

## THE GAME

Bullets blasted past Jefferson's face as he took cover behind a war-torn building. He stumbled backward over a pile of rubble and held his gun tight against his camouflage-covered chest. Destruction surrounded him on both sides. Bombs exploded in the not-so-distant background.

A voice crackled in his right ear through a small headset.

"Somebody take that sniper out! He's holding court on the southwest corner."

Jefferson answered the call. "I'm at the base of his nest, ready to climb. Do we have Intel on what I'm going into?"

"Negative soldier, we don't have eyes on the inside. Assume the place is littered with rats so stay frosty."

"Copy that."

No more time to catch his breath. He had an important mission to accomplish. A mission that could save countless lives. Jefferson regained his footing, gripped his gun tighter, and took off running down the building's perimeter. He turned the corner as machine-gun bullets zeroed in on him. A few hit the wall behind him, each one closer than the last. It only took one to smack his helmet, pushing Jefferson down to the ground with the sheer velocity of the tiny metal casing. He army-crawled and took cover behind a pile of bricks.

"Additional sniper on the southeast," Jefferson heard from his headset. That would have been helpful to know thirty-seconds ago, but at least he was still alive to get the message.

Jefferson peeled the helmet off his head and touched the bloody

wound. Luckily, his headgear took the brunt of the hit. Its thick coating cracked from the dome to the base on one side. He wiped blood from his temple. Surface damage wasn't enough to stop him. He put his helmet back on his head, but it was too bent out of shape to stay in place so he dropped it behind the pile of bricks that protected him.

He ignored the blood, the pain, the ringing in his ear, jolted back to his feet and kept going. With no more helmet to protect his skull, he swerved into the half-demolished building, unsure what he would encounter in his path to the roof.

“Southwest snipers taking out half the battalion. Come on, Jefferson. We need you.”

“Copy,” Jefferson whispered into his headset. There was no time for conversation, and he couldn't risk being overheard. He walked with a quick, light step so as not to make a sound as he moved stealthily through the building's inner corridor. Still, debris crunched lightly under his dirty boots.

Jefferson pointed his gun in front of him and scanned each room he passed for any potential threats. With no electricity, it was hard to see much amongst the dim remains of what probably used to be an apartment building. Blood continued to drip from the side of his sweaty head leaving a trail of splatter behind him.

A small calico cat bolted past causing Jefferson to flinch and redirect his weapon, but his reflexes were so precise he didn't fire. He'd trained too much to waste any bullets. Nor could he risk warning the sniper above of his presence.

Jefferson rounded a corner and climbed a set of stairs up toward the roof. How many of his brothers had this sniper taken out already? How many more would die if he didn't complete his mission within the next minute? Failure wasn't an option, and Jefferson zeroed in on the target one step at a time.

After each flight of stairs, he paused to check his surroundings at the landing to protect himself, but he didn't have time to do a thorough search to ensure no one was on the prowl nearby. His ears still rung, muffling the symphony of bullets playing outside. He had to take this sniper out before anyone else got hurt.

As he rounded his way up to the final floor, he focused in on the door offering roof access. This flimsy piece of wood was the only thing standing in the way of completing his task. He heard the

sniper's machine-gun strikes echoing from the other side getting louder and louder with each step up the final staircase. Before reaching the final landing, he reached out and tested the doorknob. It was unlocked. He needed the element of surprise so instead of kicking the door open, he pushed it quietly with the tip of his gun. He moved quickly and deliberately with his rifle leading the way.

An enemy insurgent lurked in the shadows, waiting to attack from behind. As Jefferson tip-toed through the door, the patient man struck him in the back of his head with a plank of wood.

The force of the surprise blow caused Jefferson to drop his gun. The door swung open revealing the open air and the target he was so close to defeating. Another enemy soldier protecting the sniper turned and walked toward the commotion.

"I need back-up," Jefferson managed to say as he grabbed a knife from his cargo pants. He was ready to face off in hand-to-hand combat without skipping a beat. It wasn't too late to complete the mission.

Jefferson turned and blocked another swing of the plywood. He retaliated with a quick stabbing motion to the insurgent's left abdomen. The blade slid out of the flesh ready to dive in again when it was intercepted by another man from behind. The man who was protecting the sniper stood in front of the door to the roof. Now two obstacles stood in his way, but still Jefferson wasn't ready to give up.

The enemy soldier punched Jefferson in the face, forcing him toward the floor. He had another blade in his belt and like a magician, it was in his hand one second later, ready to strike.

Jefferson turned around to face this immediate threat, fully prepared to take him on so the moment of victory could finally be his. His eyes met the barrel of a handgun.

Jefferson managed to utter two words into his headset. "I'm sorry."

Bang! The sound of the gunfire was deafening.

All the training in the world didn't save him. Jefferson was defeated. His limp body slumped to the floor. The world of chaos faded to black.

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"Game Over," a woman's voice said calmly through the darkness.

"Game Over," she repeated mechanically.

A young androgynous nondescript person opened his eyes to see GAME OVER written in red over a black screen. He inhaled deeply as if for the first time and ripped a headset off his face to get a glimpse of the new surroundings.

He found himself lying on a metal platform in the middle of an empty room. The walls were made of steel and the lighting was dim.

"Where am I?" he asked, not knowing who he was asking or if anyone would answer.

The woman's voice that sounded computer generated returned to guide him. "Relax and breathe deeply as you re-adjust from the game world. It can be a jarring transition especially when the game ends violently."

Tears came to his eyes as he remembered the gunshot that ended it all for him.

"You completed twenty-two levels during this round," the voice told him.

"Twenty-two?" he thought to himself. He was twenty-two when he died, if that's what she meant.

"During this round? What do you mean?" he asked as he looked around the steel room for a source of the voice. There was nothing and no one in the small room with him, not even a speaker.

"Checking..." the voice replied.

He gripped the metal platform beneath him and tried to slow his breathing. He looked at the wireless headset laying on the ground. *How long have I been here? Where is here?*

"You've completed three hundred and twenty-one games," the voice answered. "Do you realize it is just a game?"

"No." His nostrils flared with emotion as he shook his head. "No way it was just a game. It was so much more than that." Feelings swelled within him and seeped out, wetting his eyes.

"Status test commencing now. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Who are you?"

"Jefferson Taylor. Proud soldier of the United States Army."

"Negative. That is not who you really are. Do you understand?"

The young androgynous person crinkled his brow in confusion.

"That is who you were in the last round of game play."

"If I'm not Jefferson, who am I? Huh? Tell me!" He screamed

into the ceiling as if the voice hovered above him. In reality, the voice sounded like it was coming from every direction, encircling him.

"Names are not important, but if it helps your transition, I can assign you one."

"You can call me Jefferson."

"That will not help in your transition. Let's call you Player G."

"That's the best you came up with? That's it, I'm done playing your stupid game. I want to go home. I want to see Gwen. Now!"

"After completing the status test you are welcome to leave, although the home you speak of is no longer an option due to game completion. What did you learn from your experience as Jefferson?"

"I... I miss my mom. And Gwen. Where's Gwen?"

"What did you learn from your experience as Jefferson?" the voice repeated.

Tears formed in Player G's eyes as he thought back on the twenty-two years he lived as Jefferson Taylor. *It all felt so real, it couldn't only be a stupid game. Could it?*

"What did you learn from your experience as Jefferson?"

"I should have stayed with her..."

"With whom?"

"Gwen. She was pregnant. She begged me to stay," he said through his tears. "Why didn't I stay?"

"Only you can answer that question. You make every single decision during game play."

"I wanted to prove myself. I wanted to make money and provide for my family. Protect my country. My brothers. My honor..."

"What was the war about this time?" the voice asked.

Player G searched his brain for the answer, but he didn't really have one. All he thought about was Gwen, but for some reason he couldn't conjure up her image in his mind's eye.

"I'm downloading the log of your previous games for reference. Do you have a deeper understanding of why you wanted to engage in combat?"

Player G's eyes grew wide as glimpses of past games flooded his memory. They played out like a movie montage in his mind's eye. Past lovers, past triumphs, past defeats, past personalities he'd played looking at themselves in the mirror, both men and women of all different races and backgrounds. It all came back to him in a flood of fragmented images.

His memory pinpointed one key scene to re-evaluate. A young female slept on a cot in an army barrack. Her camouflage fatigues sat folded on the table next to her. A group of men snuck up on her as she slept. They gagged her so she couldn't scream. They took turns beating her. Tears rolled down her cheeks as they did whatever they wanted to her.

"Make it stop," the young man said as his eyes flew open.

The voice replied, "You are in control of your game memories. Do you understand now why you wanted to engage in combat as Jefferson Taylor?"

"I remember. Game twenty, I was a woman who enlisted in the army... That didn't go over so well. My father served, and I was daddy's little girl..."

Player G looked again at the headset lying on the floor. Anger coursed through his veins as he felt again what it was like to be that woman. He stood up and kicked the headset across the room causing the casing to crack.

"Why does it anger you still?" the voice asked. "It is just a game."

"What kind of messed up game is this?" he yelled. "Why would anyone want to play?"

"The choice is yours. Would you prefer to leave the game room? There are many mansions to explore beyond these walls."

Player G walked up to one wall and rested his hands on the steel barrier. There was no door, but he somehow knew there was a way out. He laid his forehead on the wall and it flushed with light, creating a translucent screen where lights of all colors danced before him.

He looked into the light show and exhaled. For one moment, all Jefferson's worries dissipated into the calming vortex that presented itself in front of him. Silence blanketed him, and with it came a sense of bliss, a sense that he was whole and complete beyond the confines of the game room.

A wave of light flashed over him, and with it, another memory flooded his mind. He remembered a vibrant woman on a summer day, picnicking on the beach. The wind blew through her curly brown hair as she leaned over and kissed him. Her bi-racial skin was a light mocha. Her eyes sparkled with an inner joy that radiated outward. Her smile was pure and innocent. He kissed the small birthmark above her lips.

“Where’s Gwen?” he asked, pulling away from the wall of light. As he took one step away from the wall, the light dissipated and returned to its steel configurations.

“Checking... The player you call Gwen is nearing the end of her game play.”

“How does her game end?”

“Natural causes of old age.”

“How is that possible? She was in her twenties just a few minutes ago.”

“Game time is different,” the voice answered. “Would you like to play again or do you prefer a break? Please know the choice is yours.”

“Will Gwen be there?”

“I do not have sufficient information to answer that question, but the probability is high. She has an unresolved desire to see you again as well.”

Images of loved ones flooded his mental screen; families of all shapes and sizes. A husband and wife kissed on their wedding day, a mother and daughter made up after an argument, perfect strangers couldn’t stop looking at each other on a train, a same-sex couple made out at a party, a son held his dying father’s hand. Gwen showed Jefferson a positive pregnancy test.

“Are they all Gwen?” Player G asked.

“No, but if your desire is strongest for Gwen, I can program the next round to search for that player.”

He looked at the cracked headset sitting in the corner across the room. He rubbed his forehead and nodded his head.

“I remember now. I can choose the presets.”

“Shall we go through the initiation steps for your next round?” the voice asked.

“I don’t want to have anything to do with any war...”

“Confirmed. You are pre-set to be against war in Round Three Hundred and Twenty-Two.”

“Gwen was pregnant before I deployed,” Player G said as he walked toward the headset and picked it up. “Was it a boy or a girl?”

“It was a girl. She grew up to be a yoga teacher. Would you also like to set a desire to connect with that player?”

“Definitely.”

“What would you like to accomplish in this round?”

“I want to be the best dad in the world,” he said as he caressed the

crack in the headset.

“I cannot confirm gender, but do you confirm these attributes for either male or female?”

“Huh?”

“Do you confirm the desire to be a strong parent whether you are male or female?”

“Oh. Yeah. What else can I choose? Can I be rich and famous?”

“Checking...”

Images of previous rounds flashed before his eyes. As a homeless man he begged for food on the street. A hardworking woman wiped sweat from her brow in a factory. A farmer toiled in the fields. Jefferson received his first paycheck from the Army and hugged Gwen with excitement.

“I’m not playing this game anymore unless I’m rich.”

“This preset will provide you with a new set of lessons. Confirmed,” the voice responded.

Player G walked back to the table with confidence. He sat and then laid down on the table with the headset in his hand.

“Alright, let’s do this!” The young man nodded his head as he thought about how easy this next round would be to master.

“I’ll see you soon, Gwen,” he whispered to himself. “Everything will be different this time, I promise.”

“Do you have any additional requests?” the voice asked.

More images from previous rounds poured over him; a young boy was teased by a class bully. A woman protested against a sexist government regime. An older man sat depressed in front of his computer screen in a tiny cubicle. A sergeant belittled Jefferson during boot camp.

“I want respect,” he said as he slid the headset over his eyes.

“The desire for respect has been programmed. Initializing...”

The headset screen read DOWNLOADING PROGRAM PRESETS.

“Before we commence, I will read the rules of the game. Use your eyes to scroll over the Accept Button when I am finished.”

Two buttons appeared on the headset screen, ACCEPT and DECLINE.

“You have chosen to play another round of the game in order to fulfill desires and goals created from previous rounds. All decisions made in the game are yours to make. You will gain Vitality Points

based on decisions that support your desires and goals, and you will lose Vitality Points based on poor decisions. Vitality Points help you achieve the goals you have programmed as well as unlock additional goal levels that have been programmed based on the data from all your previous rounds. These additional goals and obstacles may not be known to you now, but were stated in previous programming.”

The man’s eyes lingered between ACCEPT and DECLINE as he listened to the rules set forth by the voice.

“That’s a lot of fine print...” he said.

“Vitality Points help you along the way,” the voice promised. “Pay attention to your emotions, and listen for inner, intuitive guidance. That guidance will always point you to the right path in everything.”

“Okay, that seems easy enough.”

“Once the game begins, you will not remember that it is a game you have programmed for yourself. You will not remember the rules once you enter, but you will have instinctual reminders. Utilize your emotional guidance system to lead you toward experiences that will both unlock your goals and help you remember that this is just a simulation.”

“How will I recognize Gwen? And my daughter? I’ve never even seen her before.”

“You will be naturally drawn to characters with whom you have unresolved issues and goals. Please note they may have conflicting programs to yours based on their previous experiences.”

“Okay...” the young man hesitated. “What was her name?”

“Please restate your question for clarity.”

“What was my daughter’s name?”

“Checking...” the voice said before adding, “Her name was Elizabeth. However, that information will not be relevant in the next game. It should be noted that the player referred to as Elizabeth may opt out of playing another round, at least right away. Most every player chooses another round until they win, but some choose to take time in between for reflection. Do you want to proceed with this round?”

Player G’s eyes hovered over the DECLINE button. The game seemed easy enough, but clearly he’d been trapped in it for over three hundred rounds.

“I do have desires to fulfill, but will I ever be able to? Won’t I just make new desires? I don’t want to only experience it anymore, I want

to master it. How do I win?”

“Well done,” the voice complimented. “Few players learn to seek the higher goal so early in their game play.”

*Early in game play? How many rounds do people play?*

“The way to win is to fully remember that it is just a game. Become non-attached to the outcome of events, to the fulfillments of your desires. Only then will you cease to create new outward desires. Then you’ll begin to remember where you came from. From there, the most joyous experiences await you.”

“That doesn’t sound easy,” he said as his eyes hovered over the DECLINE button. He thought back to Gwen; back to that perfect day picnicking on the beach, and then to the day they said goodbye for his deployment. He hugged her so tight, her sweet perfume seemed to seep out of her every pore.

He breathed her in and whispered in her ear, “I’ll never leave you. I’ll be back soon. I promise.” He kissed the small birthmark above her lips.

His eyes moved rapidly between the ACCEPT and DECLINE buttons. His desire for Gwen gnawed at him from deep within.

“Okay, Gwen, let’s do this. I’m coming for you baby.”

He pressed the ACCEPT button with his eyes and the screen said INITIALIZING.

A circle formed on screen to visually showcase the initializing process. The circle broke into two, then four, eight, then sixteen, and so on. As if in time-lapse, the circles created a human fetus in the span of a few seconds. The screen flashed to white.

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The world went from a bright white light into an all too familiar hospital scene. A baby cried out for the first time as her new eyes opened to see a doctor.

*Aw man, I forgot I had to start all the way from the beginning...* Player G, now as a newborn baby girl thought to itself.

The baby cried in frustration as a nurse cleaned her up and handed her to her new parents.

A mother looked down lovingly at the baby girl. She stopped crying as her half-closed eyes looked up at her new mother. The mother’s eyes sparkled with an inner joy that radiated outward. Her

smile was pure and innocent, exposing the small birthmark above her lips.

*Are you who I was looking for? Who was I looking for? What was I trying to accomplish? How do I win? What is.... Who...*

The baby's thoughts trailed off as all forms of previously learned communication was now forgotten. Game Three Hundred and Twenty-two was now underway.