

No Parking Anytime: All lava lamps, all the time 'Mad computer genius' creates quirky Web site

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Watching a lava lamp's slow oozing might be strange enough. But go to Jerry Whiting's Web site, and there's no need for an actual lava lamp on the nightstand by the roach clip.

He's created a webcam that shows two lava lamps 24 hours a day -- which raised the question last week while sitting in his bar code-technology company's office in West Seattle: Why? "I'm a nerdy guy. I got to wondering if there was a lava lamp webcam. And when I realized there wasn't, I had to fix that," he said.



But that raises the question, who wonders if a lava lamp webcam exists? Was he a lava lamp enthusiast? No, he said. Whiting, 55, is a child of the 1960s but never had a lava lamp until he bought one on Craigslist about a year ago to create the webcam. "It was because he's a mad computer genius who really likes gadgets," said Miranda Pinero, 37, the director of operations for the bar code company, Azalea Software. Really, Whiting said, he doesn't remember what made him wonder about lava lamp webcams. But why? "I thought about (a webcam) with Sea-Monkeys," he said. "But that would have been too weird."

Whatever the reason, it was deemed one of the 25 most interesting webcams on the Internet -- a list that includes ones of Niagara Falls, a beachfront in Thassos, Greece, and bees in Millertown, Pa.

The judges -- among them, Barry Josephson, executive producer of the television drama "Bones," comedian Pauly Shore and recording artist Tommy James -- "decided to have some fun," said Justin Camerlengo, spokesman for [EarthCam](#), the webcam products company that has run the contest for 10 years. "They enjoyed going back to the '60s."

A lot of strange things come from Whiting's mind. He's gotten permission from the Coast Guard to put a model lighthouse and beacon on the roof of his penthouse condo on the northern tip of West Seattle. "Why?" is a question that comes up often when talking to him. He was at his weekly poker game, he said, and the question came up: Could you program a cell phone to remotely make a beacon blink from miles away? It turns out you can. Whiting has made a career out of wondering whether something could be done, then figuring out how to do it. He grew up in Cleveland, the kind of kid who spent all his time in the basement with a chemistry set. He and his friends used to make their own pyrotechnics and sell them at school until one friend almost burned his face off while combining chemicals. Another time, he figured out from books how to make napalm; his dad caught him as he was about to try to light it in the backyard.

Whiting also played with computers and learned how to write programs at 14. Without formal training -- he'd planned a career in acupuncture -- he got a job as a programmer for the Aldus company during the Page-Maker days in 1987. He was shopping one day when he wondered if there was a way to write a program to create bar codes. He did it in a few hours. And while a guy who sets up a lava lamp webcam might attract strange looks, he had the foresight to keep the copyright for the program. He started Azalea 16 years ago, selling the software to major retailers and universities.

He also sells bar code temporary tattoos, which scan on bar code readers.

"I was the last kid picked for teams. I was a nerd," he said. Now he can put lava lamp webcams online or make a lighthouse blink on his West Seattle roof from downtown, if he wants. "It's like the 'Revenge of the Nerds.' "

He's asked who would spend their time looking at a lava lamp webcam. For once, he's stumped.