

Becoming Fiction:

A Memoir of Online Addiction

"You do anything long enough to escape the habit of living until the escape becomes the habit."

~David Ryan

By: Cheryk Manning

Have you ever began life in the wrong place? I don't mean where you were born, but instead I mean begun experiencing life much later than you should? It happens more often than you would think.

This story is not one that's been practiced. It's not perfect, and it shows a side of me that I prefer to hide from. When you meet your muse you see, most people say you are gifted. But what if you create one? Are you still creative, or are you crazy? Sometimes, I am not so sure myself. But since this is my story, I get to tell it.

The first few years of my life were more of a blur. I remember the big things, like major moves, school awards, and church activities. I remember my best friend, Rachel. I remember the smell of the rain, just after the monsoons in the desert. I remember the first feelings of loss when someone loved died, and the happiness of learning to love someone new. I remember everything, everything but me.

It's hard to say what events started the chain reaction that lead to finding myself, but I can pinpoint when I began to feel a new emotion. It's not hope, or love, or fear. I guess you could call it life. Or the beginning of me living it, anyway.

I hated school. I hated it so much, I used to play sick so I could do my work in peace at home, without the bother of noise, other students in general, and waiting for other kids to catch up with class work so we could continue. So my parents tried an alternate method: charter school. Sure, it had its own benefits. But I was less than thrilled with the constant change of schools.

I had been to this school before, but had left because of the distance. Going back was strange, like the familiar scene in a movie where you feel distanced, but connected all at once. But it was easier this time. I had friends that were there, and they were more than welcoming to

By: Cheryk Manning

me. In fact, it was as if nothing had changed. I suppose this added to the disconnection with reality. Youth years are filled with change, and growth. You have continual new experiences, and thus far, it seemed more like the pages of a book. If you've ever had the sense of your soul flying behind your mysteriously animated body in a dream, you can relate. You seem to know, without your physical mind's limitation, what will happen next. But sometimes, things that are magical happen anyway.

A friend introduced me to a friend's idea.

It sounds crazy, but this is how it happened. My friend Sarah introduced me to a boy she had liked for years, because he was starting an online role playing site based on Star Wars, which was a favorite trilogy of mine. This game was completely text based, unlike many other online role-playing games popular today. They were looking for strong people to start it off. So we created a character for me, and I chose the name Daniella Organa.

If you've never made a character before, it isn't the simplest thing in the world. Essentially, you are creating one of two things. An "alter ego," or someone with traits that are so fantastically unique that you are creating obvious fantasy, is the most common form of created characters. But the real kind, the ones that stay part of you, are so believable that it can change your world. Daniella was the second kind.

Without going too much into Star Wars technical details, Daniella was an orphaned child who started with only one small, common advantage in life. A life that was, for the most part, filled with meritocracy if not the lack of fame felt often by common heroes and heroines. A lucky break of her family intervening changed not only her life, but her confidence. This is how she began, a small girl in an unfamiliar world.

Daniella was completely new for me. She was quite like me in most ways, actually. A

By: Cheryk Manning

strong personality, but an egg-shell barrier that would crack, and sometimes shatter, when attacked. But instead of living in a world with boundaries, I had freedom. No religious pressures, not familial commitments. Everything I was afraid to accomplish in life could be lived in a cyber reality, safe and without the judgment I was so afraid of receiving. I could live vicariously through Daniella, and leave reality behind for a few hours a day. An opportunity I took complete advantage of.

It began innocently enough. My friends and I would create fantastical situations in a make-believe world, and act it out. Heroic battles won, solving personal situations, crisis with family, and many other real-life topics influenced our writing. We for the most part were Latter Day Saint kids, or “Mormons” as is the common nickname. There wasn’t sex, or drugs, or even drinking. Just us, playing grown-ups, saving the galaxy, and each other.

But as time went on, the game transformed. Or I should say, it transformed us. With the age came more mature role-play. Character relationships changed, and it affected us as well. Daniella was the first on the site to marry. His name was Tim. As a young teenager, the idea of marriage petrified me. But I figured if I could practice with Daniella, maybe the idea would not become so alien. I knew I didn’t want a relationship like my parents, and through the game, I was able to act it out with someone I had known, but never met. It’s strange, but just writing a story about marriage changed my views on life. I stopped dating in reality, because the emotional connection between characters was so real to me that I had no desire for the real thing, when it was controlled and safe online. There was a level of trust there that I had never felt outside of cyberspace, and seeking it out just felt wrong to me.

With marriage comes parenting. My cyber husband and I adopted a child. Much like real life, it made things get complicated and involved real quickly. While it wasn’t a physical

By: Cheryk Manning

responsibility, two working professionals in high positions taking on a child put actual strains on things, though they weren't seen right away. It was like I had become a teenage mother in my own mind, on my own accord.

I didn't know how serious my addiction had become until I started getting depressed. Even then, I didn't know how serious the entire situation had become. By Sophomore year, my parents began locking the computer room at night to keep me from getting online and staying awake until 1 or 2 AM. I responded in kind by stealing a key and making a copy at Wal-Mart, to keep my access to the internet, and get back online as soon as they went to sleep. Instead of working in class, I began writing timelines in study hall for upcoming story ideas.

My health had also begun to diminish. Because I wasn't getting enough sleep, I couldn't focus on anything related to school. When I could sleep, I would think about the site, and not be able to get quality sleep. My grades also began slipping. Slightly at first, then more dramatically as time went on. And I began to care less and less. I wanted to write, to play the game. My emotions came with less consequences here.

However, good things don't last without consequences. We had begun to drift apart as friends. And this changed the standing of the game. In turn, my world began to slowly shatter. I remember how the fight began. The other people on the forums were broke. We were in high school, after all, and not all of the others had access to disposable income as I was blessed with. It came time to renew the domain for the boards, and the three year option was quite pricy. I had the money to help, and was willing, should some changes be made. I wanted only two head admin to the game, because someone we had known joined the game. Someone I had once called a friend, but not anymore.

The fight was ugly, and although others agreed with me, I did not win. It caused a big rift

By: Cheryk Manning

between those of us who had been friends for a long time, and it killed me to see someone undeserving of the role take charge. Changes began happening, and while they were probably good changes, the execution of it all came without warning or permission. This caused even more contention between members. It was all I could do to stay there. I knew I could not leave the site, but I also couldn't stay there. I didn't have the ability to let go.

My depression spiraled when the fight became so much that I left the site. I knew I had to leave. I had lost the people I was closest to in the world. I didn't understand how I had turned them so much against me, but I assumed it had something to do with my old friend, Amber. She had a knack for doing anything to get her way, including leading people on. She also had a history of dropping the site for long periods of time. When I tried to explain all of my concerns, I was accused of starting trouble.

Without the site, I was so alone. I joined other communities, but ended up making the same mistakes I had on the original obsessive site. I became too attached, confusing what was real and what was part of the game. And to me, it was so real. Every bit of me had been vested in the first site. It had taken my passions, my time, my friends. And what's worse, Daniella was all I could think of. I imagined scenarios all night, just as I always had. They never stopped when I tried to move on. An entire year passed, and I craved the site's comfort so much that I went back with help from the character that had been my husband, at his request.

We began almost where we had left off, trying to do our own thing, Tim and I. But in the year that had passed, the game had become foreign. Many of the old players had left, due to frustration with new policies or being too busy with the real world. But I didn't pay enough attention to the warning signs. I was so happy being in the familiar world of fantasy we had built that I let the policies of the game get to me again. And I learned that they hurt worse the second

By: Cheryk Manning

time around, when I left, banishing myself in the storyline so I could make a clean disappearance without the others hunting my character down. As much as I didn't want anything to do with the game anymore, I was still too connected with Daniella to want anything to happen to her. She had become real to me. A friend, someone I imagined conversations with. She was everything I wanted to be, and still, I had not come to terms with the addiction. Not quite yet.

I would go back one more time to learn the lesson I needed to learn back in high school.

I thought being someone new would make the others in the game leave me alone. That's all I wanted. To play. And I could reinvent a character much like Daniella if it meant I could play and not be singled out. Provoked. Maliciously cornered by people who tried to take the one thing I cared for most from me. I came back as someone new altogether, not on the same computer. I tried to write differently. I took precautions to keep my anonymity. But it was no use. I couldn't understand how, but one player found out the truth, and had me removed for something I had not done.

As childish as it seems, this is where my "a-hah" moment happened. Before, I had not understood why the site held so much of my life in its grasp. I didn't know why I let my own life revolve around something that wasn't real. By now, I had been out of high school for a few years, and had more experience with the real world. And I could see where my mistakes had happened, and how I had let it happen. I didn't know the dangers of internet addiction until I had been there myself. There are no words to describe how real the hold on me the entire game had. I had created my own worst nightmare that had brought forth my love for writing, and research, and quest to understand things that are different. I had developed not only writing skills, but my own personality had been formed here, away from life, where it should have been happening.

Suffering from a lack of social development was an understatement. Learning to interact

By: Cheryk Manning

with other people is a skill I did not have as a young adult. My whole world revolved around a computer, and other people's opinions of me there. And I had done it all to myself. The realization came as a bittersweet gift, though. I had realized a weakness, a need for other's approval that didn't even matter. But now that I knew, I could make it better. I had to. I couldn't get much worse from here, the darkness I felt all the time. Being so depressed grows on a person mentally as well as physically. And I needed a healthy way to fix my self-esteem before trying to make things right again.

It's been almost two years since I discovered my addiction. And finding myself isn't easy. Sometimes, I don't like what I am. And almost always, I am throwing myself into work and school to keep my mind from wandering back to the moments when I didn't know what I was living for. It gets easier, a little bit every day. But not easy enough to be effortless. I still have problems keeping friends my age, probably because they don't relate the same way I had become used to. One day I will be able to say that the scars are gone, and I am a better person for it. I can only hope that the day comes soon, so other characters can take the place of the "fictional" me.

By: Cheryk Manning