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Internet Dating 2.0

By Verna Gates/Miami

After typing in all manner of personal information (okay, I fudged on my weight), I hit the send button with a certain trepidation. I watched in horror as my instant background check appeared before the gathered group of onlookers at iDate 2007, an Internet dating conference held in Miami this week. The make of my unfashionable car, a reference to my ex-husband, info on a dubious family member (how many times did I bail him out of jail?) and other tidbits about my life popped up onscreen and made my palm sweat on the mouse. But seconds later, I was deemed clear of any criminal or sex offender charges or other black marks.

The company, HonestyOnline, offers a certification system that takes the lie out of online. The checks can dig down to confirm your ex- is an ex- and your B.A. isn't BS, and figure out pretty much what you earn every year.

"It's an extra layer of protection to determine if a guy is Jack the Ripper with three wives," said William Bollinger, executive vice president of National Background Data, LLC, which invented CrimSAFE, a database used by HonestyOnline.

Along with the background checks, HonestyOnline can show up at your house, snap some profile pictures, stand you on the scale, run a tape measure from head to toe, and even, if requested, leave with bodily fluids to assure potential mates you have nothing communicable. After you pass muster, you graduate to a sticker on your online profile testifying that you are ready for love.

At iDate 2007, vendors demonstrate ways to meet, court, virtual date and even marry without ever leaving home or taking the trouble to actually

meet your intended. "People don't have time, so they date online," says Marc Lesnick, conference coordinator, describing an industry he says earned more than \$1 billion last year.

Moving around the exhibit hall, my picture is snapped with a cell phone. Suddenly, I appear in the middle of a 15th century Venetian ballroom scene on a computer, with a mask over my image. Valentina, an artificial intelligence hostess, greets me and invites me to Venice Chronicles' party. An actor working from the website's office directs the fantasy by giving orders, moving our images and forcing us to make conversation with each other.

For more realistic scenarios, the company OmniDate can place you in a virtual restaurant with an animated date, literally. Both parties work keyboards and save thousands of calories on the five-course Italian dinner. You can survive some of the more awkward first date moments, such as ordering the high-ticket item on the menu, without abandoning the comfort of your pajamas. Animated figures called avatars stand in and react like you would when the waiter dumps hot soup into your virtual lap. The avatars move, speak, and even kiss goodnight for you.

For those of you who need a new cell phone nightmare, the driver in front of you could be cruising for a date. On Mobilove, I scrolled through the profiles of "lookn4luv", "LuckyL", and "Manoman," and sent text messages to the people on my hot list. An instant response brought rejection, proving that a typical dating experience can be found on the go. Already 500,000 Americans have posted their pictures and mini profiles on their cell phones, and users are growing by 20% every month, according to Mobilove vice president Nils Knagenhjelm.

The cell phone can also be turned into a Don Juan miracle tool: thanks to Vumber you can get many numbers with only one phone — and even numbers from more desirable area codes. You can be reached at a New York City number one minute and L.A. the next, or small-town Alabama, where you really live. If the person dialing one of the numbers turns out to be a less than desirable caller, poof! the number disappears with a few keystrokes. "You can vanish without a trace," said Geoff Schneider, executive vice president of Vumber.

While eHarmony brags about its personality profiles, Plenty of Fish quietly ignores theirs. This site, with 400,000 hits a day, was created by Markus Frind, who still runs it out of his apartment. He figured out people essentially exaggerate on profile answers. He follows a more sensible creed: actions speak louder than words. For example, Susie says she wants a solid, stable man who earns \$100,000-plus but keeps clicking on profiles of muscle-bound bad boys. Plenty of Fish makes sure she meets plenty of underemployed weightlifters, and some of the stable ones she ignores. "People don't even realize we do this. They just know they are getting results," said Frind, who compares his strategy to grocery store purchase tracking: diet claim or no, you're still picking up ice cream every week.

In another profile model, Chris Walker is experimenting with behavioral matchmaking. An early innovator, he started in the 1960s with punch card

computer dating. After years of matching people, he now focuses on how people choose to spend their time. Infopersonals.com also asks for frank answers on back hair, relationships with exes and the number of sexual partners.

But there are still those who believe in actual face time. "The personal touch still blows away everything else out there," says Paul Falzone, CEO of The Right One and Together, one of the nation's largest old-school matchmaking dating services where people sign up and are interviewed in person. "Sure, people get matched online," Falzone adds, "but monkeys also occasionally fall out of trees."

Even computer crazy Walker agrees. "Until you actually meet somebody, don't get excited."

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