

# Kevin Kelly: The Web Runs on Love, Not Greed

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Right on cue, the demise of the dot-com revolution has prompted skepticism of the Internet and all that it promised. An honest evaluation would have to admit it has been a very bad year for hip startup companies, hi-tech investors, and hundred of thousands of workers in the technology field. Three trillion dollars lost on Nasdaq, 500 failed dot-coms, and half a million hi-tech jobs gone. Even consumers in the street are underwhelmed by look-alike gizmos and bandwidth that never came. The hundreds of ways in which the Internet would "change everything" appear to have melted away, or to have not happened at all. As the end of the year approaches a collective New Year's resolution is surfacing: "Next year, next time, we won't believe the hype."

This revised view of the Internet, as sensible as it is, is a misguided as the previous view that the Internet could only go up. The Internet is less a creation dictated by economics than it is a miracle and a gift.

Netscape's legendary IPO in 1995 launched the web in the mind of the public. That jumpstart happened not much more than 2,000 days ago. In the 2,000 days since then, we have collectively created more than 3 billion public web pages. We've established twenty million web sites. Each year we send about 3.5 trillion email messages. If we could return back time a mere 6 years ago and ask anyone, even a geek, whether we could create 3 billion interactive, graphically rich, hyperlinked text pages on every subject known to humans, they would have frankly told you it was impossible. I would have told you it was impossible. Send 3 trillion emails? Where is the time even to push the send button? Who is going to pay for the creation of 3 billion web pages, each one which must be designed and coded and hosted? The economics of this don't work out. In 2,000 days? It's impossible. Yet, here at the end of a very bad year, this web is alive and still growing. It looks like a miracle.

In our disappointment of grand riches, we have failed to see the miracle on our desks. Ten years ago, it was easy to dismiss visions of a wondrous screen in our homes that would provide the whole world in its magical window. The idea of a universal information port was considered uneconomical, and too futuristic to be real in our lifetimes. Yet at any hour of today, most readers of this paper have access to the full text of the Encyclopedia Britannica, precise map directions to anywhere in the country, stock quotes in real time, local weather forecasts with radar pictures, immediate sports scores from your hometown, any kind of music you could desire, answers to medical questions, hobbyists who know more than you do, tickets to just about anything, 24/7 e-mail, news from a hundred newspapers, and so on. Much of this is for free. This abundance simply overwhelms what was promised by the most optimistic guru.

Why don't we see this miracle? Because large amounts of money can obscure larger evidence. So much money flew around dot-coms, that it hid the main event on the web, which is the exchange of gifts. While the most popular 50 websites are crassly commercial, most of the 3 billion web pages in the world are not. Only thirty percent of the pages of the web are built by companies and corporations like pets.com. The rest is built on love, such as care4pets.com or responsiblepetcare.org. The answer to the mystery of why people would make 3 billion web pages in 2,000 days is simple: sharing. While everyone was riveted by the drama of companies such as pets.com, we overlooked the steady growth of enthusiast sites and governmental depots such as Usenet and nasa.gov, to name some larger ones.

As the Internet continues to expand in volume and diversity without interruption, only a relatively small percent of its total mass will be money-making. The rest will be created and maintained out of passion, enthusiasm, a sense of civic obligation, or simply on the faith that it may later provide some economic

use. High-profile portal sites like Yahoo and AOL will continue to consolidate and demand our attention (and maybe make some money), while millions of smaller sites and hundreds of millions of users do the heavy work of creating content that is used and linked. These will be paid entirely in the gift economy.

Will we ever appreciate this web woven out of love and greed for the fabulous miracle it is? Perhaps as more of the world wins access to it, and more of our books, and movies, and history are added, we will come to see it as a dream come true, a collective dream created by people like you and me, sharing what they love. Who would have guessed that at the end of a harrowing year, the heart of this gift and miracle already beats?

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Upcoming Book: ASIAN GRACE, all images, no words, from Taschen, spring 2002.

Newest Project: Long Bets, ask me about it.

Official Website: <http://www.kk.org>

Current Passion: All Species Inventory <http://www.all-species.org>

Previous Book: NEW RULES FOR THE NEW ECONOMY, in 9 languages.

Old Book: OUT OF CONTROL, free text at <http://www.kk.org/outofcontrol/index.html>

First Love: WHOLE EARTH CATALOG: Editor/Publisher <http://www.wholeearthmag.com>

Former Passion: Editor, WIRED magazine <http://www.wiredmag.com>