

# Web Inventor's Home Page Is a Welcome Mat to the World

Steve Ditlea | July 24, 1996

One of the World Wide Web's most linked-to personal home pages makes you wonder what kind of brochure Johann Gutenberg might have printed up for himself had his moveable-type publishing system been adopted as quickly as the Web.

The home page of Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of home pages, hypertext markup language, or HTML, and other foundations of the World Wide Web electronic publishing system, offers a welcome mat and an oblique plea for privacy, a business-like biography and the Web's original etiquette lesson, all accentuated by the same self-deprecating humor and organizational elegance that marks this computer innovator's thought and conversation.

With just a postage stamp-sized image of his face in the right-hand corner (captioned down the page: "Bad hair day for Tim?") hinting at the Web's multimedia capabilities, Berners-Lee's sedate home page belies the hoopla associated with the Web these days.

Asked if he's recognized as a Web celebrity on the streets of Cambridge, Mass., he said in a telephone interview from his office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Laboratory for Computer Science: "A few people look at me funny, but they always did that."

The 41-year-old British citizen is now the director of the W3 Consortium, an impartial arbiter in setting standards for the Web (and the organization that hosts his Web site).

Following a brief professional biography, his home page links would-be e-mailers to one of the consortium site's valued resources: "If you need someone to find something for you about some arbitrary subject (travel agents or parakeets or whatever), don't ask me, but try the Virtual Library, for example."

The sole concession to his brainchild on his home page: "If you think the Web is wonderful, send chocolate, Lego, etc."

It was while at the European Particle Physics Laboratory, CERN, in late 1990 that Berners-Lee wrote the first World Wide Web server, the software for a global hypertext system able to connect information across a variety of computer systems.

"There were many hypertext systems by that time," he recalled. "But this was the first to link data across wide-area networks without having to merge databases." Linking data on anything other than a local area network, or LAN, was a tedious process until his modestly financed project unleashed today's boom in electronic publishing when it released World Wide Web software on the Internet in the summer of 1991.

What we now call a Web home page was "originally something different," he said. "A home page was to be a private space for personal documents and links, and there was to be another page for people coming onto your server, a welcome page for visitors, like the doormat at your front door."



Tim Berners-Lee



The current usage of home page as a welcome page crops up for the first time in *Web Etiquette*, a primer on style for server administrators, copyrighted by Berners-Lee in 1992. This document, in which he also coined the term “webmaster,” is part of a detailed *Style Guide for on-line hypertext* that anyone with a Web home page (or who is contemplating one) will find instructive. Its practical advice on concerns like “a good title,” “keep it readable,” and “acceptable content” make it one of the Web’s defining texts.

“There’s no ‘should’ for home pages,” he said in the interview. “The Web is a medium that creates its own rules. Still, on my team I like a certain amount of consistency.”

His own home page gets no more personal than brief mentions of his wife and two children. “I don’t post my interests in sports, because I don’t want to be that open,” he said. “Some people’s home pages are surprisingly open.”

Visitors can piece together a more in-depth portrait of Berners-Lee from his links to a December 1995 *New York Times* article and his *Press FAQ*: an Oxford University graduate whose parents met in London “while developing the Ferranti Mark I, the first computer sold commercially, and I grew up playing with five-hole paper tape and building computers out of cardboard boxes.”

These days what most surprises this webmaster of webmasters is how ubiquitous the drudgery of HTML programming has become, especially among creators of personal home pages.

“Most people have had to create whole buckets,” he said. “HTML wasn’t meant to be something you worked with directly.”

Part of his original Web software was a browser with the hypertext equivalent of a word processor program, for easy composition of HTML documents and links. Unfortunately, it was designed for the NEXTStep computer, Steve Jobs’ advanced but poor-selling personal workstation. Since then, browsers for other systems, including PCs and Macs, have not included the hypertext editor functions needed to fulfill the Web’s full promise as a personal storage medium and well as a universal publishing system.

Incidentally, while Berners-Lee composed his own HTML pages and continues to maintain his home page himself, the task seems to have daunted some of his fellow Web pioneers.

Marc Andreessen, co-author of Mosaic and Netscape Navigator, hasn’t got around to posting anything more than a ruddy snapshot of himself on the home page provided by Netscape. Mitch Kapor, the co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, has a home page that appears tired out. Its title (and much of its content): “Mitch’s home page is taking a rest.”