -- I just caught Bruce taking a shower.

Bruce isn't bothered by sharing his showers with the world, but he admits that too much intimacy with the world can be dangerous to the camera operator.

"I've had someone that recognized me follow me home from a coffee shop, and I've had people trace me to my home phone number," he says. "That's why I don't use my last name on the site."

Bruce says he's been inundated with e-mails since he first turned on the camera a year-and-a-half ago.

"It always amazes me, I mean to get e-mail from Estonia," he says. "That just blows me away. But for every bit of good feedback, you get two pieces of really bad criticism . . . you just learn to put it all in perspective."

He's had over 3 million people check out the site, and wonders why so many people want to watch him while he's unconscious.

"It's odd, there's this whole group of people who come just to watch you sleep," he says. "They'll e-mail me pictures of me sleeping."

Bruce says the costs of running his site vary, depending on how many hits he gets per month. The most he's ever paid is about $900.

Strangely enough, Bruce describes himself as a private person and says his family is puzzled as to why he'd share his life with the world.

The 30-year-old, who manages a Calgary group rehabilitation home, explains that it's simply a hobby for him, a sociological experiment of sorts.

"I just really liked the idea of putting someone in a glass room and seeing if they could deal with it, and seeing how other people react to it."

Calgarian Web Cam Sites

Grant Hutchinson -- www.splorp.com

Andrea Chism -- www.calgary-web.com/annie/cam.htm

Bruce -- brucetv.com/peekaboo.html

Pets on Web cam

Guinea Pig TeleVision -- www.olywa.net/jandrews/beta. htm

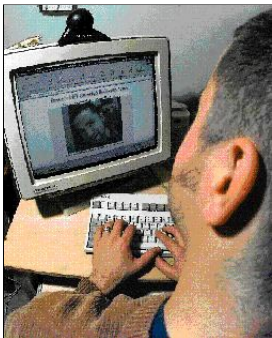Jungle II Peacekeeping Turtles Mark and David --www. jungleii.com/flyingturtles.html

The Continuously Refreshing Fish Cam --fishcam.net- scape.com/fishcam/fish

Inanimate Objects on Web Cam

Candy Dish -- www.candycam.com

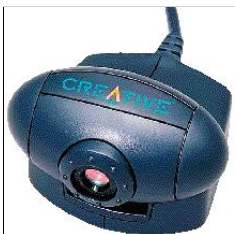Ashtray -- members.home.com/ashtrycam/livecam.html

Canon Fiery Printer (at an ad agency in Bristol, England) -- www.anderson-lembke.co.uk/fierycam.htm