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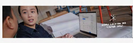

INC. PREMIUM TECHNOLOGY

An Oral History of the 2000 Webby Awards: The Night the Internet Partied IRL

It was Burning Man for the dot-com darlings, the Oscars of the internet, and the last great party for an era about to disappear forever.

BY ANNA SILMAN
MAY 6, 2025

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Webby nominee in the music category WiredPlanet.com Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

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With the internet now as ubiquitous as the air we breathe, it's easy to forget how exciting it was logging on in the year 2000. Long before TikTok and Instagram, viral sensations like the Hamster Dance wormed their way into our brains, while personal publishers like Justin Hall of links.net and Jason Kottke of kottke.org launched a blogging revolution on pixelated Angelfire and Geocities websites. While the e-commerce revolution was still taking off—bookseller Amazon was just five years old—the internet still felt like an exotic foreign land of creative self-expression where anything was possible. Accessed via hulking desktop PCs and screeching dial-up modems, every page-load was a thrill.

The 2000 Webby Awards was, in many ways, the apex of this early dot-com era. Launched in 1997 by 26-year-old artist and digital trailblazer Tiffany Shlain to award innovations in online publishing, the flashy 3,000 person rager atop San Francisco's iconic Nob Hill marked the biggest event to date for the "Oscars of the internet."

This was Web 1.0's Gatsby moment. Mainstream pop culture was finally taking interest in what had once been considered a geeky pastime. Celebrities were lining up to attend, and VC money was pouring into the space.

But the awards show that year was also its swan song—the market selloff that signified the beginning of the dot-com crash was already underway, and the Webbys as a spectacle would never reach such heights of carefree revelry again, though the show is still going strong in its 29th year.

But what heights they were. Alan Cumming served as host, fresh off his stint on Broadway's *Cabaret*, *Roseanne* star Sandra Bernhard and print media queen Tina Brown gave out awards, while David Bowie, Matt Groening, Francis Ford Coppola, and Robin Williams were part of the remote judging body. Among the winners, there are familiar names: Amazon, *The Onion*, and Google's Sergey Brin and Larry Page, whose upstart search engine was vying to unseat the big dogs like Yahoo and Ask Jeeves. Others are time capsules: music pirating enfant terrible Napster, gaming behemoth Shockwave, and John Halcyon Styn's cockybastard.com, which took home the prestigious award for Best Personal Website.

Inc. has gathered the attendees and organizers of that awards show, the artists who performed in it, the media that covered it, and the critics who wrote about it, 25 years later, to remember the excitement of May 11, 2000, in their own words.

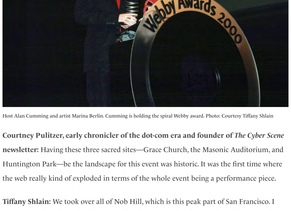
Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky, was a Webby Awards presenter and played at the After Party. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Tiffany Shlain, Webbys founder: The first year of the Webbys was at Bimbo's nightclub, then the Palace of Fine Arts, and then Herbst Theater at City Hall. This year it was like we were taking it all to the next level. It was our biggest-budget event by far. *The New York Times* covered it. *Vanity Fair* called us the 'It' awards show. We were both honoring the medium and also making fun of the hubris and the award show model. It definitely felt like, if you were from San Francisco and young, you were at this epicenter of the world and you were educating people on this new thing. It felt like driving a rocket ship.

Betty Ray, editor of digital radio site Live365: It was such a watershed moment. There was so much money flowing into the web. Everyone was trying to get that so-called first-mover advantage—that was the language back then—and the idea that it would make them the next yahoo.com or whatever they were trying to be. It was a sumptuous time.

Charles Altschul, digital education pioneer: I wasn't alive when Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic. But it was that kind of feeling that you were sort of at the beginning of something monumental.

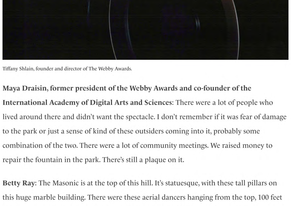
The event took a year to put together and cost around $2 million. Shlain hired dancers from vertical dance troupe Project Bandaloop to rappel down the side of the Masonic Auditorium, where the main awards show took place.



Host Alan Cumming and artist Marina Berlin. Cumming is holding the spiral Webby award. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Courtney Pulitzer, early chronicler of the dot-com era and founder of *The Cyber Scene* newsletter: Having these three sacred sites—Grace Church, the Masonic Auditorium, and Huntington Park—be the landscape for this event was historic. It was the first time where the web really kind of exploded in terms of the whole event being a performance piece.

Tiffany Shlain: We took over all of Nob Hill, which is this peak part of San Francisco. I presented in front of the residents to allow me to tent the whole top of this hill. The theme that year was the web as a time machine. We had the VIP party at Grace Cathedral, and I had opera singers on forklifts with super long dresses so they looked like angels as people walked in.



Tiffany Shlain, founder and director of The Webby Awards.

Maya Draisin, former president of the Webby Awards and co-founder of the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences: There were a lot of people who lived around there and didn't want the spectacle. I don't remember if it was fear of damage to the park or just a sense of kind of these outsiders coming into it, probably some combination of the two. There were a lot of community meetings. We raised money to repair the fountain in the park. There's still a plaque on it.

Betty Ray: The Masonic is at the top of this hill. It's statuesque, with these tall pillars on this huge marble building. There were these aerial dancers hanging from the top, 100 feet up, dangling and writhing around and all these people in glitter and costume, and limousines. It was like Burning Man.

Dancers from the vertical dance troupe Project Bandaloop. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Courtney Pulitzer: There were actors dressed in trench coats and fedoras with old-fashioned cameras, feigning being the paparazzi. It just added to that excitement of bringing the old and the new together.

Tiffany Shlain: When you walked into the theater, we had this thing that looked like an altar that you were invited to put your face in. What people didn't know is that their faces were being projected on a huge 20- or 30-foot screen at the entrance of the theater. And then just as one of my very fancy sponsors was walking in, and I'm about to run the show and direct Alan Cumming and all the moving parts, somebody puts their boob in it.

John Halcyon Styn: Earlier that year at South by Southwest, I met Tiffany, and I said, "I'm going to win a Webby this year." And she said, "Whew, that's pretty cocky." And I go, "Well, my site is called cockybastard.com." So I tried to dress as flamboyantly as possible. I wore a sky blue leisure suit that I got at a thrift store, no shirt, the name of my website on a sticker on my belly, with my long hair in Pippy Longstocking braids with pink and blue hair ties and a full-length monster white fur coat.

Betty Ray: This one big Fox news reporter came running up to John and was like, "Oh, what do we have here, who are you?" He tells her he runs this site called Cocky Bastard. And then the question is, well is that word gonna be able to run on TV? She had to go call the office and her boss to see if they could run it without censoring it.

Vain Glorious artist with their art installation in the lobby, which projected a person's face onto a large screen inside the theater Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

In addition to Cumming, and A-list presenters like Bernhard and Brown, attendees remember being starstruck by internet celebrities like Shawn Fanning of Napster and Turkish viral sensation Mahir Cagri.

Howard Rheingold, writer and critic: You saw everybody there. You didn't see Mark Zuckerberg because he was probably in high school or elementary school. But pretty much everybody else.

Tiffany Shlain: I had seen Alan in *Cabaret* on Broadway. He was just so electric. To me, that was what the early days of the web was. It was edgy. It had a kind of mischievousness to it. It wasn't mainstream. And he perfectly encapsulated the vibe of the Webbys when it was edgy and new and alternative, before 2000 when the commerce part started taking over.

Courtney Pulitzer: Meeting Tina Brown was really exciting for me. My business at the time was doing these cocktail parties, "Cocktails With Courtney," every month and writing about them—the gossip column of the dot-com era, as it's been called. She was a huge icon.

Tina Brown, Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Betty Ray: I was starstruck by the Napster guy, Shawn Fanning. Music was disrupted by internet technology really early, and Napster was taking the lead in that. It was amazing because he was just this brave kid who had kind of written this thing in his basement. It was a time when being really disruptive was dangerous and exciting. Dangerous because this kid could get sued to oblivion, which he did, and piss off a lot of people, which he also did.

Courtney Pulitzer: We went wild when we saw Mahir. Oh, my god, this guy was huge. He was like this Turkish internet sensation. He did this thing where he kept saying, "I kiss you, I kiss you." I think it was one of those first examples of someone becoming a viral sensation and becoming, like, an actual star for something that they did on their website. It was this perfect example of what the internet could and did do at that time.

Sean Parker and Shawn Fanning of Napster. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Winners in 27 categories were awarded both by a 270-person judging panel and also, for the first time, by a people's choice vote cast on the Webby Awards website. The recipients of the coil-shaped statuettes were an eclectic bunch: BabyCenter for commerce, Scholastic.com for kids, IMDB for film, Paul Smith for fashion, and Jim Romenesko's Media News for news. Most notably, it marked a victory for 27-year-old wunderkinds Sergey Brin and Larry Page of Google, who won in the technical achievement category.

Howard Rheingold: Larry and Sergey from Google were there in complete hockey outfits, with hockey skates on.

Tiffany Shlain: They were wearing silver capes.

Betty Ray: We were like, who are these guys? Because Yahoo had been the big search engine. We had all heard that Google's algorithms were cool. That's sort of what we heard, like, oh, it's this cool search, and it's just so much better than Yahoo, and it's gonna kill it. They were young upstarts, and they were just super playful.

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John Halcyon Styn: I remember Google being there and feeling like I was definitely the bigger deal.

Sergey Brin, Larry Page, and other members of the Google team. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Each of the winners was asked to deliver a five-word acceptance speech, a beloved Webbys tradition that remains to this day.

John Halcyon Styn: I was like, How can I get the most time possible onstage with five words? So I played charades. I said, "Let's play," and I held up three fingers and said, "First word," and I started rubbing my body until someone yelled, "Feel." Second word was "the," and then I made the heart sign: "Feel the love."

Mark Surfas, founder and CEO of GameSpy: We decided that the appropriate award speech—which we thought, and still think, is probably the best award speech we've ever heard—was "Everyone likes the licky-licky." The whole place just exploded. Everybody just thought that was the funniest fucking thing. I'll never forget that.

Courtney Pulitzer: Then at some point there was a marching band intermission, where a marching band came through the aisles. It was almost like they took every celebratory thing that could happen in American life and put it all together.

That year, SFMOMA sponsored a special $30,000 award for digital art, the first Webby to come with a cash prize. Winners were artist duo Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, whose site Entropy8Zuper! was hailed by The New York Times for their "complex virtual environments full of visually sophisticated images and evocative sounds."

Left to right: Filmmaker Paul Kolsby, UC Berkeley professor and artist Ken Goldberg, Alan Cumming, Tiffany Shlain, Candace Feldman, Dr. Leonard Shlain, and Alan Eyzaguirre. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Aurica Harvey, artist: The Webbys themselves were in some ways uncool to us at that moment. It was all very showbiz and there was this connection with regular pop culture—that was not something that artists who were working online were interested in, like, at all.

Michaël Samyn, artist: We were a bit snobs about being online. We thought the internet was better than anything else. I think we were a bit annoyed by the spectacle they made out of these five words.

Aurica Harvey: I remember looking at Michael and I said, if we win, we're just gonna kiss. We had fallen in love online and met in person at the Webbys in 1999. We had been together for a year. We were madly in love. So we got up there and we just went at it. Bill Viola [the famous video artist who presented the award] then tried to hide us from the cameras with his jacket. It was pretty awesome, actually, to kiss in front of all those people, like a public statement of intent. That moment, for the longest time, stood as like the most poetic moment of my life. When Zendaya is playing me in a movie about this time period, she's gonna kill that scene.

Aurica Harvey and Michaël Samyn. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Michaël Samyn: I think that was an aspect also of internet culture at the time, that exhibitionism, sharing these very personal details with people you didn't know.

Aurica Harvey: We won $30,000. We were broke AF and we didn't have any furniture whatsoever, so after winning that we bought our couch.

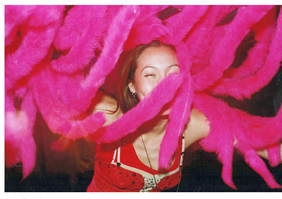
After the ceremony, the revelry continued at the afterparty in nearby Huntington Park, which was covered in tents.

Maya Draisin: To make an outdoor city park an indoor space is pretty phenomenal. Imagine you tented Union Square or Bryant Park. You have trees indoors. I just remember it feeling very magical and over-the-top. I think we were all giddy. In all ways, you're on the top of the world.

Betty Ray: There was free sushi, ice sculptures, free food everywhere, lots of free alcohol. Absolut was one of the sponsors. And the money talk was just ubiquitous. Everywhere you went, somebody was getting a deal. "Oh, here's this VC, you need to talk to this person. This guy's got money, or he had this deal with so and so." It was a giant networking event.

Mark Surfas: They had a drink called the Webby Crush. It was some sort of vodka pomegranate drink. We drank a ton of those. We brought that back home to the office.

Courtney Pulitzer: I remember there was something called the Fluff-O-Matic machine that was like hot pink feather boas that were kind of waving as you walked through them. There were all these different interactive things. We got to be these adult kids.



The Fluff-O-Matic. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

For many attendees, it was the last big dot-com party they ever attended. As the revelers were downing Webby Crushes atop Nob Hill, a major selloff of tech stocks was already underway and several high-profile companies were beginning to wobble. The following year saw 9/11 and the ensuing market collapse, mass layoffs across Silicon Valley, and the death of industry leaders like Pets.com and eToys. By the time of the next year's ceremonies, one-fifth of the 2000 nominees had gone out of business.

Mark Surfas: There were a lot of advertisers that were fairly scammy. I don't know if you remember any of those "punch-the-monkey" type ads. Those kinds of people were throwing around crazy amounts of money, and when things dried up, a lot of those guys just evaporated and left us and everybody else holding the bag. Times were pretty desperate for the next couple of years. We were able to actually buy a couple of competitors that were in that space, just in a desperate bid to kind of stay alive. We were certainly not thinking about trying to win any awards, that's for sure.

Webby attendees along with artist Marina Berlin, who served as the Webby Award statue presenter. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

Courtney Pulitzer: It was one of the last big celebratory moments of the era. Then there was the market crash, and the marketing budgets of all these dot-coms, that's first to be cut. And then 9/11, which just decimated the New York City dot-com scene.

Aurica Harvey: It was the height of net art and the death of net art at the same time. After that, there was absolutely no institutional interest in digital art whatsoever. Don't ever let them lie to you and tell you anything different.

Betty Ray: That area South of Market [in San Francisco] just really dried up. It became a ghost town. Let alone no more sushi and no more Absolut Vodka.

Tiffany Shlain: We were able to do another big show the next year at the Opera House, mostly because there were sponsors that had come on for two years, and then after that we did the first remote one. Then I sold it; my last year being involved was 2006. It started to become all a lot more about commerce and selling that your data, and it started to feel really manipulative, which was not at all what I originally was excited about with the web.

The first four years, it was like Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory: this incredible world, and we're building it, and there were all these possibilities for edginess and creativity and connectedness. And then the commerce started to kind of take over, and then it started to feel like the Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory tunnel of terror scene. And you're like, *Whoa, get me out of here.*

Maya Draisin and Tiffany Shlain looking at press of the event, which was covered by *TIME*, *Vanity Fair*, *Talk*, Entertainment Weekly, CNN, and the LA Times. Photo: Courtesy Tiffany Shlain

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