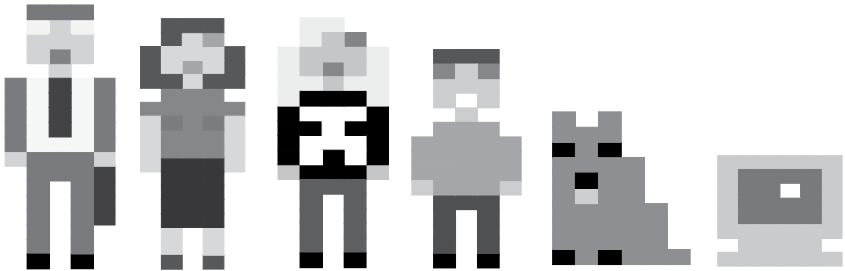


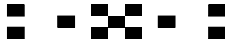
# Game Quest

by Leopold McGinnis



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## Chapter 3; meanwhile, back at the ranch...

Kendra Roberts, game designing pioneer and star-of-the-show at Madre Games Entertainment, stepped through the door that Will Roberts held open for her and into his office. Will Roberts' office was the biggest in the building...but not by much...only enough for someone to notice that it could, possibly, be bigger than the others. Will didn't need an ego. He didn't work that way. Unlike most organizations, the size of his office wasn't a status factor, or a tool of intimidation. It wasn't compensation for the size of his dick, (which was pretty much normal size). Will didn't have an ego that needed soothing in that way. Nor did he feel he needed a large office to let people know who was boss. He *WAS* the boss...and they should know that. And he wasn't the sort of boss that felt he needed to remind people that he was the boss. Things worked best when people forgot there was a boss and everything went smoothly, with him working quietly in the background, the lone cowboy guide at the back of the herd. As long as the cattle were moving in the right direction on their own, he could sit back and relax. But for those times when the cattle wanted to sit around or piss off in the wrong direction – he had a whip. The power was in his hands if he needed it. He didn't need a ridiculously large horse and he didn't need to ride up and down the herd every few moments so that they would remember he had a really large horse.

Will's office *was* nice, though. Nicer than the others. Partly because he was boss (because when he asked for a new desk, he didn't need to justify it to the accountant) and partly because he was cleaner and more organized than the others. He had a few ferns. A big window looking out into the forest. His was the only office with a sofa, but that was more out of functional necessity for meetings. Actually, with the couch taking up floor space, it sometimes appeared that Will's office was just a little bit smaller than Kendra's or Art's. But it was nicer – lighter colors, no files and folders piling up on the desk, all the pencils neatly sharpened, file folders organized, nice pictures on the wall. Art, understanding well Will's role as the lone cowboy of Madre Games, referred to Will's office as 'the Ranch'.

Will ambled on in behind Kendra. She went and stood by the chair

but didn't sit down. This was very Kendra. Especially when she was stressed. Will had an open door policy so he left the door open behind him. No one was really in the building yet today anyway, so there was little need to worry about interruptions. Will had a window that looked out into the office as well, opposite of the one that peered into the forest. Will moseyed over to the desk and sat on the front of it, clasping his hands in his lap.

"I found a bug last night." Kendra started.

"Really? A bad one?" He wondered when Kendra would start pacing. He was humoring her.

"Uh...yeah. I'd say it was pretty bad." Kendra was bordering on the edge of sarcasm. She looked like a contained ball of energy, percolating over at the fingertips and corners of her mouth. Pace, pace, pace, her body told her.

Any minute now she's going to start pacing, thought Will. "Hmmm..."

"I was up until 4:30 figuring it out."

"Geeze, what a way to spend your Sunday. You should have come to the picnic with me and the kids instead of stressing yourself out over the game." He tried to change the subject.

Kendra bit her lip. God, she'd been up so late she was fidgeting worse than ever. Worse, she was beginning to think like the characters in her game. Started thinking of her purse as her inventory...holding onto things in case she'd need them later in the 'game.' As she made her quickie breakfast this morning she'd caught herself thinking:

PUT BREAD IN TOASTER

What bread?

GET BREAD

You take the bread. It is slightly stale. You get two points.

PUT BREAD IN TOASTER

Excellent idea. Diligently, you put the bread in the toaster hoping the magical device will change it into toast.

God, she was going nuts. At 39. And like the game last night, she was

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just waiting for her life to crash. “This isn’t about coming to the picnic,” she said, “this is about finding a major bug in the program four days before it’s about to ship.” She started to pace.

Will doubted it could be that much of a major bug if the bug testers hadn’t found it. “I know, I know. I just think a nice day at the picnic would have been more relaxing than bug-hunting like nuts for an entire weekend after already spending the whole work week doing the same thing. Besides, we aren’t operating out of a garage anymore. The company is expanding. Rapidly. We have bug testers. You should let *them* handle this stuff. That’s what we pay them to do.”

*Bug test MY game? It’s my game. Are you suggesting I shouldn’t be part of the bug testing? I know my game best!* “Well, they didn’t find this bug, did they?” she said instead. “I found it. And now it’s a major problem. We’ve been rushing this too much.”

Kendra was right, Will thought. Designers are the best bug-testers, but he still didn’t think she needed to test the game. The bug testers would have caught that mistake eventually. And it wasn’t so much that he was against her testing her own game, it was just that she was stressful when she was stressed. They’d done all the hard work getting the company started – now it was time to lay back, relax. His wife could design the games and the testers could test them. It was the logical answer. She didn’t need to worry about it. It was a game, not her kid. “Well, I’m sure the bug testers would have caught the bug eventually...”

*Arrrrgkk! He’s not listening to me. Why doesn’t he listen?*

### BANG HUBBY’S HEAD ON DESK UNTIL HE LISTENS

No, he might resent it and then *you’d* have to mow the lawn and clean the gutters.

Will could see her clutching her nails into her fists. This was a bad sign. She was getting ornery. And he didn’t really have a problem with her testing the game if that’s what she *had* to do. If there was a bug, then it should be fixed. *It’s probably an easily solvable problem anyway. A few quick code tweaks. No need to scrap the already manufactured software.* “Well how bad a bug is it?”

“Perhaps the most hideous bug we have ever found four days prior to shipping a game.”

Kendra wasn’t much for hyperbole so this statement caught his attention a little. “Really? But if it’s that bad why haven’t the testers

found it?”

“That’s exactly my point. The bug is so obscure. They wouldn’t know about it. But it’s really nasty.”

“What is it exactly?” Finally, Will asked the question. Most people, when they hear there is a bug in a game, can’t wait to find out what the bug is. It’s the first question they ask. With Will, either from being well used to bugs from all his years of programming, or from only seeing them in a business productivity sense, it was always the last question he asked. And people who find the bugs are usually just dying to describe the bug and how cleverly they had found it. It’s like a war story. The weirder the bug, the better. The more you had to do, the weirder you had to get to find it, the greater your status as a bug-hunter. Like pulling freak mutant vegetables out of your garden – it was exciting. But, in Kendra’s instance, being the designer of the game, whose name was all over the cover and in the credits – this bug was not a happy occurrence. This was not fun.

“Wellll, if you give the carrot to the horse *after* you’ve completed the love-potion quest, then at the end of the game, you suddenly get booted when you’re fighting with Shareef.”

“Booted?”

“It just crashes.”

“Did you—”

“I’ve tried it almost thirty times. God, it took forever. It doesn’t make any sense. It took me at least 6 hours to find out that it was the carrot quest that does it. It’s so unrelated and separated by about 12 hours of gameplay!”

“Oh.” Will had to admit that was a pretty bad bug.

“*Conceivably*,” Kendra went on, “a third or so of the game players could get all this way in the game only for it to repeatedly crash. Even if they were patient enough to replay the entire game without using their save-games, they may *still* do the carrot bit *after* the love-potion bit and *still* end up with a crashed game.”

There was a pause. “How many copies of the game have we pressed anyway?” Kendra asked. She was fiddling with the objects on the edge of her husband’s desk.

“DiskTech was supposed to print about 750 copies yesterday. That was our first day of prelim packing.” Back in the old days, Madre didn’t press games until all the bug-testing was complete. But the adventure game business was booming. There was demand and suddenly you had to give out promise dates to dealers and gamers on the release of your next game ...or risk loss of market share. Now they had a promise date

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for Fantasy Quest V in four days that couldn't be missed. Usually the last few days of bug-testing are quiet – only minor, minor bugs are discovered – so they can start punching out a few games with minor-minor bugs ahead of time to ensure that they have all the pressing done on time. It had worked flawlessly the time they had come so close to a promised ship date with Sci-Fi Quest III.

Will didn't like having to do this. Most people at Madre games hated the practice – especially the game designers. No one liked the idea of putting out an imperfect or buggy game. But it had to be done, reasoned Will – or Madre would be bogged under by the corporate powerhouses backing the adventure game surge. A few years ago they had some major game releases, but since nobody had expected them to come out, they hadn't been as widely purchased as they should have. They'd missed the boat somehow – somewhere in the last two years the release date became more important than the release itself.. But now, with advertising stepped up and launch dates on time, Madre's games were flying off the shelves again. Or at least, holding back all the new competitors.

"Well, what do we do about it?" Kendra asked. She had stopped pacing. They were now in pro-active phase. Doing something about the problem. It was her forte. Moving towards a solution was the only time she felt at ease.

"Damn. I guess we're going to have to stall pressing today," Will reasoned. "Alert the clean-up coders of the problem and as soon as it's fixed we'll begin pressing again...and we'll have to run into the night to repress the copies we already made. It'll cost a bit more, but if we miss the launch date by a few days, it won't make a huge difference. It will only up anticipation."

Kendra hated the release date thing and had been the head crusader against pre-pressing. But they had worked so hard for a year to meet this deadline. It was maddening her to miss it at the last second. "Couldn't we just put a patch up on the BBS and on the SupraNet network?" she asked, knowing it was stupid the moment it came out of her mouth. *God, I need coffee. I should make a game called Caffeine Quest: the search for Juan Valdez.*

"Yeah. But it's too big of a bug...and not enough people have modems or the technical know-how to dial-up and download. Maybe in a few years. But now we gotta 'stop the presses.'" Will smiled at his own cleverness. It was so rare that he was clever. He was pleased with himself. He was gonna use that term too when he told DiskTech to hold off. The chance to say that almost made it worth the trouble of fixing the problem.

Kendra was pleased too. The problem was solved now. Things were back to full-steam ahead stage. Kendra was more anxious than usual to get this game out. Not because of the new deadline system, but because...she hadn't really wanted to do this game in the first place. This was the fifth game in the series. She was getting tired of it. It had been three years since the last game during which she had taken a break to do a mystery game. It had been fun to work on. It had been something totally new. It had been different. But then it was back to Fantasy Quest. Kendra was starting to feel stale towards the series. It was still popular – but if it was boring making them...then that had to impact on the fun of playing them...and she was running out of fairy tale clichés to use as puzzles. Not that her puzzles weren't fun, but the fairy tale puzzles had been a lot of the charm of the original game.

Kendra knew it was time to take a break from FQ again. Her mental health told her so. Lately, at night, she'd been having fantasies about telling her husband to stuff it when the fan demands for another Fantasy Quest reached crescendo again. She would pressure Will to find someone to take over the helm, to do the sequel. She didn't want Madre to get in a rut...and recently it didn't feel like they were doing anything new... unique – the stuff that had made them cutting edge. Now she was getting stressed out on this line of thought and Will could see it.

"Why don't you go head into the meeting room and pick up a pastry?" Will suggested, stepping around to the other side of the desk. "I'll tell the code-cleaners to get cracking on the code."

This was another thing that had been introduced in the last few years: Code-cleaners. When bugs were found, no longer did the original coder go back and fix up the problems...they were too busy working on the next Madre smash hit. Now it was up to contract code-cleaners up from San Francisco to hunt and peck through the reams of unfamiliar code and fix problems. It was good because they managed to give jobs to fresh graduates – and provided a good branch-off for new programmers into the company in an industry where there were no college graduates in 'Game Design.' With code-cleaners you could brute force a solution, throw thirty or forty workers at the problem. But it seemed so corporate. So brawn over brains. Coders not fixing their own bugs? It just seemed wrong. But Kendra tried to forget about it. *I wonder if they have a lemon Danish in the meeting room?*

SAY GOODBYE TO DOTING HUSBAND

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You say goodbye.

### FIND PASTRY

As she wandered out of Will's office she noticed she had absent-mindedly picked up a staple-remover in the process of fiddling with the objects on Will's desk. She considered returning it for a moment, but a strange compulsion came over her to keep it. *I better save this for later. It could be useful.* Kendra added it to her inventory.

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a novella



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