Interconnected

A BLOG BY MATT WEBB [About](#) [Archive](#)
SUBSCRIBE FOR $0 [Email](#) [Feed](#) [(What is a feed?)](#)
UNOFFICE HOURS [Book a call](#) [(What is this?)](#)
FOLLOW ME ON TWITTER [@genmon](#) [@intrcnnctd](#)

I wish my web server were in the corner of my room

20.39, Monday 10 Oct 2022 [Link to this post](#)

Back in college I used to run part of my website from a Linux box in my room. I made it into a speech synthesiser, and people could connect to the machine to talk into my flat.

(Retrospective apologies to my flatmates.)

This is way back in 2000 so before smartphones, and before texting, and before always-on internet (college was an exception), and before camera phones or being able to reliably email photos let alone video. Decent text-to-speech still felt novel. We had a friend who was travelling in Australia at the time and he would visit internet cafes and type in messages to talk to us. Of course there was no way of talking back. It felt impossibly magical.

But what I remember feeling most magical was the idea that there was somebody *visiting* that server on my desk. There was somebody coming from a long way away and going *inside.* An electronic homunculus.

I could hear the hard drive spin up if somebody accessed the machine, and a little *chug-chug-chug* while Festival (the open source text-to-speech engine I'd installed) generated the voice. Like footsteps approaching before the door opens.

I can have this experience again!

I was chatting with artist **honor ash** the other day.

Their [website](#) (and also [blog](#)) runs on a Raspberry Pi sitting in a corner in their house.

This feels very important.

First there's the feeling of *"I made that!"* which leads to the feeling of *"I can make all kinds of things!"* You will definitely get that more when you install

the software on the web server yourself, and also when you copy over your own hand-coded text files. (The web is just text!)

Then there's the feeling that people are visiting and - the corollary - if other people's experience of your website is just in that tiny box, then *your* experiences of all *other* websites are similarly physically located in boxes too.

If you have a local web server then you can play music into your space.

Karey Helm's old website, back in 2015:

> *…the portfolio on her website offers Party Mode. Click the button at the bottom of the page, and mouse over the various projects - the page becomes an instrument, it's like a synth! And then, I swear I heard this right, when you use Party Mode, there's an Arduino in her studio that plays the music.*

Once again I am desperate to have this for myself.

ALSO: those solar-powered websites. I can totally visualise the photovoltaics on the website owner's balcony in Barcelona whenever I read an article there.

I will also say that it feels transgressive.

It is boundary-violating, to have a website in the corner of your bedroom. Websites are meant to be in the cloud. Eternal, somehow, transcendent, like the voice of code floating down from the sky. But no, there it is. It is real! I can kick it! *Argumentum ad lapidem.*

The discombobulated feeling is not new. Seeing a server felt weird even before the cloud.

Julian Dibbell's *My Tiny Life* was written in 1998 about multiplayer text adventures - early virtual worlds - and it is one of those books that has abruptly become insanely relevant. Chapter by chapter it goes through identity play (and abuse), cybersex, money, community governance, power, doxing, and the odd existential self-obsessed angst that all online communities seem to journey through.

The system in which Dibbell is hanging out is called LambdaMOO, and there's a passage in which he visits the server.

> The_Author looks at The Server.
>
> look server
>
> The Server
>
> You see a box as unremarkable as any other in this room, only more so. Three feet square by one foot high, some cables slithering out the back, no flickering lights or any other outward indication of activity within. The box sits at about knee level, stacked unceremoniously on top of another one just like it.
>
> The_Author has come 3,000 miles to look at this machine.
>
> **Julian Dibbell**
> **My Tiny Life (1998)**
>
> Go to text →

(That link leads you to the full text, but you should <u>buy the book</u> *(Amazon)* and I don't know just sit by the letterbox until it arrives and then INHALE it.)

Dibbell is underwhelmed… and yet still holds onto his fantasy:

> *The_Author realizes now that during all those months he never really doubted LambdaMOO was in this box, compact, condensed, its rambling landscapes and its teeming population all somehow shrunk down to the size of The Server's hard-disk drive.*

I can relate! I can relate!

Seeing your website's actual server is the virtual equiv of the <u>Overview Effect</u> and I want to have that feeling the whole time!

I want to feel like my room is haunted by miniature cyberghosts whenever someone reads my blog!

I want you to have that feeling too. I think it would change how we think about the internet, in a grounding and healthy way. I think it would help us regain a sense of agency and ownership, with which we would be way more demanding of the sort of internet we want to live with, a sense that is currently so distant from us that we have forgotten it is possible and can't even tell that it is missing.

So… practically: how to achieve this in 2022?

Having a Raspberry Pi serving a website at home is relatively straightforward with a bit of work, I know.

But I would also like it to be reliable if I kick a cable out of the wall, or in the unlikely event that I get a bunch of traffic. I'd also like it to be quick!

Oh, and I don't want to have my home network hacked.

Perhaps there's a way to host my website at home, but have the static bits served by Cloudflare if the Raspberry Pi isn't available *(using a global CDN as a UPS),* and the dynamic bits always visit my home – but there's a graceful *"come back later"* message if the Pi is down?

I'm pretty technically capable but I'm not sure I can be bothered.

There are so many things in the way. Getting a routable IP address at home. Making it secure. Monitoring it. Gracefully stepping up and down from the CDN.

I would *love* a turnkey way to home-host.

Here's the BIG question: even if it works as above, it's still a bit of a hacky compromise to have my web server sitting on a shelf. How could it be easier than a monthly rental fee for cloud hosting? How could it be *extra?* Sure, ambient beats playing into my home office when somebody visits this blog… but what else? There's a project here.

Update 12 Oct:

This post made it to the top of Hacker News and stuck around for a bit. Blimey, hullo! Here are the comments (367 right now). Some lovely anecdotes there. Here's a favourite:

> *I had a URL on my website called moo.html that wasn't indexed. My friends had it bookmarked, and when they visited it they got a picture of a cow, but it played a cow mooing in my bedroom. It was a nudge to come online and be social.*

That's it! Mixing up the boundary between virtual and physical.

I don't think it's just nostalgia (that's something that came up on Hacker News and also the replies on Twitter). It should be *easy* to have a publicly accessible webserver at home with a bolt-on cloud-based load balancer in the event that I get a burst of traffic or my home internet goes down. And there's no reason that should be any less reliable or straightforward than hosting in the cloud. There's nothing intrinsically hard about it.

(Clarifying what easy means: easy means straightforward tools that work well together, and config files that keep the same format for a decade+. Command line beats GUI because I can keep notes and config in git.)

Why? Because being in the same room as your server will open up new opportunities. Playful ones at first and then… who knows what? My own bookshelf Raspberry Pi has an e-ink clock on it so perhaps I'll use that as a little window to show me visitors.

Oh hey, I found my original blog post with the embedded form that spoke words into my flat. The form doesn't work now of course, but here it is for posterity, way back in May 2000.

If you enjoyed this post, please consider sharing it by email or on social media. Here's the link. Thanks, —Matt.

Most recent posts

Filtered for ears 17 Nov 2022
Mapping everything I've written about the multiplayer web 9 Nov 2022
The Minecraft generation meets property law and AI-synthesised landscapes 8 Nov 2022
These robot legs are made for walkin' me to the shops 4 Nov 2022
The topsy-turvy celebration of Guy Fawkes 3 Nov 2022
Let me recruit AI teammates into Figma 26 Oct 2022
Hey I'm passing through San Francisco next week 21 Oct 2022
Thinking about design pathfinding, which is a bit inside-baseball but forgive me 20 Oct 2022
1,000 shops in your pocket 18 Oct 2022
Filtered for the miracle of writing 12 Oct 2022
I wish my web server were in the corner of my room 10 Oct 2022 (This post)
Basic mental arithmetic for activity and weight 4 Oct 2022

Continue reading: All in 2022

STREAK New posts for **138** consecutive weeks (see: **blogging tips**)

New? Start here: Best of 2021 (also 2020)
Or explore the archives: On this day

Archive

2022 80 posts
2021 128 posts

e.g. art

Search

Enable secret experimental features