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Online Dating Just Got Weirder

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New tech and online ventures are pushing the boundaries of romance. But are singles ready to be matched up by their exes, their immune-system compatibility, and strangers looking to score a finder's fee?

With online dating services now micro-targeted for Goths, farmers, and Sean Hannity fans, you might think the Internet matchmaking market had reached its saturation point. But new online ventures are expanding the world of e-dating in surprising—and sometimes disturbing—ways. Here are a few of the latest entrants, including some of the most buzzed about from last month's Internet Dating Conference, iDate2009, in Miami.

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ReferQuest isn't technically a matchmaking site, unless you're trying to match a Francophone nanny to your five-year-old. Launched in December, it's an online marketplace where users can post a description of what they're trying to find—an upright piano in Berlin, a buyer for their minor-league football team, a surfing instructor—and offer a finder's fee to the person who ultimately connects them with what they're looking for. Perhaps not surprisingly, some early adopters are already using it to find love—several ads on the site offer cash to anyone who can bring them (or someone they know) success in the romance department. One "secret cupid" is offering $96 to anyone who can find a girlfriend for her "teddy bear type" male friend before Valentine's Day.

The most buzzed about exhibitor at iDate was Gimmeo, a service that lets users send candy, flowers, and other gifts through any e-commerce website to a virtual friend without revealing either party's personal information. Soon "gamblinguy" can woo "waiting4U" with flowers before they've even met. Once Gimmeo gets its Facebook application and its "wish list" feature working, those virtual kittens and cupcakes won't seem so cute—just cheap.

Great Boyfriends, founded by Elle advice columnist E. Jean Carroll and her sister, lets users write glowing recommendations of their friends, siblings, and exes. "Think of yourself as the seller or 'publicist,'" the site encourages. The site's staff vets the writeups to verify that they're real, and like ReferQuest, offers an immediate (and traceable) vouch-ability in a way that conflates social networking, online dating, and traditional word-of-mouth.

SafelyBack makes smart use of the web, texting, and mobile technology to make sure a date doesn't end with someone lying in a ditch somewhere. Before going out, users input where they'll be, who they'll be with, and when they plan to return. If they don't check in at the end of the night, SafelyBack pings their emergency contacts and can even provide them with the user's last-known coordinates. The site makes plain in pink-and-white that "what if he turns out to be an axe murderer?" is no longer an excuse for avoiding a potential love match. "The idea was created following focus groups with women 18 to 40," says Laura Enston, SafelyBack's chief marketing officer. "Women in this demographic are very aware of their personal safety and can feel vulnerable." The new service, which launched in the UK in mid-January, plans to roll out Stateside in the next few months.

Darwinian dating will soon be available though online dating sites that offer GenePartner, which cheek-swabs potential matches to gauge long-term compatibility. The premise is based on the somewhat controversial science of histocompatibility, which suggests that potential mates can "sniff out" immuno-diversity in each other, which helps produce more satisfying sex and healthier offspring. The success of this Switzerland-based service seems like a long shot, but cofounder Tamara Brown, a sweetly persuasive Amelie-lookalike with a PhD in molecular genetics

who met her own husband in 2002 on uDate, insists it helps users "find someone who will be biologically compatible, which means high attraction, a better sex life and, if you choose to have children, a high possibility of healthy pregnancies and healthier children."

WomanSavers thrives on women's worst nightmares. It offers a "sisterhood of women" a place to post the worst dating experiences imaginable—and to out the men by name and other identifying characteristics in full. The focus is on the felonious, or nearly so, but some ladies aren't above cataloging bad breath and B.O. The level of discourse among the members is disturbingly compelling in its tenor and tone—the ladies prefer the hyperbole of ALL CAPS and cuss words to letting the facts speak for themselves. The site, launched a few years ago, is characterized by the red-light district school of web design, and the founder is a petite and professionally pinched-looking woman who clearly thinks of this as God's work; hell may hath no fury like a woman scammed.

Then there's no-strings hookup site OnlineBootyCall, the online equivalent of Central Park's notorious Ramble. OnlineBootyCall's founder brags that the site claims "only one confirmed marriage among the first one million users." And a matchmaking site marketed to married people, Ashley Madison, reminds users, "Life is short. Have an affair." STDs aside, those on the "soul mate" side of the dating business have grown to accept the success of these more salacious sites. One matchmaker pointed out the value of there being a place for seekers of sex-without-strings to congregate and copulate, without "messing with the tender hearts of people looking for love."

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