

Throw the Facebook at 'em

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was in the 6th grade, our family got an Apple IIc computer. I used the computer to write reports (that were printed off on our dot matrix printer and put into a slick plastic sleeve), learn to type and, of course, play games.

Cementing my status as a huge nerd, I joined the Fox Valley Apple IIc club. On Saturday mornings my dad would drive me to a bank on Wisconsin Avenue and the group would meet in the basement. This motley crew consisted of me and a half dozen men who looked like Comic Book Guy from 'The Simpsons.'

One of the perks of membership was receiving the club's monthly newsletter. The newsletter contained helpful articles about using our Apple, upcoming hardware or software and, of course, reviews of games. I wrote one such review, singing the praises of the game 'Castle Wolfenstein.' Set during World War II, you played as an American soldier whose mission was to infiltrate the castle and escape with the Nazis' secret war plans.

I saved the review on a 5¼" floppy disk that I handed to the club president after a meeting. While the review was probably lame, I sure thought the technology was pretty cool. I was able to write something and post it for my computer buddies without involving my parents (other than getting a ride to meetings).

In today's digital world, however, a kid's postings can potentially come back to haunt his parents.

Earlier this month, a Georgia state court of appeals decided on a case where a 7th grade boy created a fake Facebook page in the name of one of his female classmates. The page contained sexual and racist comments and garnered more than 70 "friends."

The school principal notified the boy's parents, Michael and Sandra Athearn, of the page, however, they took no action. The Facebook page continued to send out and accept friend requests and remained active for another 11 months before it was finally removed after the parents of the girl, Christopher and Amy Boston, sued for defamation.

The Cobb County Superior Court dismissed the suit, holding that the Athearns had no duty to monitor their son's computer activities nor any obligation to remove the page.

The Bostons appealed this decision and the appellate court reversed the dismissal. In the court's decision, Judge John Ellington wrote that while the Athearns had no reason to suspect that their son had created the fake Facebook page, once they learned of it, they did have a duty to exercise reasonable supervision over his computer activities.

The court did uphold the earlier ruling that the Athearns were not obligated to remove the page, as Facebook's policy is that only the user who creates an account has the authority to remove a page.

As a result of the decision, the case will go back down to the trial court so a jury can decide whether the Athearns acted appropriately or not.

While my review of 'Castle Wolfenstein' may have had some disparaging remarks about Nazis in it, I'm sure it didn't contain any controversial statements that could get my parents in trouble. Even if it did, no one has a computer that can read a 5¼" floppy disk anyway.

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