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Game Gurus, Clicking Their Way To Fame & Fortune

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Two years ago this week, over the lull of winter break, Rocco Repetski got bored the way high school juniors who happen to be math geniuses (and who happen to take interest in computer code) get bored. He wondered, why not design an online game?

He wasn't thinking, "Oh, a game will make thousands of dollars," though that would come later. He was thinking, "Oh, creating a game is cool," in the particular manner a teenager deems instant messaging and PlayStation 2 not only as "cool things" but as "facts of life."

To play Repetski's game, you sign up online, you get a secret link, you send it to your friends, you tell them to click on that link. The more clicks you get, the more points you earn. The more alliances you make, the more chance you'll have at landing on top of the ranking list. Simple, harmless, quick fun, like one of those chain letters -- "Please copy this entire e-mail and send it to 10 friends" -- waiting in your in box.

"It's really a primitive game that you couldn't really do anything with," says the 18-year-old, a graduate of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, or TJ, the highly selective magnet school in Alexandria. In Repetski's mind, the game could only get better. So it did.

Together with Ben Gelb, Aman Gupta and Nick Meyer, also TJ graduates, Repetski developed Kings of Chaos, or KoC. It is a "massively multi-player online role-playing game" -- a mouthful, like its acronym, MMORPG -- inspired by Middle Earth, with humans, elves, dwarfs and orcs battling for survival. Not coincidentally, the free site took off at about the same time "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers" reigned at the box office.

"I had this sole goal of seeing how many people I could get to my site," says Repetski.

Try about 5 million page views a day, with 136,488 active users and more than 90,000 hits on Google, complete with fan sites.

How a simple online game like KoC can balloon from being on a computer server of a local high school into one of the top 50 gaming sites on the Internet -- a few spots below FreeArcade.com and Nintendo.com, with a gross revenue of more than $175,000 this year -- is a big, big surprise. Even to its creators, who in the past eight months have each received a check, the exact amount they'd rather not say. The money, they admit, helps pay for their freshman year in college -- and for "some toys," adds Meyers, half-smiling.

This is proof, pure and clear, of a highly democratic Internet, which in its laissez-faire, anything-goes paradigm allows something as ingeniously entrepreneurial as this to happen. From that winter break in 2002, when Repetski put the game on his school Web site, it took only a few weeks before TJ's server

couldn't, and shouldn't, handle the game's online traffic, the group decided. "We figured we had to get more serious," Gelb says. They needed their own top-of-the-line servers -- four of them at a cost of $20,000 and a monthly fee of about $1,500, paid for out of the game's revenue. Never mind that the creators were high schoolers who'd run from their U.S. history class in room 219 to the computer systems lab in room 115 to check on their business.

"It does and it doesn't surprise me. These kids are digitally inclined, and, as a result, they are adept at utilizing tools that are available to them now. It doesn't require a large-scale infrastructure to support a business opportunity on the Internet," says Michael Dowling, general manager of Nielsen Interactive Entertainment. Having upwards of 130,000 users is more than a respectable figure, adds Dowling, considering that well-known, well-budgeted, pay-to-play MMORPGs such as Everquest II and Star Wars Galaxies are attracting 350,000 and 250,000 users, respectively. "But it's crazy to really think about what these kids have done, isn't it?"

The game's users, 90 percent of them male, with an average age range of 13-21, are mostly in the United States, though there are some in Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Australia, according to a user survey conducted by the site last year.

Randy Latimer has gotten over the initial shock, the star-struck quality of it all. Latimer, the director of the computer systems lab at TJ, taught Gelb, Gupta and Meyer.

"I'm a musician on the side," says Latimer, who plays violin, guitar and drums. "For any musician, writing the hit song is the holy grail. But who's got the magic formula to do that? It's timing, yes. It's skills, yes. It's both. I've always thought that what they've done is like writing that hit song. Except they worked as a team. They weren't a bunch of kids sitting alone in front of the computer."

On a recent weekday, Repetski, of nearby Oakton, is leaning on a long dining table, at the Gelbs' four-bedroom Vienna home, surrounded by Gelb, Meyer, of Alexandria, and Gupta, of Chantilly. They're on winter break, this time from college. Mr. Gelb, as the father of the house is known, is sitting on the table, positively glowing. Mrs. Gelb, who's eating a late lunch in the kitchen, yells out, "Skiing!" when her son is asked about his other hobbies. ("She doesn't want him to be seen as a computer geek," says Mr. Gelb, who runs a PR consulting firm.)

In a way, the quartet -- three white, one Asian -- are a reflection of TJ, a school of about 1,600 high-achieving kids from middle- to upper-middle-class families, most of them white, a lot Asian, all with access to their own Web space in the school's server. Gelb, Meyer and Repetski are freshmen at Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Gupta, the "slacker-master programmer" type who's too smart for school, is thinking of dropping out of George Mason University.

"You're not dropping out," says the younger Gelb.

"I'm not seriously considering it," replies Gupta. "But in the back of my mind, I know I probably won't finish college."

They're close friends, the usual clique with a ping-pong-like way of completing each other's sentences and a history of too many Cokes and cheese pizzas with grilled chicken and bacon. If there is such a thing as a computer-gamer look, they have it. Repetski and Gelb have known each other since preschool; Meyer and Gupta met during Spanish in their freshman year; Gupta and Gelb hung out at TJ's computer systems lab in their sophomore year; and Meyer -- Meyer was the guy who spent his freshman year programming video games (a Space Invaders-type game, a Donkey Kong-type game) in the computers of the school library. "See, that was the rule," explains Meyer. "You could play video games as long as you made them."

They're not fond of personal titles. "The second you name somebody president, then you're asking for trouble," says Gelb. Still, each one plays a crucial, distinct role.

Meyer is the hardcore gamer, the one who figures out how the game will work out in real life. Gupta is the head programmer and the advertising manager. Gelb is the money man, the one who mails out the monthly checks. Repetski is the ethicist, reading and answering user e-mails, and the house mathematician, figuring out the equations that determine who has the top stop on the rankings list.

For Meyer, running an online game on top of his four classes -- physics, chemistry and multivariable calculus among them -- is getting to be a bit much.

"It can be a chore sometimes," says Meyer. "It's one thing to start a Web site. It's another thing to maintain a Web site . . ."

Gelb cuts in. "A lot of people say that once you start a game this big, you have a responsibility to maintain it. When a server goes down, when a new gaming feature isn't good enough, there are always a few people" -- the users, he means -- "who speak out saying, 'You guys aren't doing enough for the game.' Then basically we say, 'We have degrees to get and homework to do.' "

Repetski shrugs, leans closer to the table. "This is not something I plan to work on full time after college," he says, adding that he has yet to declare a major in college -- maybe physics, maybe computer science, maybe aeronautical engineering. "I'm not really sure what I'll eventually study. Something interesting, hopefully."

Like how to start another online game during another winter break?