Five ho-hum domain names and their curious stories
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In this brave new Web 2.0 world, it's almost a badge of honor to have a Web site name that only hints at what the user will find there (see Flickr) or is so opaque as to offer no clue at all as to what the Web site is about (see del.icio.us). It's easy to forget the first Internet gold rush of the mid-to-late '90s, when dot-com domain names based on ordinary (and, investors hoped, marketable) nouns and verbs were snapped up by hopeful companies from the humble geeks who had purchased them (often ironically) in the early '90s. The weird and wooly history of the Web can best be traced through some of its most generic domains. Here's a sampling that trace the arc from the geeks to the entrepreneurs and into a more staid corporate world.

As with all voyages into the misty pasts of the Internet, we've made copious use of the invaluable Internet Archive Wayback Machine.

music.com: In a time when most music-mad teenagers don't remember a world without the Internet, it makes sense the Music.com site is a social networking and information site, complete with video and audio. But in 1996, when most of us were still painstakingly creating our flirty mixes on cassette tapes, it seemed perfectly reasonable that the domain be occupied by MUSIC Semiconductors, Inc. (the name stood for "Multi-User Specialty Integrated Circuits") -- because, really, what did the Web have to do with music? What, were you going to have a Web site dedicated to your favorite MIDI files?

By 1998, MUSIC Semiconductor began to realize that an increasingly nongeeky Web audience might have something else in mind when they entered "music" into Netscape 4.0. They apparently launched some kind of Geocities-esque music site, maintaining their incongruous trademark and copyright mark on the bottom. (Musical horoscopes from "Madam Soliel" were also available.) But our engineering friends presumably decided to take the money and run: by April of 1999, the site had become a straightforward music portal, ancestor of today's site. And MUSIC Semiconductor still lives happily at music-ic.com.

eat.com: If music.com had real geek cred in its earliest incarnation, a cursory look at the 1996 version of eat.com might lead you to believe that it was a similar outpost on the new frontier of the World Wide Web. "Mama's Dining Room" is the page's name, and the text -- charmingly unformatted on a white background on a hideous gray background, apparently unedited by anyone professional, offering a variety of tasty Italian meals. Then you get to the verbiage at the bottom of the page: "Mama's niece Ana, the lawyer, wrote this next part: Copyright 1996 Lipton, Inc. All rights reserved. Ragú, Chicken Tonight, and Pizza Quick are registered trademarks of Lipton, Inc." Yes, eat.com was one of the world's first astroturfing sites! The current iteration of the site is a much more straightforward homepage for the Ragú brand, now owned, like the other Lipton brands promoted by the entirely fictional "Mama", by Anglo-Dutch megacorporation Unilever.

car.com: The '90s was a time when companies were trying to figure out just what sort of strategy might work in this confusing World Wide Web. For instance, at some point before 1999, someone at Carter-Wallace, Inc., a pharmaceutical research firm, obviously thought "carterwallace.com is kind of a pain to type out. What if we just put our Website at the much easier to remember car.com?" And there it stayed all the way until mid-2002, baffling anyone who might be looking for a cheap deal on an automobile. By the end of that year, the domain had fallen to the classic sort of dot-com entrepreneur, who sought to connect you with the car you wanted using the power of the Internet, a modified version of which still exists today.

meat.com: In 1996, meat.com was a classic bit of golden age Internet whimsy called L'Industrie De Meat: an oddish logo on standard-issue mid-90s textured background, with an anti-Communications Decency Act jeremiad, links to an "Internet hall of shame" (optimized for Netscape 2.0), and information about the
"Transnational Church of Life on Mars." There was also a link to the site's creator's software offering: Color Manipulation Device, which helped HTML newbies choose the colors for their Web pages. Later iterations of the site foregrounded the software development angle, offering f.search, a metasearch program that would help you get the most of the pre-Google search offerings out there.

By early 2000, though, the proprietor of L'Industrie had sold the site (hopefully at full height-of-boom prices) to a company looking to sell and promote, well meat. Promising a directory of local meat suppliers and "delicious, mouth-watering entrees," it appears to have never really gotten off the ground, and by 2004 was in the hands of a domain registrar and offered for sale. Today, the site has reached the ignominious nadir for generic Websites: it's little more than a front-end for pages of text ads, with not very well thought out photo placement (clicking on "Vegetarian" brings up a picture of a roast pig, head intact). On the plus side, the site does feature the charming motto "Being American is to eat a lot of beef steak."

milk.com: And sometimes, they just stay the same. Milk.com was snapped up in the unheard-of ancient year of 1994 by Internet denizen Dan Bornstein, and it's remained a classic homepage in the '90s sense -- sparse background, unformatted text, easy-to-find links -- ever since. Dan got the domain because, basically, he likes milk, not that he has anything to do with its production or marketing. He has over the past decade and a half resisted attempts to buy it from him, and though he's amenable to offers, he estimates that $10 million is what it would take to get him to cave. He does offer a link to what he calls milk.com's "sister site" -- milk.org, the home page for the Dairy Farmers of Ontario.

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