

CROK #4

An Alert Nerd
Publication



EXTRA LIFE

Grok #4: Extra Life

TOC - June 2009

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Grok: An Alert Nerd Zine

Editors: Sarah Kuhn, Matt Springer, Chris Stewart, Jeff Stolarczyk

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Your Dad Gets Mad at You for Playing Videogames: 1982

For the love of Pete, would stop playing that *Pac-Man*? What? It's "*Donkey Kong*?" I don't care if it's KING KONG, you need to turn that damn thing off and go straight to bed! And stop sitting so close to the TV, you'll go blind! Don't you talk back to me! That's it! I'm turning off this TV right now, and you're grounded! No more telephone, no more talking to your friends! I'm turning this TV off right now and you're going straight to bed!

(Dad turns the TV off, but not the Atari. You turn the TV back on and continue playing.)

Your Dad Gets Mad at You for Playing Videogames: 2009

Dude, seriously, you need to turn that thing off. Whoa. How'd you do that? What do you mean there's a cheat for that? You read about it online? Okay, show me. That's pretty cool. But seriously, you need to turn that off and go to sleep. Wait, so how close are you to the end? Okay, just this level, but then you're going to sleep and I MEAN it.



Okay, NOW you've got to go to sleep. Look, I don't care, dude, you've got to listen to me. That's it! Hand me that headset. And the controller. I'm taking your power supply too! You're done. Oh, and hand me your cell phone; no texting at all hours of the night. No, I gave you a chance, but you didn't listen. No, I will NOT give you the firewall password, so don't bother logging in tonight. Now that's IT! Go to sleep!

(Dad closes door, but forgot about the PSP grandma bought you last Christmas.)—*Ivan Sian*

Bios

Jeff Chen would like us all to think he's fake. We know better.

Kenny Jeffery lives in the South of England, where he gets to supplement his earnings not with cash but with luck and sanity by writing, illustrating and designing comics.

Sarah Kuhn lives in Los Angeles with a geek husband, an extensive *Buffy* action figure collection and way too many comic books. She has written for a bunch of nifty publications, including *Back Stage*, *Geek Monthly*, IGN, StarTrek.com, and *Creative Screenwriting*. She is one fourth of the mighty Alert Nerd collective and also blogs about stuff at Great Hera! (greathera.typepad.com)

Caroline Pruett lives in Richmond, Virginia. Whenever called upon to share an interesting fact about herself, she will mention either that she once had library cards from six distinct library systems at the same time, or that there was entire year in which she listened to Bruce Springsteen's album *Nebraska* at least twice a day. Both of these things only seem odd to her in retrospect. She blogs about comics with three dear friends at fantasticfangirls.org.

Back when the Internets was young, vibrant and paved with gold, **Ivan Sian** contributed insipid, drunken rants to IGN Sci-Fi. But after them thar webtubes imploded, he moved along to greater heights, submitting even more infrequent articles to the gone-but-not-forgotten Entertainment Geekly. Now that Ivan is older, he's a little less drunken, but no less insipid. Ladies love him, girls adore

him, even the ones who never saw him, he's Ivan Sian.

Matt Springer has worked as a magazine writer and editor, a marketing/PR flack, and a janitor. He is part of Alert Nerd's four-sided content die and has published two books through Alert Nerd Press: a collection of his Star Wars writing, *Poo-doo*, and his first novel, *Unconventional*. He also blogs at Pop Geek (popgeek.org). He lives with a toddler and his beautiful wife in Orlando, FL.

Chris Stewart was rescued from a life of crime by Sarah, who put him to work reviewing films at Daily Sci-Fi. He continues to orbit the world of freelance writing while working in the videogame industry in Vancouver. He also runs Proton Charging (protoncharging.com), a *Ghostbusters* news site and one of the earliest blogs evar.

Jeff Stolarcyk is actually the cornerstone of the Alert Nerd rhombus, despite being the New Guy. When he's not being Sarah, Matt and Chris' Cousin Oliver, he blogs at JeffersonStolarship.com and about 30 other places. Ladies, he's single. He loves cats, romantic comedies and scotch.

Kristina Wright spends far too much of her time knitting strange things, like squid purses and tentacle necklaces, and is currently working on superhero Sackpeople in honor of her son's first game. And because they're awesome. More of her writing can be found on her blog, [Geeked](http://geeked-up.blogspot.com) (geeked-up.blogspot.com). Currently, she lives in a very tiny, very frightening rural town named Puyallup in Washington with her 95% Geek-Free husband, two kids, two roommates, and a dog named Watermelon.



Posted by: gradowyrr

2:22 pm

if the rumors about marina being written out of the trinity movie are true — and i hear they are — i for one could not care less. in fact i think you will find that the MAJORITY of true fans consider her the weak link — not as hawt as kell, not as kickass as grace. just an all-around bore. good frakkin riddance.

Posted by: JoGirl86

2:25 pm

You know, G, I can't help but feel that you're scaling some impressive new heights of wrongness with that one. If you look at Trinity as a whole — particularly the major climactic arc of season 4 — I think it's fairly obvious the show wouldn't be nearly as compelling without Marina. She's the heart of the thing. Cutting her out would be like trying to do a version of Buffy without Willow, of Star Trek without Spock, of Veronica Mars without, you know, that blonde girl. The really important one. ;)

Posted by: gradowyrr

2:29 pm

hahahahhhahhha what are u smokin...oh wait i forgot...your always smoking SOMETHING. how else to explain your many wrong opinions? marina's not willow, she's kennedy. wait, not even. kennedy was hot.

Posted by: JoGirl86

2:35 pm

Hey, I don't want to get into a hotness discussion. Thanks to the great Doctor Who Companion Debate of '07, I think we all know that such a thing never ends well.

Posted by: gradowyrr

2:46 pm

glad to see u concede so easily.

Posted by: JoGirl86

2:52 pm

I wouldn't exactly call it a concession. More of a... "let's agree to disagree" peace offering.

Posted by: gradowyrr

2:53 pm

whatever you want to call it, doesn't really matter 2 me. anyway, when the rumors are confirmed, i'll be vindicated. just wait.

Posted by: JoGirl86

2:55 pm

Is that so? Because I

**

"Yeeaaargggghhhhhhahhh!"

Thunk. Hi. Ass, meet floor.

I really should have seen that coming.

I glare up at the tiny tornado that has just successfully toppled me from my perch on the vinyl-swathed office chair. How she manages to inflict such acute physical pain, I'll never know.

"Friggin' ow, Ambra," I whine, delicately shifting my bruised bones from the floor to my unmade bed. "What was that for?"

She shrugs, settling her 5'-95-pounds-soaking-wet frame into her new throne. "Something had to be done," she says. "You were getting kind of...angry."

I flop over onto my stomach, sulking. "Blah," I mutter into the tangle of sheets. "On me, 'angry' looks like the Bruce Banner side of the Hulk equation."

I can practically hear her rolling her eyes. "Your poor, abused keyboard says otherwise. If I don't rein you in now, you'll get all pants-shreddy."

I flip onto my side and make a sad puppy face at her. "Still not moving," she says firmly. Her crown of bright red hair is currently twisted into miniature Princess Leia donuts. They kind of look like devil horns. "This computer crap is boring anyway, Jolena," she says, her voice taking on a plaintive air. "Let's go do something — it's nice out."

She has a point. The sunlight filtering through the holes around the scuzzy towel I

have tacked up in place of an actual curtain indicates a perfect Oakland day, free of the chilly marine layer that usually drifts in from the city. We could be out and about, guzzling over-priced tea on Piedmont or flipping through the back issue bins at Comic Relief.

“Alright,” I mumble.

“Yes!” She pops up from her seat in a single bounce. I imagine tiny cartoon stars and sparkles accompanying the motion. Before I’ve even had the chance to move, she snags her skull-emblazoned purse-lunchbox from the floor and bolts out of the room, a screechy “Hurry uppppppppppppppp!” trailing behind her.

I sit up and cast an eye towards the door, then at the recently-vacated vinyl chair.

My choice is clear.

I maneuver myself to my feet and take the two smallish steps from bed to desk, fingertips eagerly tapping on the laptop keyboard before my butt has hit the seat.

“What’s taking you so long? You don’t even need a jacket...” Ambra’s head pops through the doorway, her expression morphing from giddy elation to extreme parental level disappointment when she sees what I’m doing.

“I’ll just be a sec,” I insist. “I need to do *one* thing.”

She sighs the gustiest of sighs. “Oh, *Jolena*...”

**

Posted by: JoGirl86

5:36 pm

Re: the best Trinity writer who is NOT Greg Jessup — very interesting question. Kevin McKinney’s dialogue has an undeniable snap and no one writes an action setpiece like Shelly Wong. But my gut is telling me I have to go with Wendy Masterson. Her episodes always have those amazing little moments of comedy that somehow blend seamlessly with all the “OMG, we’re ever-so-tortured” angst. And she gets Marina, fully — really gets her. As y’all know, that’s important to me.

Posted by: MrsFunke

5:39 pm

good choice, JoGirl, i *heart* wendy! :) and i think she *hearts* marina almost as much as you, LOL! but my fave has got to be matt leary...i think he *must* be as much of a blake/kell shipper as i am, cause his BLELL scenes are to die for!!! BLELL FTW :)

Posted by: devildoll

5:46 pm

No love for Janet Nathan? Three words: “Bones of War.”

Posted by: JoGirl86

5:49 pm

Aggggggh, I can't believe I forgot about Janet Nathan! “Bones of War” is an amazing piece of television. She might be second only to Wendy for me.

Posted by: gradowyrr

6:01 pm

u all are psycho. the only true writer of trinity is greg — he rewrites everyone's stuff, so the stuff you guys are gushing about is all him anyway.

Posted by: MrsFunke

6:06 pm

i dunno, g, greg's scripts never have BLELL in them. just saying :)

Posted by: devildoll

6:07 pm

Since when do you have all this inside knowledge anyway, g?

Posted by: JoGirl86

6:11 pm

Since when does a wishful fabrication count as inside knowledge?

Posted by: gradowyrr

6:13 pm

whoa gettin' feisty, jogirl. anyway im not at liberty to say.

**

“I don't think it's windy enough.”

I shade my eyes and squint upwards at the blazing sun. For the last 20 minutes, Ambra has been trying to launch her stripey red and white kite into the air. It's not really working out. I've sort of known from the beginning it wasn't going to work out, which is why I volunteered to contribute a few bucks to her kite-related venture rather than buying my own.

“Ugh.” She stomps — well, as much as one can stomp in delicate patent ballet flats — back over to my side and plops down in the grass.

“It was a noble effort,” I say encouragingly. “We could BART to the city — it's usually at least a little breezy down by the waterfront.”

“Nah.” She frowns into space, then turns to look at me. “Want to go to Popszene tonight?”

I wince. The sweaty, hipster-packed black hole of Popszene isn’t really *my* scene. “I’ll go if you want to.”

“That’s no fun.” She raises a cajoling eyebrow. “How about a little party? Nothing crazy, I promise.”

“Is it with...you know, your people?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Yes you do.”

She grins at me, her eyes flashing impishly. “Cosplayers don’t bite, Jolena.”

“They might if it’s part of their costume.”

She rolls her eyes in a way that indicates she only puts up with my judgey-ness because we’ve known each other for so long. I can’t help but smile a little.

“Why don’t you try it — just once!” she pleads. “You would make a glorious Zoe Washburne. Or something.”

“Or something,” I sing-song mockingly. Personally, I think one of the essential truths of cosplay — at least for girls — is that you have to be pocket-sized to get away with it. I’ve got a good 9 inches on Ambra and am all gangly limbs and size 10 boat feet. And despite my abundance of stick-straight dark hair, I’d never even think to attempt the little Princess Leia buns she’s got goin’ on.

“I know what you really want to do,” she says. She slides down onto her stomach and props her chin up on her fists, regarding me with shrewd eyes. “You want to go home and make love to your MacBook all night.”

“Hey now,” I say teasingly. “You’ve got your obsessions — I’m allowed to have mine.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” she says. “But why does yours have to involve virtually screaming at people you don’t even know on the internet? You’re such a nerd cliché.”

“I don’t scream. I discuss. Anyway, you never answered my question. What flavor of party is this: freak, *total* freak, or normal?”

“There are no costumes involved, if that’s what you mean,” she says faux-

witheringly. “Just a few friends from work. Possibly people you’ve never met before, which I know gives you little ‘stranger danger’ palpitations.”

I shrug, plucking at the grass. “I can handle it.”

“So generous,” she grins, then sits up abruptly, raking me over with an appraising look. “We will have to do something about your outfit, though. Even among non-cosplayers, I’m pretty sure the East Bay Slob look is unacceptable.”

**

Posted by: MrsFunke

8:35 pm

any word on when prod is actually starting on teh movie???? i hope they gave blake a haircut after the series finale, LOL

Posted by: gradowyrr

8:37 pm

production starts june 17. and their supposedly looking at an unusual location, ill keep you guys posted!

Posted by: MrsFunke

8:45 pm

what do you mean by unusual??? could my dreams be coming true and they’re giving us that mountainside BLELL make-out scene? :D

Posted by: gradowyrr

8:48 pm

think unusual in terms of...cities. heres a clue: nash bridges!!!

Posted by: devildoll

8:53 pm

I still want to know where you’re getting this information. Source?

Posted by: JoGirl86

9:02 pm

He’s not. Come on, you guys — there’s no conceivable way G could know all this stuff. He’s yankin’ our chains. Call it off, G! Let’s get back to discussing the real issues. Like who had better hair in season 2 — Grace or Kerrick?

Posted by: gradowyrr

9:04 pm

why you so down on me jogirl? my info is GOOD. you’ll see.

Posted by: MrsFunke

9:06 pm

does BLELL make out in the mountains or not? that's all i really want to know :D

**

"Jolene? Like the song?"

"Yeah. Or the hot Vulcan."

"The...what, now?"

"Um, nothing. Sorry."

I smile awkwardly, tightening my grip around my lukewarm Stella Artois. Cute indie rock boy. Floppy hair, whippet-thin physique, self-consciously holey Modest Mouse t-shirt. And alas, fully not into my sad attempt at flirt-humor.

As I take another sip — mostly to keep myself from talking — Ambra bounces into view, bright hair weaving wildly through the crowd of disaffected, alcohol-toting San Franciscans crammed into the too-small one-bedroom apartment. She sidles up next to me, flinging an arm around my waist, eyes shiny and clouded over. Oh, yeah, she's drunk.

"What's that?" I gesture towards the cup of Technicolor red liquid sloshing around in her left hand.

"Mmmm...Jungle Juice." She smiles lovingly at the cup. "One par' Kool-Aid... ummmmm, vodka? S'me fruit...I forget the rest. Good. Y'should try some, Jolena."

"Jolena?" Indie rock boy's smooth, pale forehead wrinkles. "Or Jolene?"

"Jolene — 'e,'" I say, placing a hand on wobbly Ambra's back in an attempt to keep her from falling. "Just...she calls me that."

Ambra beams up at me. "Iz her nickname."

Indie rock boy grins teasingly. "Isn't a nickname supposed to be shorter than your actual name? Why not, like, Jo?"

"I've tried to establish 'Jo' as my nickname," I say, trying to wrest the toxic-looking cup from Ambra's grip. "It doesn't take."

"Hmm, so Jolena it is," he says. He lifts his beer in a mock-toast.

“Well...” I finally succeed in prying Ambra’s stubborn fingers from the cup and place it on a nearby end table. “Actually, I’m only ‘Jolena’ to her.”

“Ah.” He frowns, looking thoroughly puzzled.

Oh, argh. Why do I bother speaking at all? “Excuse me,” I say, smiling brightly. I disentangle myself from Ambra and, carefully balancing my Stella in the crook of my arm, place my hands on her shoulders. I guide her past the gang of clunky glasses-wearing Karen O. wannabes murdering “Maps” on *Rock Band*, steering her into the bedroom, where everyone’s dumped their coats. She flops down on the bed, nestling in someone’s pseudo-distressed Members Only jacket. Yikes, she better not puke. That thing probably cost a small “vintage, not thrift” fortune.

I sit down next to her and gingerly place my beer on the floor, lazily scanning the darkened space. The sounds of the “Maps” slaughter wafts in from the main room. My gaze finally rests on a rectangle of white plastic, sitting peacefully on the bedside table. MacBook.

I glance over at Ambra. Her eyes are closed and her breathing is peaceful and even. I can’t just leave her here — what if the Members Only member returns? I ease the laptop off the nightstand and onto my knees, cracking it open to reveal the hazy, calming glow of the screen.

**

Posted by: gradowyrr

11:02 pm

this just in guys!!! marina isnt out of the movie, but her part has been SEVERELY DOWNSIZED. her role is basically a glorified cameo. whoo she really pissed off greg and good! dont tell jogirl, im sure she'll want to start some dumbass petition. like those ever work.

Posted by: MrsFunke

11:04 pm

aw, come on, g, have a lil compassion — i'd be devastated if they cut blake :(lets give jogirl our best support in her time of need!

Posted by: JoGirl86

11:06 pm

Thanks, MrsFunke, but there’s really no need. This is obviously another one of G’s fakey bits of “insider” knowledge.

Posted by: gradowyrr

11:08 pm

thats harsh jogirl. im only telling the truth. don't hate because ur lameass fave is

barely gonna be in the movie!

Posted by: JoGirl86

11:10

Stop with the trolling. Seriously.

Posted by: MrsFunke

11:12 pm

you guys! no flame wars, plz! :(

Posted by: JoGirl86

11:14 pm

Sorry, MrsFunke, but I've had it. He needs to be stopped.

Posted by: gradowyrr

11:17 pm

u all r gay.

Posted by: devildoll

11:18 pm

Really, g? That's the insult you want to use? Sigh.

Posted by: JoGirl86

11:20 pm

I think this is proving my point pretty nicely.

Posted by: MrsFunke

11:23 pm

i just don't want pple to fight :(

Posted by: JoGirl86

11:26 pm

Piss off, MrsFunke.

**

Wait...*what?* I blink once, twice.

I didn't type that.

I would *never* type that.

My back goes ramrod straight as I frantically mouse over to my profile, trying to delete the post. I click, and suddenly find myself bounced to the "please re-login" screen.

Okay, okay. Calm. There's probably an explanation of...some sort. I type in my handle and complicated letters-and-numerals gibberish password. Click and... agggggh, rainbow pinwheel of death! I drum my fingertips on the laptop, brow furrowed in concentration. Next to me, Ambra shifts and sighs.

"Please re-login."

Did I misspell my handle or something?

Type, type. Click.

"Please re-login."

Um...was the caps-lock on?

"Please re-login."

Oh. Oh, no.

"Please re-login."

No.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, hands locked on the MacBook, staring at the screen in panicky disbelief. My left foot crashes into something solid, and all of a sudden my shoe is bathed in a lukewarm, foamy lather. Argh. Spilled Stella.

"Huzzah...?" Ambra raises her head, her eyes at half-mast. She looks at me dazedly.

"I'm having...there's an *emergency*," I whisper, trying to keep the rising terror out of my voice. "A computer...emergency."

She cocks her head to one side, as if attempting to fully process my complicated statement. "Schmax," she finally says, then nods vaguely, as if this solves everything.

"What?!"

"Schm—Max." She nods again, then abruptly drops her head back to her jacket-pillow, falling into unconsciousness.

I turn back to the screen, frustration churning through my gut.

"Please re-login."

Schmax. Well. I suppose that's not a bad idea.

**

Twenty minutes later, I'm knocking on the door of an even smaller, far less hip apartment than the one we've just vacated. The door swings open to reveal a wild-haired figure in a frayed Dreamcast t-shirt and loose-fitting striped pants that are possibly pajamas — really, they could go either way.

"Hi," he says, looking not-at-all-surprised at the prospect of unexpected midnight guests.

"Hey Max," I say, snatching the back of Ambra's shirt so she won't pitch forward. "I have a computer issue. Can we come in?"

He steps aside, gesturing expansively.

Max's unkempt appearance is at constant odds with his spotless, feng shui-ed into submission studio apartment. Despite the presence of three television sets, five videogame consoles, and a wall covered in fat sci-fi paperbacks, there's never even the suggestion of clutter.

I steer Ambra over to the threadbare, pea-green couch, where she promptly collapses into another deep, drunken sleep. "Schmax," she murmurs, a satisfied half-smile overtaking her slumbering visage.

I cover her with a blanket, settle into one of Max's wheelie chairs, and slide myself over to his desk, where he's already positioned himself in front of his computer. "So," he says, eyeing me suspiciously. "You have a computer issue, but you don't seem to have brought an actual computer. What's going on?"

"I've been locked out of The Haven," I say.

"Mmm," he says. "I always forget about your online forum addiction."

"Just the one forum," I say defensively. "Anyway, I suddenly can't log in."

He shrugs. "System's probably down. It happens."

"It's not just that." I frown, trying to figure out how to word it. "Right before I got booted, a post showed up under my name that I didn't...write."

Max raises an eyebrow. "That's interesting."

I groan. "Must you always understate? It's not 'interesting,' it's *freaky*."

He nods briskly and swivels to face his beast of a laptop. The thing practically covers the entire desk. “Why don’t you just get a desktop?” I say as he clicks on Firefox. “Isn’t the whole point of a laptop...portability?”

“The screen on this is superior to most desktops in resolution. And there’s a matte option,” he says in that just-the-facts tone that indicates I am an idiot. He types in The Haven’s URL. “Okay. Login?”

I give him the info, he enters it, and we are promptly booted back to the “please re-login” page. Just like before.

“Hmm.” He frowns. “Well, we can’t post, but we can look...”

He clicks over to the message board’s threads, scrolling through. I slump back in my chair, impotence personified. “Huh,” he says, brow furrowing. “Why are you telling people to die in a fire?”

“What.”

I sit up straight and lean in, eyes scanning the thread. “That’s not me!” I squeak. I hoist myself onto my knees and glare at the computer screen, pointing my pointy finger to emphasize each word. “That. Is. Not. Me!”

“Right. I get that.” His fingers fly over the keyboard and he types in some complicated looking configuration, bringing up what looks like a page of code. He frowns. “Interesting.”

“Again: not so much the interesting as the freaky,” I grumble.

He turns and regards me with Serious Face. Or on Max, I guess that would be All The Time Face. “Someone’s taken over your account,” he says gravely. “And whoever it is, they’ve done it in such a way that...well, I won’t say that I *can’t* fix it. But it’s going to take a while.”

I nod slowly. “What can I do in the meantime? I mean...this person is making ‘me’ say horrible things.”

“Open another account?”

“Can’t. You’re not supposed to have more than one active account at a time.”

His eyebrows quirk. “One of your fellow boardies — at least I’m guessing it’s one of your fellow boardies — is trying to pwn you and you’re worried about... etiquette?”

I shrug. I can't explain it, but I suppose I am.

"Can you talk to these people on Facepage? Or email?"

"No. I don't communicate with them outside of...this. And it's *Facebook*, Max. How do you, of all people, not know that?"

He waves a dismissive hand. "Social networking is a tool of the Web 2.0 devil. Alright...let me work on this and I'll get back to you."

"Max." I gulp. "I can't...afford you."

He looks at me quizzically.

"You know. Isn't this, like, a job? For Max Chang, Inc.?"

"Oh." He nods. "I suppose. But you can re-pay me in collateral. Maybe help me pick out some 'cool'" —he makes some stiff fingerquotes— "music at Amoeba. The kind people our age listen to."

I shake my head. "I can never tell when you're joking."

He turns back to his laptop screen. "I'm usually not," he says distractedly. He frowns. "By the way...now you're telling people to go die in *a thousand* fires."

I jump up from my seat, pushing him out of the way, staring at the damning words on the screen. Maybe if I stare hard enough, they'll evaporate into the ether. I grip the sides of Max's oversize laptop, eyes narrowing into tiny slits.

"Oh, no," I growl. "Friggin' *no*." My voice suddenly doesn't sound like me. In fact, it sounds kind of...big. Kind of green. Maybe just a little bit pants-shreddy.

"Mrph." Across the room, Ambra's head pops up. She lets out a squeaky hiccup. "Jolena *smash*."

TO BE CONTINUED



Resolution

By Kenny Jeffery

I'm writing this at the end of February, and as 2008 fades into a distant memory along with the majority of my New Year's resolutions, I realize that my greatest wish for 2009 is to have more time. I'm not talking about altering our working week to something more aligned with Neptune's — I just need more time to do the things I love. After all, being a geek — particularly a gamer geek — is a busy occupation.

The allure of the second life is strong. I like to sit back and be told a story, to revel in that truly all-encompassing experience with interactive media.

And yet...even though there are plenty of games still being made that are consumable in *Godfather* trilogy sized chunks, there's this guilt that stops me from really enjoying firing an MP44 at an enemy US soldier or slaughtering a village of peaceful Elf folk. The notion that all my time and effort would be better spent in the real world doing neither of these things wins out. Like many of my contemporaries who have almost failed courses or taken a self-authorized duvet day, I find these vast open world games can be addictive. Raising stats, completing quests, and befriending that NPC can all be very rewarding, but never as rewarding as being fitter, happier, more productive in the real world.

As a child and teen, I spent days playing computer games on my Amiga 600, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends. As I've grown older, I have come to realize I may still be part of the old guard that, to paraphrase Nicholas Negroponte in his book *Being Digital*, still values atoms over bytes. CDs are more valuable than mp3s, paper comics are more valuable than their digital counterparts. But above these, time spent in the "real world" rather than a virtual one is priceless.

Ultimately, I wish I was like John Barret from the comic *Rest*. First of all, I would look like Milo Ventimiglia. But secondly, and more importantly, I would never have to sleep. Medical experts say that sleep is essential for survival and I tend to agree with them. A week-long binge of late nights and energy drinks has taught me that much. But consider the benefits of a sleepless existence. You could finally turn that idea you've had into a novel, maybe catch up with that friend you haven't spoken to for a while, or even take in that art exhibition you've been meaning to visit. But probably...most people would just end up playing videogames. And I would join them.

So that's my greatest wish for this year — enough hours in the day for both the real world and a vibrant, fulfilling second life.

Anyway, have to go. Time is running out.



Author's Warning: This is all about how *Super Mario Brothers* isn't the Coolest Game Ever for people to start their kids with. This is most definitely considered heresy, and if you're concerned for your gamer soul, you may not wish to read. On the other hand, you ought to be brave. Nintendo doesn't ever need to know — though you may want to turn your Wii off before reading anyway. Just in case the Italians get nasty.

**

I was 8 and triumphant once. Smug, even, and yelling for everyone to gather in the living room *immediately* because I had just beaten Bowser. Final level, final fight and *I* was the All Powerful Gamer in the house who defeated him first. And it was all for a princess. I'm not even sure how I missed the whole Princess Toadstool storyline in the first place. I mean, I knew I was after her, but for some reason, I thought there was a greater story waiting for me. That's kid-level-comprehension, I suppose.

"...the Princess?"

"Of course, sweetie-pie, didn't you pay attention? You were trying to save her after she got kidnapped." This is my mother, whose feminist sensibilities have never been as developed as mine (I believe I got the level-up she didn't). Bless her, though, and the social niceties she spent years drilling into me.

"...but why didn't she just *leave*? Or kick his a—butt?" Language. Ladies didn't say "ass." Ladies also apparently didn't perform super-awesome turtle shell kicks or find secret paths through a sewer system.

Maybe Ladies didn't *go* into sewers at all, and my 8-year-old brain wrapped itself around this concept as the air began to deflate from my Smug Gamer Balloon.

"Because that's not what the game is about. And don't say 'butt.'" Mom's answer was succinct, nice and entirely unfair (on both counts: "butt" couldn't be a bad word). I felt duped. I felt *robbed*, because I'd been annoyed that I had to play a boy in the first place and all it amounted to was saving some crappy blonde prin-

cess. I threw my controller to the floor and told her so before stomping upstairs to listen to some more New Kids On The Block. Or maybe Debbie Gibson.

Princess Toadstool's complete ineptitude was my first, and most crushing, gaming disappointment. I resolved never to be so blindsided again and my first win is always remembered with a sharp pang and a desire to grab a controller just so I can throw it again.

Something like 20 years later, I was confronted with trying to figure out which videogame to start my son Bug with. He's 5, intrepid and chomping at the bit to break in his first game. To a casual gamer, this might seem an easy thing — whatever cool thing we find, right? No big deal, it's just a game.

Wrong. This is a rite of passage. This is *sacred*. The first one sets the entire foundation for his gaming future. This is important Parenting Stuff that we can't take lightly, no matter how foolish I may look in our videogame store. The Mister and I painstakingly reviewed our options (or, rather, I mercilessly vetoed all options). The conversation went something like this:

"Sonic?"

"No. Too annoying and Bug'll start tearing through the house repeating obnoxious catchphrases."

"Mario. Definitely Mario."

I'm 8 and disappointed again. I'm kicking ass at the Godfather Pizza's *Street Fighter* arcade game, mercilessly beating all my classmates and still getting made fun of for playing Chun-Li. I'm playing every awesome videogame where I'm stuck playing a boy — or worse, getting the option to play as a girl and being called "he" throughout the game by NPCs. I'm snubbing Lara Croft and getting mocked for complaining after "finally getting a girls' game."

"...no Mario." The look on Mister's face after I say this is akin to a child's expression after learning about the Santa Scam.

"What? No? But it's *Mario*, the best game in the *world*."

"No. There will be no weakling princesses in my house."

And that was that. I made my stand, put my foot down and lost a million-trillion gamer points. Banning Mario and Luigi from the screen was the ultimate heresy, and Mister took a step back from me, lest he be hit by the lightning the Nintendo Gods were sure to send my way.

Weeks passed with no videogame in sight. We had a definite problem.

Which game didn't involve puppies, princesses or annoying rodents? Disney movie tie-in games were out, immediately, on the grounds that they're more pop culture than classic (I had arguments for *Aladdin*, but Mister didn't agree). Picking the Very First Videogame was beginning to turn into an epic, seemingly never-ending quest. One woman, searching desperately for perfection in a field of lost princesses and greedy empires.

We were, for a brief time, a *very* geeky Lifetime movie of the week.

At least we were until I met *Little Big Planet* and the Sackpeople.

They're small. Stuffed. Controllable arms, legs and facial expressions. They don't shoot fireballs, but they've got more stickers than an overzealous kindergarten teacher and can dance. The levels remind me (fondly) of *Super Mario Brothers*, but they're three-dimensional and the kind of complicated a 5-year-old masters faster than a 30-year-old. They ride the buffalo, navigate deadly traps with adorable ease and...and they have costume changes.

Dude. *Costume changes.*

Play as Sackboy. Play as Sackgirl. Jump, swing, wear a jet-pack and defeat monsters while wearing a boxy robot costume or a big zebra head.

Best of all? There's no princess that gets kidnapped. *Everyone* is getting kidnapped by the sinister Collector, who doesn't care if you're a princess, a crocodile or a meerkat. I found my equal opportunity villain and Bug's first game.

It was beautiful. There might've been tears.

I'd wanted to have a few wise words for him as I passed the controller, perhaps a moment of silence, but he's 5 and snatched it away with a lecturing "Mooooom" and took off. It was an epic moment — my inner 8-year-old was filled with glee and I was nothing but proud when Bug executed his first jump-grab-jump move with his Sackboy, flying through the air from windmill to windmill like he'd been waiting his whole life for it.

Even better was the first time he died and his expression of utter psychotic determination as he tried again. And again. And *again*. Just like he'd seen us do. And when he finally passed the part he was struggling with — six lives and much begging for us to do it for him later — he grinned the Gamer Grin at us. Wide and *smug* and perfect. The torch officially passed and I don't feel old at all, I feel like I'm shooting fireballs at Bowser for the win *with* points again.

So maybe I should be concerned that he's dressed his Sackboy up like Frank the Bunny from *Donnie Darko*, but I'm too distracted by the awesomeness of watching him beat levels and listening to his version of swearing when he gets frustrated. "Oh, monkey fart" is my favorite. An hour on the couch playing tandem with him is easily the best hour of my day — and his complaining when that hour-or-so is up and I make him turn it off fills my heart with sunshine.

Little Big Planet takes all the awesome that *Super Mario Brothers* was built on and gives it the technology that's been developed since the Italians hit the stage. Each level ups the ante more than the last and I'm not sure Bug'll be beating it any time soon, but he can choose to replay any level once it's been beaten. It's just *cool* to watch him play a game that was clearly inspired by the game I and so many other gamers cut their teeth on, and it gets even cooler when we play together (well, right up until he leaves me off screen and I cost us a life). It's colorful, mobile and when you get into the level creation, the possibilities are pretty much endless.

The best part: there's no lame princess at the end who should've slapped Bowser and employed some of her Mario Kart skills to get the hell out of there instead of waiting for some plumber to get around to saving her. That's just *not* what the game is about.

X-Play Mistakes a Documentary on The History Channel for the Next *Call of Duty*

"While the realism is pretty outstanding, I thought the 24 frames per second didn't take full advantage of available horsepower in either the PS3 or the Xbox 360, though to its credit, it did have a much more cinematic look than past *Call of Duty* editions."

"I was more disappointed in how linear gameplay was. Where was the sandbox? And the controls seemed clunky and impossible to manage."

"I feel you, Morgan. To top it off, was black and white really the right choice here? Sure, the washed-out desert looks in *Call of Duty 4* are outstanding, but I think this is a HUGE step back."

"The voice acting was pretty realistic, but again, the sound quality just wasn't there. The mono sound was like something from the 40s."

"Back to the gameplay, you're right. It's just not that fun to play. So what do ya say, Morgan?"

"One star, Adam. And let's hope that this new game developer 'History Channel' doesn't bother trying to make any more FPS games. This was an epic FAIL." — *Ivan Sian*





MUST LOVE DICE, PART I

T1-T4: THE TEMPLE OF ALCOHOLIC EVIL

BY JEFF STOLARCYK

“Meddling fool!” Nicodamion snarled, his fingers tracing the sigils of the Infernus Charm in the air before him. “You will not keep the Eye of Thaumastor from me!”

Cannick Candlecrown somersaulted clear of the wizard’s fiery blast. He was scuffed, bruised and slightly disoriented, but not seriously harmed. Rex, on the other hand, didn’t fare so well; he was blown into the palace courtyard’s far wall by the explosion, collapsing in a heap of clockwork, broken brick and dust. Though Rex looked like a gnome — mostly — he was an automaton, and his gears whirred and clicked as he attempted to regain his feet.

“CANNICK,” the gnomebot intoned, “REQUEST: AFFECT DEFEAT STRATEGY. SUBJECT: EVIL WIZARD NICODAMION THE NIGHTWISHER.”

Crouched behind a bronze statue of a rampant hippocorn, Cannick assessed the situation. Mere, the warrior, was down. Axel the dwarf was hunched over the unconscious, armored bulk, trying to get Mere back on his fumbling feet. Nathalie and Drasus were engaged with the wizard’s bugbear henchmen and Rex...well, Rex was typically useless anyway. It was risky, but there was no other way. Cannick had to defeat the Nightwisher singlehandedly. He hated wizards.

Muttering a quick spell to invoke his own wizardly gifts and smirking at his own hypocrisy, the mage/thief rolled between the hippocorn statue’s legs and sprung forward at the enemy caster. He was counting on winning the opposed Bluff roll, which would give him a tactical advantage that made it easier to hit his intended mark and to also deal bonus damage. The pale blue fire of his enchantment danced up the blades of his twin mastercraft longswords as he drove the +3 weapons, which were gifted to him by the master of his old Thieves’ Guild (an organization that Cannick now opposed in the wake of his alignment change), in for the kill with a wicked SLAM.

Slam?

It was a door closing, followed by heavy, deliberate steps down the basement stairs. I knew who it was before I even looked up from Cannick’s character

sheet. My fist closed around the d20 in my palm, the die ready to drop onto the table and reveal the Nightwisher's fate. I kept my eyes on the hand-drawn maps and character sheets strewn on the bar in front of us. Looking acknowledged guilt.

The footsteps stopped, so she was here now, behind me. I waited, wishing for a statue of my own to hide behind.

Dreiser looked up from Rex's character sheet and waved emphatically past me, behind me. "Hi, Samantha!" Sam, thin-lipped, spat out "Martin" as if it were a gypsy curse, then leveled her glare at me. "Ron, we need to talk. Now."

I pushed my chair back, stood and, with an air of forced nonchalance, like being called out in the middle of "guys' night out" by my fiance was not a huge deal, let the die fly onto the bartop without looking back. As I hit the stairs, I heard Dreiser whoop, but my mind was on the conversation that I was already navigating in my head.

When I came back down the steps into Martin Dreiser's basement 15 minutes later, two things had changed. First, I was single; second, the Nightwisher was dead thanks to the natural 20 I rolled on my attack. Both developments felt unfair, but I smiled and high-fived and didn't mention what just happened in Martin's driveway — could not mention it until Justin and Corey and Matt and Jennie had left and I asked Martin if I could crash on his couch for a night or two.

Three Months Later

Being single sucks.

I say as much to Dreiser and he just kind of looks at me for a second, mumbles something that sounds like "Hunh" and goes back to planning out Thursday night's encounters. He does that a lot, where you say something and he doesn't react. Just "Hunh." For a week after we saw *Watchmen* it was "Hurm," but that thankfully didn't take.

"The thing I hate about the new edition," he tells me, completely ignoring what I've just told him in favor of a bracing discourse on the mechanics of pen and paper role-playing games, "is that it's like the Michael Bay version of the game. Level one and you can make things explode. They should just let the rangers drive Humvees through Cuban shanty towns as a daily power. I mean, where's the challenge when you're awesome from the start?"

The New Edition has been out for about a month, and Martin has not just read it, he has absorbed it. He downloaded scans of the pre-press galleys, bought the hardcovers, and then got a legitimate PDF download. He said the latter was to

account for any errata between the two digital copies. You hear people talk about how piracy is bad for sales and you know they don't know anybody like Martin Dreiser: like most gamers, he's a completist, and completists will pay twice for everything they steal. Not that, I think guiltily, I'm not the same way.

Sometime after his eightieth readthrough of *The New Rules*, Martin pronounced to us that they were horrible and wrong and that he hated them. We'd been using the new system for about two weeks by then, all of our characters converted over under Martin's dungeonmastery eye. We were going to scrap it and go back to the old edition of the game, but Jennie really likes the new rules. Martin (and Justin, but he wasn't running the game) really likes Jennie, so he swallowed his pride and kept slogging through the "unbalanced, unplaytested, unbearable mess" that his most beloved role-playing game has become.

"I think it evens the playing field for everybody." I'm a little annoyed that my best friend has just preempted my sulk, yeah, so I'm prepared for some friendly debate. Normally, I'll let him be right; he is my best friend, after all. I don't hate the new game, though, and he did just give me — his best friend, after all — the brush-off.

Dreiser looks at me, pushes up his glasses and theatrically throws his hands up. "Ron, no offense, but you are exactly the gamer this panders to. You're Mr. I'll Solve Every Problem With Evocations And/Or Swords."

"Hey, I've played a cleric before. Remember? Barten Dwor."

Martin sighs the way that some people punch. "You were a Sword Cleric."

I give him the finger from my perch on the couch. "Still a cleric, bitch."

"Hunh." And then he's back to work, scrivening out hit points and armor classes.

I go back to watching whatever Discovery marathon is running, something about extreme ax loggers. The commercial break comes and, instead of hearing about Kids' Bop and male enhancement for the next minute and change, I look back at Martin, still writing and calculating, calculating and writing. He thinks it's all vital to the game, God bless him. Each of us comes to the table just to have fun, sure, but I really think that only Martin finds his fun in the math part of it.

"Dreiser, making everybody formidable from the get-go isn't bad. Look at how useful mages are now. You really prefer casting your one spell for the day and then cowering behind a meat shield with a waraxe? Everybody should have something to do every round."

He closes his notebook and looks up at me. "That's not how the world works," he

says, and then meanders into the kitchen. I hear him grab a beer from the fridge and then he drops onto the couch next to me. “Now,” he says with a smile, “what’s on *Deadliest Warrior*?”

“Saxon Vs. Mecha-Saxon.” I think it’s actually cavalry vs. yakuza, but the random nonsensical match-ups we come up with are more entertaining.

“You know, I’m not quite sure if you’re joking.”

The rest of the night goes like this. We make popcorn — not microwave (my insistence on actually cooking things is a holdover from The Samantha Era) — and watch mediocre television. There is small talk about comic books and fantasy novels. Martin even makes a few snarky comments about Justin, his rival for Jennie’s affections in our little clique. Martin and Jennie and I have been friends since middle school; she and I were a couple very, very briefly, and since then she’s only dated outside our little circle of friends. Martin has liked her as long as he has been aware of girls. For the two weeks that Jennie and I were a couple, he refused to talk to me. At the height of our animosity, he wrote “Judas” in pen on my character sheet on the line where my Class should go (I was a barbarian, Varshak Cleaveskull). “Ask her out,” I tell him. I tell him this every day. He shrugs, mutters something about how it’s a conflict of interest because he’s the game master.

Game Master Notes

Do not read this section aloud.

It is a conflict of interest. If Jennie and I were to ever get involved, I would need to know that it was not under the expectation of magical items or bonus experience.

By the way, Ron has been staying at my place for the past three months. I don’t care as long as he doesn’t disorganize my things. I’ve known Ron a long time and I knew when he asked that it wasn’t going to be just a night or two. He pays his half of the bills, which I enjoy. I just wish he would stop moping about Sam. I don’t know what went on between them and, honestly, it’s not my place to care, but I always liked her. She grounded Ron.

Some background: Ron and Sam were together for four years. That’s practically unheard of for Ron. There was a ring and everything. Sometimes I don’t think he was happy, but was happy with the stability. They fought, she didn’t like most of his hobbies and habits, but their mutual attraction was strong enough that it overrode those things. They may not have been Tanis and Laurana, but they had a system.

Systems fail. It’s inevitable. He acts like this girl was the only one who’s ever been interested in him and that he will now die alone like some hermit in the Jundland

Wastes. He's had an almost incalculable amount of girlfriends in comparison to my...well, none. This is what I mean. That's not how the world works. Grife, I need to get him to snap out of this.

I'm in the middle of explaining why *Brotherhood of the Wolf* is a superior film when I realize that Martin isn't listening to me at all.

"Papal assassin gypsy prostitute. That's money, right there."

"Huh?" He's distracted by his cell phone. He's texting someone, and the idea strikes me as worrisome. The primary functions of Martin's cell phone are the tip calculator and the notepad app that he uses to write down encounter and trap ideas as they come to him.

"Monica Bellucci's character. That's what she is. Hey, change of subject, but are you going to use any of the monsters from the new sourcebook tomorrow?"

Dreiser gestures to his phone. "About tomorrow. That was Matt. He can't make it, has to go see his brother's band play down at Connelly's. He, um, invited all of us to go with. Jennie's going."

Because I can't resist being a jerk sometimes, I ask if Justin's going and I can't help but grin when Martin says, "Why would Justin come? Nobody's called him," in his best Tim Curry voice, which is actually pretty terrible. He manages to coax a hint of a smile out of me.

"You guys go," I tell him. "I'd just stand in the corner and sulk. Like a junior high dance."

"Ron, I don't want to play this card, but I kind of wanted you to go so you could... give me some advice. About the Jennie Situation."

"You are not going to say a goddamn thing to Jennie and we both know it."

"And you've done nothing but sit on my couch and watch my television for the past three months, asshole. Maybe it would be good for you to interact with the outside world for a change. Or is Connelly's inside The Bubble?"

The Bubble was the three-mile radius around the apartment I used to share with Samantha. I don't go in because the odds that I will see her spike sharply within it. Connelly's is not in The Bubble and he knows it. Now Dreiser's just baiting me. But he has a point. It might be nice to have a few beers, watch a band and try to get my mind off of her.

"So, we're really skipping game night to go to a bar? What have you done with

my friend?”

Martin looks a bit taken aback. “I figured we could just grab a booth and play there.” And just as I’m about to open my mouth to admonish him, he smiles and gives me the finger.

**

Waiting for Martin to get ready to go anywhere is like waiting for any other thing that takes forever. In the time between my return from work and our departure for Connelly’s, I could have built a barn or recited *Beowulf* in Gaelic twice. I have nothing constructive to do, but the thought that I could be doing something else, dammit, preys on me and makes me twitchy. I consider my options in the living room: the TV and the shelves full of DVDs, the laptop, the desktop computer, the DS, the PSP, the Wii, the Xbox and every other console dating back to the Atari 2600; I realize that as soon as I start playing or watching anything, he’ll be ready. Proving me right, he finally emerges from his bedroom just as I settle into a game of *Tower of Doom* on the Saturn. He’s apparently spent the last half hour deliberating over what t-shirt to wear. The one he’s opted for says “INT 20” on it and looks like something that you’d buy at Old Navy, except for the Dungeons and Dragons statistic. I had one made for everyone as a Christmas gift last year. Mine says “WIS 18” and Samantha found this exceptionally hilarious once I told her that WIS was Wisdom and that 18 was fairly high.

Stop thinking about Samantha, I remind myself. Three months, and the thought of her is still like a splinter that I can’t quite pluck out or an unreachable itch. I don’t want her back. I don’t miss her. I just miss the sense of being with someone, the validation of having someone other than Dreiser and Jennie and the others caring that I exist. It was nice to have conversations with someone that didn’t involve monks and druids or metaplot or who would win in a fight between a Euthanatos and a Lasombra.

Despite the arm-twisting it took to get me to agree to go out tonight, I spent most of the day looking forward to tonight. I love my friends, but we rarely socialize outside of Game Night. Sometimes it’s like the break-up resulted in my exile to Gamer Island. I need to escape. Going out again is the only way to do that. Happy hour, live music and good friends are great, but the real attraction to Connelly’s tonight is the sea of single female strangers my head is conjuring.

“It was either this,” Martin says, pointing his thumb at the Intelligence tee, “or the one that says ‘Dice, Dice, Baby.’”

“You made the right choice. Can we go, princess?”

“I think so. I’m trying to look like tonight isn’t a big deal. Is it working?” It is-

n't. Martin is so full of nervous energy that he's vibrating and it looks like he's actually put product in his mop of dark brown hair.

I do what any best friend would do in this situation and lie. "Sure thing. By the way, you're buying the first round."

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying about beer."

"Shut up. I can't do this. You should go without me." He's still wired as hell, but exasperated and paralyzed. I cannot believe that Martin managed to get to his late 20s without having a real date with a girl. That he still gets nervous like this over a girl we've both known since the sixth grade. I try to tell him this in a way that would be constructive. Instead, I hear myself say, "God, you're like a teenage girl."

Martin looks hurt for a second but the look vanishes quickly, was maybe never actually there. In its place is a newfound resolve, a desire to prove me wrong. "What are we still here for?" he asks. "Transform and roll out." We do, and we even do our best approximation of the accompanying sound effect. Maybe shit like this is why we're single.

**

Connelly's is the closest thing we have to an authentic Irish pub. It's not a chain like Bennigan's, but the owner is a Greek expat named Jorgos who serves Killian's and french fries and gyros while blaring The Pogues and U2 records. It is the hippest place in our dead-end town and it's full of community college kids and high schoolers with fake IDs. Matt and his wife Kathy are already at the bar. Martin's looking everywhere for Jennie, so I slide up to the bar alongside Kathy and order a whiskey sour.

Kathy, already tipsy, elbows her husband. "Shit, Matt, you didn't tell me Ron was emerging from hibernation tonight. I haven't seen you in forever," she says, hugging me warmly. "We're all so sorry about what happened with you-know-who, hon. I just haven't seen you or talked to you."

"Kat," Matt says, prying her off of me, "Ron and Sam broke up three months ago. He's fine, now."

"He looks terrible. Skin and bones and just...what's the word...morose."

If you've ever wondered what a chagrined look resembles, you could take a photo of me at this exact moment. "I'm right here, Kat. And I'm fine."

Matt, ever the perceptive and loyal friend, tries to deflect again. “Ron’s out to have a good time tonight, not to relive being dumped by his fiance.” For a nurse, Matt’s shockingly lacking in bedside manner.

Kathy reaches back to the bar for her martini and downs the rest of it. “I don’t mean it like that. Have you been seeing anyone? You know, there’s this girl at my office...” and she goes on from there. There’s this girl, Marnie, who is hilarious and has a great personality and is a little strange, not in a bad way, but in that weird way that you’d like, Ron. “And I think she likes that *Firebird* show.” Great, I’m now the charity case that gets set up with unattractive outcast Joss Whedon fangirls. “Sure,” I tell her. “I’d love to meet her.” I’m a liar, and I drink more of my whiskey sour to cover my deception.

Matt’s brother Todd is the bass player in one of the roughly eight million local cover bands. They’re called Sycophant Prog and they are shameless perpetrators of loose, shoddy covers of questionable 80s songs. Matt and Kathy and I meet up with Corey and his boyfriend Rich. Rich is just as enthused to see me as Kathy was, with accompanying hugs and blunt, probing questions about my sex life amid Corey’s halfhearted attempts to get him to stop. It’s a fun night. I’m on my third whiskey sour, so I’m singing along about how something happens and I’m head over heels, that I never find out til I’m head over heels, etc. Oh, and don’t tell anybody, but I dance a bit. We still have no sign of Jennie, and lord only knows what Dreiser’s doing, because I haven’t seen him since just after we got here. I text him. No response.

The sea of single women I was imagining is not materializing, though. Most of the girls here are with someone and the ones that aren’t are a bit scary. Sycophant Prog takes a set break and the crowd scatters out to the deck to smoke or over to the bar to drink. Matt and Kathy go out to grab a cigarette, so I slide into a booth to rest a bit, recover my voice and order some gyros. The waitress is cute and redheaded and I don’t quite read her nametag, but she smiles at me, which I’ll take as a small victory.

It’s short-lived; by the time she comes back with my food and yet another whiskey sour, Corey and Rich have joined me, Corey using the salt and pepper shakers and sugar packets to create a tactical map of the bugbear army that we should be fighting at this very minute. “I think we can use the environment against them,” he tells me. “The ground is rocky, so you should be able to cast Lava Cal-trops. That will slow their movement and we can pour arrows and spells into them until they close into melee with us. I can even use Aeryn’s Flying Carpet in order to attack them up close without being damaged by the lava.”

As much as you might not want it to happen, every outing with your gaming group becomes a discussion about gaming. If not whatever the current game is, then what the next game might be or some hypothesizing about how you’d rep-

resent firearms using The New Rules or what racial modifiers half-dragons get.

“You’re forgetting about the troll murdermages,” I tell him. “They’re resistant to lava and they can mass Haste the bugbears. The best thing to do is take them out of the fight first. Can Aeryn fit another person on that flying carpet? Because Tamasin’s +3 Sniper Bow might be able to kill them if I take an all-out attack action. And I even have those Silence Arrows we got from the Whale Sage.”

“Can you believe them?” I hear Rich say, and I look up to see the waitress there. She looks embarrassed for me and amused by whatever it is that Corey and I are talking about. “If I couldn’t vouch for one of them, honey, I’d say these two had never been laid before.” I take my basket of gyros and fries and try to shoot her a smile, but it’s not returned this time. I shoot a glare at Rich, and he scowls dismissively. “Ronald, I’m not the one sitting in a bar talking about killing imaginary monsters. We all know that’s what drove Sam away.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Corey cuts me off. Once again, one of my friends is leaping to my aid and I feel a pang of shame that I need to be aided. As he’s informing Rich that they aren’t going home together tonight and how dare he bring up the S-word, I wonder just how crippled I appear that my people don’t even want me to hear Samantha’s name. They’ve never heard the whole story about the end of the engagement. I’ve tried halfheartedly to tell that story before and have been told that they don’t need to hear, that they have my back no matter what. We have, as Matt pointed out at the time, killed a thousand orcs together. If we were dwarves like Matt’s character (like Matt himself is on a fundamental level), that would practically make us family. Hell, maybe it does.

“Guys,” I tell them. “Be cool. I’m fine. Do not get into a fight over my sorry ass. Rich is just kidding around and he—”

My phone buzzes. I have a text from Martin. I thumb the OK button and read the one-line message: *I’m such an idiot. FML.*

“Shit. Guys, I need to go find Dreiser.”

Corey’s face blanches. Simultaneously, he and Rich say “Uh-oh.”

Game Master Notes

Do not read this section aloud.

Jennie has a boyfriend.

Of course she does. I mean, why would she not? Circumstances like this are exactly why I avoid harebrained moments of optimism. Ron’s propensity for becoming emotionally committed to poor life choices is rubbing off on me and I hate it a

little bit. They all knew, obviously, and have been laughing at me behind my back. Maybe Jennie, even.

I'm reminded a bit of the plot twist in Shadow of the Naga Princess, one of the first adventure modules I ran as a game master. It was back in middle school and it was me, Ron, Jennie and her cousin Bill playing. The goal of the mod was to rescue Baron Framingham's daughter, Lady Kirsten, from the Naga Princess. By the halfway point, you fight some goblin slaves and naga warriors, rescue Lady Kirsten and are escorting her back to her father while being chased by snakemen assassins and fending off a trap-laden ambush from mutant lizardmen. Just when you think all is well again and Lady Kirsten is reunited with Baron Framingham, she kills him. Lady Kirsten, who was all sweetness and light and flirted with the party leader as instructed by the adventure's notes, has been the Naga Princess the whole time and now, in her disguise, is the Baroness. You can choose to fight her, but if you don't, she'll pay you for fulfilling the contract you were hired for and allow you to leave. Ron called the ending "freaking crap" because we were 14 and he was trying very hard not to swear.

I slipped away to look for Jennie when Matt's drunk wife was pestering him about the break-up. Ron's disturbing lack of faith had spurred something in me into action, and I was going to tell her how I'd spent the last decade pining for her.

Halfway through the awful band's first set, I caught a glimpse of her leaning against the bar. She was wearing flare jeans and a Penny Arcade t-shirt and she was wearing her dark, curly hair down for once. She was beautiful. Telling myself it was now or never, I walked deliberately toward her. I was trying so hard to not look at her that I only saw The Interloper in my periphery at first, approaching her with a bottle of beer in his outstretched hand. She took the bottle and planted a kiss on his cheek. The band launched into the chorus of that stupid Journey song that everybody loves just as it happened and that pushed me over the edge from disbelief to angry dejection. Of course, that was when she saw me. We locked eyes and I did what anybody else would have done in my shoes: I fled.

Martin is in the Hungry Pig Diner three blocks away. He's eating a piece of raisin pie and drinking a cup of coffee. You almost can't tell that he's been crying. Or that he's hurled up everything he's drunk over the past few hours. I sit down across from him and listen to him tell me everything that happened.

"So you left and she followed you out and you, what, yelled at her?"

"I wouldn't say yelled," Martin protests.

"Did you call her a strumpet, Martin?" He has no response. I ask him again.

"I didn't want to say 'whore.' I just couldn't think of a better synonym."

“You are a piece of goddamn work,” I tell him and take a forkful of his pie.

“Did you know about the guy?” he asks me. He looks broken. Even if I knew about Jennie’s mystery guy, I would lie to protect him.

“Only Corey and Rich knew,” I tell him. After I got the text, they told me everything. She met the guy at a coffee shop near the campus where she teaches and they’d been seeing each other for about two weeks. She was bringing him out tonight to meet us all, which meant that she was really into him. They didn’t have a lot of other info, but Rich attested that they’d only been to first base so far. I left the two of them at Connelly’s, arguing over whether or not it was ridiculous to still say “first base.”

Martin stares into his coffee, sulking.

“Dreiser, this isn’t even a serious thing. It’s apparently only been going on for two weeks. Maybe that’s why she didn’t say anything, because it’s not a big deal.”

“Or because she didn’t want Justin and I to know. Which is why she didn’t tell you.” He has me there.

“You need to apologize to her, man.”

“I can’t even look at her, Ron. I screwed things up with her forever. Even as friends.”

I want to tell him he’s being premature. That he’s wrong. That he can just talk to her and work everything out. But I can’t exactly speak volumes about bad situations having TV show resolutions, so I keep my mouth shut.

“I think I’m taking a break from the game,” he tells me. “I want you or Matt to run in my place.”

“Martin, you’re always the GM. This is going to blow over.”

He takes a deep sip from his coffee. “I can’t be around her right now. Besides, you have that campaign setting that you were working on back in college, right? That was good.”

“No way. I haven’t touched Kronus in four years. It needs a lot of work before I could even think about it.” Kronus was an excessively juvenile idea of mine — a post-apocalyptic volcano world full of gladiators and catgirls. The lore of the setting was centered around a mysterious artifact called The Fires of Combat. It was generic and dumb and appealed to teenagers. Everybody thinks that Sam was

what made me stop writing it. She did tell me that I was “wasting my talent” on it. I just realized she was right.

“Ron, please. I don’t care what you do, but I need a break.”

I pause. “I’ll...I’ll talk to everyone and see what we want to do.”

I hang out at the Hungry Pig for a little while longer and, when Martin tells me he wants to be left alone, walk back to the bar. I’ll hitch a ride home with somebody. Before I go, I tell Dreiser to call me if he needs to talk; all he says is “Hunh.” Back at the local Greco-Irish pub, I see everybody congregated on the deck, Matt and Kathy smoking. Matt waves me over.

“How is he?” Matt asks me in hushed tones, out of earshot from Jennie.

“He’s a mess. He’s actually dropping out of the group for a while. Wants you to take over.”

Matt frowns in thought, scratches his beard. “Maybe I can run Shadowrun.”

I excuse myself and walk over to Jennie. She’s leaning on Corey, with the mystery date nowhere in sight. “I told him to go home,” she tells me when I ask where he’s gone off to. “I’m not much fun right now, and the ‘let’s meet the guys’ plan completely backfired.” I hug her and apologize for Martin and she actually chuckles when she tells me it’s usually him that’s apologizing for me. Everybody else goes inside to settle up their tabs and the two of us are alone out on the deck.

“Why didn’t you tell me, J?”

“You would’ve told Martin. And he’d react badly.” I can’t argue this one, because we know that’s exactly what happened. But why, I ask myself, would she bring the guy to meet Martin if that’s what she was so concerned about.

“This guy—”

“His name is David,” Jennie says, defensively. As though naming him is going to invalidate what I’m about to say. We’re sparring, with words instead of imaginary swords and dice.

“David,” I clarify. “You ditched him tonight because you’re upset that Martin’s upset.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she says, but the tone of her voice tells me it isn’t.

“You bringing him here tonight, not telling anybody about it, the whole thing — it was to see how he’d react.”

“Really, Matlock? So, I wanted him to tell me what a traitorous whore I am?”

“I believe the word he used was strumpet.”

She glares at me, but it’s a mock glare. “Don’t deflect, smartass.”

“No, J, you wanted him to tell you how crazy he is about you. Because you’re not exactly oblivious to him, either.”

“I can’t just wait around for him, Ron.”

“You could also just be up front with him.”

“And you could start telling people that you dumped Sam and not the other way around.”

Ouch. There it is. “Are you blackmailing me, Jennifer?”

“Only,” she says, punching me in the arm, “if you’re going to keep playing match-maker, R.”

“Just don’t let something good slip away because you’re being stubborn, okay?” We hug again and head back inside.

Corey rushes up to me when we come inside and hands me a to-go container. I open it up and look at my half-eaten gyros and the fries, which I know aren’t going to be any good tomorrow. “What’s the big deal?” I ask him.

“Look at the bottom of the lid,” he says, giddy and still a bit drunk, I’m guessing.

In large, loopy script, someone has written “lv 12 1/2 Elf Mage — Summer” and a string of numbers. Huh.

“The waitress?” I ask, and Corey nods excitedly. To hear him and Rich tell it, she came over after I left in a hurry and inquired about what was wrong. She took my food back and kept it under a heat lamp until I came back in and once, when she was checking on the table, asked if I was single. This may be because Rich was trying to make things up to Corey by talking about how great I am.

“Are these her character stats or something?” I say, pointing at the numbers. Everybody looks at me strangely.

Jennie sighs. “That’s her phone number.”

End Part I

Next: Interlude: Betrayal of the Naga Princess



Dead Means *What?*: Comic Book Death and the Revolving Door By Caroline Pruet

“Dead means dead.”

This is the kind of statement that is so obviously true that, if you’re even treating it as debatable, you must be operating on some level beyond ordinary human understanding. You have to be talking about metaphysics or fringe science or — on a not entirely unrelated note — characters in superhero comics.

By this point, the revolving door of death and resurrection has been built so prominently into the architecture of the superhero genre, fighting against it can seem like a noble-if-futile struggle. When comic book fans and writers — and even the occasional editor — say “dead means dead,” they are trying to say something about how their fictional world operates. But what they really mean is: “We feel like dead should mean dead, but just by virtue of the fact that we’re bothering to say this, it’s clear that it doesn’t. Because even if I try to stick to this principle, some other writer or editor will come along and change everything.” It doesn’t matter if you saw a body. Chances are it was a shape-shifting alien or a life-model decoy or a clone replacing the real hero.

I understand the arguments for the “DMD” position. The constant use of death and resurrection as plot devices runs the risk of robbing stories of any stakes or long-term impact. Still, I have to confess: whenever I hear about a once-deceased character dusted off the shelves for a new generation of readers (Colossus! Mockingbird! Barry Allen as the Flash!), I rub my hands together and get ready to open a new book. Chances are, if somebody’s writing a resurrection story, it means they cared about that character enough to fight for him or her, and had a story they were passionate about telling.

Are all these stories good? Of course not. But it’s not as though the stories where these characters died were all works of genius either. The Legacy Virus plot that claimed Colossus makes a lot of X-Men fans spit nails, and I’ve yet to talk to anyone who even remembers what happened to Mockingbird in the first place. (Hush, *Crisis*-heads, I’ll get to Barry in a minute.) The truth is — and I hope I’m not shattering anybody’s illusions here — a lot of comic book storylines are not all that great. But if comic book death is always forever, one editor’s decision that (just for instance) having a supervillain torture and kill a heroine with a power drill is an awesome idea means fans of that character are eternally screwed.

“Dead means dead” also has the potential to keep comics from taking risks with big-name characters. It can mean “nobody’s going to die unless we’re pretty sure we can sell more comics by killing them than by ever having them in a comic again.” That means bad news for C-listers and love interests, and job security for Steve Rogers and Bruce Wayne. When the lock on death’s door hangs a little loosely, on the other hand, Marvel can run an epic “Death of Captain America” story, and DC can zap the one and only Batman back into the Stone Age, without losing access to these franchise characters forever.

Yes, every fan has certain deaths they would prefer not to be undone, because the stories they came out of were so important and moving. A lot of people tell me Barry Allen’s death in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* is one of those, and so they won’t be trying the new *Flash: Rebirth* series. Personally, I don’t know from Flashes, but I’d be really hard to talk into buying a Gwen Stacy resurrection. Any talk of bringing back Vic Sage — the original Question, whose passing of his legacy to Renee Montoya as he was dying of cancer might be my favorite comics story-line of all time — strikes me as a no-go.

For the most part, though, comic book universes are big, the rules about life and death are arbitrary, and there ought to be room for good stories about characters that people want to read about. My favorite, Jean Grey, for all her reputation of never staying dead, kicked it more than five years ago. The rushed ending to Grant Morrison’s *New X-Men* that saw her death wasn’t exactly iconic. If anything, it felt unfinished, and it’s a truism that every other part of that story was retconned almost immediately.

Still, Jean hasn’t been seen since. Except that quasi-resurrection in *Phoenix: End-song*. And in flashbacks. And dream sequences. And out-of-continuity comics like *X-Men: First Class*. And the Ultimate Universe. Not to mention (for me) stacks of back issues I’ve bought but never read. But that’s not the point! I have enough Jean Grey comics to last the rest of my life, but on some level it feels unjust that I can’t go to the store tomorrow and read about the characters I want in the comics I want to see them in.

Of course, I don’t want to read just any lousy story (oh, hi, *Endsong!*) to get a glimpse of my girl. But somebody someday is going to come up with a good Jean story, and I hate to think they won’t be able to use it because of some silly rules about what death is supposed to mean.

Musing on comic book life and death, I always think of Holly Robinson. When Ed Brubaker started writing the *Catwoman* series, he remembered a young woman named Holly and thought she’d make a good sidekick for Selina Kyle. He had already written several stories involving Holly when it came to his attention that the character had, in fact, died in the pages of a previously published comic. To address this glitch, Brubaker wrote a backup story called “Why Holly Isn’t Dead.”

Wikipedia claims that this story offers a continuity-based explanation for the character's presence. But I've read the thing, and as far as I can tell, it's just Holly and Selina talking about how comic book continuity doesn't make any sense. I've also read the rest of the series. It's a good comic, and the story doesn't suffer for lacking a detailed account of Holly's lost years, involving aliens or cloning.

At the end of the day, these stories are just stories. Normal cycles of life and death don't apply anyway. If Selina Kyle can be vaguely 30 for 70 years, she can have a sidekick who has no good reason for being alive.

Stories live and die as readers discover them. As long as we're reading, "dead" doesn't really mean anything.

Rejected Videogame Sequels

By Ivan Sian

Call of Duty: Grenada at War

Grand Theft Auto: Wasilla

Star Wars: Clone Your Bank Account Because George Needs Another Plane

Lara Croft and the Bra of Fate

Final Fantasy: Really, We're Serious This Time. Okay, Just One More, But THEN It'll Be THE Final Fantasy.

What The Fuck Is A Katamari Damancy?

LEGO Schindler's List

The Need for Speed: Segway Madness

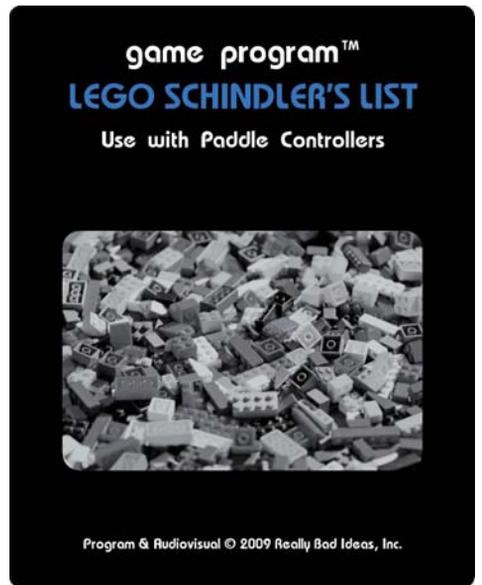
WWE Smackdown: Show Me on the Doll Where He Touched You

Street Fighter vs. Archie

Guitar Hero's Hot August Nights: The Neil Diamond Edition

Slumlord Tycoon

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Don't Ask, Don't Tell



Man Out of Time

By Matt Springer



This is how men die, Paul Freemont mused on a rainy Tuesday morning.

Men die, mused Paul, as their souls drip away onto the firmly-carpeted floor of a nondescript office building. Men die, mused Paul, in cubicles.

Also, men die by gunshot, or beating, or an overdose of pills. They are smacked into gelatin by a semi truck going eighty miles per hour. They are stabbed through the heart by a two-timing woman. They drown.

Paul Freemont's ambition, then, sat firmly on the dividing line between how men die, and how men REALLY die.

He reclined in a poorly-made Office Depot desk chair. By virtue of his twenty-seven years with Intertech Ltd., he had earned a "primo spot," as his supervisor Brett was fond of saying: He had a window at his back, and that window looked out onto the parking lot.

A nice cubicle. Well-earned, even. But still a cube.

He checked the clock: 12:30 p.m. He would be late.

He logged off his computer, grabbed his car keys, and drove to Applebee's.

**

"Were you followed?"

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. SERIOUSLY. Were. You. Followed?"

"Nope."

Paul took a gigantic swallow from his Dr. Pepper. Across the table, Gabriel Shenk narrowed his eyes to tiny slits. Paul stifled a laugh, and then suddenly became powerfully serious.

“This isn’t a game. I’m sincere.”

“You think I’m not?”

Gabriel removed what appeared to be an ornate dagger from inside his trench-coat.

“What are you, crazy?! Put that thing away.”

“It’s my weapon of choice,” Gabriel whispered. He ran the blade across his tongue.

“Careful. You’ll cut your tongue.”

“It’s not sharp. It’s a *Lord of the Rings* replica letter opener. But it stabs real good.”

**

There seems to be a threshold in the human brain beyond which the idea of continuing to exist holds no discernible interest.

It doesn’t necessarily manifest as a heaving, dramatic urge to throw one’s body in front of an oncoming train. It sometimes emerges as quiet resignation—a slight numb tingle in the heart, an emptying of the head.

Paul’s head had emptied itself at some point between his 43rd and his 47th birthdays. This much he had discerned, in the long nights as he lay awake in the king-size bed he used to share with That Bitch Cheryl.

TBCheryl had left him on his 41st birthday (yes, literally ON his birthday) to tour Europe and parts of central Asia with the lead singer of a Led Zeppelin cover band, who she had met when they played occasional live sets at that bar in the strip mall by the bank.

At first, Paul was upset, then resigned, then idiotically hopeful. He wasn’t a bad-looking guy, and he had a well-paying job and a nice house, which he carefully divested of any signs of his ex-wife’s existence.

He went to singles nights. He joined church groups for fortysomethings, even though he wasn't particularly religious, or even practicing. He met women in bars in strip malls by banks.

Nothing...happened.

He grew fat. He got lonely.

His head emptied itself, and one morning, he woke up and wasn't sure—sure if he cared if he lived or died, sure if anyone else cared much either, sure if he could just end the numb, at least that would be SOMETHING.

He placed an ad, and the ad brought Gabriel.

**

"First, we discuss terms," Gabriel said as he gently placed the Lord of the Rings letter opener onto the Applebee's tablecloth.

"Ten grand."

"That is...unacceptable."

"It's all I've got."

"It's not enough."

"I'll get someone else."

Paul dropped a dollar onto the table for the Dr. Pepper, and rose to leave. He was halfway down the aisle, about to pivot past three old ladies and two mothers with cloying babies, when Gabriel called out.

"Fine."

"What's that?" Paul put his hand up to his ear and cupped it, a mocking pantomime of "I can't hear you."

"I said, FINE. God."

Smirking a little, Paul sat back down.

**

The ad had appeared in a single issue of the Treasure Chest, one of those local rags filled with coupons and advertorials and classifieds looking for play dates. It read like so:

WANTED: Operative for discrete initiative. Someone unafraid to dirty hands. Pay is competitive. Contact corvette22341@yahoo.com for details, or call 40

The Chest's "editor," really a mother of three living in a ranch house with ambitions to become Central Florida's answer to Tina Brown, had accidentally omitted most of the phone number.

Paul only got one e-mail, which was almost a relief, as he had started to regret placing the ad at all, and had begun considering other options. But he didn't want other options.

See, Paul wanted to die, but he didn't want to kill himself. The mere thought made him nauseous.

He wanted someone ELSE to do it. That seemed expedient.

**

"How do you want to go, Mr. Bond?"

The fake name was Paul's idea; the choice of name was Gabriel's. He adopted a laughable German accent as he used it—"Meester Baahnd."

"I don't care. What sounds good to you?"

Paul was joking (sorta) but Gabriel wasn't. Frankly, Gabriel seemed incapable of joking.

"Poison."

The word hung like a bad fart, and Paul focused on his shrimp basket for a moment before continuing.

"Just figure it out and do it, okay?"

"You're not much fun, Meester Baahnd."

"Right back atcha."

**

Paul didn't want to know when, or how, he would be murdered. He just wanted it to happen, and then...well, then, nothing. He just wanted it to happen.

So he slid a plastic Publix bag across the Applebee's table. The bag had a plain white envelope inside. The envelope contained \$5,000 in small, unmarked bills. "I wear this jacket at all times," Paul said. He held up a matted blue Members Only coat, a gift from That Bitch Cheryl for Christmas 1993. "I will keep the other \$5,000 inside the pocket of this jacket. You can take it from me when the job's done."

"I like the way you think, Meester Baahnd. In another life, we might have been friends."

"I doubt it." Paul slipped on the jacket and headed for the door. Behind him, Gabriel called out for Paul's half of the tab, but Paul pretended not to hear him.

For a while, Paul sat in his car in the parking lot, crouched down low in his seat, peering out at the Applebee's door from a corner of the window. He wondered if Gabriel would try to follow him and do it now—why he wondered, and why he waited to find out, would only become clear the next morning.

**

That morning dawned thick and clammy. The instant Paul rose from bed, a single trickle of sweat beaded its way down the center of his back. He wanted to believe it was simply a matter of the clammy heat, the stationary fan on the ceiling above, and the ever-crapping-out air conditioner.

He showered, and as he showered, he could not resist the urge to constantly draw aside the shower curtain and glance at the bathroom door, as if he expected it to burst open at any moment. His ears strained for any hint of an unusual noise that might predict a home invasion.

He laughed to himself, though, as he tied his shoes and packed his lunch. Home invasion would be the most idiotic way to—

BANG.

A boot slammed into Paul's front door. Being cheaply manufactured from pressed wood, the door gave up quickly. A large black combat boot—along with the foot inside and attached body—were thus unable to kick the door down and enter the house with a macho swagger.

Instead, the boot entered the door by its lonesome and stayed there, trapping the foot along with it. Paul paused for a split-second, listening to Gabriel's frus-

trated grunts and the arrhythmic tap-tap-tapping of his free foot on the front porch.

Then Paul ran. Hard.

**

In the years to come, Paul would occasionally reach for a reason why his self-preservation instincts had suddenly kicked in with a vengeance, there in his house on that morning. After all, it had been his own idea to have himself assassinated. It was his choice from the beginning, to the extent that he even withdrew ten grand from his 401K under the guise of “home repairs” with which to pay a sad, pathetic loser to end his life.

The truth was, even though he couldn’t think at the moment of a decent reason to keep on living, he realized under mild threat of death that a reason would probably present itself eventually. Until then, he certainly had no overwhelming motivation to die, and especially not to die in this way—clumsily murdered by the poor man’s Luca Brasi, who would then reach into a jacket older than himself and score five grand for his troubling absence of morality.

What cinched the deal wasn’t anything as melodramatic as a life flashing before Paul’s eyes—instead, what played inside his brain was the opening credits of an episode of Dateline on some future Saturday night:

Tonight on Dateline...

He paid to die...at the hands of a college dropout obsessed with Lord of the Rings. One man’s sad assassination...and the pathetic assassin that ended his life, not even worth more than ten thousand dollars.

The Letter-Opener From Hell...after this break.

He would not be the victim in THAT episode. Please, God, no. He would gladly provide a corpse for the “Cheating Casanova Gets His” episode, or even the “Selfless Samaritan Risks All” episode.

But not the “Crappy Murder Suicide Whatever” episode. Even Stone Phillips couldn’t make that sound appealing.

**

The car was parked in the front driveway, but Paul figured he could still reach it if he crept carefully along the far side of the house. As he stepped onto the back patio, he could hear the final throes of Gabriel’s battle with the door.

“Gaad...damned...stupid...boot...OUT!”

The distant sound of flesh collapsing on concrete, a low-hissed “Fuuuuck,” then a muffled tumble moving through the house as Gabriel ransacked the place for Paul.

Paul was turning the ignition key in his Honda Civic when Gabriel emerged from his bedroom window and leapt down onto the hood of his car. Paul started the car, then spun it backward into the street. Gabriel, naturally, clung to the hood. A buzzing pulsed in Paul’s temples. It sped through his veins and bounced up and down his body, from toe to forehead.

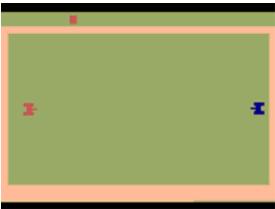
Life, he suddenly realized, is REALLY for the living.

Meeting Gabriel’s glance for a split-second, he floored it. Gabriel managed to stay fastened to the hood, but not for long; a half-block later, he had toppled sideways onto the street.

Paul went to work and died 42 years later, of natural causes.

What If There Had Been An Atari 2600 LIVE?

By Ivan Sian



Ivan: “Dude, you’re TOAST!”

Brian: “Bag your face! There’s no way your tank will get around that wall in time!”

Ivan: “As if! If your wasteoid tank can beat MY tank, then you gotta kiss Cindy Sreen!”

Brian: “Grody, dude! Gag me with a spoon!”

Ivan: “HA! See that! My tank TOTALLY got your tank! Wizard, man!”

Brian: “Dude, you wanna play *Burger Time*?”

Ivan: “Whatchu talkin’ about, Brian? You finally got *Burger Time*? That’s the TITS!”

Brian: “Word.”

Ivan: “Cross the BURGER! CROSS IT!”

Brian: “RUN! RUN! STUPID PICKLE!”

Ivan: “This is bogus to the max. Hey, I gotta go. My mom needs to make a phone call and if I keep tying up the line, she won’t let me watch *The A-Team* anymore.”

Brian: “Later days.”

Scenes From a Drunken Hook-Up with Bit From *Tron*

By Ivan Sian

No.

No.

No.

No.

Yes.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

No.

No.

Yes!

Yes!

Yes!

No.



Next issue in



Retcon

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