

Pimpf

Written by Charlie Stross

I hate days like this.

It's a rainy Monday morning and I'm late in to work at the Laundry because of a technical fault on the Tube. When I get to my desk, the first thing I find is a note from Human Resources that says one of their management team wants to talk to me, soonest, about playing computer games at work. And to put the cherry on top of the shit-pie, the office's coffee percolator is empty because none of the other inmates in this goddamn loony bin can be arsed refilling it. It's enough to make me long for a high place and a rifle . . . but in the end I head for Human Resources to take the bull by the horns, decaffeinated and mean as only a decaffeinated Bob can be.

Over in the dizzying heights of HR, the furniture is fresh and the windows recently cleaned. It's a far cry from the dingy rats' nest of Ops Division, where I normally spend my working time. But ours is not to wonder why (at least in public).

"Ms. MacDougal will see you now," says the receptionist on the front desk, looking down her nose at me pityingly. "Do try not to shed on the carpet, we had it steam cleaned this morning." Bastards.

I slouch across the thick, cream wool towards the inner sanctum of Emma MacDougal, senior vice-superintendent, Personnel Management (Operations), trying not to gawk like a resentful yokel at the luxuries on parade. It's not the first time I've been here, but I can never shake the sense that I'm entering another world, graced by visitors of ministerial import and elevated budget. The dizzy heights of the real civil service, as opposed to us poor Morlocks in Ops Division who keep everything running.

"Mr. Howard, do come in." I straighten instinctively when Emma addresses me. She has that effect on most people—she was born to be a headmistress or a tax inspector, but unfortunately she ended up in Human Resources by mistake and she's been letting us know about it ever since. "Have a seat." The room reeks of quiet luxury by Laundry standards: my chair is big, comfortable, and hasn't been bumped, scraped, and abraded into a pile of kindling by generations of visitors. The office is bright and airy, and the window is clean and has a row of attractively un-browned potted plants sitting before it. (The computer squatting on her desk is at least twice as expensive as anything I've been able to get my hands on via official channels, and it's not even switched on.) "How good of you to make time to see me." She smiles like a razor. I stifle a sigh; it's going to be one of those sessions.

"I'm a busy man." Let's see if deadpan will work, hmm?

"I'm sure you are. Nevertheless." She taps a piece of paper sitting on her blotter and I tense. "I've been hearing disturbing reports about you, Bob."

Oh, bollocks. "What kind of reports?" I ask warily.

Her smile's cold enough to frost glass. "Let me be blunt. I've had a report—I hesitate to say who from—about you playing computer games in the office."

Oh. That. "I see."

"According to this report you've been playing rather a lot of Neverwinter Nights recently." She runs her finger down the printout with relish. "You've even sequestered an old departmental server to run a persistent realm—a multiuser online dungeon." She looks up, staring at me intently. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

I shrug. What's to say? She's got me bang to rights. "Um."

"Um indeed." She taps a finger on the page. "Last Tuesday you played Neverwinter Nights for four hours. This Monday you played it for two hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon, staying on for an hour after your official flexitime shift ended. That's six straight hours. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Only six?" I lean forward.

"Yes. Six hours." She taps the memo again. "Bob. What are we paying you for?"

I shrug. "To put the hack into hack-and-slay."

"Yes, Bob, we're paying you to search online role-playing games for threats to national security. But you only averaged four hours a day last week . . . isn't this rather a poor use of your time?"

Save me from ambitious bureaucrats. This is the Laundry, the last overmanned organization of the civil service in London, and they're everywhere—trying to climb the greasy pole, playing snakes and ladders with the org chart, running esoteric counterespionage operations in the staff toilets, and rationing the civil service tea bags. I guess it serves Mahogany Row's purposes to keep them running in circles and distracting one another, but sometimes it gets in the way. Emma MacDougal is by no means the worst of the lot: she's just a starchy Human Resources manager on her way up, stymied by the full promotion ladder above her. But she's trying to butt in and micromanage inside my department (that is, inside Angleton's department), and just to show how efficient she is, she's actually been reading my time sheets and trying to stick her oar in on what I should be doing.

To get out of MacDougal's office I had to explain three times that my antiquated workstation kept crashing and needed a system rebuild before she'd finally take the hint. Then she said something about sending me some sort of administrative assistant—an offer that I tried to decline without causing mortal offense. Sensing an opening, I asked if she could provide a budget line item for a new computer—but she spotted where I was coming from and cut me dead, saying that wasn't in HR's remit, and that was the end of it.

Anyway, I'm now looking at my watch and it turns out that it's getting on for lunch. I've lost another morning's prime gaming time. So I head back to my office, and just as I'm about to open the door I hear a rustling, crunching sound coming from behind it, like a giant hamster snacking down on trail mix. I can't express how disturbing this is. Rodent menaces from beyond space-time aren't supposed to show up during my meetings with HR, much less hole up in my office making disturbing noises. What's going on?

I rapidly consider my options, discarding the most extreme ones (Facilities takes a dim view of improvised ordnance discharges on Government premises),

and finally do the obvious. I push the door open, lean against the battered beige filing cabinet with the jammed drawer, and ask, "Who are you and what are you doing to my computer?"

I intend the last phrase to come out as an ominous growl, but it turns into a strangled squeak of rage. My visitor looks up at me from behind my monitor, eyes black and beady, and cheek-pouches stuffed with--ah, there's an open can of Pringles sitting on my in-tray. "Yuh?"

"That's my computer." I'm breathing rapidly all of a sudden, and I carefully set my coffee mug down next to the light-sick petunia so that I don't drop it by accident. "Back away from the keyboard, put down the mouse, and nobody needs to get hurt." And most especially, my sixth-level cleric-sorcerer gets to keep all his experience points and gold pieces without some munchkin intruder selling them all on a dodgy auction site and re-skilling me as an exotic dancer with chloracne.

It must be my face; he lifts up his hands and stares at me nervously, then swallows his cud of potato crisps. "You must be Mr. Howard?"

I begin to get an inkling. "No, I'm the grim fucking reaper." My eyes take in more telling details: his sallow skin, the acne and straggly goatee beard. Ye gods and little demons, it's like looking in a time-traveling mirror. I grin nastily. "I asked you once and I won't ask you again: Who are you?"

He gulps. "I'm Pete. Uh, Pete Young. I was told to come here by Andy, uh, Mr. Newstrom. He says I'm your new intern."

"My new what . . . ?" I trail off. Andy, you're a bastard! But I repeat myself. "Intern. Yeah, right. How long have you been here? In the Laundry, I mean."

He looks nervous. "Since last Monday morning."

"Well, this is the first anyone's told me about an intern," I explain carefully, trying to keep my voice level because blaming the messenger won't help; anyway, if Pete's telling the truth he's so wet behind the ears I could use him to water the plants. "So now I'm going to have to go and confirm that. You just wait here." I glance at my desktop. Hang on, what would I have done eight years ago . . . ? "No, on second thought, come with me."

The Ops wing is a maze of twisty little passageways, all alike. Cramped offices open off them, painted institutional green and illuminated by underpowered bulbs lightly dusted with cobwebs. It isn't like this on Mahogany Row or over the road in Administration, but those of us who actually contribute to the bottom line get to mend and make do. (There's a malicious, persistent rumor that this is because the Board wants to encourage a spirit of plucky us-against-the-world self-reliance in Ops, and the easiest way to do that is to make every requisition for a box of paper clips into a Herculean struggle. I subscribe to the other, less popular theory: they just don't care.)

I know my way through these dingy tunnels; I've worked here for years. Andy has been a couple of rungs above me in the org chart for all that time. These days he's got a corner office with a blond Scandinavian pine desk. (It's a corner office on the second floor with a view over the alley where the local Chinese take-away keeps their dumpsters, and the desk came from IKEA, but his office still represents the cargo-cult trappings of upward mobility; we

beggars in Ops can't be choosy.) I see the red light's out, so I bang on his door.

"Come in." He sounds even more world-weary than usual, and so he should be, judging from the pile of spreadsheet printouts scattered across the desk in front of him. "Bob?" He glances up and sees the intern. "Oh, I see you've met Pete."

"Pete tells me he's my intern," I say, as pleasantly as I can manage under the circumstances. I pull out the ratty visitor's chair with the hole in the seat stuffing and slump into it. "And he's been in the Laundry since the beginning of this week." I glance over my shoulder; Pete is standing in the doorway looking uncomfortable, so I decide to move White Pawn to Black Castle Four or whatever it's called: "Come on in, Pete; grab a chair." (The other chair is a crawling horror covered in mouse-bitten lever arch files labeled STRICTLY SECRET.) It's important to get the message across that I'm not leaving without an answer, and camping my hench-squirt on Andy's virtual in-tray is a good way to do that. (Now if only I can figure out what I'm supposed to be asking . . .) "What's going on?"

"Nobody told you?" Andy looks puzzled.

"Okay, let me rephrase. Whose idea was it, and what am I meant to do with him?"

"I think it was Emma MacDougal's. In Human Resources." Oops, he said Human Resources. I can feel my stomach sinking already. "We picked him up in a routine sweep through Erewhon space last month." (Erewhon is a new Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game that started up, oh, about two months ago, with only a few thousand players so far. Written by a bunch of spaced-out games programmers from Gothenburg.) "Boris iced him and explained the situation, then put him through induction. Emma feels that it'd be better if we trialed the mentoring program currently on roll-out throughout Admin to see if it's an improvement over our traditional way of inducting new staff into Ops, and his number came up." Andy raises a fist and coughs into it, then waggles his eyebrows at me significantly.

"As opposed to hiding out behind the wet shrubbery for a few months before graduating to polishing Angleton's gear-wheels?" I shrug. "Well, I can't say it's a bad idea—" Nobody ever accuses HR of having a bad idea; they're subtle and quick to anger, and their revenge is terrible to behold. "—but a little bit of warning would have been nice. Some mentoring for the mentor, eh?"

The feeble pun is only a trial balloon, but Andy latches onto it immediately and with evident gratitude. "Yes, I completely agree! I'll get onto it at once."

I cross my arms and grin at him lopsidedly. "I'm waiting."

"You're—" His gaze slides sideways, coming to rest on Pete. "Hmm." I can almost see the wheels turning. Andy isn't aggressive, but he's a sharp operator. "Okay, let's start from the beginning. Bob, this fellow is Peter-Fred Young. Peter-Fred, meet Mr. Howard, better known as Bob. I'm—"

"—Andy Newstrom, senior operational support manager, Department G," I butt in smoothly. "Due to the modern miracle of matrix management, Andy is my line manager but I work for someone else, Mr. Angleton, who is also Andy's boss. You probably won't meet him; if you do, it probably means you're in big trouble. That right, Andy?"

"Yes, Bob," he says indulgently, picking right up from my cue. "And this is Ops Division." He looks at Peter-Fred Young. "Your job, for the next three months, is to shadow Bob. Bob, you're between field assignments anyway, and Project Aurora looks likely to keep you occupied for the whole time—Peter-Fred should be quite useful to you, given his background."

"Project Aurora?" Pete looks puzzled. Yeah, and me, too.

"What is his background, exactly?" I ask. Here it comes . . .

"Peter-Fred used to design dungeon modules for a living." Andy's cheek twitches. "The earlier games weren't a big problem, but I think you can guess where this one's going."

"Hey, it's not my fault!" Pete hunches defensively. "I just thought it was a really neat scenario!"

I have a horrible feeling I know what Andy's going to say next. "The third-party content tools for some of the leading MMORPGs are getting pretty hairy these days. They're supposed to have some recognizers built in to stop the most dangerous design patterns getting out, but nobody was expecting Peter-Fred to try to implement a Delta Green scenario as a Neverwinter Nights persistent realm. If it had gone online on a public game server—assuming it didn't eat him during beta testing—we could have been facing a mass outbreak."

I turn and stare at Pete in disbelief. "That was him?" Jesus, I could have been killed!

He stares back truculently. "Yeah. Your wizard eats rice cakes!"

And an attitude to boot. "Andy, he's going to need a desk."

"I'm working on getting you a bigger office." He grins. "This was Emma's idea, she can foot the bill."

Somehow I knew she had to be tied in with this, but maybe I can turn it to my advantage. "If Human Resources is involved, surely they're paying?" Which means, deep pockets to pick. "We're going to need two Herman Miller Aeron chairs, an Eames bookcase and occasional table, a desk from some eye-wateringly expensive Italian design studio, a genuine eighty-year-old Bonsai Californian redwood, an OC3 cable into Telehouse, and gaming laptops. Alienware: we need lots and lots of Alienware. . . ."

Andy gives me five seconds to slaver over the fantasy before he pricks my balloon. "You'll take Dell and like it."

"Even if the bad guys frag us?" I try.

"They won't." He looks smug. "Because you're the best."

One of the advantages of being a cash-starved department is that nobody ever dares to throw anything away in case it turns out to be useful later. Another advantage is that there's never any money to get things done, like (for example) refit old offices to comply with current health and safety regulations. It's cheaper just to move everybody out into a Portakabin in the car park and leave the office refurb for another financial year. At least, that's what they do in this day and age; thirty, forty years ago I don't know where they put the surplus bodies. Anyway, while Andy gets on the phone to

Emma to plead for a budget I lead Pete on a fishing expedition.

"This is the old segregation block," I explain, flicking on a light switch. "Don't come in here without a light or the grue will get you."

"You've got grues? Here?" He looks so excited at the prospect that I almost hesitate to tell him the truth.

"No, I just meant you'd just step in something nasty. This isn't an adventure game." The dust lies in gentle snowdrifts everywhere, undisturbed by outsourced cleaning services—contractors generally take one look at the seg block and double their quote, going over the ministerially imposed cap (which gets imposed rigorously on Ops, freeing up funds so Human Resources can employ plant beauticians to lovingly wax the leaves on their office rubber plants).

"You called it a segregation block. What, uh, who was segregated?"

I briefly toy with the idea of winding him up, then reject it. Once you're inside the Laundry you're in it for life, and I don't really want to leave a trail of grudge-bearing juniors sharpening their knives behind me. "People we didn't want exposed to the outside world, even by accident," I say finally. "If you work here long enough it does strange things to your head. Work here too long, and other people can see the effects, too. You'll notice the windows are all frosted or else they open onto air shafts, where there aren't any windows in the first place," I add, shoving open the door onto a large, executive office marred only by the bricked-up window frame in the wall behind the desk, and a disturbingly wide trail of something shiny—I tell myself it's probably just dry wallpaper paste—leading to the swivel chair. "Great, this is just what I've been looking for."

"It is?"

"Yep, a big, empty, executive office where the lights and power still work."

"Whose was it?" Pete looks around curiously. "There aren't many sockets . . ."

"Before my time." I pull the chair out and look at the seat doubtfully. It was good leather once, but the seat is hideously stained and cracked. The penny drops. "I've heard of this guy. 'Slug' Johnson. He used to be high up in Accounts, but he made lots of enemies. In the end someone put salt on his back."

"You want us to work in here?" Pete asks, in a blinding moment of clarity.

"For now," I reassure him. "Until we can screw a budget for a real office out of Emma from HR."

"We'll need more power sockets." Pete's eyes are taking on a distant, glazed look and his fingers twitch mousily; "We'll need casemods, need overclocked CPUs, need fuck-off huge screens, double-headed Radeon X1600 video cards." He begins to shake. "Nerf guns, Twinkies, LAN party—"

"Pete! Snap out of it!" I grab his shoulders and shake him.

He blinks and looks at me blearily. "Whuh?"

I physically drag him out of the room. "First, before we do anything else, I'm getting the cleaners in to give it a class four exorcism and to steam clean the carpets. You could catch something nasty in there." You nearly did, I add silently. "Lots of bad psychic backwash."

"I thought he was an accountant?" says Pete, shaking his head.

"No, he was in Accounts. Not the same thing at all. You're confusing them with Financial Control."

"Huh? What do Accounts do, then?"

"They settle accounts—usually fatally. At least, that's what they used to do back in the sixties; the department was terminated some time ago."

"Um." Pete swallows. "I thought that was all a joke? This is, like, the BBFC? You know?"

I blink. The British Board of Film Classification, the people who certify video games and cut the cocks out of movies? "Did anyone tell you what the Laundry actually does?"

"Plays lots of deathmatches?" he asks hopefully.

"That's one way of putting it," I begin, then pause. How to continue? "Magic is applied mathematics. The many-angled ones live at the bottom of the Mandelbrot set. Demonology is right after debugging in the dictionary. You heard of Alan Turing? The father of programming?"

"Didn't he work for John Carmack?"

Oh, it's another world out there. "Not exactly, he built the first computers for the government, back in the Second World War. Not just codebreaking computers; he designed containment processors for Q Division, the Counter-Possession Unit of SOE that dealt with demon-ridden Abwehr agents. Anyway, after the war, they disbanded SOE—broke up all the government computers, the Colossus machines—except for the CPU, which became the Laundry. The Laundry kept going, defending the realm from the scum of the multiverse. There are mathematical transforms that can link entities in different universes—try to solve the wrong theorem and they'll eat your brain, or worse. Anyhow, these days more people do more things with computers than anyone ever dreamed of. Computer games are networked and scriptable, they've got compilers and debuggers built in, you can build cities and film goddamn movies inside them. And every so often someone stumbles across something they're not meant to be playing with and, well, you know the rest."

His eyes are wide in the shadows. "You mean, this is government work? Like in DeusEx?"

I nod. "That's it exactly, kid." Actually it's more like Doom 3 but I'm not ready to tell him that; he might start pestering me for a grenade launcher.

"So we're going to, like, set up a LAN party and log onto lots of persistent realms and search 'n' sweep them for demons and blow the demons away?" He's almost panting with eagerness. "Wait'll I tell my homies!"

"Pete, you can't do that."

"What, isn't it allowed?"

"No, I didn't say that." I lead him back towards the well-lit corridors of the Ops wing and the coffee break room beyond. "I said you can't do that. You're under a geas. Section III of the Official Secrets Act says you can't tell anyone who hasn't signed the said act that Section III even exists, much less

tell them anything about what it covers. The Laundry is one hundred percent under cover, Pete. You can't talk about it to outsiders, you'd choke on your own purple tongue."

"Eew." He looks disappointed. "You mean, like, this is real secret stuff. Like mum's work."

"Yes, Pete. It's all really secret. Now let's go get a coffee and pester somebody in Facilities for a mains extension bar and a computer."

I spend the rest of the day wandering from desk to desk, filing requisitions and ordering up supplies, with Pete snuffling and shambling after me like a supersized spaniel. The cleaners won't be able to work over Johnson's office until next Tuesday due to an unfortunate planetary conjunction, but I know a temporary fix I can sketch on the floor and plug into a repurposed pocket calculator that should hold "Slug" Johnson at bay until we can get him exorcised. Meanwhile, thanks to a piece of freakish luck, I discover a stash of elderly laptops nobody is using; someone in Catering mistyped their code in their Assets database last year, and thanks to the wonders of our ongoing ISO 9000 certification process there is no legal procedure for reclassifying them as capital assets without triggering a visit by the Auditors. So I duly issue Pete with a 1.4 gigahertz Toshiba Sandwich Toaster, enlist his help in moving my stuff into the new office, nail a WiFi access point to the door like a tribal fetish or mezuzah ("this office now occupied by geeks who worship the great god GHz"), and park him on the other side of the spacious desk so I can keep an eye on him.

The next day I've got a staff meeting at 10:00 a.m. I spend the first half hour of my morning drinking coffee, making snide remarks in e-mail, reading Slashdot, and waiting for Pete to show up. He arrives at 9:35. "Here." I chuck a fat wallet full of CD-Rs at him. "Install these on your laptop, get on the intranet, and download all the patches you need. Don't, whatever you do, touch my computer or try to log onto my NWN server—it's called Bosch, by the way. I'll catch up with you after the meeting."

"Why is it called Bosch?" he whines as I stand up and grab my security badge off the filing cabinet.

"Washing machines or Hieronymus machines, take your pick." I head off to the conference room for the Ways and Means Committee meeting—to investigate new ways of being mean, as Bridget (may Nyarlathotep rest her soul) once explained it to me.

At first I'm moderately hopeful I'll be able to stay awake through the meeting. But then Lucy, a bucktoothed goth from Facilities, gets the bit between her incisors. She's going on in a giggly way about the need to outsource our administration of office sundries in order to focus on our core competencies, and I'm trying desperately hard not to fall asleep, when there's an odd thudding sound that echoes through the fabric of the building. Then a pager goes off.

Andy's at the other end of the table. He looks at me: "Bob, your call, I think."

I sigh. "You think?" I glance at the pager display. Oops, so it is. "'Scuse me folks, something's come up."

"Go on." Lucy glares at me halfheartedly from behind her lucky charms. "I'll

minute you."

"Sure." And I'm out, almost an hour before lunch. Wow, so interns are useful for something. Just as long as he hasn't gotten himself killed.

I trot back to Slug's office. Peter-Fred is sitting in his chair, with his back to the door.

"Pete?" I ask.

No reply. But his laptop's open and running, and I can hear its fan chugging away. "Uh-huh." And the disc wallet is lying open on my side of the desk.

I edge towards the computer carefully, taking pains to stay out of eyeshot of the screen. When I get a good look at Peter-Fred I see that his mouth's ajar and his eyes are closed; he's drooling slightly. "Pete?" I say, and poke his shoulder. He doesn't move. Probably a good thing, I tell myself. Okay, so he isn't conventionally possessed . . .

When I'm close enough, I filch a sheet of paper from the ink-jet printer, turn the lights out, and angle the paper in front of the laptop. Very faintly I can see reflected colors, but nothing particularly scary. "Right," I mutter. I slide my hands in front of the keyboard--still careful not to look directly at the screen--and hit the key combination to bring up the interactive debugger in the game I'm afraid he's running. Trip an object dump, hit the keystrokes for quick save, and quit, and I can breathe a sigh of relief and look at the screen shot.

It takes me several seconds to figure out what I'm looking at. "Oh you stupid stupid arse." It's Peter-Fred, of course. He installed NWN and the other stuff I threw at him: the Laundry-issue hack pack and DM tools, and the creation toolkit. Then he went and did exactly what I told him not to do: he connected to Bosch. That's him in the screenshot between the two half-orc mercenaries in the tavern, looking very afraid.

Two hours later it's lunchtime, Brains and Pinky are baby-sitting Pete's supine body (we don't dare move it yet), Bosch is locked down and frozen, and I'm sitting on the wrong side of Angleton's desk, sweating bullets. "Summarize, boy," he rumbles, fixing me with one yellowing rheummy eye. "Keep it simple. None of your jargon, life's too short."

"He's fallen into a game and he can't get out." I cross my arms. "I told him precisely what not to do and he went ahead and did it. Not my fault."

Angleton makes a wheezing noise, like a boiler threatening to explode. After a moment I recognize it as two-thousand-year-old laughter, mummified and out for revenge. Then he stops wheezing. Oops, I think. "I believe you, boy. Thousands wouldn't. But you're going to have to get him out. You're responsible."

I'm responsible? I'm about to tell the old man what I think when a second thought screeches into the pileup at the back of my tongue and I bite my lip. I suppose I am responsible, technically. I mean, Pete's my intern, isn't he? I'm a management grade, after all, and if he's been assigned to me that makes me his manager, even if it's a post that comes with loads of responsibility and no actual power to, like, stop him doing something really foolish. I'm in loco parentis, or maybe just plain loco. I whistle quietly. "What would you suggest?"

Angleton wheezes again. "Not my field, boy, I wouldn't know one end of one of those newfangled Babbage machine contraptions from the other." He fixes me with a gimlet stare. "But feel free to draw on HR's budget line. I will make enquiries on the other side to see what's going on. But if you don't bring him back, I'll make you explain what happened to him to his mother."

"His mother?" I'm puzzled. "You mean she's one of us?"

"Yes. Didn't Andrew tell you? Mrs. Young is the deputy director in charge of Human Resources. So you'd better get him back before she notices her son is missing."

James Bond has Q Division; I've got Pinky and Brains from Tech Support. Bond gets jet packs, I get whoopee cushions, but I repeat myself. Still, at least P and B know about first-person shooters.

"Okay, let's go over this again," says Brains. He sounds unusually chipper for this early in the morning. "You set up Bosch as a server for a persistent Neverwinter Nights world, running the full Project Aurora hack pack. That gives you, oh, lots of extensions for trapping demons that wander into your realm while you trace their owner's PCs and inject a bunch of spyware, then call out to Accounts to send a black-bag team round in the real world. Right?"

"Yes." I nod. "An internet honeypot for supernatural intruders."

"Wibble!" That's Pinky. "Hey, neat! So what happened to your PFY?"

"Well . . ." I take a deep breath. "There's a big castle overlooking the town, with a twentieth-level sorceress running it. Lots of glyphs of summoning in the basement dungeons, some of which actually bind at run-time to a class library that implements the core transformational grammar of the Language of Leng." I hunch over slightly. "It's really neat to be able to do that kind of experiment in a virtual realm—if you accidentally summon something nasty it's trapped inside the server or maybe your local area network, rather than being out in the real world where it can eat your brains."

Brains stares at me. "You expect me to believe this kid took out a twentieth-level sorceress? Just so he could dick around in your dungeon lab?"

"Uh, no." I pick up a blue-tinted CD-R. Someone—not me—has scribbled a cartoon skull-and-crossbones on it and added a caption: DO'NT R3AD M3. "I've been looking at this—carefully. It's not one of the discs I gave Pete; it's one of his own. He's not totally clueless, for a crack-smoking script kiddie. In fact, it's got a bunch of interesting class libraries on it. He went in with a knapsack full of special toys and just happened to fuck up by trying to rob the wrong tavern. This realm, being hosted on Bosch, is scattered with traps that are superclassed into a bunch of scanner routines from Project Aurora and sniff for any taint of the real supernatural. Probably he whiffed of Laundry business—and that set off one of the traps, which yanked him in."

"How do you get inside a game?" asks Pinky, looking hopeful. "Could you get me into Grand Theft Auto: Castro Club Extreme?"

Brains glances at him in evident disgust. "You can virtualize any universal Turing machine," he sniffs. "Okay, Bob. What precisely do you need from us in order to get the kid out of there?"

I point to the laptop: "I need that, running the Dungeon Master client inside

the game. Plus a class four summoning grid, and a lot of luck." My guts clench. "Make that a lot more luck than usual."

"Running the DM client—" Brains goes cross-eyed for a moment "--is it reentrant?"

"It will be." I grin mirthlessly. "And I'll need you on the outside, running the ordinary network client, with a couple of characters I'll preload for you. The sorceress is holding Pete in the third-level dungeon basement of Castle Storm. The way the narrative's set up she's probably not going to do anything to him until she's also acquired a whole bunch of plot coupons, like a cockatrice and a mind flayer's gallbladder—then she can sacrifice him and trade up to a fourth-level demon or a new castle or something. Anyway, I've got a plan. Ready to kick ass?"

I hate working in dungeons. They're dank, smelly, dark, and things keep jumping out and trying to kill you. That seems to be the defining characteristic of the genre, really. Dead boring hack-and-slash—but the kiddies love 'em. I know I did, back when I was a wee spoddy twelve-year-old. Fine, says I, we're not trying to snare kiddies, we're looking to attract the more cerebral kind of MMORPG player—the sort who're too clever by half. Designers, in other words.

How do you snare a dungeon designer who's accidentally stumbled on a way to summon up shoggoths? Well, you need a website. The smart geeks are always magpies for ideas—they see something new and it's "Ooh! Shiny!" and before you can snap your fingers they've done something with it you didn't anticipate. So you set your site up to suck them in and lock them down. You seed it with a bunch of downloadable goodies and some interesting chat boards—not the usual MY MAG1C USR CN TW4T UR CLERIC, D00D, but actual useful information—useful if you're programming in NWScript, that is (the high-level programming language embedded in the game, which hardcore designers write game extensions in).

But the website isn't enough. Ideally you want to run a networked game server—a persistent world that your victims can connect to using their client software to see how your bunch 'o' tricks looks in the virtual flesh. And finally you seed clues in the server to attract the marks who know too damn much for their own good, like Peter-Fred.

The problem is, BoschWorld isn't ready yet. That's why I told him to stay out. Worse, there's no easy way to dig him out of it yet because I haven't yet written the object retrieval code—and worse: to speed up the development process I grabbed a whole bunch of published code from one of the bigger online persistent realms, and I haven't weeded out all the spurious quests and curses and shit that make life exciting for adventurers. In fact, now that I think about it, that was going to be Peter-Fred's job for the next month. Oops.

Unlike Pete, I do not blunder into Bosch unprepared; I know exactly what to expect. I've got a couple of cheats up my non-existent monk's sleeve, including the fact that I can enter the game with a level eighteen character carrying a laptop with a source-level debugger—all praise the new self-deconstructing reality!

The stone floor of the monastery is gritty and cold under my bare feet, and there's a chilly morning breeze blowing in through the huge oak doors at the

far end of the compound. I know it's all in my head—I'm actually sitting in a cramped office chair with Pinky and Brains hammering away on keyboards to either side—but it's still creepy. I turn round and genuflect once in the direction of the huge and extremely scary devil carved into the wall behind me, then head for the exit.

The monastery sits atop some truly bizarre stone formations in the middle of the Wild Woods. I'm supposed to fight my way through the woods before I get to the town of, um, whatever I named it, Stormville?—but sod that. I stick a hand into the bottomless depths of my very expensive Bag of Holding and pull out a scroll. "Stormville, North Gate," I intone (Why do ancient masters in orders of martial monks always intone, rather than, like, speak normally?) and the scroll crumbles to dust in my hands—and I'm looking up at a stone tower with a gate at its base and some bint sticking a bucket out of a window on the third floor and yelling, "Gardy loo." Well, that worked okay.

"I'm there," I say aloud.

Green serifed letters track across my visual field, completely spoiling the atmosphere: WAY K00L, B0B. That'll be Pinky, riding shotgun with his usual delicacy.

There's a big, blue rectangle in the gateway so I walk onto it and wait for the universe to download. It's a long wait—something's gumming up Bosch. (Computers aren't as powerful as most people think; running even a small and rather stupid intern can really bog down a server.)

Inside the North Gate is the North Market. At least, it's what passes for a market in here. There's a bunch of zombies dressed as your standard dungeon adventurers, shambling around with speech bubbles over their heads. Most of them are web addresses on eBay, locations of auctions for interesting pieces of game content, but one or two of them look as if they've been crudely tampered with, especially the ass-headed nobleman repeatedly belting himself on the head with a huge, leather-bound copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "Are you guys sure we haven't been hacked?" I ask aloud. "If you could check the tripwire logs, Brains . . ." It's a long shot, but it might offer an alternate explanation for Pete's predicament.

I slither, sneak, and generally shimmy my monastic ass around the square, avoiding the quaint olde mediaeval gallows and the smoking hole in the ground that used to be the Alchemists' Guild. On the east side of the square is the Wayfarer's Tavern, and some distance to the southwest I can see the battlements and turrets of Castle Storm looming out of the early morning mists in a surge of gothic cheesecake. I enter the tavern, stepping on the blue rectangle and waiting while the world pauses, then head for the bar.

"Right, I'm in the bar," I say aloud, pulling my Project Aurora laptop out of the Bag of Holding. (Is it my imagination, or does something snap at my fingertips as I pull my hand out?) "Has the target moved?"

NO JOY, B08.

I sigh, unfolding the screen. Laptops aren't exactly native to NWN; this one's made of two slabs of sapphire held together by scrolled mithril hinges. I stare into the glowing depths of its screen (tailored from a preexisting crystal ball) and load a copy of the pub. Looking in the back room I see a bunch of standard henchmen, -women, and -things waiting to be hired, but none of them are exactly optimal for taking on the twentieth-level lawful-evil chatelaine of Castle Storm. Hmm, better bump one of 'em, I decide. Let's go for munchkin muscle. "Pinky? I'd like you to drop a quarter of a million

experience points on Grondor the Red, then up-level him. Can you do that?" Grondor is the biggest bad-ass half-orc fighter for hire in Bosch. This ought to turn him into a one-man killing machine.

0|< D00D.

I can tell he's really getting into the spirit of this. The barmaid sashays up to me and winks. "Hiya, cute thing. (1) Want to buy a drink? (2) Want to ask questions about the town and its surroundings? (3) Want to talk about anything else?"

I sigh. "Gimme (1)."

"Okay. (1) G'bye, big boy. (2) Anything else?"

"(1). Get me my beer then piss off."

One of these days I'll get around to wiring a real conversational 'bot into the non-player characters, but right now they're still a bit-

There's a huge sound from the back room, sort of a creaking graunching noise. I blink and look round, startled. After a moment I realize it's the sound of a quarter of a million experience points landing on a-

"Pinky, what exactly did you up-level Grondor the Red to?"

LVL 15 CORTE5AN. LOL!!!

"Oh, great," I mutter. I'll swear that's not a real character class. A fat, manila envelope appears on the bar in front of me. It's Grondor's contract, and from the small print it looks like I've hired myself a fifteenth-level half-orc rent boy for muscle. Which is annoying because I only get one hench-thug per game. "One of these days your sense of humor is going to get me into really deep trouble, Pinky," I say as Grondor flounces across the rough wooden floor towards me, a vision of ruffles, bows, pink satin, and upcurved tusks. He's clutching a violet club in one gnarly red-nailed hand, and he seems to be annoyed about something.

After a brief and uncomfortable interlude that involves running on the walls and ceiling, I manage to calm Grondor down, but by then half the denizens of the tavern are broken and bleeding. "Grondor pithed," he lisps at me. "But Grondor thtill kickth ath. Whoth ath you wanting kicked?"

"The wicked witch of the west. You up for it?"

He blows me a kiss.

LOL!!! ROFL!!! whoops the peanut gallery.

"Okay, let's go."

Numerous alarums, excursions, and open-palm five-punches death attacks later, we arrive at Castle Storm. Sitting out in front of the cruel-looking portcullis, topped by the dismembered bodies of the sorceress's enemies and not a few of her friends, I open up the laptop. A miniature thundercloud hovers overhead, raining on the turrets and bouncing lightning bolts off the (currently inanimate) gargoyles.

"Connect me to Lady Storm's boudoir mirror." I say. (I try to make it come out as an inscrutable monkish mutter rather than intoning, but it doesn't work properly.)

"Hello? Who is this?" I see her face peering out of the depths of my screen, like an unholy cross between Cruella De Vil and Margaret Thatcher. She's not wearing make-up and half her hair's in curlers—that's odd, I think.

"This is the management," I intone. "We have been notified that contrary to statutory regulations issued by the Council of Guilds of Stormville you are running an unauthorized boarding house, to wit, you are providing accommodation for mendicant journeymen. Normally we'd let you off with a warning and a fifty-gold-piece fine, but in this particular case—"

I'm readying the amulet of teleportation, but she seems to be able to anticipate events, which is just plain wrong for a non-player character following a script. "Accommodate this!" she hisses, and cuts the connection dead. There's a hammering rumbling sound overhead. I glance up, then take to my heels as I wrap my arms about my head; she's animated the gargoyles, and they're taking wing, but they're still made of stone— and stone isn't known for its lighter-than-air qualities. The crashing thunder goes on for quite some time, and the dust makes my eyes sting, but after a while all that remains is the mournful honking of the one surviving gargoyle, which learned to fly on its way down, and is now circling the battlements overhead. And now it's my turn.

"Right. Grondor? Open that door!"

Grondor snarls, then flounces forward and whacks the portcullis with his double-headed war axe. The physics model in here is distinctly imaginative, you shouldn't be able to reduce a cast-iron grating into a pile of wooden kindling, but I'm not complaining. Through the portcullis we charge, into the bowels of Castle Storm and, I hope, in time to rescue Pete.

I don't want to bore you with a blow-by-blow description of our blow-by-blow progress through Cruella's minions. Suffice to say that following Grondor is a lot like trailing behind a frothy pink main battle tank. Thuggish guards, evil imps, and the odd adept tend to explode messily very soon after Grondor sees them. Unfortunately Grondor's not very discriminating, so I make sure to go first in order to keep him away from cunningly engineered deadfalls (and Pete, should we find him). Still, it doesn't take us too long to comb the lower levels of the caverns under Castle Storm (aided by the handy dungeon editor in my laptop, which allows me to build a bridge over the Chasm of Despair and tunnel through the rock around the Dragon's Lair, which isn't very sporting but keeps us from being toasted). Which is why, after a couple of hours, I'm beginning to get a sinking feeling that Pete isn't actually here.

"Brains, Pete isn't down here, is he? Or am I missing something?"

H3Y d0NT B3 5AD D00D F1N|< 0V V XP!!!

"Fuck off, Pinky, give me some useful input or just fuck off, okay?" I realize I'm shouting when the rock wall next to me begins to crack ominously. The hideous possibility that I've lost Pete is sinking its claws into my brain and it's worse than any Fear spell.

OK KEEP UR HAIR ON!! 15 THIS A QU3ST?? D0 U N33D 2 CONFRONT S0RCR3SS 1ST?

I stop dead. "I bloody hope not. Did you notice how she was behaving?"

Brains here. I'm grepping the server logfile and did you know there's another user connected over the intranet bridge?

"Whu—" I turn around and accidentally bump into Grondor.

Grondor says, "(1) Do you wish to modify our tactics? (2) Do you want Grondor to attack someone? (3) Do you think Grondor is sexy, big boy? (4) Exit?"

"(4)," I intone—if I leave him in a conversational state he won't be going anywhere, dammit. "Okay, Brains. Have you tracerouted the intrusion? Bosch isn't supposed to be accessible from outside the local network. What department are they coming in from?"

They're coming in from—a longish pause—somewhere in HR.

"Okay, the plot just thickened. So someone in HR has gotten in. Any idea who the player is?" I've got a sneaking suspicion but I want to hear it from Brains—

Not IRL, but didn't Cruella act way too flexible to be a 'bot?

Bollocks. That is what I was thinking. "Okay. Grondor: follow. We're going upstairs to see the wicked witch."

Now, let me tell you about castles. They don't have elevators, or fire escapes, or extinguishers. Real ones don't have exploding whoopee cushions under the carpet and electrified door-handles that blush red when you notice them, either, or an ogre resting on the second-floor mezzanine, but that's beside the point. Let me just observe that by the time I reach the fourth floor I am beginning to breathe heavily and I am getting distinctly pissed off with Her Eldritch Fearsomeness.

At the foot of the wide, glittering staircase in the middle of the fourth floor I temporarily lose Grondor. It might have something to do with the tenth-level mage lurking behind the transom with a magic flamethrower, or the simultaneous arrival of about a ton of steel spikes falling from concealed ceiling panels, but Grondor is reduced to a greasy pile of goo on the floor. I sigh and do something to the mage that would be extremely painful if he were a real person. "Is she upstairs?" I ask the glowing letters.

SUR3 TH1NG D00D!!!

"Any more traps?"

N0!?!?!?

"Cool." I step over the grease spot and pause just in front of the staircase. It never pays to be rash. I pick up a stray steel spike and chuck it on the first step and it goes BANG with extreme prejudice. "Not so cool." Rinse, cycle, repeat, and four small explosions later I'm standing in front of the doorway facing the top step. No more whoopee cushions, just a twentieth-level sorceress and a minion in chains. Happy joy. "Pinky. Plan B. Get it ready to run it, on my word."

I break through the door and enter the witch's lair.

Once you've seen one witch's den you've seen 'em all. This one is a bit glitzier than usual, and some of the furniture is nonstandard even taking into account the Laundry hack packs linked into this realm. Where did she get the mainframe from? I wonder briefly before considering the extremely ominous

Dho-Na geometry curve in the middle of the floor (complete with a frantic-looking Pete chained down in the middle of it) and the extremely irate-looking sorceress beyond.

"Emma MacDougal, I presume?"

She turns my way, spitting blood. "If it wasn't for you meddling hackers I'd have gotten away with it!" Oops, she's raising her magic wand.

"Gotten away with what?" I ask politely. "Don't you want to explain your fiendish plan, as is customary, before totally obliterating your victims? I mean, that's a Dho-Na curve there, so you're obviously planning a summoning, and this server is inside Ops block. Were you planning some sort of low-key downsizing?"

She snorts. "You stupid Ops heads, why do you always assume it's about you?"

"Because—" I shrug. "We're running on a server in Ops. What do you think happens if you open a gateway for an ancient evil to infest our departmental LAN?"

"Don't be naïve. All that's going to happen is Pimple-Features here is going to pick a good, little, gibbering infestation then go spread it to Mama. Which will open up the promotion ladder once again." She stares at me, then her eyes narrow thoughtfully. "How did you figure out it was me?"

"You should have used a smaller mainframe emulator, you know; we're so starved for resources that Bosch runs on a three-year-old Dell laptop. If you weren't slurping up all our CPU resources we probably wouldn't have noticed anything was wrong until it was too late. It had to be someone in HR, and you're the only player on the radar. Mind you, putting poor Peter-Fred in a position of irresistible temptation was a good move. How did you open the tunnel into our side of the network?"

"He took his laptop home at night. Have you swept it for spyware today?" Her grin turns triumphant. "I think it's time you joined Pete on the summoning-grid sacrifice node."

"Plan B!" I announce brightly, then run up the wall and across the ceiling until I'm above Pete.

PLAN 8 :) :) :)

The room below my head lurches disturbingly as Pinky rearranges the furniture. It's just a ninety-degree rotation, and Pete's still in the summoning grid, but now he's in the target node instead of the sacrifice zone. Emma is incanting; her wand tracks me, its tip glowing green. "Do it, Pinky!" I shout as I pull out my dagger and slice my virtual finger. Blood runs down the blade and drops into the sacrifice node—

And Pete stands up. The chains holding him to the floor rip like damp cardboard, his eyes glowing even brighter than Emma's wand. With no actual summoning vector spliced into the grid it's wide open, an antenna seeking the nearest manifestation. With my blood to power it, it's active, and the first thing it resonates with has come through and sideloaded into Pete's head. His head swivels. "Get her!" I yell, clenching my fist and trying not to wince. "She's from personnel!"

"Personnel?" rumbles a voice from Pete's mouth—deeper, more cultured, and infinitely more terrifying. "Ah, I see. Thank you." The being wearing Pete's

flesh steps across the grid—which sparks like a high-tension line and begins to smolder. Emma's wand wavers between me and Pete. I thrust my injured hand into the Bag of Holding and stifle a scream when my fingers stab into the bag of salt within. "It's been too long." His face begins to lengthen, his jaw widening and merging at the edges. He sticks his tongue out: it's grayish-brown and rasplike teeth are sprouting from it.

Emma screams in rage and discharges her wand at him. A backwash of negative energy makes my teeth clench and turns my vision gray, but it's not enough to stop the second coming of "Slug" Johnson. He slithers towards her across the floor, and she gears up another spell, but it's too late. I close my eyes and follow the action by the inarticulate shrieks and the wet sucking, gurgling noises. Finally, they die down.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes. Below me the room is vacant but for a clean-picked human skeleton and a floor flecked with brown—I peer closer—slugs. Millions of the buggers. "You'd better let him go," I intone.

"Why should I?" asks the assembly of molluscs.

"Because—" I pause. Why should he? It's a surprisingly sensible question. "If you don't, HR—Personnel—will just send another. Their minions are infinite. But you can defeat them by escaping from their grip forever—if you let me lay you to rest."

"Send me on, then," say the slugs.

"Okay." And I open my salt-filled fist over the molluscs—which burn and writhe beneath the white powderfall until nothing is left but Pete, curled fetally in the middle of the floor. And it's time to get Pete the hell out of this game and back into his own head before his mother, or some even worse horror, comes looking for him.

"Pimpf" is a Bob Howard story, in the same setting as The Atrocity Archives. To see this author's works sold through Amazon, click here:

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Charlie Stross knew he wanted to be a writer from the age of six, or thereabouts, but didn't really get started until his early teens (when his sister loaned him a manual typewriter around the time he was getting heavily into Dung.....

(To read the rest of this bio, and see other stories in Jim Baen's Universe visit Charlie Stross's author page.)

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Candy-Blossom

I was going to run. As soon as he . . . it . . . the THING stopped looking at me. Staring a hole through my stupid head with its four eyes. I was going to run like the wind. I shouldn't have come here. Never. I swore to God . . . if I ever got out of here . . .

Chilling "You stupid idiot, you've killed us!"

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Nothing should have been able to ruin my lunch.

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The Darkness

"Hi, Lieutenant," someone said as he walked into Ruthven's room. "Good to see you up and around. I gotta do a few tests with you back in the bed, though."

What Would Sam Spade Do?It was shaping up to be a quiet day when Officer Murtagh and Officer Garcia came knocking on my door. The PI business isn't all it's cracked up to be, especially not in Philly and especially not this week.