

Sex Drive: Where Sex and Tech Come Together

By Regina Lynn

Every week, I expose myself to a hundred thousand people online and invite them to discuss it in a public forum.

They don't love me for my body. Hell, some of them don't love me at all. But they come back each week because they know they'll find a geek's-eye view of sex. If nothing else, I give them something to think about over the weekend.

It's a challenge, and I love it.

I started writing Sex Drive in early 2003 as a companion to TechTV's documentary series *Wired for Sex*. TechTV was reaching out to a more mainstream audience, and the web team wanted to develop some strong Internet personalities distinct from the on-air talent. The producer of TechTV.com knew me well -- I had hired him into a good job, once upon a time -- and what's more, he knew about my explorations into the areas of the Internet everyone visits but no one talks about in polite company.

Our initial conversation went something like this:

Producer: So we're doing this doc series about sex and technology, and we need some web content to go with it.

Me: You need me to write a weekly sex-tech column!

Producer: Can you start Monday?

When I tell people I write about sex and technology, they often look puzzled, cock their heads to one side, furrow their brows and say something like, "Sex and tech? You mean like ... online dating?"

Except in place of "online dating," some people say "Internet porn." And some say "cybersex." And some say "sex toys." Less common are "virtual reality" and "webcams."

Given a moment to think about it, most people come up with an example of how technology infuses their own sex lives. Some send steamy text messages throughout the day, while others compose romantic emails that would do Cyrano de Bergerac proud. Sex toys are coming out of the closet, thanks to their relatively new accessibility. Now everyone in the world can visit women-friendly sexuality boutiques like Good Vibrations, Toys in Babeland or Grand Opening. (Unfortunately, not everyone can have their purchases shipped to them -- it depends on local laws. But we'll get there.)

Through chat rooms, email forums, online personals, and role-playing games, we're finding kindred spirits and building relationships without regard to geographical or political boundaries.

And, of course, we have an abundance of porn. Porn on the web, porn on DVD, porn on your PDA, porn on your cell phone. Technology is enabling a barrage of sexual content unlike anything the world has ever seen. It's a crusader's wet dream to have so much to wage moral war against.

Porn Positive?

After TechTV's demise and a three-month hiatus, I pitched Sex Drive to *Wired News*. I sent the senior editor several sample columns and described my mission: to chronicle, and to help drive, the sexual revolution 2.0. We agreed to a four-week pilot, and if the column succeeded, I would sign an ongoing contract. I was stoked.

Prior to this moment I had only written about porn peripherally. Sex Drive is about sex, I thought, not about porn. Only when *Wired for Sex* produced an episode about online pornography did I devote any serious column space to it. I had no objection to porn. It was just that I don't watch much porn and I had so many other topics to cover.

But during those first four weeks at *Wired News*, porn dominated mainstream media headlines. Congress had invited four prohibitionists to testify in a hearing about whether we need more studies about pornography's effect on society and perhaps a public awareness campaign, much like the ones warning us not to smoke or drink to excess.

Porn is heroin! the headlines proclaimed. *Porn is crack! Porn compels people to commit rape, to succumb to addiction, to become pedophiles!*

My new editor all but demanded I write about this.

And in researching that column ("Porn Prohibitionists Miss Point," *Wired News*, 11/27/04), I had to examine my own feelings about porn. Was I offended? Did I fear it? Did my sexual self-image change because of it? When I did view porn, what did I do with it?

Porn Is Boring

When the web first began to boom in the mid-1990s, I bought an electronic passkey of some kind that let me into any porn site that used the service. The idea was to keep minors out without putting too much of a burden on subscribers -- you entered your passkey, rather than your credit card number, to verify your age at each site. It was

cool to be able to look at as much porn as I wanted, of any flavor, without having to leave the house.

That, and I thought it was cool to be a girl looking at porn. Not that my parents ever mentioned porn, but somehow I learned early on that it wasn't for girls. (Ha!)

I caught myself clicking through to a gallery, taking in the contents with a glance, and backing out to click through to the next gallery. I didn't need to spend much time with the pictures to feel the titillation of porn.

That's what gives me a hint about how it must feel to be obsessed with online porn -- that the search, as much as (or more than) the pictures, is really what turns you on. No individual picture or video can be as novel or exciting as you hope it will be, so you keep searching and looking, looking and searching. You're never satiated because if you just masturbated to any particular picture or video, you'd miss out on all those other ones.

Never mind that they, and thousands like them, will still be there for you tomorrow.

I browsed through a lot of genres just because I could, but what appealed to me most were group scenes and triple penetration. Fantasies I had not tried, but that could be possible (although not probable) in real life. I learned that romantic, softly lit scenes of heterosexual couples did absolutely nothing for me. Neither did naked girls. But one woman with multiple men? Yes, please.

The novelty wore off and I did not renew my passkey when it expired. Yet I was aware that I had taken advantage of an opportunity not available to women until recently. Even among the internet generation, men far outnumbered the women working the newsgroups for porn. It took the world wide web to bring us equal access.

I liked seeing women in sexual situations who enjoyed what they were doing, and wished I could find more of it. I came to terms with my own preference for being submissive in bed (although not anywhere else). I learned that being the sub meant being in control -- and that being sexual meant so much more than I had heretofore experienced.

I rarely saw anything I would call degrading or damaging to women. I'm not saying it's not out there, only that I could usually avoid it. The actresses and models on the sites I chose to patronize were paid to be there, and they knew what they were getting into.

Hell, I have a fantasy of lying across a coffee table on my back, my hands wrapped around two different men's cocks, and my lips sealed around a third, while another man knelt between my thighs and yet another masturbated above my belly and breasts. If

an actress in a similar scene is degraded, and represents the humiliation of all women by all men, what did it say about me that the image made me wet and achy?

Within months, I learned that most porn is boring. It's churned out without regard for quality and certainly with no thought to portraying female enjoyment. But when porn is good, it has a powerful effect on the senses. And when it's likely to appeal to women (which doesn't mean it's not explicit or "dirty"), it is often referred to as "erotica" instead.

While women like Danni Ashe and Tristan Taormino began to turn the porn world upside down, I looked elsewhere for sex.

For the Love of Cybersex

In my teens and early 20s, my sexual actions did not live up to my sexual imagination. I was shy, inhibited, fearful and had almost no libido. I'd find any excuse not to have sex, and I deliberately gained weight to keep myself "protected" from sexual behavior.

Like most American women, I had experienced inappropriate childhood sexual incidents, although I hesitate to label them "abuse" because on the scale of things it truly wasn't that bad. I could trace my negative responses to sex directly back to being six years old when I knew something was wrong and that I had absolutely no control or power over what was happening.

As an adult, my libido was drowned in shame and I managed to dissociate from anything more involved than a kiss. Two years of therapy during college helped me find peace and forgiveness, but I couldn't translate that mental state into a healthy and active sex life.

Enter cybersex.

One night, when porn wasn't doing it for me, I decided to try something different, something more interactive: adult chat. I picked the first HTML chat room that came up in a Yahoo search, called myself Aphrodite, and plunged in. I spent six hours in that chat room the first night, so involved in conversation and flirting that I didn't mind the clunky technology. But when another member told me about internet relay chat (IRC), I dumped the HTML chat in favor of text-based mIRC (a sort of "back door" to the same chat community). Then I went back the next day, and the next, and the next....

It was transcendent. I had written sex scenes before, but never real-time, never with a man writing back to tell me how aroused he was, or continuing the fantasy with words of his own. The immediate response to my words turned me on like nothing else.

And the challenge of keeping it interesting, unique and hot engaged my brain in ways real sex had not. It's hard to make love to a mind that's completely dissociated from the proceedings. But good cyber is all in the mind, even if you are also using your hands, cucumbers or other convenient household objects for physical stimulation.

In training my brain to love sex, I found myself craving it outside the computer. I overcame my fears about oral sex and developed a newfound appreciation for penetration. I was in my late 20s, I had been in my relationship for 12 years, and for the first time I truly felt myself to be a sexual creature.

And the Tech Shall Set You Free

One of my childhood experiences involved being trapped against a wall while a neighborhood boy shoved a porn magazine in my face. I clearly remember a picture of two women extending their tongues on either side of a penis. "Just like licking an ice cream cone!" the boy said, and I could feel a heat radiating from him that had nothing to do with the weather.

I didn't give much thought to the picture, even though it was my first exposure to what adult males look like naked. (This was in the 1970s, when men in porn didn't look like they do now. Alas.)

But I instinctively knew I was trapped, vulnerable to whatever the big kid had in mind, and that I had to handle the situation very carefully if I were to escape unscathed. At this point I didn't have any specific knowledge of what might happen but I did know that it would be bad.

That incident and others, more serious, that followed imprinted on my brain one thing: penises are predators. It wasn't the pictures that taught me this, it was the way I was exposed to them. Never a secret, private perusal of the adult world; always an image thrust in my face, and yanked away again before I had a chance to process what I was seeing.

And yet when I hit my teens I always got along well with boys, and I could flirt with the best. Only when it came time to put all that energy into practice did I freeze. My mental warehouse door rolled down with the reverberant clang of metal on cement and that was it. My mind was safe on one side, no matter what was done to my body on the other.

Cybersex blew that door to pieces. The computer provided two things that no amount of real-world behavior modification could. I was safe, because no penises were in the room with me. And I was intimate, because co-writing sex does not leave much room for dissociation.

If you've done it, you know what I mean. If you haven't, I probably can't explain it well enough for you to understand just how powerful it is. It's something that has to be felt to be believed.

Aphrodite Offline

My relationship was in trouble when I discovered cybersex, and spending all that time on the computer did not help. We eventually parted ways. (At least he benefited from my newfound sexual enthusiasm before we split up!) I found myself single for the first time in my adult life.

That year is still hazy in my memory. Too much happened in a short time. I changed jobs, moved to a new city, got a puppy. My mom was devastated about my breakup and we could hardly talk without one of us crying.

I traveled across the country to meet one of my cybersex partners in real life and we had earth-moving sex. I traveled up the coast to meet another one, and we had tide-changing sex. I met a guy at a country bar and we had sex.

Suddenly, I was Aphrodite_Offline. I kept condoms in my purse and a twinkle in my eye and I invited a few of my male friends to have sex with me. (Individually, over time, not one big orgy.) This was not "casual sex" per se, because I don't believe sex can ever be casual, but I made it clear that it was sex without a romantic relationship to frame it. Sex based on mutual affection and chemistry.

Eventually, I knew I needed to try dating formally, not just slutting around with my friends. It's too easy for boundaries to get blurred if you let those flings go on too long. (Not all of my sexual education was fun.)

I realized I had never actually dated. I met my ex when I was 15, and was dating him by the time I was 17. Here I was almost 30 and, while I had slept with more than one person (finally!), I had never actually been on a first date. So I went after one, the only way I knew how. I created an online personal ad and dated by the database.

Where Sex and Tech Intersect

Perhaps because my most powerful positive sexual experiences involved technology, I have incorporated tech into my sex life on a permanent basis. Or maybe it's just that I'm already a geek, with technology infusing every aspect of my life, including sex.

That's probably why my favorite sexual imagery involves tech. FuckingMachines.com and the sci-fi/fantasy sex at Pornotopia.com consistently stoke my fire.

The intersection of sex and tech happens in the communication side of things. Sure, we have all kinds of gadgets and doohickeys to use during intercourse, but it's the mental intercourse that best benefits from technology. You can have sex without any man-made tools at all; you can't whisper sweet nothings to a lover 100 miles away without some sort of technology.

Mobile phones with their video cameras and hands-free headsets are essentials for any couple who spends time apart. Webcams and instant messaging enable long-distance sex, and show us that most of sex really happens in the mind. Women often tell me they had their first good orgasms in cyberspace.

Remote sex is getting closer to the real thing with products like the Sinulator. The Sinulator is a combination of hardware and software that connects your sex toy to the internet for someone else to control. The control panel works with any browser and it looks like a game console, so if you're in the airport, no one can tell at a glance what you're doing.

The system even translates between a sleeve-style vibrator for men and a rabbit pearl vibrator for women. If he thrusts hard and fast, her toy vibrates hard and fast. If he goes slow and gentle, hers goes slow and gentle. If he gets up and walks away, her toy goes dormant. You can be thousands of miles away or in the same room, as long as both toys are connected.

Through it all, communication technologies keep you in tune. Cell phones and internet telephony take the expense out of long distance, as does instant messaging and a webcam.

The web also offers a wealth of sexual education, and I don't just mean porn. You can read up on sexual technique, sexual health and sexual fantasy without having to hide a stack of books away every time your parents come to visit. Never before have we had access to this much information with this much privacy. It may not be as sexy to think about, but it's one of the great benefits that technology brings to our relationships and our sex lives.

And the anonymity conferred by a chat room handle gives you a comfortable arena in which to ask questions, practice flirting, and even have sex in ways you have not or will not except in a fantasy setting.

Am I Adult?

When Carly asked me to contribute to Naked Ambition, my first thought was "Wait, I'm not in the adult industry." Then I thought "If I'm associated with adult content, will my column be taken less seriously?"

That's when I realized I held prejudices about porn that I didn't know I had. I always said I had no problem with porn, regardless of whether I chose to bring it into my life. Yet by not wanting to be associated with it, wasn't I perpetuating the stereotype that Porn Is Bad, and particularly that Porn Is Bad For Women?

"Adult" encompasses so much more than porn. And porn itself is hard to classify. I love Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* novels, but each one has more sex and less serious plot than the last. Each novel puts Anita in more situations in which she must have sex with one or more of the several males in her adventurous life. Hamilton writes great sex, if you like metaphysical fantasy, which I do. It's explicit and raw and beautiful all at once. Is it porn?

On the literary side, Jane Smiley has a beautiful lovemaking scene in her novel *Horse Heaven*. I've given it to several friends as an example of a beautiful piece of writing, whether about sex or anything else. It too is graphic and powerful. Is it porn? Is it adult entertainment? Or, because it is literary, is it erotica and is that less smutty than porn, more respectable to be seen reading?

Sex Drive is not explicit, either pornographically or erotically. But I don't hold back, either. If I think readers need to know where I'm coming from, why I know what I know or feel what I feel, I tell them. It's not about exhibitionism, it's about credibility. And I take a "we're all adults here" stance, even though I know not everyone who reads Wired News is 18.

I concluded that "adult" is merely a code word for "sex," and in that case, yes, Sex Drive very much falls into the adult realm. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. We don't diss food writers for writing about food, and we don't diss fashion writers for writing about fashion. (Well, okay, sometimes we do, but not with the same scorn reserved for porn.) If food and clothing are two biological needs -- and I would defend clothing as a biological, not just a social, human need -- why wouldn't we afford the same respect to sex?

I think our perception of porn and adult entertainment is built on notions about the business and its players that may not always be true, especially now that women have moved up and revolutionized parts of the industry that used to belong solely to men.

The only way that perception will change is if the realities behind it change -- and we let people know about it. That's part of what Sex Drive can do, and it's part of what every woman in this anthology is doing.

We're rewriting "adult" into more mature content and business models, and I don't mean as in "for mature audiences only." I mean in terms of how we approach sexual content, whether in writing, in performing, in distributing, in experiencing, or in any other capacity.

You Say You Want a Revolution

I don't know why more people aren't writing about technology and sex together in a positive light. I know of only a handful. Annalee Newitz has a wonderful column, Techsploitation, syndicated through AlterNet.org. Jonno and the Fleshbot.com team look at porn through geek eyes. And sometimes you'll run across an essay by a counselor talking about how cybersex has helped clients heal sexual problems.

But when you consider just how much technology we have that centers around sex -- from Viagra to teledildonics to portable porn for your mobile device -- it's amazing to me that sex-tech is not a common phrase, or that women's magazines rarely stray beyond the safe, ubiquitous vibrator when offering advice about sexual aids.

The mainstream media seems to focus on the fear. I've seen so much written about Internet infidelity, pedophiles using chat rooms to lure kids out to piers, CEOs and priests with porn on their hard drives. I don't ignore this, nor do I pretend it's not happening. People do bad stuff with sex-tech.

Yet we have so many ways in which technology enhances our relationships. That's where I go with Sex Drive. I like to focus on the individual even if I'm writing about society-wide implications. Here's how I use a particular technology, or here's how so-and-so uses it. And here's how you can use it, too.

I like making associations that I don't see other writers making. All my life I have been told that I see things from an unusual angle, and I try to let that perspective guide me. I also feel tremendous pressure to be brilliant every single time, even though I know that's not possible. Sometimes informative has to be enough. Informative and funny. And insightful.

I am not an advice columnist. I just want to get people thinking, paying attention, talking about these things. My role is to make the connections, to start the conversation and to provide a safe community where we can have that conversation.

I don't have all the answers. But I sure as hell can raise the questions.

~ Regina Lynn
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