A note from our Research Director, Nishant Shah

When the Digital Natives with a Cause? team first asked me to contribute to this first of the DN newsletters, they wanted me to write a poem. However, in all my good faith, I know it, that I am not a poet, and how difficult it is to write a poem without actually inflicting pain on the people who have to read it, and so I resisted from penning verse, for the better, or for the worse.

Instead, I decided to welcome you all to this newsletter with a poem that somebody else wrote, for somebody else. It is called "Waka Waka Bang Splat" (No, it does not feature Shakira!) and is a poem that is not in a human readable language. It is not intended for humans to intuitively read it. It does not have recognisable meanings and does not hold profound truths in its structure. All it is, is a series of sounds, created out of punctuation marks, to remind us that the world we live in, is not only about us. Especially for Digital (alter)natives, we talk, as much to machines (with whom we develop intimate relationships) as we do to/with people (who are generally more difficult to trust).

If a Digital Native love technologies, think of them as extensions of their selves, and invest in their relationships (with human or non-human actors) through digital technologies, it is a pity that Hallmark never made an 'I love you cellphone' or the 'Best Laptop in the World' cards. However, this New Year's Eve, when the ball drops and you get together with people you love (and hopefully, who love you back), go ahead, and read out this poem, written especially for your gadgets. (I have included the Human Readable version to let you know how to read it. The original poem does not have the words; just the symbols):

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< > ! * ' #
Waka waka bang splat tick tick hash,

^ " $ _
Caret quote back-tick dollar dollar dash,

! * = @ $
Bang splat equal at dollar under-score,

% * < > ~ # 4
Percent splat waka waka tilde number four,

& [ ] . /
Ampersand bracket bracket dot dot slash,

| { , , SYSTEM HALTED
Vertical-bar curly-bracket comma comma CRASH.
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With these words of non-wisdom, I wish you all, a very happy 2011 from the entire Digital Natives with a Cause? team, now scattered across 4 continents (Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America) and growing.

Warmly,
Nishant Shah, Director – Research, Centre for Internet and Society
This is a story of the frogs growing up in the fictitious world of author Terry Pratchett's book, Wings. Growing up hunting insects among the petals of the epiphytic bromeliad, laying eggs in the central pool of the petals, and growing up into tadpoles. “Eventually they die and sink down and join the compost at the base of the leaves, which, in fact, helps nourish the plant. And this has been the way things are for as far as the frogs can remember. And even if they remember anything more than that, it does not really count because the frog cannot say more than -.-.-.mipmip.-.-.-

“One such frog, in its quest for beetles, goes very close to the edge of the petals and then he stops and stares. Far away in the distance, it sees another flower, wedged in a fork in the trees. Another flower. Another universe. Another frog staring at it from the edge of the petals. -.-.-.mipmip.-.-.- says one of the frogs to the others and because that is about the only word that frogs have ever mastered in their lives, they are content. You cannot write epics with -.-.-.mipmip.-.-.-. but if you both know what it stands for, it can contain the extraordinary power of containing the entire universe...”

I imagine a meeting between the tiny, training wheel-limbed frog from Terry Pratchett’s Wings and the cyber-aquatic creature Babel Fish, who can only translate what is fed into it, but has nary a thought. What a contrasting world both of them come from. When so few words would do, no, just one in fact – “Mipmip”, Babel Fish teases the frog to widen its vocab and go crazy with blah blahs. Blah blah, it says to the frog, is the new Mipmip.

Funky, how some of the most profound stuff written about synecdoche gets centred on an amphibian creature, and the most useful and clever device (supposedly) invented, the multilingual instralator (instant translator, anyone), actually sought inspiration from an aquatic being born in the imagined world of Douglas Adams’ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.

But wait, how do you define this universe? Did it come out of a tadpolean egg and crack up into several thousand frogs, all of them screaming Mipmip Mipmip Mipmip. Or is the cyber-verse really a Babel-inspired translation – a universe translated – from a language that already existed in some other Verse? The first sound came from us. And the cyverse is a reflection of its mirrored reflection. And what an irony, we now wait for the original to catch up with its copy so that all rules are evened out.
Especially the one about the tweeting white bearded man

Some dreams are for the sane
My dreams are for the insane
Especially the one about the tweeting man
I got a gift that I wouldn’t keep
Beautiful and antique but modern in build
Colorful and shiny as the deep sea
And yet I needed my glasses to see
My eyes have never had fault
See, my dreams are not for the sane
Especially the one about the tweeting white bearded man
I sent a thousand gifts to my friends
It cost me bandwidth, not cents
In reply I received their smiles
In form of smileys
I never received so many gifts before
And never had to touch none of my gifts before
I do not know some of the people I sent gifts
What a world! God should desire to live here
See, my dreams are not for the sane
Especially the one about the tweeting white bearded Santa
I had cleared all doubts of his existence
Till I got mail from Mark Zuckerberg’s company
Santa had for me a package to accept or reject
And now I willow in shame
For having doubted my childhood friend
All these years he looked for my socks
Lo! Now I have a Santa hat for this Christmas,
But I shall never wear it.
In Mark’s storeroom forever it shall last
I told you, my dreams are not for the sane

A Mobile Network’s Christmas Present

By Khanyile Joseph

A few weeks before Christmas, I knew that it was going to be different. I felt that in my blood. Even though overzealous children had started blowing firecrackers imported from China through South Africa, I knew there will be some missing details, some missing stroke to this year’s Christmas picture here in Bulawayo.

However, an interesting conversation I eavesdropped in an Emergency Taxi (ET) on my way to work three days before Christmas provided me with the missing stroke.

A young teenage girl was telling her mother of developments among their relatives in South Africa.

“So when is Samson and all others coming for Xmas?” the mother had asked.

“Samson is not coming,” the girl said in a quiet voice and seemed reluctant to continue. ‘Jabu and Sipho are still trying to apply for permits. Jabu didn’t have a longer birth certificate to apply for a passport and only got into the list now that the South African government said those without any form of documents can be compiled into a list. Sipho is still waiting for his permit.”

“But what about Samson? Why is he not coming?” the mother asked.

“He is in jail.”

“In jail? In South Africa?”

“Yes,” the girl looked sad. “He has been in jail for years now. Armed robbery.”

The mother was quiet. The teenage girl was quiet too.

I was also quiet and thinking of what the girl had just said as if I was a legitimate participant of their conversation.

I was not concerned about Samson who is in prison. There are so many Zimbabweans who are guests in South African government’s correctional colleges. I was thinking of the two brothers who were trying to get four-year study, work and living visas.

In what the girl had said, there lay my answer on why our brothers and sisters are not coming for Christmas this year, and complete the picture of the festive season in our part of the country.

There are thousands of young people who work in South Africa from Matabeleland and every year, they come back home to celebrate Christmas and the coming of the New Year.

This year they did not come and I had wondered why; then the girl gave me the answer: They were trying to regularise their stay in South Africa.

The fact that they were still in the process of getting permits to stay in South Africa for four years meant that they could not come home and enjoy a normal Christmas celebration.

At the beginning of September, South African authorities announced that the country would begin deporting Zimbabweans on the last day of December 2010 and warned that all undocumented Zimbabweans that they have until that date to sort out their paperwork.

On 20 September 2010, South Africa started issuing 4-year free permits to Zimbabweans as a way of regularising their stay in the country and only holders of a valid Zimbabwean passport are eligible for the permit.

A moratorium on Zimbabwean deportations was announced in May last year, at the same time that the South African government announced it intended giving Zimbabweans a special dispensation permit, that would assist Zimbabweans in regularising their stay in South Africa.

However the mother had not been easily sold to the girl’s stories like I had been. Maybe it is because the girl’s world and mine were almost similar.

“How come you know all this? Are you not making up stories? When did they last call? People in SA rarely call these days,” she said.

“I am always in touch with Sipho on Facebook. It is cheaper that way,” she said.

“Facebook is something on the internet. I have internet on my cellular phone and we always talk.”

Her mother was still puzzled. The ubiquity of technology and how it has shrunk the world at affordable rates such that I am in touch with friends and family in South Africa, the UK and the USA; as if they were in the next suburb here in Bulawayo.

Sometimes, I hardly know what is happening to my sister in a suburb across town, yet up to date with a cousin’s progress at varsity and her love relationships in the USA. So, I just took for granted what the girl had said but never thought that to the mother it will sound like a folktale – some yarn that depends on the suspension of disbelief on the part of the listener.

The country’s largest mobile network provider, Econet Wireless, introduced its 3G internet service at the beginning of September 2010 and, mostly teenagers have flocked for connection.

When I disembarked from the ET and walked past Meikles Department stores and saw a Father Christmas figure inside the shop, I knew that the Econet service had come on time as it connected thousands of people in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe with thousands of the brothers and sisters in economic exile and trapped by the necessity to regularise their stay across Limpopo.
Behind the Stories: Digital Natives with a Cause(?) and TCW

An interview with a six year old Digital Native

My name is Henna, I am 6 years old and I go to Frank Anthony’s Public School in Bangalore. I like to play Iwin games on the computer. I like the cooking games most and also with bright colours. I also have Nintendo game and there are sooooo many new games! I used to have a Nokia phone but since I lost it my mother wont give me a new one. She gives me coins to call from local phone booths now. Since some dirty pictures came on the internet, my mother doesnt let me use the Internet when I’m alone. That’s ok, I have a Nintendo and my downloaded games. No no I dont wish I was four years old again or even five. Yes those days my mama used to let me play soooo many games on the computer, but now every Sunday mama takes me for book reading with other kids which is fun too! Oh, my phone? It’s ok, even my other school friends dont carry theirs to school so I dont miss it. Haha! This is the first time I’ve had an interview and over the phone but that’s not enough to make me want one. Happy new Year to you too!
The Past and Present of Social Networking Mapped

Figure 1: The past
Figure 2: The present

LOL

Map of Online Communities
Size on map represents volume of daily social activity (posts, shares, etc.) based on data gathered over the Spring and Summer of 2010.

About this Map
Communities rise and fall, and total membership numbers are not a good measure of a community's current size and health. This updated map used size to represent total social activity in a community—the more trash, trailing, sharing, or other socializing happening there, the more significant that community is, in my experience.

Estimates are based on the best numbers I could find, but involved aggregation of billions, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, and a random sampling of smaller social networks, such as Friendster and Classmates.com, among others. Sources of data include Google, AOL, Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other major social networking sites, as well as personal conversations with members of online communities.

Haha courtesy http://www.xkcd.com