Brilliantly boring

A website that shows a large piece of cheese as it (very slowly) matures is getting thousands of hits a day. What is it about dull-as-ditchwater webcam footage that can be so strangely gripping? Oliver Burkeman dissects the cult of banality on the net while Alexandra Topping picks some of the classics of the genre

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Something strange and slightly troubling begins to happen when you spend more than about two minutes watching Cheddarvision, the much-publicised website set up by the cheesemaker Tom Calver, which broadcasts live footage of a single 44lb truckle of cheddar as it imperceptibly matures. First, unsurprisingly, you feel bored and irritable. Then, after a while, and without really meaning to, you slip into a peaceful, meditative, quasi-hypnotic state. You start to breathe more deeply. Peripheral distractions - traffic noise, ringing telephones - fall away. There is you, and there is the cheese. Nothing more. If something should actually happen to the cheese while you're in this state of mind - every week, the cheese is turned over; on one occasion, the label fell off and had to be replaced - it has an impact utterly disproportionate to the event. It is inexplicably hilarious; astonishing; gasp-inducing. Then the drama subsides, and once again, it's just you and the cheese - and, depending on the time of day, perhaps tens of thousands of other people, scattered across the planet, for whom no other concern is more pressing in their lives, right at this very moment, than to stare at cheddar.

It is generally agreed that we are more bored today than ever before. Some surveys put the percentage of people who yearn for more novelty in their lives at around 70% and rising. As the scholar Lars Svendsen explains in his book, A Philosophy of Boredom, until at least the 17th century being bored was an elite privilege, bragged about by princes and the nobility. The paradox is that boredom seems to have become democratised in exact proportion to the explosion of reasons not to be bored: books, affordable international travel, and the mass media, for a start. And here is an even stranger paradox: in the age of the internet, when the average person has access to vastly more genuinely fascinating information than at any point in history, what are the sites that consistently achieve cult status, from the birth of the web up to the present day? The boring ones. A ripening cheese. A coffee pot in a Cambridge University computer lab (the first webcam, and now a dusty artefact of online history). A camera trained on a street in a Scottish village where nothing ever happens. And I do mean nothing: so little, in fact, that it would be more interesting to watch paint dry - which, incidentally, you can also do via the web, at watching-paint-dry.com.

Some incredibly boring websites, it's true, hold the promise of sporadic but genuine excitement - a webcam trained on the US-Mexican border might conceivably show an immigrant crossing it illegally; the webcam trained on Mount St Helens might show it erupting. Even the Virtual Holmfirth webcam, positioned to broadcast a live view of events taking place on the pavement between Sid's Cafe and the parish church, might catch a West Yorkshire youth engaged in antisocial behaviour. (If that ever happened, by the way, we would probably identify the epidemic of boredom as the cause of the antisocial behaviour.)

Just as frequently, though, boredom seems to be the very point of a boring website - as if we truly appreciate
the quiet, uncomplicated space of a few moments spent watching, say, a nest full of eagle eggs that are not going to be hatching any time soon. Suddenly, it becomes a little easier to understand why people go trainspotting.

Steven Johnson, in his book Everything Bad Is Good for You, advances the thesis that our attention spans are actually getting longer, and that popular culture is making us smarter. Feature films, he points out, last longer than they ever did. Computer games, along with many TV drama series, require far more sustained cognitive engagement than was needed in the purported golden age of childhood. Is it possible that we are becoming more patient, too? After all, which is the truly more shocking thing about Channel 4's Big Brother: that it becomes a freakshow of racism and psychological dysfunction when condensed into a half-hour broadcast? Or that there is actually a market, however small by comparison, for hour after unbroken hour of footage from the Big Brother house, broadcast on the digital channel E4, where absolutely nothing occurs? In an information-saturated society, writes the sociologist Orrin Klapp, "we suffer a lag, in which the slow horse of meaning is unable to keep up with the fast horse of mere information". It would be nice to believe dull websites are popular because they are a rebellion against overload - a space for our slow horses to graze.

Except for one problem. The truth is that we all know how the web exerts a mesmerising power of distraction, somehow absorbing our boredom without really curing it. This is what we mean when we say that web-surfing is addictive. Big Brother has this effect, too: you don't feel bored while you're watching it, but afterwards, you still wish you hadn't. The fact that you just spent 10 minutes staring at a decomposing compost heap - as you could, until recently, at a website operated from the Sussex village of Horsted Keynes - does not automatically mean that you really wanted to, nor that it was good for you to do so. True, it's possible that you watched the compost decompose with a deep appreciation for the ever-advancing natural cycles of life and death. Then again, maybe you were just bored. Maybe you had spent half the morning staring listlessly at your computer screen, and were desperate for any novelty - even the novelty of someone putting something so incredibly dull on the internet.

I could go on. But it would only get boring. And besides, I have a cheese to watch.

The Trojan Room coffee pot

**Started** 1991, although it only went global in 1993 (before that it was confined to Cambridge University's local computer network).

**Finished** August 2001 (after which the by-then-famous coffee pot was auctioned online for pounds 3,350).

The story The Trojan Room coffee pot is thought to be the world's first webcam. In the days before the world wide web, Cambridge academics had the idea of training a camera on the department coffee machine to help people avoid making pointless trips to the machine before the coffee was ready. When the coffee pot eventually made it on to the web, hundreds of thousands logged on for a look. "It became famous for being famous," said Quentin Stafford-Fraser, one of the original developers.

JenniCam

**Started** April 1996.

**Finished** December 2003.

**Number of hits** At the height of its popularity, JenniCam attracted an estimated 3 to 4 million people a day.

The story Long, long before Justin Kan was making the news with the 24/7 webcam of his life ([justin.tv](http://justin.tv)), American student Jennifer Ringley was doing exactly the same thing, albeit on a much smaller budget, from her college dorm in Pennsylvania. Generally, it was very, very boring, but sometimes Jennifer, who was 19 when
she started broadcasting, did things like have sex. Or strip for the camera. The ethics of all this were much debated. Was it voyeurism? Hi-tech post feminism? (This was a long time ago, remember, in internet terms.) She went on the David Letterman show to chew it over. Later she charged for access to the site; in the end it closed down because of problems over nudity and the online payment service she was using.

**Mount St Helens VolcanoCam**

**Started** 1996.

**The story** One of the first webcams to be pointed at an active volcano. Mount St Helens notoriously erupted in 1980 with a blast equal in power to 500 atom bombs, and has been in continuous eruption since reawakening in 2004. The picture is updated every five minutes, and, weather and light conditions allowing, you get a nice view of the volcano from an observatory about five miles away from the action. From September 2004 to March 2005, the website received more than 342m hits, averaging 1.8m a day.

**How to find it** [VolcanoCam](http://technology.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329766603-117802,00.html)

**Big Brother webcam**

**Started** 2000.

**Finished** It keeps finishing, but then it starts all over again ...

**The story** Back when Big Brother was an exciting, newfangled thing, few seriously believed that viewers would keep logging on to webcam footage when the TV show was over. Especially as the technology then was plain rubbish. But how wrong we were ... Web footage of the inside of Big Brother houses used to be free; these days, you have to pay for it. Part of the thrill, if it can be called that, is that sometimes stuff happens that is too revolting to be shown on TV.

**EaglemCam**

**Started** September 2004.

**Finished** May 2006.

**The story** There are many webcams trained on eagle nests. Generally speaking, they are of niche interest. Last year, for reasons that may never be fully understood, one abruptly rose to international prominence. An estimated 10 million people a day began logging on to follow the fortunes of a pair of bald eagles in an accountant's backyard on Hornby Island, near Vancouver, Canada. The birds were there, or they weren't. They preened, or didn't. Would the eggs hatch? No. They, allegedly, were eventually smashed and eaten by their parents. Bird lovers everywhere mourned.

**Hencam**

**Started** Summer 2005.

**Number of hits so far** More than 470,000.

**The story** They cluck, they peck and, sometimes, they lay eggs. Hen-owner Neil Whitaker says that the idea to chronicle the lives of his three birds, Milly, Tilly and Penny, came to him when he was chatting with friends in the pub. You may or may not be pleased to hear that the Bradford-based chickens have laid 49 eggs between them so far this year. When the Guardian logged on yesterday, Penny and Tilly appeared to be eating something from the earthy floor of what looked like a chicken coop. Milly's feathery bottom could be seen in the background. "I can't honestly believe so many people would want to sit around and watch hens," says

http://technology.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329766603-117802,00.html
Whitaker. But there it is.

How to find it hencam.co.uk

Texas Border Watch

Started October 2006.

Finished November 2006.

The story For one month only, scores of webcams provided live footage of the 1,240-mile-long Texas/Mexico border. The idea was that the public would email or call the Texan authorities if they saw anyone attempting anything that looked like an illegal border crossing (out of Mexico, into Texas, to clarify). The trial was a huge success. More than 25m hits were recorded on the website, and more than 200,000 people subscribed: thousands of emails resulted. The site is currently closed, but the state now plans to open a full-time webcam public surveillance operation. As Texas Governor Rick Perry put it, "A stronger border is what Americans want and it's what our security demands and that is what Texas is going to deliver."

Wildcamgrizzlies

Finished August 2006, but highlights can still be seen on the National Geographic website.

The story This grizzly bear webcam was a smash hit last year. Like all the classics of its genre, there was sometimes nothing doing. A bear sitting doing nothing, say. Or no bears at all. Other times, though, you got to watch bears frolicking and catching salmon in the McNeil river in Alaska. The camera was hidden in a fake boulder on the riverbank, allowing viewers to get a uniquely close-up, fear-free, view of the bears. As one blogger wrote at the height of the webcam's popularity: "A smaller bear than last night has been feasting since about 5pm EST. This is really fascinating. I look forward to seeing more of them. The large male last night was awesome."

How to find it wildcamafrica/

Cheddar Vision


Number of hits so far 803,414.

The story The new undisputed king of the boring webcam. Since going live 102 days ago, more than 800,000 people have logged on to watch a piece of West Country cheddar mature. Highlights have included someone putting a sticker on the piece of cheese, and the sticker almost falling off. If you go to the cheese's webcam site, you will find directions to YouTube, where you can see a time-lapse film of its first three months of life. The cheese, which also has its own MySpace site (where it has more than 500 friends) will be auctioned off for charity when it reaches full maturity.

How to find it: cheddarvision.tv/

The Neilston webcam

The sell "Probably still the most boring webcam on the net!" Or so it says on the frontpage of the website.

The story Someone has put up a webcam on a suburban street in Neilston, a village of 6,000 people 12 miles south-west of Glasgow. It is updated at regular intervals throughout the day. When the Guardian logged on yesterday, it looked quite sunny there, but there was no one in shot. All you could really see was some road,
and a bit of someone's driveway. As far as cult webcams go, this is still very much a new kid on the block, but its popularity is growing fast. At least 106,529 other visitors have also been bored by this page, it boasted yesterday.

**How to find it** [neilstonwebcam/](neilstonwebcam/)