Online poker is under siege and under fire in Congress. Shira discusses the possible ban.

Poverty still exists, and it’s high time that Americans opened their eyes. Anand takes us through Ghana’s social landscape.

Crapping your pants with fear is the new black.

The latest from Muse, plus old school Swedish death metal.

Why can’t we all just get along?

Flip it over, waste some time. Repeat.

COVER: BEAUTY, RACHEL TRAN

CONTACT First Call

FIRST CALL, Kelly Writer’s House
3805 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104
www.firstcallmagazine.com
LETTERS@FIRSTCALLMAGAZINE.COM

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF: LAUREN SAIL, ANNA STETSOVSKAYA. • EXECUTIVE EDITORS: ANDREW PEDERSON, SHIRA BENDER
ASSISTANT EDITORS: ADAM GOODMAN, ISAAC KATZ • DESIGN EDITOR: MICHAEL SALL • LAYOUT EDITOR: KRISTAL GODINES
BUSINESS MANAGER: ANNA TOLMACH • WEBMASTER: TIM POTERS • ARTISTS: YUE WU, SHIRA BENDER, EJ HÖRLACHER
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS: SHIRA BENDER, ANAND JAHI, ISAAC KATZ, BENNY LAITMAN, DOUG MOORE
PHOTOGRAPHERS: RACHEL TRAN
Dear Campus Crawlers,

For some reason, parents only show up at Penn when the leaves start to die and clog Locust Walk in big, sodden clumps in the freezing sky-piss that God reserves especially for the fall. We all know that the season wouldn’t be nearly as bad if it were possible to cross campus on rainy days without a rowboat, but as the nice people on College Green informed us, “Worship Jesus or Perish.” Looks like all the naked keg stands with those 17-year-old pre-froshes are starting to catch up with us.

But so goes the cycle of the seasons, one of the most important component circles in what my personal philosopher once so elegantly deemed the “Circle of Life.” Different cycles hold sway in other arenas, but in all walks of life, things come and go, and we are always traveling forward through the ebb and flow. The life cycle. The menstrual cycle. The spin cycle. Recycling. Everything is connected in a beautiful web of interlocking elements, of yin and yang, socks and shoes, Uggs and Great Neck (ZING!).

Another respected cycle, and perhaps one of the most prevalent here on campus, is the information cycle. Four years ago, we consumed everything Penn had with bright, unspoiled eyes and the fresh souls of (technical) virgins. Many empty bottles and bedfellows later, we come to find that not only do the old hook ups pop up around campus with the vengeance and inevitable regularity of a bitter winter, but the same stories begin washing up with equally awkward feelings.

Look around, upperclassmen. Do you feel that itching sense of déjà vu? Everything you see has happened at least once before, if not multiple times, and the eeriness of repetition, the inescapably bizarre sensation of facing the past in the present is enough to drive a man mad. It’s really a good thing that it’s too early to die a tragic, artistic death. Maybe next year. If I’m good.

It is natural to begin anew with a fresh batch of experiences every four years or so, but the tragic thing is discovering that the Penn Universe is a limited constellation, with high walls keeping out most of the rest of the Milky Way. Unless that other star is a gigantic, flaming ball of urban violence. Those get through just fine.

The point, however convoluted with writery ostentation, is that it would sometimes be nice to be able to stick your head over the ivy fence once in a while. Screw Malinowskinaya or Murderscankia or whoever is on trial for murder. Does anybody even know her? I may not be an Upton Sinclair, or even a skinnier, more alcoholic Thomas L Friedman, but certainly there’s something more to be had than this thinly connected “Penn” story.

We’re in West Philly. Have a beer at Natalie’s and deal with it.

Andrew Pederson

Dear Penn,
Have more Family Weekends.
Love, Stephen Starr
APOCALYPSE NOW
SUCKERS FOR THE END OF THE WORLD
ISAAC KATZ

A little girl, playing outside, counts down from five. When she reaches one, she looks for her brother and sees him standing on the roof of the house. “No fair, Woody, you have to hide better,” she says. Woody, though, is looking off into the distance and doesn’t respond. The camera pans upward, and we see a mushroom cloud gently bubbling up from the horizon.

So begins the first episode of “Jericho,” CBS’s new hit series about the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse. Oh yes – atomic bombs, radioactive fallout, general collapse of civilization. But it’s not just CBS hyping up the threat of nuclear bombs; NBC’s “Heroes,” about a group of random people who inexplicably get the powers of superheroes, centers on a nuclear detonation in New York City just weeks after the show’s present day. And it’s not just fictional dramas that TV channels use to warn us of the upcoming end of the world. This past summer, SciFi channel ran a presentation titled “Countdown to Doomsday,” detailing “the top ten ways the world can end tomorrow.”

(And just so we all could understand the magnitude of the issue, the NBC-chosen host was the epitome of gravitas himself, Matt Lauer). Jon Stewart said it best: “Lauer’s two-hour investigation into your pants, and why you should crap them, is hardly an isolated case of fear mongering.”

Not isolated at all: in August, ABC took the fear mongering to network primetime, running a heavily-promoted two-hour special titled “Last Days on Earth,” counting down seven different ways that life on Earth – or at least human civilization – could come to a quick and sudden end. Each threat was lovingly depicted using the newest CGI imagery, and the program was hosted by Elizabeth Vargas. (As we’ve known since hearing Mother in Alien, the voice most enticing for narrating death and destruction belongs to a robotically sexy female – the modern day Siren.) Threat number seven to life on Earth: a tie between a nearby gamma ray burst and a rogue, nomadic black hole. Six: the revolt of the machines. The fifth threat was super volcanoes, such as the one steaming under Yellowstone National Park, which erupts every 600,000 years or so, suffocating the continent under eight feet of ash and toxic gas and plunging the world into the equivalent of a nuclear winter. The last eruption was about 640,000 years ago: the next is due any day now. Threat four: asteroids, a la Armageddon. Three: Nuclear explosions, either by terrorists or by capture of two soldiers precipitated the Israeli attack, journalist Yossi Klein Halevi, writing for the New Republic, declared that “The next Middle East war – Israel against genocidal Islamism – has begun.” According to Halevi, Hezbollah was the least of Israel’s problems, though. Halevi’s source noted that If Iran gained nuclear capability, Israel would “act unilaterally” if the US refused.

As the war in Lebanon ground on, the sensationalism that should have been tempered by reflection on the true scope of the battle instead gave way to greater rhetoric. Former

FOR ALL THE ULTRA-LIBERTARIAN LONGING FOR CHAOS, THE LUST FOR THE APOCALYPSE ULTIMATELY ARISES FROM THE MOST CONSERVATIVE OF INSTINCTS - A DESIRE FOR REASSURANCE THAT LIFE IS GOOD, CHAOS WILL NOT ARISE, AND EVERYTHING WILL BE OKAY IN THE END.

accident. Two: Biological pandemics, either by terrorists or by nature. And the number one threat to human civilization and life on earth: global warming.

We could die any minute now – because ABC told us so.

But the doom-saying doesn’t just come out in serial dramas and flashy special presentations. Even – no, especially –news networks hype up any and all step toward the apparently inevitable end. This summer, when the regular tit-for-tat skirmishes across the Israel-Lebanon border escalated into a small invasion and larger bombing campaign against Hezbollah, the 24-hour news cycle gloated over the latest blip in that perpetual war zone. This was like the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the talking heads crowed, exulting in the juiciest of news: war, death, and destruction.

Immediately after Hezbollah’s Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich declared in the most liberal of English newspapers, The Guardian, that “the Third World War has begun.” Civilization itself was on the brink, Gingrich declared. Echoing Bernard Lewis, he said:

The civilized world stands balanced between victory and defeat...

An Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas terrorist alliance is waging war against Israel; seven bombings in Mumbai, India, killed more than 200 people; North Korea launched seven missiles, including an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of hitting the West coast of the continental United States; seven Americans pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda on video tape; a plot to bomb New York City subways and tunnels; 18 Canadians arrested with twice the explosive force used in the Oklahoma City bombing. Now all the cities where previous events have occurred and a global campaign of terror is no
Never mind that North Korea’s intercontinental missile fizzled, that the suspects in the New York and Canadian plots had been monitored for months and years, respectively, that Israel has waged wars against its allied neighbors half a dozen times over its short history, that the threat to the “civilized world” from Islamic terrorism is nothing compared to the Cold War’s constant threat of nuclear war that could have easily been triggered by a technical glitch or a misinterpreted action.

“Dude,” as Jon Stewart said about such doom-saying. “Get real.”

Today’s threats – whether from Islamism and the Middle East, ABC’s wandering black holes, or “Jericho”’s mysterious atomic bombs, are comparably miniscule. Why does the media so actively promote – glorify, even – death and destruction? Only because we lap it up: we are suckers for the end of the world.

And we’ve been that way for a long time. In 1898, H.G. Wells wrote “The War of the Worlds,” detailing a calamitous Martian invasion of Earth. In 1938, when Orson Welles broadcast an adaptation of the novel on the radio, millions of people deliriously believed in the fiction. A decade later, when an Ecuador radio station broadcast a translated version of the same story, mass panic similarly ensued; when the station frantically clarified to its audience that the alien invasion was fictional, mobs set fire to the station and the offices of the leading newspaper, killing 20 people. Steven Spielberg’s 2005 adaptation earned almost $600 million at the global box office, despite star Tom Cruise’s couch-jumping.

Alien invasion isn’t the only apocalyptic scenario we flock to. From Mary Shelley’s 1826 follow-up to Frankenstein, The Last Man, to Danny Boyle’s 2002 horror film 28 Days Later, pandemics have repeatedly been used in fiction to kill off civilization. The machines come to rule us in works as varied as Jean-Luc Godard’s Alphaville to the Wachowski brothers’ Matrix trilogy. Ecological catastrophe causes a near-apocalypse in everything from Cat’s Cradle to The Day After Tomorrow. The Bible itself ends with the juiciest of apocalypses, the Book of Revelation; today, the Left Behind series dumbs it down for the masses.

After every failed media scare – killer bees in the 80s, Y2K in 90s – we refuse to learn our lesson. The next one is real, we say; this one sounds plausible. As the saying goes, every prediction of the end of the world is always wrong, except for the last one. The media hypes potential catastrophes only because we already love them – we’ve read the books, seen the movies, believed the radio
WE COME BACK FROM THE EMOTIONAL HIGH OF BLOODLUST AND WE RECOGNIZE INTELLECTUALLY THAT IN CHAOS, WE ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE THE STRANGER KILLED THAN THE KILLER OF STRANGERS

we hate society. Truthfully. Only a little bit, of course, because most of us aren’t traveling to Iraq to set off IEDs, or smuggling dirty bombs over the Canadian border. It is, at its base, escapism: we are sick of our sleazy politicians, our socioeconomic imbalances, our societal constrictions. We yearn to tear society down and live anew, in the ultra-libertarian wasteland of the post-apocalypse, where we can loot stores and kill strangers and have no consequence for our actions.

But then we come back from the emotional high of bloodlust and we recognize intellectually that in chaos, we are more likely to be the stranger killed than the killer of strangers. Society’s constructs lift us up more than they hold us down. And, most of all, for that post-apocalyptic situation to come about, almost all of us have to die – and by statistical probability, we are almost surely to be among the “almost all of us.” Better to live today than to die tomorrow.

Remember the opening of “Jericho,” with the little girl counting down to zero just as a nuclear bomb goes off? It’s a hint back to the 1964 LBJ-Barry Goldwater presidential campaign, when a famous ad showed a little girl counting the petals on a daisy before picking them off – and then, as the camera zooms at her pupil, a nuclear bomb explodes. “These are the stakes,” the narrator says. “To make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die. Vote for President Johnson on November 3.”

This is the ultimate attack ad, sleaziness beyond boundary. Johnson essentially accuses Goldwater of being the cause of future nuclear war and the killer of cute, innocent children. We are repulsed – the ad only ran once because of protests, but the point sticks. Only an actual apocalypse could bring down the vilenes of the type of people who would create, film, and run such an advertisement.

Such an apocalypse is displayed in 28 Days Later, perhaps the best post-apocalyptic movie made in decades. Cillian Murphy wanders empty London streets after a pandemic turns most of the population into zombie-like raging killers. To escape the infected, Murphy’s character and a few of the people he meets flee north. In the most spontaneously joyful scene of the movie, our heroes enter an empty supermarket and fill countless shopping carts with all the supplies they need, while upbeat electro-pop plays on the soundtrack. Then, at the checkout counter, they mockingly leave a credit card to pay for their loot. The scene portrays exactly the wanton joy an apocalypse provides. But the movie takes a dark turn; the characters head north to a lone military outpost that turns out to be anything but the refuge they had hoped for. Society’s destruction turns humans into savages, and director Danny Boyle uses the military outpost as a wicked and horrifying satire on human nature and social constructs. I won’t give away the ending, but suffice to say, the apocalypse in all its glory is not very enticing.

And this is the common theme: for all the reckless, joyful abandon of the fictional apocalypse, the negative aspects of destruction – in the end – always outweigh the positive. Every movie or book always ends either with a return to civilization (the sudden alien deaths in War of the Worlds and the plane flying in 28 Days Later, for example) or, alternately – and more rarely – a bleak, barren wasteland (the end of Cat’s Cradle, for example) that puts to rest any idle fantasies about the joys of destruction. For all the ultra-libertarian longing for chaos, the lust for the apocalypse ultimately arises from the most conservative of instincts – a desire for reassurance that life is good, chaos will not arise, and everything will be okay in the end.

I, however, can never be so sure, so I’ll leave you with this: On September 26, 1983, alarms went off as the computers in a bunker near Moscow said that US missiles were headed to the Soviet Union. Stanislav Petrov, the Russian officer on duty, had two options: do nothing, and risk letting the five missiles hit Russian cities and kill – for all he knew – perhaps hundreds of millions; or, report a US missile strike and order a return of fire, risking hundreds of millions of lives for what could be merely a false alarm. It must have taken balls of plutonium, but Petrov held his ground, trusted that the US wouldn’t start a nuclear war, and didn’t report the missiles. It was a false alarm, of course, and Petrov had, more or less, saved the world. Still, the incident revealed flaws in the Soviet military structure, and Petrov was turned into a scapegoat; his promising military career quickly ended. We came very, very close to a nuclear holocaust – and, of all people, the hero was blamed. So sit back and relax, heroes and villains: if the world ends, c’est la vie; if we’re still here and you work for the Russian government, do think twice before pushing the wrong button. ☮
Muse has always been all about the grand design, even when it doesn’t seem to make a whole lot of sense to the listener. Rarely has this been truer than on Black Holes and Revelations, which is the British act’s most elaborate and scattershot album to date. Muse’s execution here is absolutely true to form: epic in scale, exacting in performance and dripping with eyes-to-the-sky drama to the point of parody. However, they’ve expanded their repertoire with a few too many disorienting stylistic sleight-of-hands for comfort.

Most obvious is Muse’s bizarre choice for Black Holes and Revelations’ lead single, “Supermassive Black Hole” has no more elaborate studio trickery than most Muse tracks, but the glitz and polish here goes to produce a sort of Eighties sleaze-funk anthem that will likely skeeze out as many people as it turns on. Similarly, “Map of the Problematique” casts slightly trance-y sheen on Matt Bellamy’s robotic guitars and plaintive vocals, and the song’s structure ultimately buckles under the weight of the disparate styles. The results are interesting in the context of their back catalogue but are a smidge too ridiculous to make for particularly good listening.

But it’s hard not to love Muse when they do hit home. “Starlight” and “Take a Bow” see the band summoning up sweeping pathos on two of their favorite subjects—love and condemnation—and supporting it gorgeously with skyscraper choruses and glistening synth arpeggios. Though they never quite muster the infectious hard rock fury that drove the excellent “Stockholm Syndrome” from 2004’s Absolution, “Assassin” and “Exo-Politics” allow Dominic Howard to flex his rock-hero skisman muscles and Bellamy to break out some of his punchier riffing. By the time that the closing trifecta of “City of Delusion,” “Hoodoo” and “Knights of Cydonia” roll around, most listeners will be too involved to care about the songs’ slight bloating and indulgent nature. Black Holes and Revelations, for all of its extra ambitions and confounding style-hopping, is still a satisfying, engrossing experience that’ll satiate most listeners.

Opeth: Live at the Trocadero (October 3rd)

Opeth are something of a paradox. With their expansive prog-metal style, they’re not exactly easy on the ears, and yet the band has come as close to a household name as any act ever remotely related to death metal can get. Opeth owe their relative fame in large part to the dulcet vocal melodies and artful guitar leads of frontman Mikael Akerfeldt, whose deadpan stage raps and spot-on delivery have been lighting up arena-sized venues nightly as part of Dave (Megadeth) Mustaine’s Gigantour package. Like any good metal band, though, Opeth is still very much driven by their core fan base, and they proved it with a showcase of older material on October 3rd at the (comparably intimate) Trocadero.

The show was technically an off-package date with Gigantour mates Arch Enemy and Sanctity, but there was no question that Opeth was the prime draw. The two openers evoked the usual displays of moshing and headbanging from the largely black-clad attendees, but the crowd exuded little pre-rock-out tension until just before Opeth’s set. Some of the band’s older fans would have been intrigued by the decidedly diverse audience. Though there were plenty of longhaired elder metalheads, Opeth’s newfound popularity also drew in a young and more colorful element.

Many of these new fans, only familiar with Opeth’s last two or three albums, were likely disappointed by the band’s set. It was a paradise for diehards, though, as Akerfeldt and company plowed through a set heavy with rarities and old favorites. Only two tracks from the wildly successful Ghost Reveries made it into the set (“Ghost of Perdition” and “The Grand Conjuration”), and they were largely outshone by the rousing renditions of classics like “The Leper Affinity” and “Deliverance.” Drummer Martin Axenrot will always have big shoes to fill, and fans will likely always miss masterful ex-drummer Martin Lopez, but Axenrot’s performance was spot on for virtually the whole night. Especially noteworthy was his showing on live rarity but perennial fan favorite “Godhead’s Lament,” even in the face of Akerfeldt’s commanding chorus. The real treat of the night was a virtually unheard-of performance of “Under the Weeping Moon” from Opeth’s debut Orchid album. The trudging, thick nature of the song may have unnerved fans more used to their recent progressive meanderings, but Opeth’s devastating delivery proved their refusal to deviate entirely from their roots.

The set length was relatively short, but by the time Opeth had rocked the Troc with encore crusher “Demon of the Fall,” the vast majority of the crowd was drained by the effort of absorbing the performance. Tuesday’s show was one of the last live Opeth performances this side of their native Sweden for some time to come, as the band is resting and preparing to record a new album. For an act that’s been on the road for almost eighteen months, Opeth gave a remarkably good account of themselves to a hungry crowd.

Doug Moore is a freshman in the College. You can write to him at motdoug@sas.
I’ve never played poker before. Sure, I sat on my boyfriend’s lap in high school while he played in his friend’s basement and asked me for my advice so I could feel included, but that doesn’t count. The only gambling I’ve ever done has been on a cruise ship one time, in my room, on the TV. Blackjack. I lost ten dollars.

Why, then, am I writing an article on internet poker? Well, aside from the fact that anything the religious right is against tends to make for worthy news fodder, apparently lots of people do play it. As in millions of people, in and around the 18-35 demographic, from their homes, apartments and dorm rooms. I’m talking 11,500,000 hits on Google for “poker.” Don’t worry, there were 117,000,000 for “porn” — Americans aren’t losing their mojos over a game. (By the way -- 1,410,000,000 for “love.” Makes a girl’s heart melt.) Clearly poker is a global phenomenon. But as of a couple weeks ago, they’re not too happy.

Before I address their concerns, a word on the history of the phenomenon itself.

Online poker is relatively new, starting in 1998 with the site Planet Poker, and then hitting it big in 2001 with the introduction of other major sites, including PartyPoker, PokerStars and UltimateBet. In 2003, poker hit mainstream television, with the World Poker Tour debuting on the Travel Channel and the annual World Series of Poker on ESPN, as well as many other poker-themed shows, which ushered in a huge rise in mass popularity, both online and off. Today online poker is a game played by professionals and amateurs alike: businessmen with too much to lose, college kids with too much to gain and everyone in between who just enjoys the game.

But the honeymoon may now be over. That’s because there are some in this country who oppose the right to play and are now starting to do something about it. Whether you’re against gambling or not, whether you think it’s moral or not and whether or not you care at all, this whole debate over the legality of online poker is actually pretty interesting. And this is coming from a girl who thinks cards are way more fun to build castles with than anything else – trust me on this one and hear me out before you run off to your underage drinking binge fest.

The current controversy revolves around a bill that passed through Congress about a week ago, which makes it a crime for a bank or financial institution to transfer money to an online gambling site, essentially a ban for online poker in the US, since most sites and intermediary banking accounts will no longer transfer their money. The Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act is title VIII of a completely unrelated bill, the Safe Port Act and was pushed through Congress by the Republican leadership in the final minutes before the election period recess. All it needs now is Dubya’s signature on the bottom.

To clarify: online poker is not illegal. Neither are online horse-betting or online fantasy sports betting (provided the sites include some players who are really made up. Great rule. Makes sense. Actually, not at all.). Regular online sports betting is illegal because of the 1961 Wire Act, but poker is not, according to most legal experts. Republicans, however, think it should be. Why? According to Senator Bill Frist, the main supporter of this bill, “gambling is a serious addiction that undermines the family, dashes dreams and frays the fabric of society.” Right, Bill, gambling frays the proverbial fabric, which is why you’re...
poker is *not* technically illegal, and most people are *not* addicted. Besides, the last time this country tried to ban something addictive, that didn't turn out so well, as evidenced by the aforementioned binge-fest. It's just a bad reason for a law. And hey, maybe there are problems with it, maybe people will get hurt by playing. The thing is, skydiving is dangerous too. Maybe they should add a skydiving ban to the Safe Ports Act. Hey, hey, they're connected. Really. 'Cuz like, the sky's a port. And all.

If people choose to play, let them. After all, as Mike McDermott says in *Rounders* (that Matt Damon movie about underground poker in New York? Yeah, that one) “You can't lose what you don't put in the middle. But you can't win much either.” If they choose to play, and they win, hooray for them. If they choose to play but lose, that's too bad, but this is a free country for *all* people, winners and losers alike. Regulate it, tax it, do whatever is necessary to it, but don't ban it.

Anyway, you don't care about my opinions, as I have nothing to do with the poker world. Fortunately, I know someone who does. But first, a few words from fellow students on the matter:

“I think pot, poker, and possibly prostitution should be legal, but don't quote me on the third.”

“I gamble with friends on all sorts of stuff, so if you ask me, gambling should be allowed throughout society.”

“I just think gambling is the dumbest thing. It's like making an investment in a stock that A) has a negative expected return and B) is VERY risky. Online is faceless, yes, but for every big winner there is a big loser. It's just a waste of human resources.”

And what kind of article would this be without the slippery slope argument? “I think it is a very slippery slope when the government starts to say what we can and can not do over the net. There has to be some kind of limit to what they have control over... the internet has been for a long time free play, and once the government steps in and starts regulating the content, it is a slippery slope as to
what they will do next.”

So to sum up: my friends think things starting with a “P” should be legal, what we do with friends is the marker for legal appropriateness, (binge!) gambling is dumb, loserish, and a waste of human resources, and slippery slopes lead to broken ankles. Well said, mes freres.

After all this talk from people who don’t really know the game too well, I think it’s high time we take the matter to someone who actually plays.

Moses is 21 years old, recently graduated from NYU and lives in a sweet apartment in Tribeca, Manhattan. He plays poker. And I mean, really plays poker. As a semi-professional player, he spends hours online, playing about 8-10 tables at once, analyzing the game and his own strategies, perfecting and honing his skill and teaching others how to do the same. He’s been doing this for a few years now and has reaped the benefits over time. He’s played in major high-stakes tournaments around the world and is friends with the regulars. He doesn’t intend this to be a long-term career, but it’s making him a lot of money while keeping him entertained, comfortable and close to his friends, which is a lot more than can be said for most out-of-college nine to fives.

I asked him about his thoughts on the recent ban, since he has the unique perspective of someone who has actually studied and played the game extensively.

On the bill itself, Moses had this to say: “Spending who knows how many hours convincing congressional committees to add the act into the Port Security Act when the Republicans couldn’t manage to find the time to add provisions or budgets for train and bus security really pisses me off. It basically sends the message that internet gambling is more dangerous than homeland security, which is obviously not the case.”

Still, he was able to see the other side as well. He understands the moral or precautionous justification for the bill, since clearly gambling can be harmful and ruinous to some. But he also pointed out that the act will least affect its intended targets, which are those who would get hurt by the game:

“Those people who are apt to lose their mortgage or their businesses on the blackjack table will still be just as likely to lose it in Vegas, Atlantic City or at the racetrack in Monticello. Problem gamblers are problem gamblers, and while the internet certainly gives them an additional avenue to work their vice, I doubt it’s altering their stability in any real way. Thus, the people most affected by this act are recreational gamblers: predominantly, online poker players and some individuals who enjoy playing online blackjack/roulette/slots, etc.”

I asked Moses what role poker plays in his own life.

“I love the game. I spend hours each day analyzing it, in the same way that a stock trader would spend hours...
professional would do in their craft.”

He continued by comparing his “craft” to other types of legal gambling available, such as the stock market.

“Why isn’t stock trading considering gambling or a vice? Like poker, it is a game of information. Like poker, there are winners and losers. The more you study, the better you’ll do. Like poker, an idiot could get lucky for a while. But in the long term, the only winners will be the studious pros who seek an edge in whatever understated information they can find. I do the same for poker, and that’s why I win.”

I was also curious about the game itself, and asked him about the element of luck and skill. Being someone who doesn’t know the game too well, I would think however much skill there is in the game of poker, there must be even less involved with the online version, since none of the traditional “poker face” rules apply. But Moses has informed me otherwise; analyzing how people play their hands still works, even if you can’t watch them get uncomfortable in their seats. And after enough time studying the game, the odds and the psychology behind your own and other players’ actions, someone can become very skilled indeed. It is also a matter of short-term vs. long-term play. Even if in the short-term there’s always the chance of winning big on a bad hand or losing big on a great one, if you know what you’re doing, and you give it enough time long-term, you will make money.

Moses is clearly an exception to the overall rule of players who just want to make a quick buck, don’t spend time learning the game and ultimately lose a lot of money to people like him. I asked him if this ever makes him feel guilty. He said that while he rarely feels guilty playing with high-stakes players, considering he has met them and knows that they are mostly wealthy businessmen and service is going to call your house and ask you security questions, and only then can you put money online and start playing. The point is it takes effort to put money online.”

60 Minutes did a study recently to see how easy it would be for children to use their parents’ credit cards to play poker online, and none of their test subjects were successful in their endeavors. I mean, sure, save the children and all that, but I’d say we should be focusing more on saving them from guns in their schools and the plight of public education in this country and the lack of health care coverage and oh so many more things than the bogey-man of internet poker.

So after all of this talk about a game, indeed a whole culture I don’t know too much about, I feel like the issues surrounding this ban reach much further than a simple game of chance. Really, why ban it? The reasons of morality and anti-terrorism provided by the Republicans just don’t do it for me. Children can’t get online. It’s not hurting anyone who is not consciously deciding to do it. It’s providing income for lots of players worldwide, who, while not necessarily providing a tangible service for others (unless you count the service of enjoyment, entertainment, and recreation, which is certainly eligible I’d say), aren’t doing any harm to anyone. All this ban is accomplishing is the creation of a ton of angry people who are losing their livelihoods (whether or not you agree with it) and a few happy Republicans in Congress.

I say, leave the game alone. Prohibition never did anybody ever good, and neither will this. Let the people play.
IT’S NOT EASY SUCKING BLOOD

COMING OUT OF THE BLOODSUCKING CLOSET

BENNY LAITMAN

I am a Vampire. I come from a long bloodline of Vampires: my father is a Vampire, his father was a Vampire, his grandfather was a Vampire, and so on. My mother is not a Vampire. She’s a normal human being like most of you reading this. Because of my mixed blood, I do not look very much like your typical Vampire. I am not pale nor do I have the giant lateral incisors. However, I do get pretty bad reactions to garlic on my food and I have to wear loads of suntan lotion. That wouldn’t give it away, though, because I have red hair and I would burn easily regardless. I am nonetheless, a Vampire.

I discovered my family history at the age of four. One night, as I was fast asleep, I awoke to a slight hissing and tapping coming from my closet. As any normal four year-old, I was scared. I cowered in my bed, hoping for it to go away – whatever it was. It didn’t. It just got louder and louder and louder, and soon I couldn’t ignore it anymore. I grabbed my plastic baseball bat and opened up my closet door – only to find my dad inside, hissing at me. It was the first moment I remember pissing myself. I ran to my mom and cried. My dad came in, only to scare me some more. It was a joke to him – his version of initiation into a new lifestyle. He explained to me what he and I were. I was scared – I couldn’t watch “My Girl” without being frightened by the bee scene, let alone watch a Vampire horror flick. I didn’t believe him.

As the years went by, though, the evidence only grew stronger. My mom tried to shield me from it, but my newborn sister’s massive lateral incisors gave it away. My dad began to train my sister to hiss on command. I started to notice that my dad only associated himself with Vampire friends as well. They would show me their teeth and hiss if I didn’t believe them. It was a scary and confusing time, but I got through it. I now know what I am.

O.K. We’ve passed the point where you believe me. We were probably past that point on the fourth word. But it’s true. It’s what I am. Vampires are everywhere. The movies poorly portray us, and so the common folk imagine us to be scary, bloodthirsty, vicious creatures. That is just not true. There are some who spoil it for everyone, but that happens in every culture.

I’m not going to lie. Some of the stereotypes have a hint of truth in them. For example, I do like blood. But this doesn’t mean that I am going to go around biting people left and right. That’d be stupid in this day and age, anyway, what with the AIDS epidemic. Not knowing who has what, I could end up with AIDS – for eternity. I am, after all, immortal.

We as a Vampire people have attempted to get blood by consensual means. But the truth is, no one wants to address the dietary concerns of a Vampire. All around the world the kosher and vegetarian diets are accommodated, but never that of the Vampire’s.

My life has followed a similar path. No one has understood or accommodated me. People made fun of my large overbite, my pale skin, and allergies to extreme light and garlic. As I grew up, things only got worse. I was very self-conscious in high school: not being able to see your reflection in the mirror does not help when you want to look good for asking a girl out on date. It was miserable. And while most boys have to worry about fighting their sexual urges during class (hoping that they don’t get called to the blackboard at the “wrong” time), I had to worry about fighting my urges to bite people. I know I said that we were humane, but I still had urges. I just don’t want to harm anyone. I’m not like that.

All of this has led me to where I am now: Penn. It’s just as hard out here as it was when I was a little kid. The classes are tough, and being away from home is difficult, but what really gets me is that I am basically misrepresented everyday. On the surface I am a white, Jewish, male from New York—stereotypical—but in reality I’m a Vampire. No one thinks of me as that; know one knows me as that. It’s hard to live this double life and have no one understand it.

My first few days were especially tough. My roommate is Italian and loves garlic—I mean loves it. He puts it on everything. So my first
week I looked like a constant allergic reaction; not pretty. Night three at Penn, I turned into a bat in the middle of the night (purely by accident—stuff happens), scaring the hell out of my roommate and subsequently the whole hall. I then had to conjure up an excuse as to where I was during the whole uproar. At the Philadelphia Art Museum, during NSO, I had an embarrassing moment as I started drooling in front of painting with blood all over it—that was hard to explain as well. At least the frat parties were good—the nightlife is just kind of my thing.

It’s just that in a school as large as Penn you would think there would be other people like me. You see, Vampires have a sort of radar—we can tell who’s a Vampire and who’s not. There is no such thing as an “in the closet” Vampire to us. And, it just so happens that I am the only one at this school (but is Vampire listed as a minority on the Penn application? I think not). It’s hard enough finding your group of friends, let alone people who can relate to you. I have friends, but they don’t know the real me. Well, I guess now they do. I only hope that they believe.

Why am I telling you all this? What is the reason for me to let everyone know who I really am? Maybe I think it’s time for you to look around you and see people for what they really are—underneath the superficial relationships that we have already formed. I’m not what I seem and neither are many of the people that are on campus (in good, and unfortunately bad ways as well). As many of us are beginning to form new relationships we should look at who we are surrounding ourselves with.

I also ask that everyone is more accepting to Vampires. We are a sensitive people. It’s a weird request, but given the opportunity, I’ve got to ask it. I know you probably don’t believe a word I said, but maybe at least it got you thinking.

Happy Halloween everybody! Make my people proud and wear your Vampire colors! It will make me feel more at home. As for me... I’m going as Super Mario. Man I love that guy.

Benny Laitman is a freshman in the College. You can write to him at laitman@sas.

First Blog
WWW.FIRSTCALLMAGAZINE.COM/BLOG

Pelosi at Penn

Adam Goodman (10/12/06)

Pelosi clearly thinks that her “optimistic message” will better serve the political goals of her party. But this could be a dangerous miscalculation. Pelosi’s speech will do little to rally Democrats, and it’s a well-known political truth that the best way to get people to vote is to make them angry.

In that sense, the speech was just too... nice. The Republicans are flailing right now. From a Democratic perspective, this is the time to deal the final blow, to put the nail in the coffin. This is politics, not a junior high basketball league; you kick your opponents when they’re down. With all that’s gone wrong for the GOP in the past month as well as Bush’s nosedive in popularity, the political dynamic has changed. There has never been a better time to strike.

GooTube

Tim Potens (10/11/06)

The huge video website YouTube has finally been acquired by a larger company - Google, of course.

It’s a bit scary to think of how much power Google continues to gain. YouTube was one of the most popular things online that wasn’t controlled by Google, and that certainly didn’t stop Google from making its move. YouTube now has the financial resources to do things they never could afford, and the larger publicity will only increase their popularity and market worth. But, there’s always that flash of conscience in the back of your mind. Is it such a bad thing that the internet media is vastly controlled by Google, NewsCorp, Yahoo, MSN, and a handful of others? Or would be better off if the little guys - like YouTube was - stayed independent?

On Blogging

Andrew Pederson (10/8/06)

This week three women farted in my face in separate, non-consecutive occasions. Right in my face. The first was in Rosengarten Reserve, when a girl was making the normal trip down the aisle towards Mark’s Cafe when, mid-stride, right as her hips were level with my head, she let loose an incredible nether-wind about five decibles above the background chatter.

Next, as I was walking home up Locust Walk at about 1 am, a pair of girls came running past, and, the VERY second the closest one passed me, again, the same dirty thunderclap.

The third example actually happened as I was riding my bike. Again, I pass a female, who is enjoying a leisurely commute in perfect peace and quiet. As soon as I get within range, BLAM! I think she even shot forward a foot or two.

Log on to firstcallmagazine.com/blog to read and comment on the rest of these and other blog entries. First Blog is updated daily.
In the sub-Saharan African context, Ghana's poverty level is relatively low. With respect to the West, however, the level of poverty and standard of living in parts of Ghana is overwhelming. I expected my semester in Ghana to be very different from any semester that I had spent in the U.S., but no amount of reading or information sessions could have prepared me for what I have seen. It's not that the things that I have seen here are brand new to me: poverty exists in the U.S. Anyone who has walked through areas of Philadelphia has seen buildings, corners, and scenes that look like they belong in the Third World. However, in the U.S., these examples of poverty are less rampant. Unemployment, poor or incomplete education, low access to clean drinking water, hunger, high infant mortality rates, and crime are characteristics of poor communities everywhere. But it is a different brand of poverty here in Ghana. It's everywhere, it's in your face, it's obvious, it's unarguable, it's unavoidable – and it's the rule, not the exception.

In the U.S., the standard and price of living is much higher than in most of the world. A Legon Journal of Sociology article defines the poor as “those living in households with per capita expenditure of less than 900,000 cedis (approximately US $100). The very poor are those with per capita expenditure of less than 700,000 cedis.” Imagine a household trying to survive on $100 per year in the U.S.!

In a place where money is so scarce, every penny counts. It’s hard to get a job in Ghana, so most people hustle to survive. And the issue really is survival. Everyone has something to sell. In Accra, you could probably do all of your grocery shopping on the way to the grocery store. Bread, water, snack foods, ice cream, batteries, soccer balls, maps, screwdrivers, wooden carvings, chocolate, watches, clothing, towels, toys. If you need anything, chances are that someone is selling it at an intersection near by. Medina market is lined with independent businessmen and women selling everything from food to carpets to electronics and household appliances.

Enter the international students of the University of Ghana, Legon. They come from the land of opportunity equipped with fancy clothes, expensive gadgets, and, most importantly, big budgets. The roundtrip plane ticket alone costs nearly $2000, so those international students have plenty of money to burn.

Bartering is a way of life in Ghana; almost nothing has a set price. The price a customer gets depends on his ability and willingness to barter. We enter the marketplace and represent big dollar signs to everyone inside. Their goal is to get as much money out of us as possible. Ours is a little bit more complicated. During a trip to Kumase, one member from my group spent 90,000 cedis (almost $10) on a small wooden toy, something that costs about $4 in the States, while another member managed to buy a large wooden staff worth upwards of $50 in the U.S., for 40,000 cedis (less than $5). We know that they’re trying to hustle us, and they know that we know, so, for the most part, bartering has a light, playful tone.

During a bus ride to Cape Coast, a member from my group spotted a woman selling plantain chips in the street. She got the woman’s attention and asked her how much she was charging for the chips. “5,000,” the woman replied. “Oh, that’s way too much,” interrupted another member from my group with a hint of satisfaction in his voice. “It should only be 2 thousand.” The bus drove off, the woman was left without a sale and my fellow international student was left without chips. And seemingly for good reason. After spending a slightly more than two months in the country, I can confirm that the standard price for a bag of plantain chips is 2,000 cedis. The woman on the street was trying to hustle an American, and she got busted. But there is more to the story. 5,000 cedis is equal to about $0.55 U.S. Plantain chips should cost about 23 cents, but instead, this woman was trying to get 32 cents extra. “Way too much?” I’m not so sure.

It’s a common theme that I’ve noticed among the international community here in Ghana; we guard every last penny of our money much harder than we ever would in...
the States. 32 cents?! During my freshman year alone, I found over $20 on the ground just walking around the University of Pennsylvania campus ($15 all at once, at one point). Here, we argue with cab drivers to take 5 of us to Bojo Beach and back (a 5 hour commitment) for 80,000 cedis (about 9 U.S. dollars). Then, we get to the beach and each of us spends 35,000 to enter, 20,000 on drinks, and 40,000 on a meal. Jay-Z performed here last Friday. Regular admission tickets were 600,000 cedis (about $67), but all of the international students who attended were V.I.P. and shelled out 1,000,000 cedis (about $111). But 55 cents for some plantain chips is too much.

To be honest, I'm not completely sure why. I do it myself and don't completely understand why. Perhaps it is because I come from a middle class background and, though I am rich here, am far from rich at home. So I come to the Third World with a spending budget that has been drastically influenced by the exchange rate but an attitude that has not made the switch. I still think the way that I do when I'm at home, and I know that I need to be careful about the money that I spend while I'm here because I won't be rich when I get home, and, if I'm not careful, I might be poor. It's also the principle of the matter; no one likes being hustled. We like to feel that we know what is going on and we like to show people on the street that they cannot con us as easily as they may think ("20 dollars for some Nikes? I don't think so"). But when I saw my fellow oburoni (Twi for "foreigner" or "white person") deprive herself of some delicious plantain chips over an extra 32 cents, a new idea popped into my mind: maybe we want to keep these people in poverty.

Children are everywhere in Ghana; unfortunately, affordable daycare is not. If a woman has a young child and that child is not at school, the child is probably with his or her mother. The woman selling plantain chips in the street was carrying a baby on her back. When we barter, we often forget the bigger picture. 55 cents is nothing to us. But to someone who survives off of one dollar per day, 55 cents is a lot. Maybe she was trying to hustle the girl from my group, but what was her goal? Was it to lure an unsuspecting American into shelling out a crippling amount of money or was it to get a little closer to being able to buy enough food for that baby and her older siblings to get through the week?

Maybe we like the poverty. Maybe we love feeling so rich. Maybe we think that the floorless and windowless shacks that pass for homes here make our good background for a photo album cover. If the poverty didn't exist, how could we go home and talk about the courage and hospitality that the people of Ghana display in the face of such dire conditions? All I know is that I'm starting to get a better idea of why Americans have such a bad reputation all over the world.

We come to Ghana. We meet the people and snap pictures of the poverty. But when that poverty reaches out towards us and says, "Do you have 32 cents to spare?" we recoil. We know the history. We've been to the slave castles. We know how the slave trade drained resources out of this land and used them to build up what is now our home. We know that Ghana was once called "the Gold Coast." We know where that gold went; and we know that now that it's gone, people have to struggle just to survive. But most of the time, we don't care. Don't get me wrong; it bothers us on a grand, theoretical, philosophical, and political level. But in practice, we don't care enough to dish out the extra 32 cents.  

All I know is that I am starting to get a better idea of why Americans have such a bad reputation all over the world.

Anand Jahi is a junior in the College. You can write to him at anand@sas.
CROSSWORD: WAYS TO ESCAPE REALITY

ACROSS
4. Girlfriends are overrated anyway. Go online and play World of ______.
5. Sweat. Turn yourself into a pretzel. Pay someone too much money to help you do so.
9. Turn on ______ and watch The Real World, because you're tired of the real world.
11. Go to Alcor Life Extension facility and sign up for ______ so you can be around when the Red Sox- oh, shit. Never mind. When the Cubs finally win the World Series.
13. Head to ______ with some rowdy friends and three handles of tequila, order every single flavor of margarita, mix them all together, and get completely plastered.
16. Obsess about how awesome ______ game-shows were when you were 9. Then start a face book group about it.
18. ______ yourself. Then ______-image yourself. Then check out ______-scholar. Then lament the fact that ______ has taken over your entire life.
20. Buy a ______, who is the one, who is so much fun, and have a bubble bath with it.

DOWN
1. Read up on past issues online in the First Call ______.
2. Sick of all that math and physics, Penngineer? Head to ______ and actually read something.
3. ______ your face with dining hall food. Throw out your scale. Repeat.
4. Run into a ______ headfirst a few times; you won't even know what happened.
5. Borrow someone's ______ and sing for money outside Huntsman. Beginners only, please.
6. Wear ______ indoors, and give dirty looks to anyone who tells you that you look like a douche. Then realize they can't see your dirty looks. Take them off.
7. Build a ______ out of an apple, a straw, and some of that Ivy League ingenuity.
8. Go argue with the Christian evangelists in front of college ______.
9. When the Cubs finally win the World Series.
10. Hang out with Lucy. In the Sky. With ______.
12. Take the bus to NYC and play the piano with your feet at ______. Oh wait. It went bankrupt. Never mind.
14. A bit chilly? Buy seven Penn ______ so you can flaunt your Ivy pride, AND feel like you're back home in California.
15. A bit chilly? Buy seven Penn ______ so you can flaunt your Ivy pride, AND feel like you're back home in California.
17. Relive Fahrenheit 451 by organizing a ______-burning in the wind tunnel.
19. Build an obstacle course in the ______ and charge freshmen $5 on their way to the exits to test their agility.

OVERHEARD

Eavesdropping in class, on the Walk, at a party? So were we. If you hear anything hilarious and want to spread the word, e-mail quotes to editors@firstcallmagazine.com.

Sorority girl #1: Maybe it's like her first love, but Mike is like a legitimate candidate for marriage.
Sorority girl #2: Like, yeah!

Med students sitting outside Houston at lunchtime:
“Brought my A game, man, my A game, and she STILL didn’t go for it.”
“Dude, really? your A game?”
“Yeah. My A game.”

Outside DRL:
Construction guy 1: She said it wouldn’t be gay, it’s an experience!
Construction guy 2: <silent>

On Spruce:
Middle-aged man to middle-aged woman: You hit me first! It wasn’t just a beating, you hit me first!

Guy 1: “Well they’re not real people.”
Guy 2: “Yeah, but I still have to live with them, or it, or whatever the case is.”

In the King’s Court dining hall:
Guy 1: “What!? No meat anywhere?”
Guy ahead in line: “Dude, they’re bringing fish out in a minute.”
Guy 1: “Fish! Fish isn’t real meat! Since when does fish count as meat?” [3 minutes later] “PESCADO?!”