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Words to live by

Off-base Net dialogue now belongs to many

By D.C. Denison, Globe Staff, 3/22/2001

CAMBRIDGE - The phrase is awkward and nonsensical. By the fourth word the syntax is fighting with itself: "All your base are belong to us."

Then why is it plastered in huge block letters in a second-floor window in Harvard's Eliot House, staring across JFK Street at the august Kennedy School of Government? And why is it splashed across a stretch of plate glass on the seventh floor of an office building in Waltham? Why did a variation ("All Your Quiche Are Belong to Us") suddenly show up on the 1369 Coffeehouse menu board in Central Square, Cambridge?

Why? Maybe because it's awkward and nonsensical.

"The actual text means nothing," explained Brian Seeve, the Harvard sophomore who posted the phrase in his dorm window. "It's just kind of - odd."

"It's amusing to see it inserted into all sorts of everyday situations," added his roommate, Mike Tucker.

It's also, surprise, from the Internet. Specifically, the phrase is a line of dialogue from an obscure video game called Zero Wing, spectacularly mistranslated from the Japanese. It has spawned hundreds of variations during the past few months, most of them circulating via e-mail and on the Web.

Released in 1989 for the now-defunct Sega Genesis machine, Zero Wing was never a commercial success; the company that created it went out of business in 1994. But about a year ago, a 12-line excerpt from the fractured dialogue began showing up on Internet gaming sites. Soon variations began replicating like a virus: "All

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your base ... '' was inserted into a stunning variety of mundane and exotic situations, both real and virtual.

Billboards, advertisements, government documents, and news photographs were posted with snatches of Zero Wing dialogue cleverly inserted. Soon there was a downloadable video that featured a quick-cut collage of the best ''All your base'' manipulations set to a techno soundtrack. Move over ''Hamster Dance,'' Mahir (''I Kiss You!''), and the Dancing Internet Baby - another Internet fad was on the loose, a ''Kilroy Was Here'' for the new millennium.

It was the video that hooked Harvard students Tucker and Seeve.

''A friend who's in college in Virginia sent me a link to the video a few weeks ago,'' Tucker said, standing in the living room of his Harvard dorm room. Late afternoon light was trying to sneak past the loose blanket of white paper with the bold black letters taped to the window. The living room walls and ceiling were dotted with 150 variations of ''all your base.''

''We both thought it was really funny,'' Tucker said. ''We played it over and over. Then we decided to put it all over the room.''

''The scary thing is that we thought it was our private joke,'' Seeve added. ''But then we went to our algorithms class, and when the professor slid up the chalkboard, there it was on the chalkboard underneath: dialogue from Zero Wing.''

''Since then I've seen it posted on the bulletin-board kiosks in Harvard Yard,'' Tucker said.

''I saw one of those guitar lesson ads that you see on bulletin boards modified into an 'all your base' thing,'' Seeve added.

Henry Jenkins, the director of MIT's Program in Comparative Media Studies, is not surprised by the way the ''all your base'' phenomenon has circulated.

''All your base' is typical of a new kind of folk culture that's coming from the Web community,'' he said. ''It's more communal. On the Web people can archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate this kind of material. This is not mass culture, produced by the major media industries. It's popular culture.''

According to Jenkins, ''The fact that people are able to claim something that is relatively trivial, and make it into something much bigger - that's the Web community flexing its muscle.''

For Shane Dupree, a programmer with the Tripod division of Lycos, the Waltham-based Internet portal, flexing the Web's cultural muscle meant impulsively posting the phrase, one letter per page, on the window of the floor where he works.

Since then a few of the letters have disappeared, but Dupree is in no hurry to take it down.

"I'm going to wait until it's not funny anymore," he said, deadpan, as he stood regarding it from a colleague's cube.

If previous Internet fads are any indication, the phrase still has a few funny weeks left before it fades into ephemeral Internet history.

"'All your base' is really just starting out," according to Aaron Schatz, who maintains the "Lycos 50," a countdown of hot Web topics for the Web portal Lycos, and works in the same building as Dupree.

Schatz has charted the rise and fall of most of the recent Internet fads. "'All your base' came out of nowhere and went from nothing to enormous in two weeks," he said. "It's huge on the Internet, but it's really just breaking into the general culture. There was a reference to it in the comic 'Fox Trot' last week. That's a start. But it hasn't cracked the media in a major way. Jay Leno hasn't made a joke about it. That still has to happen."

"I don't think it's peaked yet," Schatz said, authoritatively.

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