

Crying, While Eating

My sad, hungry climb to internet stardom

I found a picture of my girlfriend on a Japanese fetish site the other day. Yes, that was definitely her, cramming a piece of sausage into her mouth as tears streamed down her face. What's that right below her? A breast pump? This was all my fault. I'm the one who put that video online. They never told me that Internet celebrity would be like this.

A month before, I had signed up for a "contagious media" contest. The rules: Make a (nonpornographic) Web site. Promote it any way you want, short of paid advertisements. The page with the most visitors after three weeks wins.

The contest's host was Jonah Peretti, the creator of the much-forwarded Web site Black People Love Us. Peretti now runs a research group at New York's Eyebeam art and technology center that studies how sites get passed around the Internet. According to Eyebeam's experts, Web pages spread via the "Bored at Work Network"—the millions of shiftless desk jockeys whose fingers are glued to the forward button on their e-mail. Hoax product sites and pages that

elicit a nervous laugh get passed around a lot, as do funny animal videos and movies of people dancing. But the most successful contagions are the oddballs, earnest amateurs like the *Peter Pan* guy and the *Star Wars* kid who had never tried to tap in to the Bored at Work Network. How could I compete with them?

As contestants, we had at least one advantage over the Peter Pan guy: a workshop that allowed us to kick around ideas with certified contagious-media professionals. Very few of us actually did. One guy announced his plan to create an animated dog that vomited things. After an awkward silence, the expert on hand suggested that he might want to think of a new idea. I was confused. Was a barfing dog any worse than the contagious Poke the Bunny site we'd learned about an hour before?

Forget the dogs and bunnies. I wanted my site to be about people, or food, or people and food. My friend and collaborator Casimir Nozkowski remembered a game he used to play at camp: Stuff some food in your mouth, and cry. We had our idea—Crying, While Eating.

On a rainy night, we drove around New York with a video camera, some sausage, a box of fried chicken, and an apple. I watched my friend Rob fast-forward through *Babe* until he got to the part where the sheepdog puppies are given away. Casimir zoomed in as Rob sobbed good, long sobs into the fried chicken. We took off a few minutes later with the sausage and the apple.

Crying, While Eating launched on a Thursday night with 12 videos. Christy, who was drinking a vanilla shake, cried because she was “good at lots of things but not great at anything.” Tashi lamented the fact that “sex will never be that good again” while munching on Milano cookies. I ate

buckwheat noodles with rooster sauce and blubbered about having “ruined Passover.”

We waited until the next morning to send a batch of self-promotional e-mails. By the time we got out of bed, the blog Waxy had spotted our page on the contest Web site. From there, we got picked up by BoingBoing and Metafilter. I e-mailed the URL to a former co-worker in San Francisco that afternoon. He said he’d already gotten it from another friend in California, who had gotten the link from a guy in Austin, Texas. When I checked the stats that night, we had almost 50,000 visitors.

On Saturday morning, I got a message on my cell phone from “Joe,” who claimed to be a marketing specialist in Los Angeles. “We have a deal in mind for you,” he promised. When I called back, Joe said he’d seen *Crying, While Eating* on the “outrageous media” server and thought it was “fairly viral.” He offered me a 60–40 split for placing ads on the site and asked if I was ready to “play ball.” I made a counter-offer of 95–5, contingent on his telling me where he got my cell phone number. He didn’t call back.

By the end of May, the site had gotten 7.5 million hits. Blog entries mentioning the site appeared in Dutch, Galician, Italian, Turkish, Norwegian, and German (“das ist doof”). People submitted videos from all over the world. Gwenda from Australia cried over “the shameful mistreatment of animals” while eating triple-chocolate ice cream. A guy from New Jersey sent footage of himself dressed up like a baby and crying over a plate of ribs.

Our egos swelled as we became D-list celebrities. An art gallery in New York requested videos for an upcoming exhibition, and a telecom company in Florida offered us thousands of dollars to put CwE clips in a commercial for

long-distance service. Literary agents contacted us to discuss how the site could “make the jump to print.” We got mentioned on VH1 and in *Entertainment Weekly* and were invited to appear on countless radio shows. Crying, While Eating even crossed over to the world of Internet porn. We got a huge number of referrals from a site called Goregasm (“where bones meet boners”) and discovered that prospectors had snatched up the domain name www.cryingwhilemasturbating.com. The sex-themed blog Fleshbot called CwE “our favorite new fetish of the year!”

And, yes, my girlfriend’s video wound up on a Japanese sex site. Sure, that was a bit awkward, but I took some consolation in the fact that, after just two weeks, CwE was the top result of a Google search for “crying.” I was a lock to win the \$2,000 grand prize. I could make up for tossing my girlfriend to the Internet pervs by taking her out for a nice dinner. A really, really nice dinner.

Then my dot-com bubble burst. I’d been keeping an eye on a couple of our competitors, especially a video of people chugging Slurpees at 7-Eleven and a page featuring a masked man who freaked out to cell-phone ring tones. In a blink, a site I’d hardly noticed surged ahead in the standings. Forget-Me-Not Panties, a hoax page that offered futuristic, GPS-enabled chastity belts to concerned husbands and fathers, had become enormously popular overseas. (The Japanese in particular couldn’t get enough.) Pretty soon, a Google search for “panties” led directly to their site. Crying, While Eating had dropped to third on the “crying” list, right below the Hungarian prog-rock band After Crying. We’d peaked too early, the contagious-media version of Howard Dean.

The contest ended a week later—with Crying trailing

Panties by more than 200,000 unique visitors. How had this happened? Hadn't anyone noticed the lovely write-ups in the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Toronto Star*? Didn't anyone other than my parents watch us on *Best Week Ever*?

I pored over our traffic records to figure out what went wrong. Our television and radio spots hadn't really helped. All of that mainstream press came as we slid down from the contagious peak of our first few days. Newspaper articles didn't translate into lots of hits; all they did was lead to more print and television coverage. (The link I added to my *Slate* bio didn't help too much, either—it accounted for less than one-half of 1 percent of CwE's visitors.) Most of our traffic came from blog links and Web sites like College Humor and Something Awful.

It's easy to look back and see why Crying, While Eating did so well, at least for a time. It's a simple concept. It's interactive. It makes you laugh and feel uncomfortable at the same time. But there are two parts to contagious media. You have to make something that people want to spread around, but unless you're as lucky as the Star Wars kid you also have to do a little of the spreading yourself. CwE got lots of free publicity because it was an entry in a contest; if Casimir and I tried to make another contagious site, we'd have to do that legwork for ourselves. I don't know if we could pull it off. It seems like a real pain in the ass.

While the "Panty Raiders" took home the \$2,000 jackpot, we did come away with two \$1,000 awards. Crying, While Eating won Eyebeam's Alexa Prize as the first entrant to crack the Web's 20,000 most popular sites and the Creative Commons Prize as the most-visited site covered by a free distribution license. Best of all, I got to take home a humongous, four-foot-wide check. I thought about convert-

ing it into a coffee table, but I still owed my girlfriend a nice dinner. Now if I could only fit this thing through the front door at Nobu.

The contagious media sites cited in this article can be seen at the following URLs:

blackpeopleloveus.com
pixyland.org/peterpan/
ebaumsworld.com/starwarskidv.html
platinumgrit.com/pokethebunny.htm
cryingwhileeating.com
thebrainfreeze.com
ringtonedancer.contagiousmedia.com
forgetmenotpanties.com