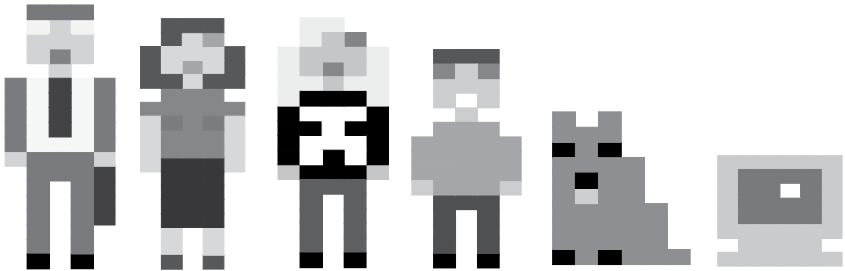


Game Quest

by Leopold McGinnis



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Chapter 49; viva la revolución 94109

September 4th, 1995

Out of hope and respect they hadn't reassigned Ron and Laura Johansen's office space. It had been a week since the husband and wife team had officially put in their last hour. They'd punched out. The papers normally scattered across the desk, the hanging bead passageway that they used instead of a door, the African tapestry with project artwork taped to it, the large didgeridoo they sounded as an alternative to venting frustrations... it was all gone. Only the empty metal filing cabinet, a chair, a desk and the lonely, unused computer that sat on top of it remained. Although Art could still, if he concentrated, detect the faint smell of incense that used to burn in the office in happier times. Stopping and peering in for something to do, Art thought the office seemed like a fetid lagoon, bare and misty...but beneath the silence lay a primordial ooze ready to burp, gurgle and spring into a vibrant microcosm. It was still ready to spring back to life...with Ron & Laura, rebirthing from gigantic flower pods.

Normally unassigned space was sucked up so fast you could hear the 'Sssschlllllluuuuuupppp!' sound of staff instantly filling up the vacuum. There were plenty of people who deserved and had been waiting for an office with a window for a long time. But this time, nobody had even asked for the empty room, as if there was an unspoken expectation that the HomoSapien Quest designers would be back...or perhaps it was in deference to Ron & Laura's incredible talent: no one felt they could live up to the office's reputation.

And there was reason to hope. Although the mail from Madre fans was slowing down now, the response and vitriol of not only HSQ fans, but of other Madre adventures as well, had been beyond expectations. Of course, HQ hadn't responded either way. No comment. It was almost as if they weren't opening their mail...but they couldn't ignore fans like that, numbers like that, not with the way those business types lived by facts and figures. Art imagined that if they put all the letters in Ron and Laura's office, they would be spilling out of the doorway dramatically, like in that movie where they brought all those bags and bags of letters to

Santa Claus into the court room. But, Art recollected sadly, technology was rapidly doing away with physical communication and the vast majority of their support, the complaints and pleas, had come not on sheets of paper at all but in the ethereal form of bits...letters that didn't really exist: email.

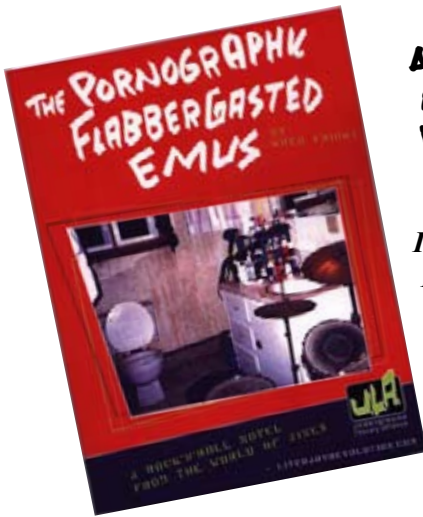
Investigating the office was depressing so Art moved on, changing the subject in his mind. It was a good thing it had been a no-cats-allowed bar-b-que, Art thought as he walked down the hall. Cats would have hated it.

Art had had a sneaking suspicion about the weather the moment he woke up on the day of the bar-b-que. It was the way it was sunny for the most part and then you'd turn around for just a moment and the sky would suddenly sour, clouds curdling over, as if a wizard's mysterious smoke had been waved over the crystal ball of the world by his long, wizardly fingernails. And then, just as you'd turn back it would clear up in a matter of seconds, as if making faces behind your back. Art and Betty, his wife, prepared to have the bar-b-que inside. Art didn't trust nature. He was sure he would get the whole thing set up outside and then it would rain. But then it was sunny for several hours straight and so they set up outside anyway. The guests started arriving, the sky went dark again and droplets of rain came down. They waited for fifteen minutes to see if it would go away, but it didn't, so they moved everything inside. It didn't downpour, but it turned into one of those long, drawn out weeps that lasts long into the night and sucks all the worms up out of the ground and on to the veranda.

It wasn't the first time it had rained on the infamous bar-b-que day. But it didn't happen often. Art had read the statistics somewhere and this was usually one of the driest times of year at Redwood. But the event had been pleasant enough despite this. Everyone huddled inside and stared outside the windows at the moody rain, the droplets of water clinging to the underside of the desk railing, popping off of Art's raincoat and sizzling as they hit the grill. In a way, Art had felt the rain was appropriate: Sour, sad...but cleansing at the same time. Beer in one hand and flipper in the other, Art was pleased. Somehow the weather made the whole affair more low-key and personal. Conversations couldn't help but start in those cramped personal quarters and somehow beer went almost as well with rain as it did with sun.

When everyone had finished their meals Art had just taken the dishes outside to the lawn and let the rain do the hard work. And, thankfully, everyone this year pooped in the proper place... Art didn't

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Game Quest

find any surprises behind his couch or TV. All in all, he'd say it was one of those sleeper-hit bar-b-ques. Nobody could ruin the Madre bar-b-que. Not Melfina. Not the gods.

Art wandered down the hall to Henry's office. He strode through the door, mouth open with something witty to say and then remembered, by the lack of a certain Henry in the office, that Henry was off today. Henry hadn't much work to do now either, due to the stalled production. How long was this going to go on for? Then HQ had Henry put together some theme song for some advertisement they were doing. Art could still remember Henry's reaction to this: *They've reduced me to a jingle writer!* So, when Henry finished that up he booked a holiday. He figured that he'd never known this office to not be busy, so he had best get away while it was for once. Also, Henry reasoned, if he wasn't around they couldn't assign him any more jingle-duties.

Art grabbed some peanuts off of Henry's desk, swirled them in his fist then popped them into his mouth. He moved down the maze to Bill's cubicle.

"How's it going? Want a peanut?"

Bill took a peanut. Bill, who was also rather underused while Melfina tried to decide what the hell they'd bought Madre for anyway, had unofficially been keeping track of the letter campaign. He called it Revolution 94109 for Madre HQ's zip code.

"meh," Bill replied. He pursed his lips. "*Nothing* from HQ yet. I mean, they must have received thousands of letters. And in three weeks we haven't heard anything from Newman."

They both stared at the screen almost as if waiting for the reply to come that instant. But nothing did.

"It makes me so mad," continued Bill. "It makes me want to slip laxatives into his coffee."

"That's not a bad idea," Art added.

Bill and Art suddenly locked gazes. The same thing went through their minds. The little twinkles in the back of their eyes were communicating, arcs of energy leaping from their retinas and meeting halfway. And then they both, just as suddenly and decisively, broke the gaze. Even though it was a good idea, it was probably not a good idea.

"I wonder how many of these changes actually come from Newman, though," Art pondered. "Are they his ideas? Or are they Melfina's and he's just a lap dog."

"Both," Bill said. "He's a lap dog that you don't have to instruct because he knows what and agrees with what the Master wants anyway."

"I'm glad we got Swarthy Victor done months ago," continued Art. "I'm glad we didn't have to put any product placement in our game."

"Yeah. For sure. Tim said to me yesterday every time he picks up the phone he cringes thinking it's going to be Newman saying *Che's Coffee Revolution* wants to be in their game."

"Ecch! I always knew that product placement would happen someday. I knew it. I just never thought I'd see it here...and definitely not first."

There was a pause in their conversation as they monitored Bill's screen. Across the way, Art saw Will walking purposefully down the hall. Art hadn't recalled seeing Will all day. His face looked kind of red. He wondered where he'd been hiding out.



Tim and Geoff were both admiring the box cover design for *Sci-Fi Quest 4* on their computer. Again. Although they'd received the design over a week ago, they kept coming back to admire it. It was always hard to imagine their game in finalized form. Staring at the box always provided them with a surreal feeling of accomplishment. As if the box was a beautiful, voluptuous, radiant fairy calling to them, saying 'You are both good boys. You've worked hard for me...and now I'm yours.' Besides, the box art was cool. It was the first thing to come out of San Fran they were genuinely pleased with.

"It's still cool," Tim said. "Even after a week."

"Yeah. Especially the hologram." Although they couldn't actually see the hologram on the computer screen, holograms were generally cool no matter what they depicted...well, almost. A little placeholder marked 'hologram' was there instead.

Tim and Geoff were so engrossed they'd hardly noticed Will had stormed into their office. Only when Will shut the door behind him did they both look up.

Will hadn't thought about how he was going to say this. He couldn't think of a diplomatic way to do it. All his diplomatic energies had been sucked up. And what he was about to tell them hadn't been his decision. He'd been arguing on the phone over it all morning. So, lacking energy for tact, he went straight to the point.

"Sci-Fi Quest is cancelled."

Tim and Geoff both squinted, sure they'd heard Will speak nonsense and not something that sounded like 'Sci-Fi Quest is cancelled.'

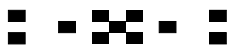
"What?" they asked in unison.

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