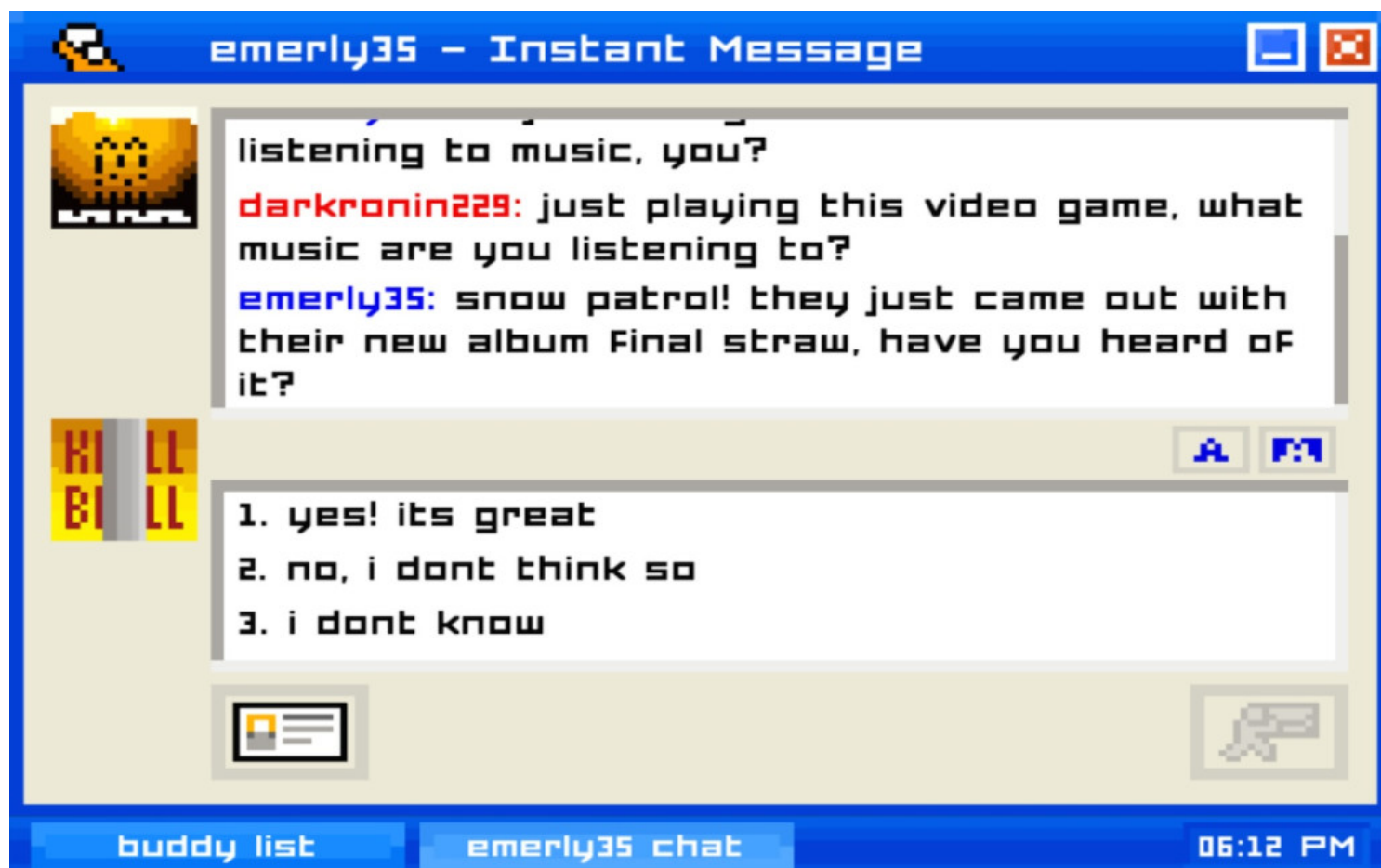


'Emily is Away' is a Game for Anyone Who Grew Up with AOL Instant Messenger

By Giancarlo Valdes

December 17, 2015



I was in middle school when I first started using AOL Instant Messenger (AIM). My mom's boyfriend brought home a PC that everyone in my family had to share. We had dial-up Internet, which interrupted the phone line whenever someone logged into our CompuServe connection.

Under the guise of my screen name, I felt like a different person. A better one. No one could see that in real life—I was just a shy, chubby kid with a face full of acne. I jumped from one AOL chat room to the next just to find someone to talk to. Most of these were fun conversations that helped pass the time. Others ended miserably, like when I clumsily flirted with girls (or people who I thought were girls).

Emily is Away, a free game for PC and Mac from creator Kyle Seeley, takes a typical boy-meets-girl story and frames it in AIM conversations like the ones I had as a kid, making the concept feel fresh again. The game is essentially a facsimile of the once popular chat program.

It's about two characters: you and the computer-controlled Emily. It charts your relationship from 2002 to 2006 through five distinct online conversations. You begin the game as good friends talking about how excited you are to graduate from high school. But that friendship mutates into an ugly, unrecognizable beast as you both try to figure out if you want something more.

For anyone who grew up using AIM and other online chat platforms, *Emily is Away* is a sobering reminder of the fragility of online relationships. It made me realize just how much of my own teenage memories are forever tied to the sights and sounds of talking to strangers on the Internet.

A PERFECT SIMULATION



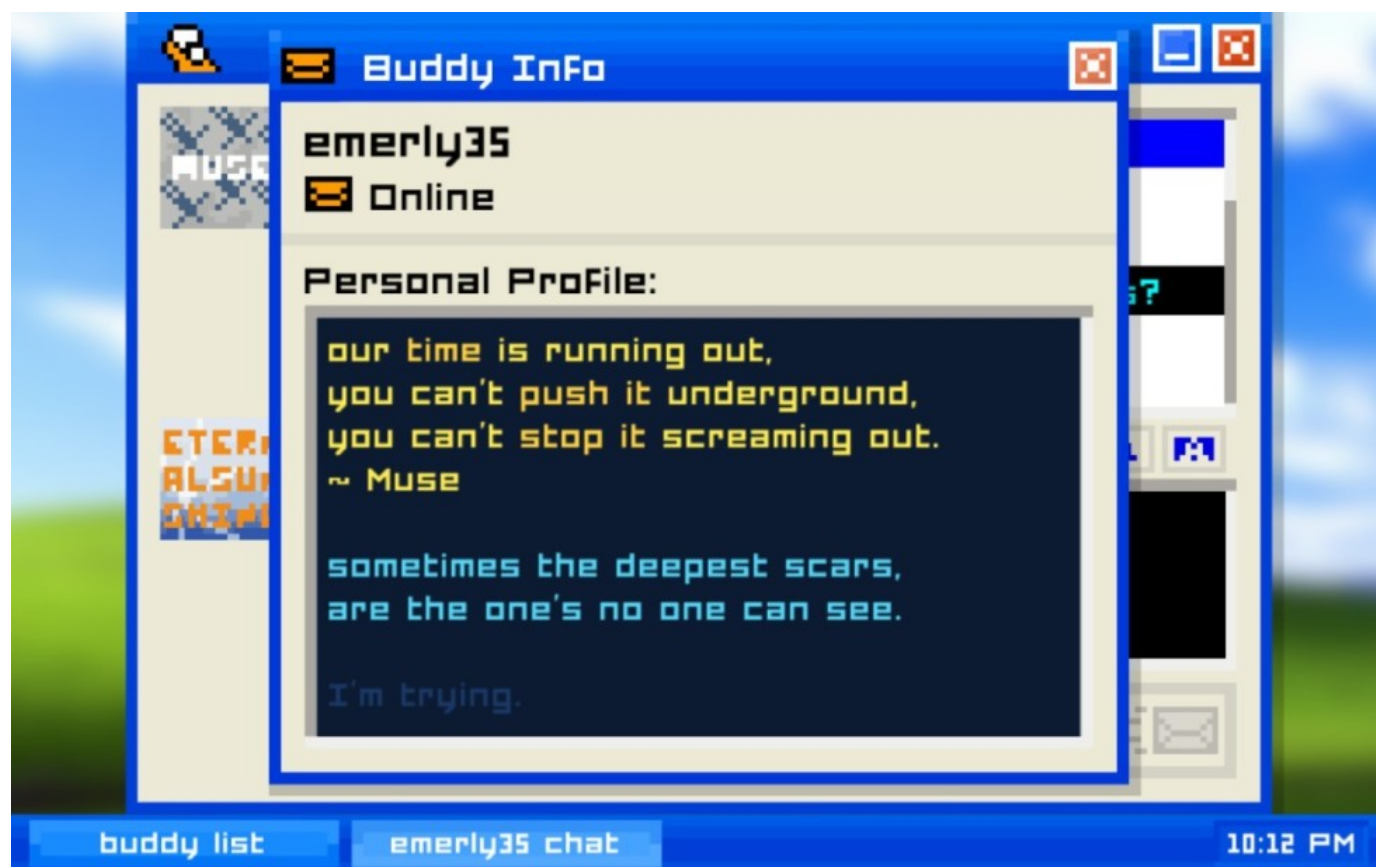
you select one of three dialogue choices. After picking the one you want, you have to type on your keyboard to make your character write the full message.

What you type ends up being nonsense because you don't know the exact words that will appear on screen. But the tactile interaction went a long way to making me feel like I was the one answering Emily and not simply following a prewritten script.

Just like in AIM, a notification in the chat box lets you know when Emily is typing or deleting a message. She sometimes takes a while to answer, writing and deleting over and over. It reminded me how anxious that used to make me feel in real life, especially if I had just typed something important. AIM's signature jingle plays whenever you send or receive a message, a loud ping that I used to hear hundreds of times a day.

Emily is Away transported me to a time when my life was the Internet—when it was easy not only to gain friends, but to lose them as well.

NO GOODBYES NEEDED



Of all the online-only friends I lost touch with over the years, one of them is still very special to me. For this story, I'll call her Amy.

AIM's really slow file transfer system. Amy, a pretty blonde girl, was in a few of them, but they were mostly of her dog.

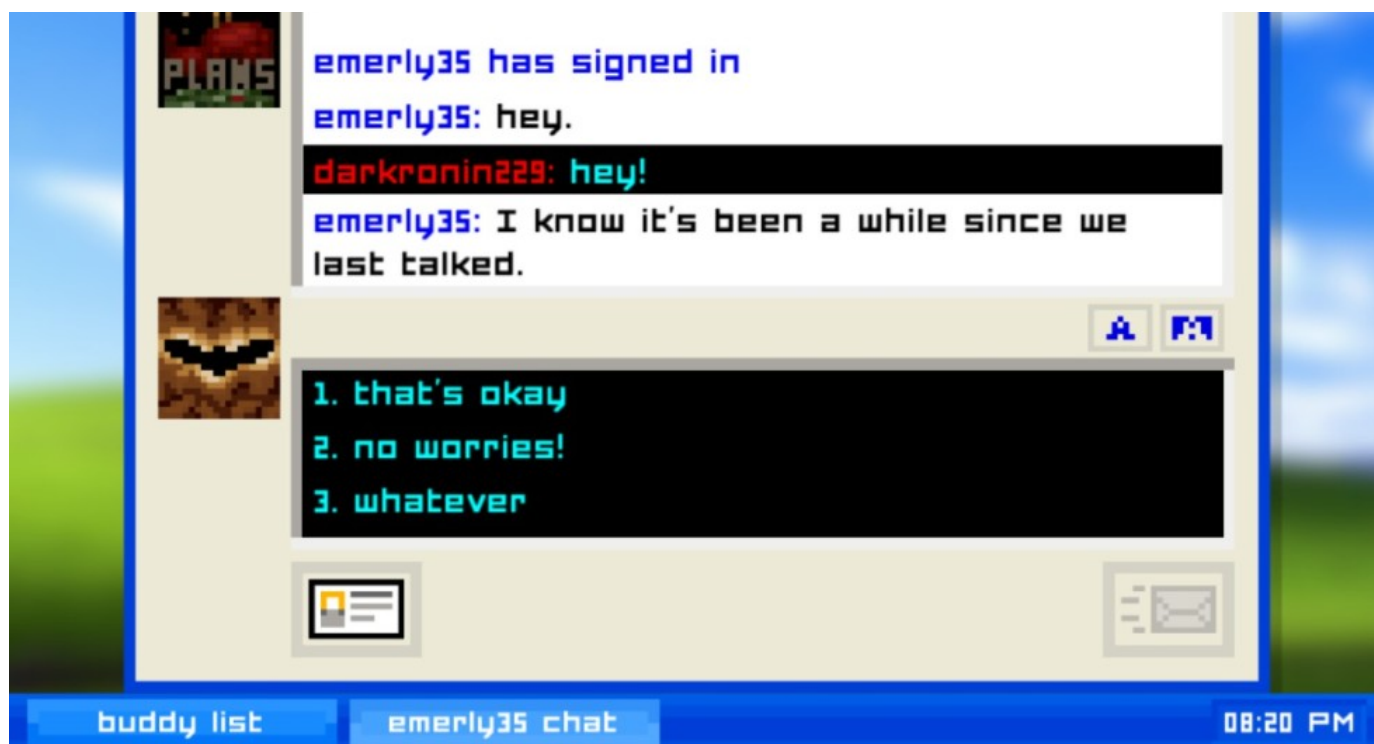
I might've sent her a picture of me, but I don't know for sure. Fifteen-year-old Giancarlo usually avoided doing that as much as possible.

Amy and I lived on opposite sides of the country. She loved to surf. I loved to just sit on my ass and play games. But we had one important thing in common: We were two very bored teenagers. We'd talk to each other until one of us had to leave, or until someone kicked us off the computer. That was more or less the pattern our conversations followed for a few years.

She liked to say that she loved me like "a fat kid loves cake." But what we had wasn't romance. I certainly thought about it at times, daydreaming about what that'd be like and if it'd ever work out. Mostly I think we were both happy to know that we were there for each other, even if it was just for some dumb entertainment on a lonely summer day.

That's the crux of *Emily is Away*: Emily wants you to be there for her. You can choose how to interpret that and try to turn it into a romantic relationship. But for a number of reasons—many of them out of your control—it doesn't work out. Emily drifts further and further away as the years go by. Her enthusiastic messages become bland, generic responses. By the end, she seems wholly uninterested in you.

BANAL CONCLUSIONS



By the time I was a senior in high school, I had almost stopped using AIM completely. Playing on sports teams and preparing for college took up most of my time. I imagine Amy must've been going through something similar. Either way, we gradually stopped talking to each other. We didn't plan on it. It just happened.

Some years later, I saw her pop up on AIM again. I immediately sent her a message. But we didn't have one of our usual afternoon-long discussions. So much had changed in our lives that we found it difficult to relate to each other anymore. I remember saying something like, "I hope it doesn't take another few years before we speak again." I haven't seen her online since then.

I rarely go on AIM these days. When I do, my Buddy List is a wasteland filled with dozens of greyed-out screen names, the digital remains of the people who once used them. In 2015, we have so many options to stay in touch with someone that AIM just isn't useful to me anymore. I have no idea what Amy is up to now, but I'm grateful for the time we did have. She taught a socially awkward kid that it was OK to be a little weird. In some small way, I hope I made her life better, too.

In *Emily is Away*, the last chat with Emily is remarkable because of its banality, something I could relate to all too well.

Giancarlo Valdes is a freelance writer based in southern California. He spends an unhealthy amount of time thinking about the past. If you'd like to confess your own awkward AIM stories, you can find him on Twitter @ [boogs](#).

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