mechanics of porn

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The Porn Lords of Budapest took my bid for the project. Shackles latched and key tossed out, I'll be here for…oh, let's just say another month. I've got my own apartment in the ghetto. I'm directing a team of programmers who barely speak English. I own one change of clothes. There are naked people in my office.

For the past three years of my life adventure has followed adventure and given the opportunity to build Europe's largest internet porn empire, I accepted with only a little hesitation.

The decision to take contract work in Budapest was confounding. One overwhelming obligation simplified my choice—I was deeply in debt on my Mother's credit card, which I had promised to pay off at the first opportunity. The vocational merits of the work were compelling, especially with a project of this size and complexity. In this industry (web programming), porn web sites are the hardest-hit, most secure, high-tech sites built. And there's the excitement, the overpowering curiosity, of living in Budapest in my own place. All very influential reasons. But then there is pornography. More than sleep-ing in, wearing socks with sandals or even public erections, any association with porn is a fire-alarm of shame. At first I was sensitive to the overwhelming social condemnation of porn, I felt wrong to associate myself with it. But why? Taboos and traditions have always perturbed me, and it felt wrong to make a decision without fully understanding the arguments at play. I felt the freedom to explore. I grew curious.

It was arranged that I would be flown to Budapest on a one-week return ticket to assess the project, to see how damn dirty the whole thing was, to allow client and contractor to exchange contemptuous glances. I fantasized about international espionage as I packed my battle-worn laptop and a sweater. The hired gun still needs to keep warm.

I am in and out of a series of boxes, pass some time with book in hand—suddenly the world is different. Metro→RER→bus→airplane→airplane→bus→metro→tram→elevator: suddenly there is Magyar, Forints, goulash, post-Communism, and the Blue Danube. Contrast is the essence of perception.

One of the Porn Lords' minions meets me at the airport and we ride a bus into the city, discussing the week to come. He has a hard time describing what to expect. Without any cultural common ground it is difficult to understand an office and place of business where people get naked and have sex. I dream of a twisted Dr. Seuss story where a boy from the country wanders into the city and sees many strange things, including pimps on stilts and breast police.

The first week at the office is unsettling. It is a time of information gathering for me, orientation. Porno head-quarters is an entire floor of one of the grandest buildings in Budapest, facing onto the Hungarian version of the Champs-Elysées. This grandeur is not redemptive, the moral agenda of the place is the same as the two-bit peep shows that litter the neighborhood where I live. But aesthetically speaking it's nice. A lot better I hear than the warehouse that they had before on the edge of town. I'm sure the models feel better about spreading their pink in rooms with hardwood floors, high ceilings and balconies. There are three photo studios, refitted daily with new fur-niture, wallpaper, paint. There is a costume room where the models are refitted with new furnishings, hair, make-up. The studio films and photographs all the popular gen-res: hardcore, girl-girl, casting, leg, teen, outside, Sybian, uniform, taboo, footjob, hairy. The camera action is always behind closed doors but I can tell what is taking place just from the auditory cues or spying actors' costumes as they pass through the hall. There's a shared kitchen and meet-ing room. Dirty magazines abound in heaps, research materials from a recent sex industry conference in Las Vegas. There are boxes stacked near the entrance, likely the shipment of dildos that they've been expecting. A hallway from the main entrance splits the photo studios from the bathrooms and showers. It's only a matter of time before you convene with a naked body somewhere in the building. Adjacent to the photo studios are three office rooms containing a dozen high-end computers, scanners, a light table, and countless racks of photo archives on CD-ROMs and slides. I shake the sweaty hands of the photo retouch guys: some body builders who try to talk to me about cars, others with styled hair and

overzealous handshakes. Hungarians working eight-hour shifts keep the keyboards warm and greasy from 7am-to-10pm, scanning slides and touching up photos—birthmarks, tan lines, extraneous pubic hair, razor burn—it all goes. Plastic comes out the other end. These touch-up guys have the worst jobs, as bad as the web-cam dildo girls (who also put in eight-hour shifts)—staring at flesh continuously, eight hours, daily. I'll catch a glimpse or two of their work, and it's too much for me. I learn about dildos and product placement—the Sybian has sold well, I hear, because of some videos featuring its "240 volts of pummeling power." I learned that thousands of models have been photographed in the 20 years since the company was founded, all archived with passport photocopies and signed waivers. These archives are a collection of specimens bound in sheet binders and shelved, to await sale on the flesh market. A large network of buyers, editors and film-makers converge on international marketplaces where the librarians of porn license images of nameless women. Photos are sold for reprinting to many of the popular adult magazines, including *Penthouse* and *Hustler*, and are also available by subscription on web sites built and managed by Hungarians. The Porn Lords' current web sites are a catastrophe, yet are popular enough that a month of overhead is earned in one day. It is these sites I have been brought in to rebuild.

It is my job to create an intelligent back-end database system that will allow them to keep detailed statistics of their customers, manage content between their twelve sites, and lock out hackers and password pirates. I contemplate the amount of work ahead of me as I ride the tram back to my apartment. I have only touched the surface of the complexities involved, and I am certain this will be the largest programming project I have ever done. I think a month will be enough time to complete the work.

My apartment is in Ferencvaros, bordering the neighborhood everybody declares the nastiest. I'm quick to agree. Mere blocks from my gated entranceway is an area picturesque in that vile war-zone sort of way. During the day you find scrappy kids skipping rope and toothless men sitting on steps playing cards with owners of pantry-sized corner stores. At night there are nothing but dusty cars and paintless weathered walls stained by moonshine. I wander after a late-night showing of some David Lynch film and feel strangely at peace with my environs. Following these streets at night has become a passion. The Danube river is a short walk, just past an all-night general store where I buy chocolate and pretzels. The river reflects sparkling lights from the bridges and I eat chocolate and think about database schemas. The visuals here are hyper, and contrast the dull hardwood floors and dust covered furnishings of my apartment. During the communist era only a single factory existed for each product. Consequently everybody has the same heater, the same furniture, the same everything—all devoid of refined aesthetics, purely utilitarian.

Another day of hard core filming in the studios. The forced ecstasy is barely audible from the computer room but my psyche is littered with the knowledge of what is happening next door. Naked girls walk through the office carrying sex toys. God that freaks me out. It's like cartoons coming alive. Breasts that large should just stay in two dimensions. 'Sorry,' they say in passing, like there's something offensive about their three-dimensionality. En route to the toilet I bump into a guy that I'm sure I've seen before in a hard core video. These are the last people you expect to meet, the pixilated people you download from the internet. I have found them in Budapest. I'm thoroughly shaken. In this place, sexuality becomes business, an open topic. It flows from my tongue when I speak to the programmers, "This datatype needs to be referenced by blowjob, girl-girl, and the masturbation sets…am I forgetting anything?" My relationship with sexuality, an insecure concept usually hidden by countless personal masks, is suddenly on the tip of my nose. It was a full week of awkwardness before I became desensitized.

I give my presentation to the Porn Lords and win the contract. I am stunned by the realization that I live in Budapest now. I keep telling myself a month, 31 days. But it's a lie. 520 hours of programming roughly approximated is a month…working 16 hour days. My reality-distortion-field kicks into effect. Some of the work-load will be shared by other programmers—Eric, an American, and two Hungarians, Tamás and Zsolt. The emotional support they provide is invaluable. At the office flesh and sex are everywhere, a lugubrious environment. Tamás and I will be working together on some complicated and serious database schema—passing through the wall behind us are the sounds and cries of sex. We can't help but laugh out loud at this ridiculous situation. Then, a knock on the wall, somebody yelling in Hungarian, "Be quiet, we're filming!" It pleases me to think that our snickers might be heard on the soundtracks. Suddenly I am standing backstage and the strangeness of the place is made normal. I no longer have perspective to pass judgement.

Tamás and I become good friends immediately. His English is poor for garden-variety words, but excellent for technical terms. He learned English reading programming guides and unix man pages. He and I connect at a surprisingly deep level discussing the nature of the universe using only programming terms to convey our ideas. He was one of the first people in Hungary to own a C64 computer but because his parents couldn't afford a display screen, he learned to program it by sound, listening through headphones. He drives a green Camaro, one of the only ones on the road, and as all the police know his paperwork is a little out of order, he is stopped at almost every corner and made to pay a bribe. Eric and I develop a very peculiar relationship. He and I had not met before this project, and even after generating thousands of lines of code together I haven't learned his surname. Without pausing a moment to socialize, two strangers immediately begin creating something complicated together. I think that's weird. But working with a team of programmers is great. Even with Tamás' and Zsolt's inept English, we generate technical whirlwinds of ideas filling vast sheets of paper

with schematics and pseudocode. It's like when dogs meet and run together in the park.

As the work progresses through the first few weeks, the true complexity of the project reveals itself. 100 gigabytes of existing media and tens of thousands of existing subscribers prove very difficult to extract and import into the new system. I've never heard of programmers pulling their hair out, as their hands are always busy at the keyboard. Instead they internalize all their grief and sublimate it some other way. My outlet for stress is juggling. I buy some tennis balls at the Chinese market and fill them with rice to get the right weight. I defy gravity a couple hours a day.

There is evil in this place, the awareness of a ghost that has been following me all along.

Working for the Porn Lords is an interesting anthropological study. Childhood backgrounds, social perceptions, popular influences—where do these people come from? The only face of this industry in view is the consumers. What happens behind the scenes is an altogether different picture. It is a strand of society that is just as entwined in our culture as it is stigmatized. As far as I observe, the people behind the camera are as demographically varied as any actor or model. Anybody might fill the shoes of Szilvia, Ferenc, or Zsuzsa. Some are married or have stable partners, yet take to an alter-sexual life for the excitement, their non-acting partners usually remaining uninformed. Sometimes the income is the only reason. Some girls obtain long-term contracts and are in the

office on a daily basis. We eat lunch with these girls and discuss the weather. But the customers are the scariest people of all. Fans write letters to the Porn Lords and express their interests and dislikes in great detail, frightfully fanatical and demented.

I sit at the computer more than I ever have. In code-land, everything is perfect. An infinite abstract universe, devoid of social taboo, emotion, ideals—all the quandaries of existence. It is pure and whole. A place to find God. The ghost does not haunt me there. It is my world, it reflects me. Subject and object become a singularity.

The Porn Lords have me in chains. This fucking project is bigger and taking longer than expected. There are the natural hitches that slow everything down, and the heavy-handed, pointless criticisms of the Porn Lords' minion have me walking backwards. My solution is to work at home and convene with the programmers in secret cafés. Otherwise we'd run around in endless circles of escalating miscommunication and ambivalence. I hear often from the collective in Paris, who speak of their adventures. It's like an ex-lover phoning with news of recent sexual escapades. I am jealous and hurt, and miss terribly the company of my friends and of all Paris. So I work faster faster faster and push myself to each sunrise and collapse feeling empty with frayed nerves. I have become very bad at scheduling my sanity. With ten-hour coding binges at the computer it seems I drain myself of reason during the day while by night I fall victim to deviating states of mind. I look up from my world of code—

suddenly night has fallen and my bedroom is one-meter cubed and I can hear the light bulb. I followed a ferret seven blocks one night. I didn't know they had wild ferrets in Budapest.

Carpel tunnel syndrome is real and I am not immune. Days of coding interspersed with juggling and coffee have broken my wrists. At first I push it further. I am driven to escape this hell and the only solution is more code, more keystrokes. The machine in me considers steroid injections. But persistence make it worse—I can't lift a teacup. Frustration is realizing how useful hands normally are. This week I have learned how to pace.

I'm getting close to the end of the project, which means I'm starting to integrate templates and design into the code. This means there are naked things on my screen occasionally. Sometimes I lose touch with what I'm doing and, since I'm usually working in cafés, startle people with cockspussylipstitsass as I sip my latte.

I decide not to remove the spider webs from my ceiling.

My landlord is crazy. There are two locked rooms in my apartment. He enters with his own key and spends time digging around. Sometimes he brings girls over and wanders around my place in his boxer shorts. If he spoke any languages other than Hungarian I'd ask him not to. All I can do is smile at him. He becomes nervous and paranoid at me smiling all the time and he asks me to leave.

My last day in Budapest is 51 hours long. I have a ticket and a plane to catch and we still have 28,000 subscribers to import. Eric, Tamás and I spend the last night

yelling synchronization queries back-and-forth across a room in an office of cold computers and idle dildos. There is a problem somewhere in the code, the import process keeps failing after two-thirds completion. Eric suggests corruption in the data. Possible, but his scripts should account for that. His girlfriend calls at midnight, angry at him for working late. She hangs up and he returns to his terminal unphased. Emotion is a luxury at this point. No progress is made by morning. We have worked in vain. I watch the sunrise from the balcony with Tamás and we discuss the situation. The unfinished web sites deny visitors' access to porn. Some fat man with a big dick somewhere in the world clicks frantically, "Why can't I log in!? Damn it, I'll have to use the old pictures again."