

**ONE'S
COMPANY,
TWO'S
A CROWD,
THREE'S
A SOCIAL
NETWORK**

CHAPTER ONE

*In concentric circles of family
and community, society and
nation, a social network takes
shape in a little town in the
vineyards of the Western
Cape, South Africa.*

TUESDAY EVENING in Stellenbosch. It's raining. A soft mist sweeping in from the roof of the mountains, falling like a benediction on the rows of green that will one day be turned into wine. One day.

For now, the traffic in Dorp Street heading out of town is heavy and sluggish, as it always is at this hour.

People who've lived in Stellies all their lives will tell you that the town isn't what it used to be. They'll say it's become a place of bustle and noise, and outsiders rushing in to make a quick buck. I don't know about that. The bucks aren't quick in Stellenbosch.

But one thing I can tell you is that the grid-lock isn't as bad as it is in Joburg, either. For starters, there's the view. The sunlight filtering through the leaves of the old oak trees, casting the curls of the Cape Dutch gables into stark relief. The water swirling down the stone canals that shoulder the streets. Technically, I suppose, they're gutters. But I think you're allowed to indulge a sense of romance in Stellenbosch.

My heart is in this town, and not just because it's where my wife, Sibella, grew up, and where we're bringing up our

family too. My heart is here because I'm building something, investing in an ideal, putting down roots. Small acorns grow into sheltering oaks, seedlings become the vineyard. But the harvest of my dreams is something you can't touch or taste, see or feel. And yet it is as pervasive and as vital as oxygen.

The miracle, for me, never fades. I tap on the face of a small device, fashioned from glass and silicon and plastic. The signals are interpreted, processed, and conveyed on radio waves that swarm and cluster in cells, like the chambers of a hive. Someone talks to me, or reads my words on their screen. We connect.

In these criss-crossing threads are woven the fabric of a community, a society, an economy, a nation. And beyond that, the world itself. But the technology isn't the dream. The dream is what you can do with it.

Run a small business. Find a job. Educate a child. Pay your bills. Bank. Run a big business. Learn, teach, share, counsel, build. Connect.

In Africa, my home continent, there are about a billion people, and more than half of those hold in their possession the most powerful instrument of social, economic and political transformation ever invented. We skipped the printing press, the telegraph and the fixed line, leapfrogging every major breakthrough in communication technology, waiting for the ultimate innovation.

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The mobile phone.

Millions of nodes on a network, each representing a person with a dream of their own, and the means, however remote, to achieve it. This is our age of digital Uhuru, of the African mobile economy on the move, and it excites and inspires me to be a part of it.

But this story of mine begins with a networking exercise of the old-fashioned variety. An amble along the banks of the Eerste River in Stellenbosch one August morning in 2011. It was raining. I was sharing an umbrella with a guy named Herman Heunis.

Earlier, I had popped him an SMS: 'Keen for a 9.30 am coffee-walk?' Ah, the coffee-walk. A fine Stellenbosch tradition. There is something about walking in a town like this, something about a cup of coffee to go, that stirs the air and quickens the senses.

You're thinking on your feet, going places, open to serendipity and the elements. You're on equal footing. Which is important, when the overriding item on the agenda for your coffee-walk is a business decision that will dramatically change both your lives. Herman and I had an understanding.

A memorandum of understanding, to be precise, under the terms of which, a few months earlier, I had made an offer to buy a company from him and his equity partners for just under R700 million.

A company called Mxit, an instant-messaging and chat service that in less than a decade had grown to be the biggest social network in Africa. More than that, it had become a cultural force, a community of millions, with its own economy, its own infrastructure, its own systems, its own traditions.

I had become an evangelist, an unpaid, unofficial

ambassador for the network, flipping the lid of my laptop to show anyone who had a moment that the numbers were mind-boggling and that this was so much more than a forum for teenagers to chat and flirt.

It was a marketplace of products and ideas, a platform for lobbying and mobilising, a springboard for education, opportunity, social upliftment, empowerment.

I had begun to think of Mxit as a country, rather than a network – a country with connections all over the world, and its heart beating strongest in Africa. Of course, I wasn't just flying the flag for goodwill and PR. I wanted to raise awareness, and turn that awareness into bundles of cash.

I wanted to see the Mxit flag flying over my fledgling group of mobile-internet startups, World of Avatar. I wanted to live in the Republic of Mxit. I wanted to raise the standard high. We walked. I took a sip of coffee. Bitter.

We talked for a while about a subject that was marginally off the agenda. Religion. I told Herman I had stepped impulsively into a chapel on the way, to say a little prayer. Some deals, you need all the help you can get. He laughed.

Herman is a wiry, no-nonsense kind of guy, with a scraggle of silvery, shoulder-length hair and an edge of flint to his voice. He grew up on a farm in Namibia, a son of the soil who is at his most animated when sharing his passion for the African landscape. He mountain-bikes. He kite-surfs. He 4 x 4s.

A few years ago, roaring through the Namib Desert on a motorbike, he almost wiped himself out in an accident that left him with a broken back and a spell of several months in rehabilitation.

But there is an aura of Zen about Herman too, the soul of an artist, and he grappled over whether to do an arts degree or a

B.Comm. at Stellenbosch University, after his stint of military service, writing software for the South African Navy. He chose commerce.

Computing was his hobby, but it became his obsession, and then it became his fortune. He started out as a tamer of main-frames, the mighty beasts that crunch numbers and mull over data at banks, insurance companies and other mega-corporations.

Then, like an astronomer switching his gaze from Jupiter to a speck of stardust, he scaled down, down, down to the micro-cosmos of mobile. He spun off a division of his main-frame consulting company to build text-based games for cellular handsets.

From that fusion of big and small thinking, plugged into

the right technology
in the right place at
the right time, Mxit
was born.

There we were, two guys in
brown leather jackets, sharing
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up conversation in the rain.

Bizarre, I know. But to his
eternal credit, Herman was
cool about it.

Herman wasn't
the coder, the Grand
Designer, but he was
the founder and the
architect-in-chief,
and he had assembled
a team of wizards and

whizz-kids who had come up with something simple and mag-
ical, a portal to networks and communities and worlds.

But over the last few years, he had fallen out with his one-
third partners, the multinational media conglomerate, Naspers,
and he was tired. He wanted to cut his ties and move out of the
building. He was a willing seller. I was an eager buyer. But

it takes more than good intentions to build a bridge between those stations. We stopped.

'Sorry, dude,' I said. 'I just haven't been able to raise enough cash.'

There we were, two guys in brown leather jackets, sharing an umbrella, having a break-up conversation in the rain. Bizarre, I know. But, to his eternal credit, Herman was cool about it.

We walked back to his car – a brand-new Porsche – and shook hands. No words. He got inside and drove off. I carried on walking, watching the rain chasing the leaves in the gutters of Stellenbosch.

To make matters worse, it wasn't the first time I'd had coffee with Herman and found myself walking away from the opportunity of a lifetime. In 2006, while I was running a wireless broadband service provider called iBurst, I had flown down to Stellies on a mission to stake my claim to Mxit. A modest stake, but still.

The service at that stage had some 360 000 users, more than two-thirds of whom were in the dream marketing demographic of 12 to 25. And more than 10 000 new users were signing up every day.

Even so, it would have been crazy, back then, to project that Mxit would grow to almost 50-million users in 120 countries, 23-billion messages a month, and up to 50 000 daily signups, by 2012. But that's exactly what happened.

Herman sat across the table from me, giving me a look that said, who's this lightie trying to get in on my business? Then he levitated a figure that made me laugh, twice, quietly to myself.

Once back then, because of the sheer audacity of what he was asking, for the size of the stake. Once, now, because in

retrospect, what he was asking was a pittance. Thirty-five million rand.

In retrospect you rationalise to dull the pain of regret, but the timing wasn't right for me, and I was still trying to get my own startup off the ground. Coffee, handshake, thank you. I paid the bill and left.

Now here I was again, five years later, walking away, wandering, lost in thought. The stakes this time had been so much higher, the fall so much further. I hadn't felt this let down or defeated since high school. Glen High, in Pretoria East. I must have learnt a few things there – my love of writing and history, and enough basic maths to scrape through university, years later, as a chartered accountant.

But it was a rough-and-tumble institution, with lots of fighting and unruliness, and the biggest lesson I learnt, looking back, was How Not to Get Caught with Alcohol on School Grounds. I learnt that lesson, I'm sorry to say, by getting caught with alcohol on school grounds.

I was in Standard 9, and my misdemeanour earned me a suspension. The only reason I wasn't expelled outright was that my mates didn't rat on me. Three other guys were expelled, each of them ratting on the other. So, don't take booze to class, and don't rat.

My dad did not appreciate the subtle distinction between suspension and expulsion when I told him what had happened, and therein lay another lesson – given by one Alan Knott-Craig to another. He wasn't impressed. And he knew a thing or two about handling wayward children.

As a computer programmer working for the South African Post Office in the 1970s, my dad earned barely enough money to pay the rent. Then an offer came up, and he and my mom,

Janet, a schoolteacher, moved from their tiny flat into a spacious, rent-free home in Pretoria. There was just one catch. It was the Louis Botha foster home in Wonderboom, a place of care for orphans and children from broken homes. My folks took on the job of house-parents, and for the first three years of my life, I grew up with a bunch of kids who had some serious mental baggage.

But the videos show a happy and laughing brood, myself among them, so the house-parents must have done a good job. So much so that when I was ten years old, I went out and got a job of my own. Just part-time, showing people to their seats at my local Nu Metro, and then packing fruit and veggies at the Spar.

At school I ran the soccer betting pool, and sold ices at break. I wish I could say I invested my micro-earnings wisely, and learnt valuable lessons about entrepreneurship. The truth is, I spent every penny on fantasy books and computer games.

I would sneak into the study after everyone was asleep and play Hero's Quest for hours on end, escaping from dungeons, ascending spiral staircases, accumulating weapons and artifacts, confronting evil wizards, battling fearsome monsters, casting spells, opening secret doors, vaulting over

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spear-traps, dodging falling rocks, and hoping like hell that my dad wouldn't walk in, tap me on the shoulder, and ask what I thought I was doing on the computer at four in the bloody morning.

'Isn't it obvious? I'm overcoming a series of obstacles while searching for the treasure that will fulfil my quest and make me a hero.'

That would never have worked with my dad. He doesn't dwell in the kingdom of metaphor and analogy. He works in the world of metal and fire, of character forged in the crucible of toil and sweat and grit. And here I'm just talking about what he does for a hobby, making lovingly hand-crafted barbecues. He's an electrical engineer, and that kind of thing comes as easily to him as striking a match. Me, I'm not a natural spot welder.

But it was a ritual of my childhood, my old man calling me over to take the welding gun in my bare hand, and then standing and watching as I touched the white-hot rod to the grid, squinting against the shower of sparks, grimacing at the fiery crackle and the smell of scorched electrodes.

But at the end of it, if all went well, if the spots were neat and the bars of the grid were straight, I would feel like a hero in the eyes of my dad. He's always been a fast talker, a sharp shooter, impatient with needless rules and niceties and excuses for not getting things done.

Someone who worked for him once took a look at his initials on a memo, and turned them into a nickname that stuck: AK-47. That caused great amusement in our household.

In 1990, soon after the release of Nelson Mandela set in motion the waves of change that would shape the new South Africa, my dad was seconded from his management position

at Telkom, the state-owned telecommunications company, to help get a new revolution into gear. Cellular radio telephony, it was called – liberation from the tyranny of the landline. The cutting of the umbilical cord that tethered people to one fixed point on a map. We were going mobile.

I was still in high school, trying to figure out what to do with my life, when my dad was appointed chief executive officer of the startup company that would become Vodacom, the national cellular service provider. My grandfather, also Alan Knott-Craig – I'm often referred to as Alan Knott-Craig Jr, but I'm really Alan Knott-Craig 3.0 – ran a small chain of country newspapers in the southern Cape. So I've got ink as well as radio waves flowing in my veins. But when the time came for me to choose a career, I was given the option of pursuing any university course I wanted, as long it was a B.Comm. in accounting. It didn't inspire me, but that wasn't the point. My dad insisted. He said he wouldn't pay for any other course, and then he promptly sold his car to help finance my tuition.

There was a lot riding on my performance, and you could say I passed with flagging colours, just scraping through with a rewrite to get into the honours class. Miraculously, thanks to a seasonal shortage of clerks, I managed to sneak onto the articles list at Deloitte in Cape Town, where I met another chartered accountant who would soon become my wife. Sibella Bosman. Articles was a great time in my life. Living in a digs of five guys, earning actual money, having a party in the Mother City. Work was fun, too. I spent most of my billable hours thinking of ways to escape the office early, and figured out some great new methods of auditing, reducing effort by 50 per cent and producing the same results.

This did not mean that I produced double the output. The

extra time I generated was put to good use on the golf course and on the water, sailing. I wasn't planning on working my way up the ranks to the hallowed status of partner, so shining at work was never a priority.

I was almost fired twice. Once for bunking work, and once for being on a porn email distribution list. At 25, I was done with articles and married to Sibella. We went off to New York, where we worked for a stint before selling up and backpacking around the world for six months.

Back home, reality waited, in the form of the huge Absa loan that had been used to fund our overseas adventures. My assets were souvenirs and memories and the equity of love. But I needed a job. I started phoning around and going for interviews. I didn't want to be a CA. I wanted to work in cellular telecommunication.

Trouble was, I couldn't figure out how to do that without working for one of the networks: Vodacom, which would have meant working for my dad, or MTN, which would have meant ... well, I don't know if they were going to be too happy to hire a guy named Alan Knott-Craig.

In many ways I think that I'm a lucky guy. Not that I was born into luck (which I was), but just because luck is a matter of opportunity and circumstance, and sometimes, in my life, they've collided.

One day, out of the blue, I got a call from a man by the name of Gavin Varejes. He asked if we could have a coffee. Funny how no one ever asks, can we talk business? It's always, can we have a coffee? And why not? We had a coffee.

Gavin was an entrepreneur who had purchased the licence for location-based cellphone tracking software from a UK company. Now he was looking for someone to take the licence and turn it into a viable proposition. At our second meeting, he

offered me 10 per cent equity and a nominal salary to start Cellfind. Of course, I knew that part of the attraction was my dad's position at Vodacom.

I asked my dad what I should do. He said I should join a big company, rather than try to start a small one. But he wasn't going to stand in my way. I asked Sibella. She also had dreams of entrepreneurship, but was willing to put them on hold for me. She said go for it.

Sibella paid the bills for two years, while I learnt the hard lessons that my dad had warned me about. In fact, after nineteen months I told Gavin to shut the business down. He told me to back myself.

In month 25 we paid our first dividend. In September 2007 the company was valued at a few hundred million rand, and Blue Label Telecoms paid me cash for my stake. That was November 2007, just before the global financial crisis. I got lucky.

I was already running iBurst at that time. It was a licensed broadband operator, and Blue Label Investments had bought 40 per cent of the business blind – no due diligence, nothing – before sending me in to fix things up. The deal for me was no equity, only a salary, and the opportunity to build something big. I signed up like a marine and stormed into battle with my troops.

We took a company with no share register, no customer care, no billing records for 15 000 customers, no audited accounts for five years, 50 employees and a physical network of 40 rag-tag base stations, and somehow turned it around.

After three years, we had 120 000 customers, a national network of 350 base stations, a history of unqualified audits, the MyADSL prize for Broadband Provider of the Year, and the Deloitte Best Company To Work For prize for our industry.

I must admit it went to my head.

Despite the successes, however, iBurst could not escape mediocrity. We talked a good game, but simply couldn't get to the next level. My dad had warned me about the difficulties of starting your own business. What he hadn't warned me about was the cost.

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During the iBurst years, I drifted apart from Sibella. I was fighting a roaring battle, fending off competitors, managing shareholders and motivating staff. I would get home late in the evening, only to be told that I wasn't giving my family enough attention. I felt like I was walking a tightrope across a raging chasm.

I visited my dad and asked how he managed to deal with balancing the demands of work and family, my implication being that work is so much more important. He had just reached a milestone birthday, and he was in a reflective mood. 'When you're 60,' he said, 'it's not your employees that are around you, it's your family. Look at your family and look at your staff. And choose.'

At that point, he'd had two heart attacks and a divorce, so I guess he was speaking from experience. For once, I could see my way to the other side of the chasm.

I went to see Brett Levy, my chairman at iBurst. I knew he

wasn't going to be happy with what I had to say. But he understood. I resigned so that I could move with my family from Joburg to Stellenbosch, and put some effort into rebuilding my own troubled network for a change. But first, the handover.

Four months of pain and trauma. Many people felt betrayed, angry and hurt. In the process of trying to avoid one divorce, I had plunged straight into another. No matter how much I tried to justify it, it looked like desertion in the heat of battle.

I learnt a bitter lesson: never gather followers unless you're prepared to lead them in the front line for a hundred years. I had made my choice.

We settled in to Stellenbosch, which at least offered a change of pace and place. Then, one Sunday in January 2010, I picked up the *Sunday Times* to find a familiar pair of names all over the front page. Alan Knott-Craig and Alan Knott-Craig.

It was a hard-hitting story, rife with allegations that the CEO of Vodacom had benefited or favoured family members in awarding a contract and assisting with business ventures. One of those family members, so the story said, was me.

The 'Alan Knott-Craig nepotism scandal' dominated the headlines for days, and although the board and shareholders of Vodacom exonerated my dad of any wrongdoing after an independent enquiry, it hit very close to home.

By nature I'm an optimist, but that spell in the spotlight left me feeling embarrassed and defensive, and I decided to lie low for a while. A couple of months later, I boarded a plane to the US, for a ten-day course on public policy and leadership at Harvard, as part of the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leader programme.

Far away from home, far from iBurst, far from the mess of it all, I had an epiphany. There were two things, I realised, that

were more important to me than anything else. The first was family, followed by the pursuit of my purpose in life. I just had to figure out what that was.

On the journey home, a series of hops that kept me in the air for 32 hours, a word popped into my head as I gazed at the rolling clouds. ‘Avatar’. An earthly manifestation of a divine being, a spiritual guide, a dream-warrior on a mission. And the image you choose to represent you or your alter ego on video games and social networks.

By the time we touched down, on April Fool’s Day, 2010, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I had found my purpose:

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to help people make money and build community via their mobile phones.

I asked one of my original technical partners at Cellfind, Peter Matthaei, to visit me in Stellenbosch and we spent a weekend

walking through the vineyards talking about the world and tech in general. It was a conversation about chasing greatness and doing something meaningful. The seed was planted, and Pete and I were ready to nurture it into World of Avatar.

Things began to move at the speed of lightning. Pete’s development team moved to Stellenbosch, bringing Mobicanvas, a tool for building cheap mobile websites, with them. Steve Briggs called in a panic and I stepped in to save Arc Telecoms, a voice and data service provider.

Tom London, a lanky, laid-back talk radio presenter, moved

from Johannesburg to pursue his plans for an internet-based radio station. Veeren Naidoo quit everything to chase his dream of an online bill-payment service called Triloq.

Johnny Graaff approached me to get involved in FSMS, an ad-supported web-and-mobile SMS service. Katy Digovich flew in from Gaborone and we agreed to launch Jujuz to sell mobile classified ads.

Andrew Rudge and I bonded over many a coffee and we decided to try MobiFin, a platform for distributing financial information and other educational content on mobile devices.

Pete Matthaei, my co-founder and chief technical officer, wasn't enjoying being pulled in ten different directions. He wanted to chase his dreams of building a world-changing product. Which turned out to be BOOM!, an online music discovery service.

A close friend of mine, Nico van der Westhuizen, moved to Stellenbosch in April. He and I had both started our first businesses in 2003, sharing many of the trials and tribulations of first-time entrepreneurs.

Immediately upon settling in, he started persuading Kevin Harris and me to establish a passive investment holding company to help us diversify our assets and to learn new industries. After much umm-ing and ah-ing, we agreed to give it a go. The fateful meeting was at Basic Bistro on Church Street, so we decided to call the company Basic Business Investments (BBI).

Through one of Sibella's best friends I met Jimmy Hane-kom, a typical disgruntled employee who felt he could do a better job than his boss, if only he had his own company. I backed him. Problem was that it was a property-development company, and you can do squat without a balance sheet.

Nevertheless, he cracked on, and that company became

Foundation Capital. My shares were bought by a good friend, Johan Bosman, and BBI.

In the online media arena, I invested in a venture run by one of the most driven and determined mavericks I know. Branko Brkic, editor and publisher of the *Daily Maverick*, a journal of news and commentary that is helping to shape the way we see our noisy, disruptive democracy.

Before I knew it, we had a group of rockstars – or avatars, as I would come to call them – and no way of going back.

Of course, we had a couple of hiccups. I was introduced to a woman with big dreams of rolling out IPTV (internet protocol TV) and completely disrupting the pay-TV industry. Music to my ears. After giving her R500 000 in good faith, things rapidly started going pear-shaped. I decided to walk away when it was clear she couldn't work with my guys, and worse, was insulting them.

I also made the rash decision to start an office-letting-cum-tech-incubator and signed a five-year lease for 500 square metres of the most expensive office space in Stellenbosch.

Meanwhile, on the home front, Sibella and I began working together to make our marriage work. To my everlasting surprise and relief, we identified the problems, dealt with them, and realised we were still crazily in love.

Thank God, because that's when the real business pressure began. Without a rock-solid relationship at home, I would probably have crashed.

It all happened in August 2010. On the first of the month, I received an email from my banker, saying the bank had changed its mind regarding the pre-approved additional facility on my house, thereby removing R5 million of capital from my war chest. At that point, I had R1 600 remaining in my

overdraft, and an overheads bill for World of Avatar alone of R250 000, due on the 25th.

On 12 August, I re-proposed to Sibella. She accepted, luckily for me.

On 13 August, a Friday, we opened the first World of Avatar office and had an official launch party.

On 14 August – my birthday – Sibella informed me she was pregnant again.

On 15 August, I double-checked my bank balance. Yup, still R1 600 left.

On 16 August, I finally plucked up the courage to email my dad and ask for an emergency loan. He mulled over it for a couple of days, and then said he would help me with 20 per cent of the amount. And I had better pay it back in a hurry.

I borrowed money from friends. I found money I'd forgotten about in an overseas account. I searched like a chicken pecking in the dust. And then one day, I went to a kiddie's birthday party in Stellenbosch, and bumped into an angel. The best kind of angel: the kind that, with a little bit of persuasion, puts faith, trust and money into your business dreams and ventures. To my eternal disbelief and relief, I'd found a capital partner. On a handshake, I was saved.

I got lucky.

One day in early January 2011, in Stellies, I was having a casual breakfast with one of my closest friends, Francois Swart. Francois, aka Frank, was CEO of a listed private equity company called Paladin, based in Stellenbosch.

Just like that, Frank asked whether I would consider bringing him on board the World of Avatar train. I was flabbergasted. Frank was always the top-rated clerk at articles, seventh in the board exams, and a rockstar at Goldman Sachs in London. And

here he was saying he was keen on the World of Avatar story.

Clearly, I can talk a good game. Over the next few weeks, we thrashed out a deal whereby he bought 20 per cent of my shares and could wriggle his way out of the PSG Group without offending anyone.

This proved to be quite serendipitous because my personal finances were not looking hot. I was a classic case of 'asset rich, cash poor'.

We sealed the deal in February 2011, and by the end of March, Frank was in the fire. I'll never forget when he asked whether I minded if he wore baggies to work. This was his first experience of working outside a corporate. I said, please don't ask anything like that again. He came to work in baggies. Suffice to say, I love Frank.

The businesses were ticking over, with a couple of rockets taking off, but I still felt there was something missing from the mix. I popped into an office just outside town. The office of Herman Heunis, founder and CEO of Mxit.

Hello, Herman. Me again. This was in April 2011, four months before we would take that walk along the Eerste River. After an hour of pleasantries, I casually suggested to Herman that I'd like to throw my hat into the ring, should Mxit be for sale. He laughed. Turns out I was serious.

He called me a couple of weeks later, and after a few more weeks of negotiation, we signed a formal memorandum of understanding on 11 May, for World of Avatar to acquire between 90 and 100 per cent of all the Mxit companies for R669 million. How did I get to the valuation?

Well, when I started the negotiation with Herman, I had to put a number on the table. I knew that number had to be sufficiently big to get him excited, otherwise (a) he would not take

me seriously, and (b) he would look around for other buyers to up the price.

My gut said anything less than a billion was a steal. Herman owned 60 per cent of the company. So I came up with a valuation of R669 million, which meant his share would be a nice round R400 million, which sounds better than R390 million. Retail Psychology 101.

Then started the most exciting and stressful four months of my life. We pulled together a star team, conducted a full due diligence within four weeks, held two strategy sessions with all the big hitters present, appointed RMB as our corporate advisors and went on a two-week roadshow to investors.

And failed.

Everyone loved the story. No one loved the numbers. We eventually agreed on an extension. The big day arrived. I didn't have the money. It probably didn't help that Greece was going bankrupt, the US government debt was downgraded and global stock markets had their biggest fall since 2008.

That aside, our failure to raise the cash was an indictment of me. Potential investors didn't believe I could make the magic happen.

I felt like a loser.

I woke up on 19 August, with a sick feeling in my stomach. I sent Herman an SMS. 'Keen for a coffee-walk at 9.30 am?'

Well, some walks take you further than others.

I felt crushed, but I psyched myself into believing there would be other possibilities, other opportunities. I'd lost Mxit, but life would go on. I woke up that Monday feeling on top of the world for some inexplicable reason. Then my attorney, Jan Viviers, phoned. 'Alan,' he said, 'the deal might be alive.'

In a nutshell, his advice was to make a cash offer and

see what happens. Since May, Naspers and Herman had lost patience and energy. They had emotionally disengaged, and World of Avatar was far and away their preferred and most likely buyer. So maybe, just maybe, they would accept a lower price. But where to find the cash?

Long story short, I found enough to make an offer to purchase Mxit for R330 million. A discount of more than 50 per cent on the original offer, but better than nothing!

At 4 pm on 1 September, I sign the letter in my attorney's office. Ten days for the sellers to accept. Jan and I finish a quick beer, and I head home for some play time with my girls.

Sibella and I dash off at 5.30 pm for the launch of Livewell Suites, my buddy Jimmy Hanekom's new venture. It's a series of lifestyle and healthcare facilities for senior citizens. Very smart and stylish. I tell Jimmy that if things don't go according to plan with World of Avatar, I might have to move in.

Friday. A long day. No word from the sellers.

Weekend is *lekker*, just chilling with the girls.

Monday, no word from the sellers. I'm getting nervous.

Tuesday, I get an email from the sellers' attorney, requesting an extension in order to consider the offer more carefully. Golf in the afternoon with Jan. He shakes his head. We can't give an extension.

September 10 comes and goes. Now what? I tell the sellers we're getting deal fatigue. The ball is in their court.

Four days later, they call to say a signed agreement is on its way. We have 24 hours to sign, or they go overseas to find a buyer.

At 4.55 pm on Friday 16 September, we put pen to paper. Price: officially non-disclosable. But a whole lot less than the original R669 million. This deal was meant to be.

And now here I am again, on a Tuesday evening in

Stellenbosch, walking in the rain, crossing Dorp Street, smiling to myself, doubling my pace across the courtyard, and slipping into the sanctuary of Gino's, the biggest pizza-and-beer hangout for students in this student town.

Except, there are no students here tonight. Just us. We've booked the whole place out. We're celebrating. Mavericks, coders, dreamers, wizards, whizz-kids, techies, accountants, avatars and me – an upstart restarting a startup.

We're sitting at the long wooden banquet tables, talking, laughing, shouting over the hubbub of clinking glasses and the waft of hot dough rising in the pizza oven.

And somewhere above it all, silently, invisibly, the signals are shooting like stars, from handset to base station, across thousands of kilometres of cable, under the sea, onto a server on a distant shore, and all the way back again, over and over. People sending messages to each other. People communicating. People searching, reaching out, networking, connecting.

Welcome to Stellenbosch. Welcome to my world. Welcome to the New Republic of Mxit.

We've booked the whole place out. We're celebrating. Mavericks, coders, dreamers, wizards, whizz-kids, techies, accountants, avatars and me – an upstart restarting a startup.