

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.ImaginaryYear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

## 74 / STRESS REDUCTION

Clark is playing a Flash game on her computer. The game is called *Kill*.

She plays a red humanoid figure standing in the center of a wide, featureless plain. White humanoid figures appear at the horizon and rush at her. When one gets within range she clicks on it, and her avatar delivers a single blow, and the enemy disappears into a chunky, bloody mist. When this happens, the computer makes a satisfying meaty *thud*—it sounds like someone hitting a cow with an ax—and a counter registers one more kill.

There is no way to lose the game, even though the enemies come at her in heavy swarms. If one of them reaches her, autopilot will take over, and her figure will kill it on her own. She can walk away and get coffee and come back and her figure will still be there, killing things. The game doesn't work too well as a measure of skill, but as a stress reduction tool, it's superb. Some of her coworkers turn it on in the morning and let it run all day. She's heard that the counter rolls over after 10,000 kills.

The game was designed by one of Perihelion's programmers. He burned copies of it for everyone, and since then the sounds of computer butchery have become a fixture around the office. There must be a lot of stress that needs reducing.

Perhaps it could be because the company numbers are so far from what they projected. They wanted to have 1,000 paid subscribers by the time of September's launch. That seemed attainable, frankly people thought of it as *modest*. But right now they have a few *dozen*. They counted on a market of non-gamers who might be willing to play a game if it

was sophisticated enough, and if it didn't resort to the normal science-fiction or fantasy scenarios. This market exists, but they're all signing up to play Sims Online.

It doesn't help that Perihelion has no full-time, in-house marketers. The leanness of the company undoubtedly makes it easier for Jean-Pierre to keep sending the checks from Paris—lots of their more bloated competitors have disappeared over the last few years. But right now the company could really use ten people spending eight hours a day trying to convince the masses to subscribe.

*This isn't my problem*, thinks Clark. She clicks on an enemy and her figure bursts it by delivering a karate kick to its midsection. *This isn't my problem*, she thinks, *all I'm supposed to do is write the story*. She clicks again. Her figure dispatches its assailant with a head-butt. Clark smiles a thin smile of satisfaction: the head-butt is the rarest move in the game's arsenal.

A voice behind her: —Knock knock. It's Paul.

—Come in, she says.

He sits down in the free chair. —Listen, he says, —I'm taking tomorrow and Friday off, so if there's anything you need me to do for you this week, let me know and I'll try to get to it today.

—Okay, Clark says. —I don't think there is anything, though.

—Great, says Paul.

—So what are you doing with your days off? Anything fun? Little vacation?

—It's GenCon, Paul says.

—It's what?

—GenCon. It's the biggest annual, uh, role-playing gamers convention, Paul says.

—My roommate and I have wanted to go for like ten years, but this is the first year where we actually got our act together to go, and had the money, and all that.

—Oh, Clark says. —That sounds like fun.

—I think it will be fun. There's like twenty thousand people there.

—Really? Clark says.

—Yeah, Paul says.

Clark remembers something on her To Do list: *talk to Paul about guys*.

—You should try to score while you're there, she says.

—Oh, Paul says. He fiddles with his shirt collar. —I don't know.

—No, really, she says. —All those gamer boys in one place? I'm sure some of them are queer. This is a good opportunity. *Everybody* who goes to one of these things single is looking to score.

Clark wants to see Paul get laid. But upon realizing this, she thinks *wait, what are you doing?* She feels like she's putting the pressure on, and this doesn't fit, exactly, with this notion that she was talking to Fletcher about at the Ale House just the other night, this notion that not everyone needs or wants sex equally. If it's true, shouldn't you let people determine the magnitude of their need on their own? But on the other hand, she feels that Paul's problem is not that he feels no desire, but that he he feels desire that he cannot express. And maybe here is where she could help. She has never had much of a problem expressing herself.

She snaps her fingers. —You should make up your mind that at GenCon you'll be out, visibly out.

—I don't even know how to *do* that, says Paul.

—Just get like a button or something, Clark says. —You know. Rainbow pin. Or go to a T-shirt shop at the mall and get them to make you a shirt that says QUEER GAMER in iron-on letters.

—I don't know, Paul says. —I don't think that's, uh, my style.

Paul looks both ways nervously, as though seeking an avenue of escape. Clark decides not to push it.

—Okay, she says. —But keep your eyes open for someone who is out. I'd like to see you with a nice gamer boy.

Paul would like that, too. —Okay, he says.