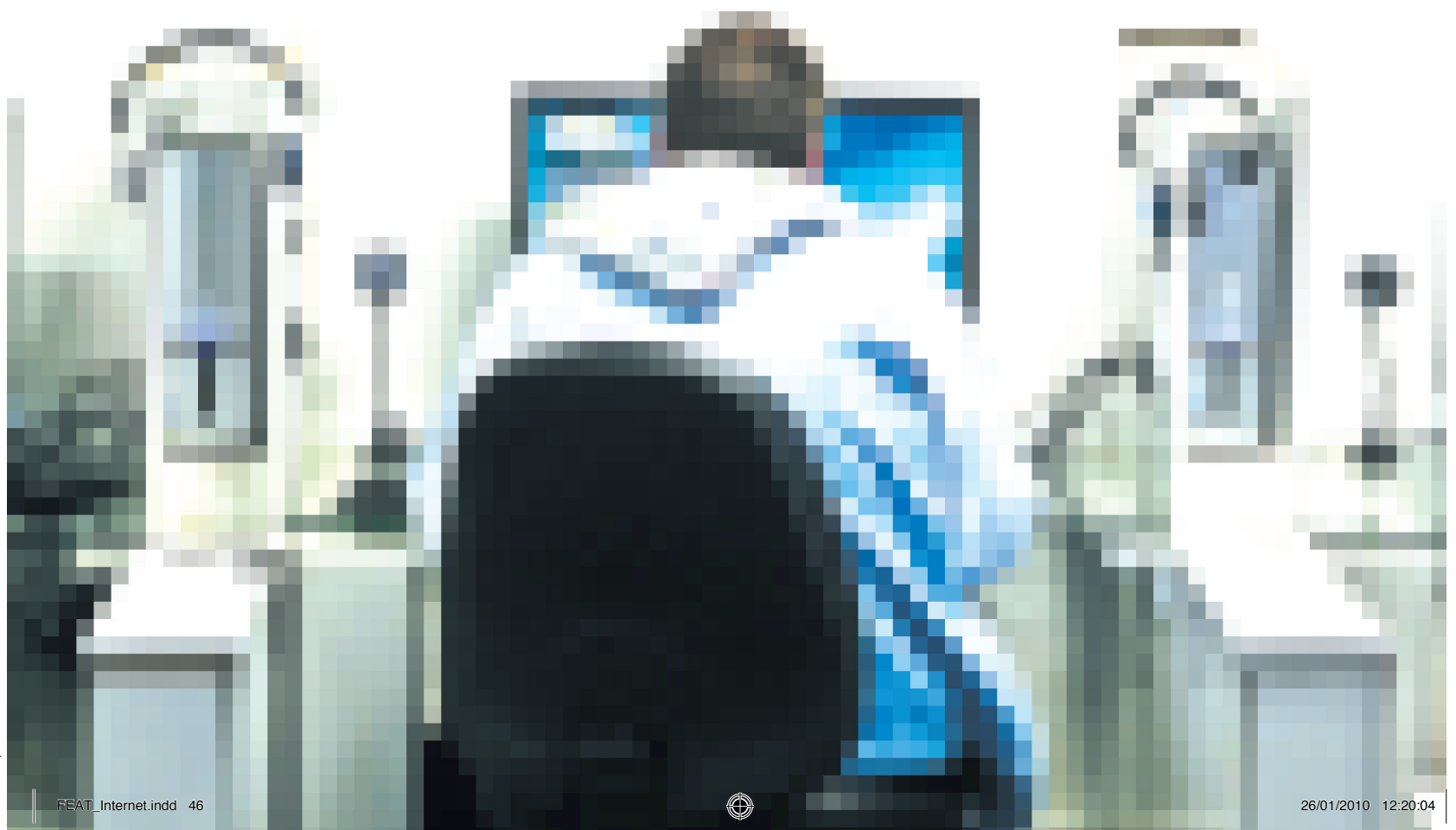


DOT COM BOOM

Throughout the day and deep into the night, they welcome gamers and gamblers, immigrants calling home and people with nowhere else to go. LENNY ANTONELLI spent a week wandering Dublin's Internet cafés



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IT'S AFTER midnight in an Internet café in Dublin city centre. The room is half full; chatting staff ignore the 'Please Keep Quiet' signs on the walls. In the corner, a 30-something woman spins an online roulette wheel over and over. Others play games and check Facebook. Some browse sex chat sites.

A pounding noise upstairs in the private members' room shakes the ceiling. "What's your fucking problem? You stupid baldy c***," a man's voice shouts repeatedly. "You stupid baldy c***!"

Staff run up, then back down again to call the Garda. It seems the shouting man had been pretending to work there, ordering a woman asleep at her keyboard to wake up. Regular customers confronted him and a brawl ensued; one of those trying to help ended up with cuts on his face and torn clothing. The guards eventually found the offender, who had headed off down the street, but no charges were pressed.

After a while everything is calm again, and the staff shrug off the incident. Not long later, the man sticks his head back in the front door. "Anyone seen my phone?" he asks calmly.

The action was real tonight, but mostly it's pretend. At night adult gamers arrive in the cafés, usually to play World of Warcraft (WoW to its devotees), a multiplayer fantasy game that – by all accounts I've heard – is highly addictive. It has 11 million players worldwide.

"A 30-SOMETHING WOMAN SPINS AN ONLINE ROULETTE WHEEL OVER AND OVER. OTHERS PLAY GAMES AND CHECK FACEBOOK. SOME BROWSE SEX CHAT SITES."

Marco, 38, spends "50 or 60 hours a week" playing WoW here. A former corporal in the Dutch army, he played rugby at the highest level in Holland before a sky-diving accident forced him to quit. He landed a job with an airline in Dublin and took advantage of generous staff discounts – he could fly first class for free. "Eight o'clock in the morning

IRELAND'S INTERNET HISTOR.IE

1967 "With the use of a large screen, people will have television discussions by telephone as a family party." *Erskine Childers, Irish Minister for Transport, Power, Posts & Telegraphs*

1991 Ireland's first commercial Internet service provider (ISP) is established in a small room in Trinity College

1993 A community board called Galway Online morphs into an ISP called Ireland Online when they move the operation to Dublin

1998 US President Bill Clinton and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern sign a strategic joint communiqué on e-commerce using a digital signature

2005 Ryanair is named the most popular airline on the web by Google. ryanair.com is the most searched travel website in Europe

2009 The number of Irish broadband users hits 1.2 million



– open the champagne please!” he laughs. “I saw the whole world for free. You name it and I’ve probably been there.” Venezuela? “Yup.” Hawaii? “Yup.” Fiji? “Yup.” Ethiopia? “No, I didn’t do Africa.” He was made redundant in 2005 when the airline moved its operations to Poland.

■ “A SHOCKED CROWD FORMED AT THE SHOP WINDOW. ‘WHEN I POINTED IT OUT TO THE PRIEST, HE WAS SWEATING – HE GOT UP AND LEFT QUICKLY.’”

Marco says it’s the social side of WoW that appeals to him – talking to other players, usually via a headpiece, is a big part of the game. Another man tells me he’s had “great conversations with players

from Israel and Palestine. You meet people from all over the world and talk about religion and politics. The level of intelligence is very high.”

Despite the steady stream of gamers flowing through their doors at all hours, Dublin’s Internet cafés are by no means recession-proof. “We’ve probably been hit harder than a lot of places,” says Dennis from Kimmage, who manages a café in Temple Bar. He took the job when a broken leg and quadruple bypass forced him to swap his 24-hour car-recovery service for less demanding work. Up to two years ago, most of his custom came from immigrants contacting home, but many have since left Ireland. Revenue is half what it was in 2007.

Dennis isn’t complaining though. “It’s fun, every day is different.” He has his share of stories: old men coming in to call sex chat lines, a student whose porn habits led to a string of complaints, and a female customer who Gardaí suspected of child trafficking.

His favourite, though, is of the priest whose porn-watching prompted a shocked



crowd to form at the shop window. “There were 20 or 25 people,” he says. “When I pointed it out to the priest, he was sweating – he got up and left quickly.”

THE WALL behind Leo, a slight young man from south-east China who works in a northside Internet café, is plastered with CCTV photos of thieving customers. One of them managed to strike four times, snatching purses and wallets from people’s pockets. Another stole €110 from Leo’s own jacket. He once had to call the gardai when a man locked himself in the bathroom, took drugs and fell asleep. They kicked the door in.

Leo says that business is down drastically; his boss is struggling to pay the bills. But despite this – and the odd bit of trouble – he says the job is generally hassle-free. He’s glad he made the move from China to study business and computers four years ago: “It’s very different here,” he says. “Life in Ireland is easy.”

Ali is equally happy he made the move. This slender, tracksuited 21-year-old

spends a few hours each day in a Liffey Street Internet café chatting to his parents and friends in Pakistan on Skype. He’s not working at the moment and can’t afford a computer. Still, life in Ireland is “very good,” he says – “but very cold.”

“AT 7AM, TWO MEN SIT IN FRONT OF COMPUTERS, SOUND ASLEEP. BEHIND THEM, A YOUNG WOMAN IS ASLEEP ON A DESK WITH NO COMPUTER.”

Dubliner Brian, too, spends up to six hours a day chatting in Internet cafés. He returned to Ireland from Canada after five years in September, but his girlfriend and other friends are still across the water. “I loved [Canada] but

I was deported. My visa expired and my passport expired.”

How does he find Dublin now? “It’s changed quite a lot. It’s a lot faster, more dangerous. There’s more drink and drugs in the city. One or two of the Internet cafés around are [open] 24 hours a day and a lot of people just use them as sleeping houses. The lights are turned down and people just sleep on the floor and in the phone booths.”

Of course many customers come in for simple reasons – to check emails, browse Facebook, chat. And the Internet cafés of Dublin are more than a little varied – some are dank and dingy with rickety computers that crawl along; others have big cushy chairs, wide booths and widescreen monitors. But Brian was right – some double as sleeping dens too. At 7am in another city-centre Internet café, two men sit in front of computers, sound asleep. Behind them, a young woman is asleep on a desk with no computer. At the back of the room a man is stretched out on the floor asleep, his head tucked under a desk.

In another Internet café nearby, men sleep uncomfortably on sparse plastic seats. The lucky ones stretch out across two, buried under blankets.

Kevin, a slim man with greying hair and a hunched gait, chats with the night worker and other customers, some of whom are just waking up. He seems to know everyone. “This is what we do,” he says. “Come in here for the night, put the head down for a few hours and watch a good film.” He’s been homeless for three months. “My wife got pregnant with my best friend,” he says. “I lost my job, my home, everything.” He says the lads in the café try to get into hostels, but they’re “too full of junkies,” and often booked out.

Early another morning, a bleary-eyed man in a grey hoody asks me to help him find Metallica songs online. He’s not that familiar with computers. He shows me a blood stain on his elbow. “I nicked a bike from O’Connell Street, but the Guards must have seen me because when I cycled past the station they tackled me off the bike.” He gets up to leave. Another man follows him out the door, grabbing his sleeping bag and heading out into the dark street.