

I wrote a feature film based on my life. It's a dramedy in the tone of *The Big Short* or *The Wolf of Wall Street* - fast, funny, and true to the chaos of the dot-com era.

Picture this: It's 1996 in Anchorage, Alaska. The internet is still a dial-up screech to most of the world, but I'm living a bizarre double life. By night, I'm a DoD civilian explosives inspector for the Air Force. By day, I'm the exhausted owner of Surf City - one of the first hard-wired internet cafes in the country.

I poured my life savings into this place, but the reality of small business is brutal. My early partners bail when the ledger bleeds red. I'm working eighteen-hour days, sleeping on the floor, drowning in debt. A sharp-suited regular named Chadwick even offers to buy me out and turn the cafe into a boring, profitable corporate media hub. But I'm not a corporate guy. I'm a gamer. And I decide to bet the farm on the chaotic LAN-party crowd who treat my cafe like a sanctuary.

Surf City becomes a world of its own - snowy Alaska outside, and inside a Cape-Cod-style cafe with blue Cat-5 cables snaking through the walls and floors. Upstairs, glowing monitors. Downstairs, a basement full of misfits, dreamers, and gamers who practically live there. Somewhere in all that chaos, this little crew becomes a found family - and keeping that alive becomes the real fight.

Then the game changes. Literally.

EverQuest drops, and it devours my customers' lives. One night, I watch my top player, a fierce redhead named Vandra, sell a digital sword - just pixels on a screen - to a guy online for \$110 in real cash. The merchant gene in my DNA ignites. I realize I don't have a room full of gamers paying five bucks an hour... I'm sitting on a digital gold mine.

So I gather my best players in the basement and make them a pitch: free food, free drinks, unlimited T-1 internet - in exchange for farming digital loot for me. We become the Pixel Cartel of virtual swords and armor. Surf City transforms into an illicit digital sweatshop. Suddenly, the bills are paid. We're making thousands. For a moment, we're kings of the Last Frontier.

Then eBay bans us for IP violations.

Most people would quit. I don't. I go to my Air Force buddy Dave - a logistics wizard and self-taught coder - and tell him we're building our own stock exchange for virtual weapons. He warns me it'll take massive processing power and complex PERL coding. We do it anyway.

We build a giant server in the cafe's freezing basement. We manually scrape 7,500 email addresses of known buyers - risking our military clearances - and blast them all at once. We launch. And egamesauction.com explodes. We corner the market. For a brief moment, we're untouchable.

Then the blizzard hits. And out of the snow walks a corporate lawyer from 989 Studios, the creators of EverQuest. He stands in the middle of my cafe and tells me he's shutting my server down - threatening criminal charges for IP infringement.

I'm backed into a corner. I can't afford a multimillion-dollar legal war. So I execute one final hustle. I find a dot-com competitor in Los Angeles who's figured out a legal loophole to keep his servers running. I call him. I bluff him into thinking I'm leaving the business by choice. Then I offer to sell him my proprietary list of 7,500 dedicated buyers to double his business overnight.

I force him into a contract: he pays me \$7,500 for the list, and my crew gets to sell on his platform, commission-free... for life. My local lawyer - who works for free coffee - calls the contract "a work of art". We win. We outsmart the corporate giants without firing a single legal shot.

And what none of us realized then is that we were early pioneers of something the whole world is wrestling with now- digital economies, gold-farming, online labor, and the value of virtual work.

But technology marches on. Cable modems roll into homes. The physical Surf City cafe becomes obsolete. I unplug the servers and lock the doors for the last time.

Then we flash forward to today. I'm in my sixties, working as a day trader. I log into World of Warcraft, put on my headset... and who's in my ear? Dave and Earl - the same guys I've been gaming with for almost 30 years.