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Better BFFs

For many people, online friends are best friends indeed, if not in person.

By Natalie Pompilio - July 20, 2008

For The Inquirer

Yevgenia Arlenok does a lot of things and knows a lot of people. The 26-year-old Ardmore resident, who starts classes at community college in the fall, works at day-care centers and schools and volunteers with charities ranging from Habitat for Humanity to Big Brothers Big Sisters Southeastern Pennsylvania.

But when she thinks about the people with whom she's closest - the ones she tends to seek out when something's troubling her - she does not turn to the folks she knows from her multiple activities. She thinks of the friends she's met online, the people she's connected to and bonded with on sites like Second Life, Facebook and MySpace.

"I can think of plenty of times when I felt my online friends came through for me when I felt my real-life friends didn't," Arlenok said in an e-mail interview.

For years people have tried to spark romantic relationships using sites like Match.com, JDate and eHarmony, which invite users to post profiles and make contact with strangers they otherwise might not have met. But virtual worlds - where people create computer-generated representations of themselves called avatars and play games, build societies, and meet for chatting, parties and more - also encourage deep, I-feel-like-I've-known-you-all-my-life friendships. And in some cases, these people have never met in person.

"This is not just geek stuff anymore," said Jeremy Bailenson, director of Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, which was created five years ago to study social behavior in virtual worlds. "This is a large part of our population putting stock into our online selves."

Nick Yee, also of the Lab, was a graduate student when he conducted a survey of 30,000 gamers that found that nearly 40 percent of men and 53 percent of women who play online games said their virtual friends were equal to or better than their real-life friends. More than a quarter of the gamers said the emotional highlight of their past week took place in a virtual environment.

Howard Rheingold, the critic and writer who is credited with inventing the term "virtual communities," said the things that are missing from online communications - lack of

judgmental facial expressions, tone of voice, body posture - can feel like an advantage to some people.

"It gives you the opportunity to talk to a person and communicate about values and shared interests without being distracted by that strong physical component," Rheingold said. "You might have a chance to have a deeper conversation easier. You might have a different impression if you met face-to-face."

Brian Shuster, CEO of Utherverse Inc., an Internet networking company interlinking virtual worlds including redlightcenter.com, said people who don't frequent these Web-based universes may have difficulty imagining their appeal. Of Utherverse's worlds, Red Light Center is one geared towards adults - and based on real-life Amsterdam - meaning avatars aren't only meeting for (virtual) tea and conversation.

"It's like waking up and going, 'My God, I'm actually at home, and for the last couple of hours I've been in a different moment,' " Shuster said. "It's immersive."

Shuster knows firsthand the appeal of these worlds. When he went through a bad breakup, he said, it was his online friends who helped get him through it.

"I didn't want to leave my condo, and I spent a lot of time talking to friends I made at Red Light Center," he said. "I had a whole bunch of people saying, 'It's going to be OK.' It was uplifting and therapeutic."

In some ways, it's easy to see how facile it would be to make friends in a virtual world. Profiles allow quick glimpses into people's lives - assuming they're being truthful - allowing players to find fellow Phillies fans or model-train collectors or ham-radio users. Compare that with going to a nightclub, where the personal backgrounds of those strangers are significantly harder to come by.

For some, participation in virtual worlds takes away limitations they might face in the real one.

Colin Trethewey is a spokesman for Weblo, a virtual world where people can buy and sell every property on Earth with real currency. He tells of one of Weblo's stars, who is a woman living in a small town on Canada's west coast. In real life, she's isolated by her location. Online, she's the mayor of 50 major cities, including Pittsburgh.

"She has a persona in the virtual world she definitely doesn't have in the real world. She's very popular and people look up to her as a sort of leader," Trethewey said.

Christina R., a 30-year-old housewife from Marcus Hook, Delaware County, who declined to give her last name, said she first migrated to chat rooms because she was looking for people who wouldn't judge her. She was a single mother, having had her child at age 15.

Since then, the Internet has helped her meet her husband - whom she calls "the love of my life" - and some of her best friends.

"Friends online seem to be less conditional. They tend to give you honest, unconditional advice," Christina said in an e-mail interview.

For the last year, Mandi O'Keefe, 30, has spent eight to 10 hours a day in virtual worlds. Disabled from an on-the-job injury, the Birdsboro, Berks County, woman has chronic pain and an arm prone to spasms. None of that shows online.

"My avatar doesn't have any injuries. She doesn't get hurt when she falls down," O'Keefe said, quickly adding that she doesn't present a false self to her online friends. "I'm just as real out there as I am out here."

For O'Keefe, the virtual worlds of Utherverse.com are the place where she meets with some of her dearest friends on a daily basis. She'll talk with them on the phone, over Web cams, and has even met some of them in person.

But she's careful. She was betrayed, she said, by one woman she considered a good friend.

"You can get close enough to someone in a virtual world for them to turn around and mentally hurt you in the real world," O'Keefe said.

Are such relationships healthy? That depends.

"I'm not sure if it's healthy or unhealthy, but it is sort of the way of the world," said Kimberly Young, a clinical psychologist who teaches at St. Bonaventure University and the director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery in Bradford, Pa. "Already, we see people engaged more with their BlackBerry than with each other when they go to bars, dinner or anywhere."

But online relationships can be dangerous, as someone could be luring you in, only to break your trust.

Young recalled one unusual story in which a woman thought she'd met a man online, fell in love - and found the man was another woman.

"I don't think everything is as dramatic as that, but there's a skepticism that's healthy to have when going into an online relationship," she said. "It can be dangerous because you start to feel the other person is your soul mate. But if you can say anything you feel like, so can anybody else."

Rheingold said that even if online friends don't become best friends, there's a benefit to building a "portfolio of weak ties." When you experience something traumatic, he explained, like losing your home, you're most likely to seek shelter from one of your

closest friends or relatives. But when you lose a job or are seeking a mate, a sizable network of weak ties can come to the rescue.

"Weak ties can be very important," he said, "hence the utility you find in Facebook or LinkedIn."

Despite the growing popularity of these new means of communicating and relating, Bailenson doesn't think there's a concern for the future of the race.

"Throughout human history, when new media comes out, there's always concerns," he said. "We love media, but we also love face-to-face interactions. Humans are physical animals. As a species, we've long adjusted to different media, from cave paintings to television, and we still stay people."