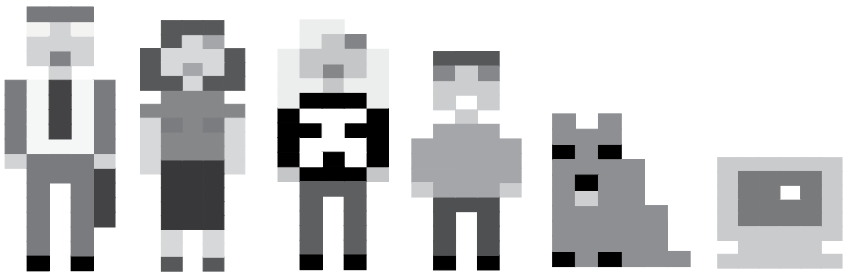


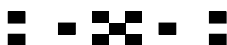
Game Quest

by Leopold McGinnis



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Chapter 19; the 1st day of Christmas

December 14th, 1994

Art sat at his desk. As usual he was in the office just before almost everyone else. There were fewer and fewer people around these days. Some had already left for early holidays...those who weren't under immediate game deadlines. And it was the first year in a long time that Art could remember where everyone in the office hadn't been cramming in 16 hour days to get some game out for the all-important Christmas buying mania.

Outside the window behind him, the pine trees were capped with thick, wet layers of snow. The snow looked almost exaggerated, like the frosting on the gingerbread house in Art's living room. The branches looked so heavy that if a tree were to dump their burden as someone passed under they could be buried alive. And this white silence stretched for miles, across the treetops of Redwood forest.

Madre had its own mini-tractor to clear the snow on the driveway. There was always at least one or two of these major snow falls a year. They could have hired someone to come in and clear the driveway...but that would take a long time... especially during the winter months when they were sweating bullets to pump out a game and couldn't wait for some schmo to come clear the driveway. Besides, it was just cool to have a company tractor. It boosted morale. This way, on a major snow storm day, whoever got to work first got to use the snow tractor. There were a lot of early workers on a major snow day.

Art found it easier to work on his game in this weather. He enjoyed the winter... but it was also easier to fantasize about being in his game: in a tropical paradise, picking up exotic women. He could really get into the mood. But he was having trouble getting into the mood this morning. He'd just seen Newman's slick sports car pull up the road outside and park. It set him off thinking about that really, really, really big meeting last month...when they announced they were selling SupraNet. SupraNet was gone now, the property of USACoolConnect! or, at least, would be soon enough. When Art thought about why it was done, he guessed

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selling it was the right decision. But why did they have to sell it to *USACoolConnect!?! He hated their TV ads. They were such a cheesewhiz company. All those idiots on the screen shouting *wow!* and talking about how their lives had been drastically altered for the better by signing up, staring at the TV camera and reacting to USACoolConnect!'s service as if it were a theme park ride with a free orgasm at the end. Selling SupraNet to them was like selling a prized antique you couldn't keep anymore to someone you just knew wouldn't, *couldn't* appreciate it for its *true* value! Art hated their name too. USACoolConnect! They had more subscribers in countries outside of the US than inside... They were growing rapidly, giving a bad name to computer literacy everywhere.*

Art had been sure the sale, when announced to the public, would sink the stocks. But, so far, they'd gone up. The shareholders must have seen it as dead weight. Still, Art liked SupraNet. He had believed in it. He was sorry to see it go.

He watched Newman come in through the front door, snow lightly dusting the shoulders of his long, black, wool trench coat. Art liked Newman generally...but there was something that bugged him. And a part of what bugged Art was that Newman was bald. Until now, Art had cornered the market on baldness at Madre. Art was skeptical of Newman's baldness. Newman wasn't funny. He wasn't really charming either, at least in any genuine way. He was a stiff. A business whiz with no personality. Newman was a bald-impostor! He should have to get a wig...or hair plugs. He was a faux cool bald guy. But Art saw through it. He knew it was superficial and phoney.

Newman entered the upstairs part of the building where the majority of the staff now worked, and disappeared behind the cubicles. Art decided to go hang out by the new cappuccino machine. It had become the new water cooler, where everyone gathered to chat...especially on these cool winter days. Someone had even developed, for the festive season, a way of using eggnog instead of milk in the coffee. That seemed kind of disgusting to Art. But everyone was always there now, making fancy coffee and chatting. Like Will had said, they had become game making baristas...in a few short weeks. Will and a few others were first trained on it when it first arrived. They learned the secrets of how to make the froof, and swizzle the wimmer-wammer juuuusssst so and create the steam. And then, in turn, they passed that knowledge unto others. And those others unto others until everyone was an expert and Will wasn't worried somebody was going to break it.

Newman rapped on the door to Will's office. Will looked up and

smiled. This was the last meeting he'd have with Newman before vacation. His trip was marked off on his calendar, just after Christmas. Twelve days to go.

They took their coffee and scones into the small room Will had set aside for these head office meetings. The staff often referred to it as the 'nice room.' That was a pretty fair description. It was just nice. Not fantastic. Pretty utilitarian...but nice. It had been nicer, but some stuff from it had been transferred down to HQ. It was a comfy room, though, narrow with a window facing the picturesque landscape of the mountain, and a round table perfect for placing lots of documents and beverages. The room was near the secretaries in case somebody needed something, but far away from the worker bees, so they wouldn't be noticed or disturbed. At this time of year, though, Will guessed the latter point didn't really matter. A lot of employees had taken advantage of the long, easy Christmas.

Newman draped his coat over the back of his chair and sat down. Will thought Newman had kind of a funny look for a man in his late thirties...especially for a successful business man of this age. Where was his gut? He looked like one of these thin manager guys who kept sneakers in his desk drawer at work and ran every lunch, ate at fancy, overpriced restaurants only to order lean, fatless meals. It seemed a strange contrast to Will. He pictured business men to be like himself: men who enjoyed a good steak and a soda. A middle aged man – he should have a gut. Not an unhealthy one, but one like Will's – slight. After all, Will was still in good shape. Being a cowboy ensured it. But this new guy he's a...a...city slicker. A dude. A suit. Will didn't have any feelings that he'd hired the wrong man for the job. In fact, this man was what a head office needed... but Will couldn't appreciate Newman on a personal level. He seemed too slick. But all this big business stuff needed someone slick and Will wasn't good at slick. He knew that the world needed slick, somehow, because there was so much of it. Even he needed slick for the head office, but it was odd to work with slick, to see slick out of its natural habitat.

They set to business and coffee.

"I just found out that we've had three movie offers from Tantomount Pictures to make a Swarthy Victor movie!" exclaimed Newman.

Will wasn't sure if this was a conversation starter or if Newman was going somewhere with this. "Four," Will elaborated.

"Really?" Newman was interested.

"Seven if you include the independent production houses that approached us."

"Why didn't you go forward on any of the offers?"

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“Well,” Will laughed, “The scripts they sent were beyond terrible, some totally missing the point or humor and style of the Swarthy Victor games. But mostly the studios saw it as an opportunity to use the hard-earned popularity of our hero for their own profits at our expense. They wanted the rights to everything.”

“Did you ever go into negotiations?” he asked.

“Naw. Not really. We talked in earnest a few times, but they were never serious from the beginning. They tried to screw us from the get-go so we just brushed them off. We’re not really in the business of movies.”

“Yeah. I think that’s how Hollywood does business,” Newman added, “But we should look into that. Think of the synergy. We could have books and action figures. I can have a team put on it, if you want.” Newman was giddy at the thought.

“A team can look at it, if you want,” Will cautioned. He wasn’t really sold on the idea. Swarthy Victor wasn’t a toy for kids. It was a dirty video game for adults. He could already picture Swarthy Victor gracing candy bar wrappers, leaping out of cereal boxes. The idea made him queasy.

“I think it would be a great opportunity to advertise,” continued Newman. “I think we need to push that aspect of the business. It would really push up our sales. Especially when they’ve been sagging lately.”

“I think the market’s really saturated with adventure game clones right now,” Will said. “It’s a lot harder to break through...even as the industry leader.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Newman agreed. “I think the poor sales of HomoSapien Quest kind of highlighted the dangers present. We need to look at our image a bit. Focus on the things that will put us above the cheap clones.”

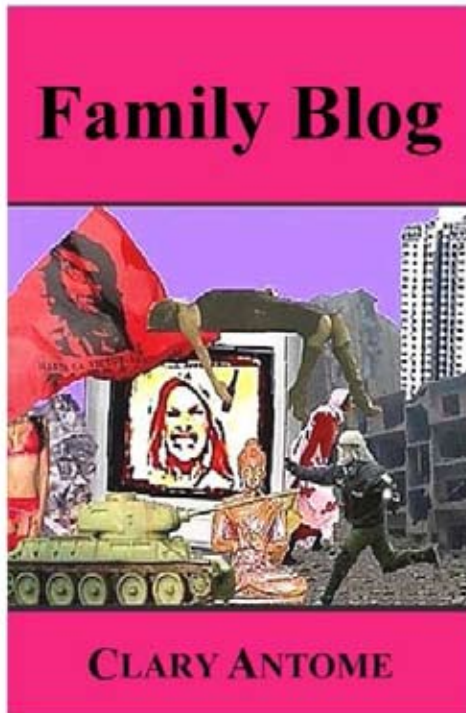
Will never really obsessed over the Madre image. It seemed superfluous and besides the point to making great games. Great games sold games, not logos. But he was interested in what Newman had to say. “Like what?”

“I have a friend over at Paradise Film Entertainment. He has just hired a full time cool-hunter to help raise sales and project their image. I think it would be a great move for Madre. Madre has done a lot of noteworthy stuff...with just a little more brand recognition,” Newman paused for effect, “we could really boost sales. Now I’m not talking about *hiring* a cool-hunter. But I’m pretty sure we could rent him from my friend’s company for a while. Have him come in and look around. Pick his brain. Have him give us a suggestion or two. No need to re-invent the wheel, right?”

“A cool hunter?” Will was almost afraid to know.

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“Yeah. That’s kind of a silly name for them. It’s what they call themselves professionally, though. But, basically, they’re cool. They make a life out of knowing what’s cool – what sells to kids, hip people – make a business of being on top of cool...of knowing what’s hot or not.”

“I don’t know,” began Will. “I think a lot of people in this department are pretty cool. Or, at least, not uncool. Our games are popular with kids...and adults.”

“But the expendable income is with the kids,” Newman argued. “Besides, all those other game companies, they’re run by kids now. They’re cool. They’re up to date. We may be cool now. But we could be cooler. And if we don’t do *something* we may be uncool soon. And that wouldn’t be cool. Anyway, this is getting off the point. I’m not trying to suggest Madre needs to suddenly focus all its efforts on being cool. I’m not even sure that’s a direction we need to go. But it is definitely something we should think about...and since I have some contacts with this guy, I can bring him in for little or no cost just to have a look. All I’m suggesting is that we listen to what he has to say. Then see if his advice is worth anything at all.”

Will was reluctant to do this. It seemed so...business fad... Even if it was a legitimate business technique it seemed so...calculated...so phoney. To Will it even seemed uncool. Having to hire someone to make you cool? Will was never an ultra-cool guy, but he was pretty sure that hiring someone to make you cool was a very uncool thing to do. It was like paying someone to be your friend.

But this wasn’t high-school, Will thought. This was big business. Newman knew this sort of stuff and it was what Will had hired him to do. Will wasn’t sure if Newman was awaiting a yea or nay – or just making Will aware of what he was thinking.

“Look,” said Will. “If you think this is a good idea, then let’s give it a try. Certainly doesn’t hurt to see what he thinks. Corporate image is headquarters’ domain now...”

“Ok,” Newman said with a smile. “I don’t think I convinced you, but I do think it’s a good step.”

“Sure. Anything else you wanted to talk about?”

“Yeah...”

Will sipped his coffee and stared out at the snow now falling again. He wasn’t really listening. He was thinking about his vacation to Hawaii.

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