Web Weaver

A world without websites. It's next to impossible to imagine. The Netcraft Web Server Survey reports the existence of more than 213 million websites. That's nearly double the total from just three years ago and doesn't even touch the number of individual web *pages* available for instant consumption.
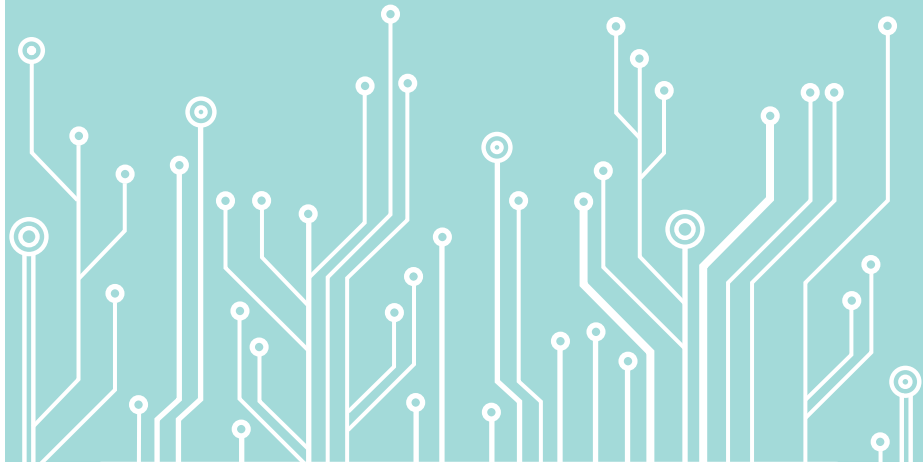
The brushfire ubiquity of the Internet is made even more spectacular when considering that 30 years ago, had someone described places you could visit on a computer—but that weren't necessarily *in* the computer—to do everything from buy Van Halen tickets to watch videos of cats playing piano, the information would have been met with blank stares or a mild panic attack. When it comes to the World Wide Web, you're dealing with the heady kind of runaway statistics often reserved for stuff like astronomy and quantum physics.

So who's responsible for this beautiful mess? Who's building this impossibly colossal interactive infrastructure? The answer, in part, is Lisa Murphy.

Lisa is a Peoria-based web designer who spins websites for businesses and municipalities across Central Illinois. Lisa Murphy Web Design launched in 2006, almost as an afterthought. "Before I became a web designer," Lisa says, "I was a personal gardener and landscaper for several people."

Despite her green thumb, Lisa says she found herself cultivating the fertile grounds of various computer software applications late at night after spending her days in the dirt. "I spent countless hours creating 2D images of plants and outdoor items [on the computer]. I quickly became addicted to manipulating images, troubleshooting software and hardware issues, and interacting with people from all over the world."

After teaching herself the essentials of web design, Lisa took a crack at creating her own page, then a few more for family and friends, then a few more for referrals. In no time, Lisa was exchanging her spade and shovel for an optic mouse and keyboard on a permanent basis. "It wasn't something that was necessarily planned," she explains. "It was more of an evolutionary process."

These days, Lisa spends a good part of each day—some days in the neighborhood of 16 hours—working on websites. She says she doesn't mind the long hours, evincing the familiar refrain of those who have found their passion in life: "It doesn't feel like work to me."

A typical workload includes juggling five or six various projects simultaneously. This is beyond the maintenance of previous projects and the tacit task of reading and responding to client emails and phone calls. One assumes Lisa finds a few minutes here and there to eat or possibly sleep.

"Right now I'm focused on building the City of Elmwood's new website. They liked the site I developed for Tremont, Illinois, and wanted something similar as far as design—large banner images and easy-to-follow navigation."

The irony is that Lisa, a woman responsible for the online branding of people, businesses, and entire cities, likes to keep a low profile. She doesn't invite clients to her home and prefers electronic correspondence over face-to-face encounters. Since she's already at

WORDS BY **WARREN BRINEGAR**   ILLUSTRATION BY **NICOLE BLACKBURN**

the computer, she reasons, it's easier. She's admittedly shy, so web designer appears to be a savvy occupational decision. Working as an Internet Oz behind an electronic curtain fulfills both her artistic and social needs.

And just like the mysterious Wizard of Oz, her methods and machinations remain esoteric to most of us whose experience with computers fails to reach beyond checking emails and updating status reports on Facebook. Lisa herself has a hard time describing exactly what it is she's up to until all hours of the night.

"Web design is comprised of so many different elements," she says, "it's hard to summarize in a tidy definition."

She settles for calling it the art and process of combining copy and design elements into a pleasing arrangement, but that's only the beginning. Web design also includes site navigation, response and loading times, screen resolutions, multimedia, interactivity, font selection… it's an indefatigable list of responsibilities, which makes sense. Computers are expansive computational machines, capable of executing myriad tasks at lightning speed. Add to that an even vaster matrix of interactive information— the Internet—and you have one sizeable palette to work with. The list of required abilities is lengthy, and Lisa says it touches on both analytical and artistic ways of thinking. "Ultimately, an expert in web design must not only be technically adept at building a site, but she must also understand how to present the design elements both cleanly and artistically."

← ┌ Selections from Lisa's extensive portfolio. ┐

Web designers, especially on the scale of a small-business entrepreneur like Lisa, were a rare breed just a few years ago, but the occupation's nascence doesn't mean the industry isn't advancing quickly and mightily. Lisa admits she constantly battles to stay abreast of the latest technology and methods. Add it to her list of responsibilities.

One advancement sweeping the web design landscape is content management systems, or CMS, but it's not a development Lisa endorses. "Using a CMS," she says, "the client is able to update his own website. While CMS can work for some, I do not design sites using it. I've had too many clients come to me after trying a CMS solution developed by another firm or having tried a 'do-it-yourself' template, only to find it did not work for them."

Lisa says in her experience, clients lack the time or talent necessary to maintain a CMS site, especially ones with a lot of bells and whistles. Once they have a taste for what it takes, she says many clients opt for austere and utilitarian applications. "They also like the fact that I can do site updates for them quickly and trouble free. They just send me the update via email, and I make it happen right away."

If her marathon work shifts haven't convinced you already, Lisa doesn't mind shouldering the load. As she toils away in obscurity—site location unknown— she's responsible for the image and message of countless individuals and organizations you interact with every day, and just like a spider in that hidden corner behind your favorite chair, she spins her refined and complicated webs for the world to discover.✦

lisa | murphy
web design

www.LisaMurphyWebDesign.com