

FEATURE

Up and down (and up and down) with Baltimore County internet-porn pioneers Jen and DaveBy **Baynard Woods**

PUBLISHED: APRIL 4, 2012

Though the holidays have long since passed, and the trees are blooming outside, Christmas paper and lights still adorn the walls of Jen and Dave's Baltimore County apartment, along with drawings by their 7-year-old twins. Fossils of ancient video-game systems and an old, broken computer haunt one shelf. The book *Sex for Dummies* is nestled between a copy of *Obscene Profits* (a history of internet pornography published in 2000), and the fifth and sixth volumes of the *Harry Potter* series, with a Christmas elf acting as a bookend. The apartment is cluttered with children's toys—all of the couple's more adult playthings are tucked discretely away. It is warm and stuffy and smells strongly of cats.

It hardly looks like a porn palace, but Jen and Dave (they prefer not to use their last name) have been making and distributing amateur internet porn here for the last 17 years. In fact, through trial, error, and exhibitionism, they helped invent online pornography. And if Frederick Lane, the author of *Obscene Profits* (in which the couple is featured), is right, they also helped pave the way for internet commerce in general.

In April 1995, a 20-year-old Jen, and her then boyfriend Dave took the No. 9 bus from their Cockeysville apartment to buy a 75 megahertz computer and a 14.4 modem, which was, Dave says, "pretty bitchin' back then.

"We found Usenet, the 'actual internet,' and back then Usenet was pure content—just people sharing."

In 1996, Libertarian think tank the Cato Institute estimated that there were "17,000 newsgroups [that] are unmoderated forums known as 'UseNet' newsgroups. A substantial subset of these are 'alt' (alternative) newsgroups, which tend to be devoted to relatively eccentric freewheeling discussions."

Dave was drawn to this eccentric, freewheeling world. "And being a pervert, I quickly found porn," he says.

Dave rattles off this pathway to his discovery like a medieval priest still speaking Latin long after the rest of the world has moved on to another vernacular: "Porn.alt-binaries.pictures.erotica.amateur.female, or alt-binaries.pictures.girlfriend."

He has the kind of druidic look of an aging slacker—long gray hair and a goatee, T-shirt, and loose pants—and he recalls those initial days with a heady nostalgia. "There were these regular

women—it was such a turn-on—they were doing something very personal,” he says. “So I went to Jen and said, ‘Can we do this?’“

“I’ve always been kind of an exhibitionist, so I said sure,” recalls Jen, a short woman with a round, girlish face, red hair, and, it must be said, large breasts.

So Dave started taking nude photographs of Jen. In those days, they had to find somewhere that would develop their film (35 mm negatives, not digital files) despite its content, so they sent it off to Seattle to be processed. In July 1995 they posted the first nude photographs of Jen under the handle SharpJ, and then the partly pseudonymous Jen Sharp.

Both Jen and Dave got off on posting the pictures. Every Sunday night, they would post three new ones. According to the couple, people began downloading and collecting them. But Usenet deleted all posts after a few days, and, according to Jen and Dave, they were bombarded with requests to repost certain images.

“People would write and want Jen Sharp series No. 3 or whatever, trying to fill in the gaps in their collections,” Dave says. “It was happening all the time, and I got sick of it. We had full-time jobs”—Jen as a receptionist and Dave as a salesman. “This was something we were doing for fun.”

On Oct. 1, 1995, they started their first web site. “We had 63 pictures and we posted them all online,” Dave says. “The site was always really slow. No designs or anything.” He says their first server wasn’t prepared for the traffic and “we started getting nasty messages from them, using terms like 3 gigabytes—I had no idea what that meant. And 50,000 unique visitors. They had said ‘unlimited bandwidth,’ but even they didn’t really know what that meant.” (These problems have not gone away, as demonstrated by AT&T’s recent limitation of some subscribers with “unlimited data plans” whose smart phones use roughly the same amount of data as Jen and Dave’s early web site, registered first as cris.com/~jen-dave.)

“It actually caused a policy change,” Jen says. “No one had had that kind of traffic. Even today, it’s hard to get your head around. People tell me I was part of the welcome package at [Johns] Hopkins,” she says, referencing the popularity of her site on college campuses. “For me, it was an ego trip.”

To handle the demand for nude pictures of Jen, they started using “mirrors” as far away as Australia—bouncing back and forth from server to server until the traffic got too high. Eventually they discovered a local mirror, izzy.com, that said it *would* handle their traffic. “For a long time, they did,” says Dave. “But then, even Izzy started to be overwhelmed.”

Other pressures were mounting on the new digital frontier. Dave clearly wasn’t the only one interested in finding X-rated content online, and the Communications Decency Act (CDA), passed by Congress in 1996, threatened to limit “obscenity” and “indecent” on the internet and proposed harsh penalties for those who made such material available to minors. As with the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA) this year, Jen recalls that “the whole internet was freaking out,” and many individuals and businesses either blackened their sites or marked them with “free speech” blue ribbons in protest.

“No one knew it would be shot down,” Jen says, of the 1997 Supreme Court’s *Reno v. ACLU* ruling that declared, as Justice John Paul Stevens wrote in his majority opinion, “that the [CDA] abridges ‘the freedom of speech’ protected by the First Amendment.”

“At the time, the way for us to verify that [visitors to the site] were 18 was to see if they had a credit card,” she says. Adding a pay-wall to the site seemed the perfect way to lower traffic (and keep the server from crashing), while figuratively covering their asses in terms of the CDA.

So in February 1996, Jen and Dave registered their domain name jen-dave.com and opened a membership area on their site that charged for “anything that was completely naked,” as Dave puts it. “It was \$5 for six months of the weekly updates and \$10 for three months of everything we’d put up.

“We made four grand the first week. Then six the next, and after that 10,” Dave continues. They made \$20,000 in the first three weeks. “And it was all in increments of five and 10 dollars,” he adds.

All those people paying \$5 and \$10 to sites like jen-dave.com didn’t know that they were changing the way America did business. The *Wall Street Journal* reported at the time that a woman named Danni Ashe was set to make \$2 million dollars off of her amateur site in 1997. While the idea that there is a lot of money to be made off the internet is conventional wisdom now, the *Journal* was reporting on Ashe precisely because it wasn’t so obvious then.

In *Obscene Profits*, Frederick Lane noted that most corporations were “quick to see the advertising potential of the internet,” arguing that they essentially saw the internet as a giant billboard. But a homegrown site like Jen and Dave’s, he wrote, helped “convincingly [demonstrate] (to an estimated \$2 billion in 1998 alone) that consumers are willing to shop online and use credit cards to make purchases.”

Once online, those corporations faced mom-and-pop start-up sites across a level playing field—something neither side was accustomed to. “It is generally just as easy and quick to access the Web site at ‘www.jen-dave.com’ as it is to visit ‘www.playboy.com,’ despite *Playboy*’s institutional advantages,” Lane wrote.

Jen and Dave weren’t accustomed to having large incomes either. “When we got the money we were 21 and 26, and we didn’t even have a car when we got the computer—it’s hard to get a computer home on the bus,” Jen says. “So when we got [the money], we started spending [it].” They soon quit their jobs and lived off proceeds from the site.

But success brought its own problems. In the old days of Usenet, they had been posting nude photos with joy, as a part of a community for whom it was all about DIY and sharing. Before they ever got their first check from the membership area, the e-mails from those former fans began rolling in—Dave says there were hundreds. “I hid them from Jen,” he says. “They were nasty. ‘You’re a sellout, you’re an awful person. You planned this from the start.’”

At first, it didn’t bother Dave too much. “I was like, ‘Fuck you,’” he says. “If I really wanted to make money, I wouldn’t be doing it like this. But then, it got to me. I was thinking, ‘Oh my God, I’m a filthy fucking sellout.’”

Jen knew nothing of Dave’s inner turmoil, and it only got worse.

“I felt awful,” he says. “I made decisions to limit the money coming in. I slipped into depression, started drinking a lot, letting it go to shit.” In an e-mail, Jen estimates that they made \$60,000 in 1996, a figure she estimates was cut in half in 1997 due to Dave’s attempts to self-sabotage the site. Dave says that while he was still deeply devoted to the site, he “actively avoided things that would make us more money if I thought it could be construed as selling out.” He refused to introduce recurrent billing or banner ads, turned down an invitation to join consortia of similar sites, and kept the site’s pricing structure “ridiculously cheap.” Jen and Dave weren’t the only ones with a site anymore, and they weren’t competing.

When the money dried up, Dave went to work at a national pizza chain. “I still didn’t know how we were going to pay the rent,” Jen says. “So I recruited a co-worker of his”— a woman named nicknamed Simple who later started her own site—“and started reviving the site. Dave taught me the basics of html. In two months, I could do html, and I didn’t have that same guilt [that he did].”

“When I finally told her about the e-mails and told her how I felt, she said one of the wisest things anybody has ever said to me,” Dave says, his voice full of emotion and something akin to awe. “She said, ‘David, you shouldn’t feel guilty about making money doing something you love.’ She asked what I’d do if I won the lottery, and I said I’d make the site free. She told me: If you’d quit your job if you won the lottery, it’s the wrong job.”

With Jen doing the programming, posting, and modeling, the site rose from the ashes, and Jen and Dave found themselves part of another community—this time not the early Usenet sharers, but the community of early truly amateur porn entrepreneurs—who would turn out to have an even more communal vibe than the early Usenet groups.

When they met Oasis (cum2oasis.com), another amateur porn star/webmistress in 1998, they learned about the world of public porn parties. “We reached out to her because I was a big connoisseur of porn, but nothing really appealed to me until I saw her,” Dave says. “When she suggested we should meet at one of her events, I said you’re crazy for meeting your fans. But she convinced us.”

Oasis lived in Florida with her boyfriend Rob, who had run a couple of other adult sites (beginning with a dial-up bulletin-board system in 1987). They were working on the site full time. In an e-mail, Rob recalls that “the entire industry went nuts” over real amateur porn. “I never felt like I sold out,” he adds. “I set out to make money in this from the very beginning.”

Jen and Dave were making money too. Jen estimates that their income from the site went up to about \$90,000 a year around the time they went to one of Oasis and Rob’s parties at a bar in Clearwater, Fla., in May 1998. A year later, they went to another in Arizona. “It was the [amateur] porn renaissance of the late 1990s,” Jen says. They began holding their own parties. “We had 60 people at our third-year [web site] anniversary,” Jen says. “All these people seemed normal. For the most part, everyone was cool, average, like us. It wasn’t like they were coming to see a star. It was a community.” Jen and Dave didn’t charge for the parties, and you didn’t have to be a member to come. “We didn’t plan it out,” Jen says. “At least not in a business sense. It just

became our social life . . . all these webgirls [and] couples traveling around, attending each others' parties, doing fun stuff."

In August 2000, Joab Jackson visited one of Jen and Dave's local parties for his now-defunct *City Paper* column Cyber Punk ("Come as You Are," Aug. 30, 2000). He reported that both Oasis and Steffie (steffiecam.com), another of Jen and Dave's porn friends, were there, describing Oasis as "Ally McBeal-thin twentysomething" and Steffie as a "tough blond biker chick."

But of the fans, whom he described as in their early 20s, Jackson wrote: "It was sad, their shyness, and lack of communication skills."

Dave recalls the *City Paper* story. "It was fair," he says. "But he made it seem like it was all these irredeemable nerds, and we didn't see them that way. They were our friends"

They had a rule that no one should come to a Jen and Dave party expecting sex. "There was no sex at Jen and Dave parties . . . until there was," Jen says.

"Through the parties," Dave adds, "Jen would fool around with other girls—"

"Mainly started with Steffie," Jen says.

As they describe it, the site was more than just their livelihood—it was a major part of their sex life and their social life. "We felt it was a waste of sexual energy, if we didn't get out the camera at some point," Dave says, adding that he is camera shy. "For me the biggest turn on was taking the pictures."

Though many of the thousands of pictures and dozens of videos on the site depict Jen solo, plenty show her with other lovers. Did he ever get jealous?

"At the end of the day—I've never been gifted with a big dick or stamina," he says. "I'm not a great lover. Many others are more gifted. Watching Jen with other guys is a turn-on, but after I feel like I wish I were such a good lover." He pauses before adding, "But she is with me."

Jen and Dave were so heavily involved in the amateur-porn scene that at their wedding in 2000—scheduled to coincide with the site's fifth anniversary—the guest list was split between family and porn friends. "There were a few awkward seating arrangements we tried to avoid," Jen says. A photo on the web site shows her pulling down the top of her wedding dress to reveal her breasts for the camera as guests gawk in the background.

By 2003, in Jen and Dave's opinion, the internet porn world had gone corporate. The events that used to be so much friendly fun were now full of industry types. But porn has always been among the earliest applications of new media technology, and pay sites for amateur women like Jen, mom 'n' pop porn sites, have since been swept up by giant conglomerates or made obsolete by YouTube-like sites where anyone can upload a video without having to commit to running a whole site.

"I yearn for the days of one girl, one site," Dave says. "They were individuals as individuals, not part of a larger thing, or hired models pretending to be amateurs."

But Jen and Dave were growing up as well. They decided they wanted to have a child, and in 2005, they had twins, 10 weeks early. “We’d hoped to do lactation shots and stuff,” Jen says. “But it was overwhelming. The babies took over our life.”

The next year, Dave’s two teenage children from a previous marriage moved in with them. “We had a different kind of crazy for a while,” Jen says.

Now that the older kids have moved out and the twins are in school, Jen is once again spending more time with the site. While she still finds it fulfilling, it is also an economic necessity.

“I grew up on the internet,” Jen says. “I’ve spent my entire adult life doing this. The reason I still am—this is what I know.” She has developed a wide array of web skills over the last 17 years and has worked on a couple of non-porn web sites. “I’ve tried to take what I know and move on in a non-adult way,” she continues. “But it’s still our primary source of income . . . unfortunately.”

“We’re no longer getting 10,000 visitors a day,” Dave says.

“We have a couple hundred members now, but we had about 2,000 in the heyday,” Jen says. “I’m not going to do this forever.”

“I would,” Dave says with a goofy grin. “But,” he adds, seriously, “I still feel responsible. If I didn’t do the things I did to sabotage the site, we would be having this conversation in a nice townhouse somewhere and not this apartment.”

“But it is still nice to look back,” Jen says, looking around the room. “To have that record, you know. I’m like, man, I was hot.”

Dave nods. A few minutes later he says, “I was never a truly moral or ethical person until I got into porn. In the process of doing something I really loved, then being called a sellout, and coming to terms with that, and working with truly wonderful people, I started looking at the big picture, trying to experience life with the rest of human kind. We could have done it differently and been miserable pricks. But we’re not miserable pricks.”