

# CLIVE THOMPSON

## Other People's Property

Renting out that unused gear in your garage can help your neighbor—and the world.



THREE YEARS AGO, French entrepreneur Gary Cige was helping a friend hang a mirror in his country house when they realized they needed a drill. But where to get one? Buying one would cost 150 euros, a huge waste considering they needed it for only half an hour. And since it was Sunday, every rental shop would be closed. ¶ Yet as Cige realized, they were likely surrounded by drills. Odds are, at least one of his friend's neighbors had a drill that was sitting idle. Why wasn't there some easy way to find a drill to rent—for just a few bucks? ¶ Propelled by that idea, Cige cofounded Zilok, a startup that offers precisely this service: People post possessions they're willing to rent out, along with a price. Need a zoom lens for a wedding? That'll be a mere \$15 a day. Want to use someone's car for the day? That's \$60, cheaper than most auto-rental agencies. Cige's Web site processes the fee, tracks the reputation of your renting partner (so you can determine whether to trust them), and—in France—even issues insurance for your item. After two years in business, Zilok has 150,000 items listed, with 6,000 transactions a month, and it's the fastest-growing renter of cars in France. ¶ Peer-to-peer renting—and similar services—has boomed in the past few years. Some work like Zilok, while others let people swap things they own (such as books and CDs at Swaptree). A few even let you take advantage of space that's lying fallow, like Shared Earth, where landowners hook up with gardeners. ¶ In essence, we're seeing a new relationship to property—where access trumps ownership. We're using bits to help us share atoms. ¶ The genius of these sites is that they make a virtue of modern society's ecological sin: oversupply. In developed countries, we're prosperous but horribly wasteful. We buy tons of things


we use rarely—and which sit unused in basements and storage lockers.

So why not reduce the number of digital cameras and Xboxes we need to produce in the first place—by sharing more efficiently the ones that have already been purchased?

Peer renting and sharing is, of course, an old idea. But it never took off before, for logistical reasons: It was too hard to connect millions of renters to owners. The Internet's eBayesian ability to make markets solved that problem. The Net also provides crucial social glue, as the new startup Zimride proves. Ride-sharing systems have historically petered out because it can be kind of creepy to pick up strangers. So instead, Zimride lets people share rides with friends of friends from Facebook through either Facebook Connect or networks it sets up for individual organizations. "The limiting factor before was trust," Zimride cofounder Logan Green says, "and Facebook solved that."

Besides the environmental benefits, there are economic ones: Some users of Zilok make more than \$1,000 a month circulating their possessions. Granted, it's not enough to quit your day job, but a little extra dough for almost no effort never hurts.

As peer-to-peer renting and swapping evolves, tools like geolocation and micropayments could make it even smoother and more ubiquitous. Rachel Botsman, coauthor of *What's Mine Is Yours*—a new book that documents "collaborative consumption"—envisions a world in which everyone's stuff reports its status in real time: Where is it right now? Is it available for use by someone else? Your property could circulate for days or months, making you money instead of moldering in your garage. "We're facing a revolution in the way we think of ownership," Botsman says.

Or, to put it another way, your drill may be my drill, too. 

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