

# Serious Games

By David Vickery

Went out on my own again today, heading for the Scope – but with the car still in the driveway I didn't get far. Seem to be spending more time on my own these days. These impulsive acts aren't helping either. Decided to turn back a few miles along Roadway One and Franz and Tica drove up, laughing and signalling for me to get in. When I told them I wanted to walk they seemed offended.

Especially Tica. The old slow burn. Well, she can keep it, we poets are true to our loves (I've always heard). Franz probably puts her up to it anyway, and I'm not in the business of providing free entertainment.

I checked the screen as soon as I was back inside. Two messages: one from Alsa, good old sun-of-my-world, wanting to change it to nine tonight. That suited me fine, more time in the viewer (more time? I practically live in there already). One from Internal Billing. Ground rent, settlement will oblige. Saw my ident on the screen and it just killed me. Getting the IB to address me as "Oct" was a famous victory, even if no one else seemed to think so.

Except Alsa, she recognises my inherent talent. Or does she? She doesn't say much. Maybe I go with her, apart from those fragile porcelain features, which together with my bulldog tenacity and rugged individualism should give good old Nov Axel Jones an unbeatable edge; maybe I go with her because she is so quiet, because she gives me space.

Read through last year's poems later on. The only thing that stops me deleting them all is the pseudo-romantic air of such a gesture. I'm sure that's all it would be, a gesture. Incredible. Just a few weeks ago they were the glass to my wine. At least I now recognise how worthless they are. I'm being honest, you'll note, a rare thing for poets these days.

Worthless that is except for one or two about the sun-of-my-world. Lines danced around in my head when I dropped by at nine. We went inside, holding each other, and she shut the door behind her with her heel, and I looked around me, breathing everything in – not just the food aroma, although that helped, but the whole deal. With the shades down and those homey pictures, it was the nearest thing I was ever likely to find. I shut my eyes, laughed, and breathed C21 Earth.

I'm not sure Alsa understood my mood, but it wasn't necessary. There she was, standing, welcoming, another time, another place. That torchy smile of hers lit up the room but gently as I sat, pulling her down opposite me. That smile. When we first met.

*And she smiled like glass afraid of shattering  
And I got a load of her bracing stuff.*

Yes, one or two are okay. Or is it just that they remind me of an earlier, simpler time? After eating I thought about telling her what I'd been feeling lately, but I can't see it going over. Come to that, I'm not sure about putting it into words myself. So instead we just fooled around and frittered the time away as usual. She offered me the enhancer, but needless to say that didn't fit my present mood, so we amused ourselves with what you might call an "old-fashioned". On the rocks.

The word on the street is all the new star still. Part of me is ashamed not to have got to the Scope yet, part as me as usual proud. Anyway, no journeying today, with or without the car. I cancelled my connections and spent my time in the viewer.

Who looks at those ancestor biostats these days? Not anyone. But these last months have been a hard time. If I speak to Alsa about it she tells me to take an antidep, but that's no use. Inside that beaming face I'd still be in there, glowering. The sad clown born out of his time. Perhaps that's where the fascination of old Axel Jones comes from. I'd never spent much time thinking about C21 Earth before, or Earth at all if it comes to that; what use is it anyway? But he seems to know where he is in life. I suppose I should say seemed to know, but it's hard to think of him in the past. He's more real than I am for God's sake.

When he looks over to Vera (his "girlfriend": I had to smile when he said that right into the screen) there's an exchange in the air. Trees and stars and all that bracing stuff. But the main thing is the picture of C21 Earth in the background, and their messages of course. I sit listening to those words which were never intended for me. Or were they? Is it vanity to think of Axel and Vera as my parents, as something more than parents? Especially when Axel says, "Son, although we can't be out there with you in body, part of us has always been there." Turning to Vera, slightly self-conscious, "Isn't that right, Vera?"

The beautiful Vera, whose eyes shine like real stars, turns and smiles (how I wish I'd known her) and says, "Oh yes, I've always thought that."

Behind them is a backdrop that the screen, if you ask it nicely, identifies as the Honister Pass, the English Lakes, April, C21 Earth.

It's like a view from on top of the world, with hills rolling away below it, the sides edged with snow. The first time I saw it, it hit me like a knife in the heart, and my collar was suddenly tight when I thought of what was outside.

Wednesday. The morning group. I knew there was a reason for that sinking feeling on waking up. Must admit I find Ribo something of a pain in the behind these days. Must also admit that he hasn't changed as far as I can tell, so it must be me. He started in talking about the social he and Larta were at yesterday.

"Dag Laerskjold was the centre of attention all right," Ribo said. "Quite a while since I saw him last. Boy," he snickered like a junior, "I wouldn't care for a job in his office."

I got irked by this. I irk easily these days. I said, "Oh come on Ribo, cut out the pretence."

“Pretence? What pretence?”

“You know he doesn’t work out of an office. He’s the captain for God’s sake!”

I couldn’t believe it. I swear they were blushing. Even Alsa looked uncomfortable.

“Some captain,” I continued to mutter. “He’s as much in the dark as any of us.”

“Okay, okay Oct, calm down,” Ribo said, forcing a smile. “Let’s get back to the business in hand, why don’t we.”

The business, what a joke, what a group. Poetry and psychosexual art with a card painter and a hack lyricist. Perhaps I’m being too hard on them. Perhaps I’d lost my group spirit. At least Alsa was there, she was a real artist, a composer and a musician. Made my art look like cutting up dictionaries, but she never competed. I certainly liked the soft option, didn’t I?

“Oh yes, the business,” I said nastily. “Well, let’s see. It’s Larta’s turn isn’t it?”

Larta said, “These are just a few I knocked up. I don’t know if they’re finished or not...” and she threw something up on the screen, fading from one to the next. There were five in all, 3D with telemetry. Nothing wrong with the technique. In fact it was that which persuaded me that those curls and swirls were Ribo – or a rose-tinted view of him. He actually smirked. He can be a complete rejmat at times.

Alsa said, “They’re lovely, Larta.”

I murmured something indistinct. Actually I was busy watching Alsa. She’s golden. I love that gold halo of hair. It almost made me feel human again. Ribo brought me back to the present.

“Come on Oct, your turn.”

“Yes, my turn,” I said huskily, taking a pad from my back pocket. “Yes,” I said, still looking at Alsa. “I intended to read you my latest poems today, but I find I haven’t written any.”

There was a little polite laughter at this point.

“But how about this?”

*For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over  
and gone; the flowers appear on the earth: the  
time of the singing of birds is come, and the  
voice of the turtle is heard in our land.”*

There was a brief, not altogether happy, silence. Even Alsa said, “Why these archaisms?”

Ribo said reasonably, “You’re not going to tell us that’s one of yours, Oct?” I shook my head and he relaxed.

“I thought not. Hardly up to your usual standard. Who wrote it?”

“Solomon,” I said.

“Do I know him?” asked Ribo.

Shut myself in the viewer all afternoon. Carmel beach, the screen said, California, November, C21 Earth.

A place of desolate beauty. (Beauty. A word I never applied to anything not human until a few weeks ago.) No people, just one grey tree against a grey sky, pulled by the wind. The sea flecked into remote white caps behind it. The sea rolls like a restless sleeper. (See? It evokes poetry almost, but what's the use? It's a sea, a time, a place I can never know.)

Axel said, in voiceover, "These places of natural beauty are becoming rarer. Even the climate is not what it was. Yet, as you can see, just fifty years ago there was plenty of room for everyone."

Vera added, "If we can't remake this place as it was, at least we can reach out in the hope of finding somewhere unspoilt, somewhere to make a fresh start."

You tell 'em, Vera. It was a nice idea anyway.

A new development today. I was in the library, early C22 Earth section. Needless to say it was practically deserted as usual. Although not quite. A girl, slim, attractive in a way. Long hair. Blonde – I think I've seen her there before. Realised I was staring at her. She smiled in a nervous way, made her seem vulnerable. Why this weak spot for smiles?

"I like the background music," I said, clutching at straws. "Do you know who wrote it? Sounds a bit like B27."

She looked suddenly scornful. Must remember not to be fooled by vulnerable smiles in future.

"Yes," she said. "Also known as Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685 – 1750."

"Sixteen –?"

"Sorry, what you would call as C18 composer (Earth)," she said.

It still hurts from where she stabbed me. "I didn't invent the system did I?"

She seemed to relent then. "Sonata for solo flute," she said. "Not easy to play on an actual flute – although I don't suppose that's much of a problem any more."

I thought I'd better not reveal any more ignorance.

"It's very good," I said. "I've got some sea tapes of C21 Earth I thought it would go well with. Didn't think it could be that old."

"Genius is timeless," she said, suddenly timeless herself. I realised where I'd seen her before, or someone like her. Would she object when I started calling her Vera?

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Genissa," she replied, adding, "if you want to listen to the Bach properly, I've got everything of his loaded into the car. We could go for a drive."

There seemed to be nothing more to say, so mutely I picked up my disks and strolled with her to the exit. I didn't mention that sick feeling I'd had while driving. I thought maybe the company would keep it at bay.

Genissa said, "So you're into twenty-second century stuff?"

I shrugged. "To some extent. Actually this is following up some stuff I've been researching. But really it's, uh, twenty-first century material I'm interested in. What do you do?"

"I'm a historian," she said, finely cut fingers flicking hair. "I like those periods a lot. What about you?"

"I suppose I'm a historian too now. At least, it's all I think about."

She smiled. "We're alike. Without a future what else is left but the past?"

We left the library in Genissa's car, Roadway Four. It felt okay. The rush of air past us felt good. I said only one thing as we drove: "It seemed that they could look both forward and back at that time, that they had a genuine choice."

She replied, "Perhaps you could say that of a lot of periods. But I know what you mean."

Later she said, without looking over, "Maybe I'll show you some of my games."

Saw Alsa in the evening as usual.

"Did you know that B27 was Bach?" I asked her as we ate.

"What?"

"The composer B27. He was really called J.S. Bach."

Alsa smiled. "No," she said. "I didn't know. But it doesn't matter. It's his music I appreciate, that cool mind. Such a timeless quality."

"Yeah," I said, suddenly tired.

Went out walking again today. Ribo went past in his car but I pretended not to see him. Bet he didn't have to pretend. Had this idea of reaching some kind of high point and looking into the distance. The biostat, I guess. Distances don't seem to work that way up here though. Went back tired and depressed. Spent the afternoon in the viewer. Axel took me on a guided tour of Venice, as it once was. Even this made me sad. He and Vera were so pleased at the work that had taken place to stop the whole lot sinking without trace. Personally, I identified with the city. Not a good day.

Spoke to Alsa in the evening. Talked in a roundabout way of how I felt. Said something about wanting to have the sun setting in my eyes. She didn't speak or look directly at me. Perhaps she's tiring of being a sun to a lifeless world.

Finally looking at me, she said, "I can see you're not happy. But what is it you want?"

*Aha*, murmured Axel in my inner ear, *the sixty-four thousand dollar question*, but I would have flunked it.

Woke this morning feeling strangely changed. Slept indifferently but somehow I wasn't tired. Went straight to the screen. Four messages. One from the Guild advising me exactly how much I was below quota. What do they think poems are, lumps of wood? (Mine may be, but they don't know that yet!) One from the IB which I took a small pleasure in leaving unread. One from Alsa, good old Alsa. She's too good for me. Obviously she thought so too: *Can't see you tonight. Something's come up*. And one from Genissa – didn't recognise the name at first: *How about lunch?*

I heard the car outside while I sat reading.

We had lunch and talked about the distant past on the distant planet Earth. Then she sat back in her chair, looked at me and said, "Well?"

I attempted a light tone. "I'm going with someone," I said. "And we poets are true to our loves. Didn't you know?"

She laughed, almost harshly. "No," she said. "Besides, you've got to find it before you can be true to it."

Then her mood changed. She reached out.

"I need you."

"You don't need anyone."

"We need each other."

Later, soft designs moving over the ceiling, she spoke. "You're a history man. Ever hear of Harry Crosby?"

I said I hadn't.

"I've been reading about him," she said. "Very interesting character. Rich guy, very good Boston family. Rejected the banking career mapped out for him and became a poet. Obsessed with death, suicide and the sun. He painted his fingernails black and had a sun tattooed between his shoulder blades. He once said that the final refuge is suicide."

I looked over to her, to the lights in her eyes.

She said, "Let me show you some of my games."

"Games?" I asked. "Like for juniors?"

"No," she answered. "Serious games."

In the kitchen area she had rigged up a random interrupt on the disposal tube and then forced the outlet upwards so that it faced outwards. She switched on the box she'd rigged up. The beam cut out, then flashed into life again, maybe three seconds later. I watched. The next delay was five seconds. The next, half a second. There was no pattern.

She was quivering with excitement. "Put your hand in and out of the outlet," she said.

I looked at her. "If the beam engages while your hand is there it's goodbye hand."

She seemed impatient. "That's not the point," she said. "The point is riding the risk. The point is coming through. The point is winning."

She flashed her hand through the opening. Once. Twice. I could feel cold sweat dividing the shirt from my back. Then, almost to my own surprise, my arm leapt out from my body and my hand was passing into the opening. It seemed to gape at me. I pulled it back as quickly as I could but everything seemed unnaturally slow. As my hand whipped back the beam cut in again and I was aware of a sudden intense heat. I looked down at my hand, half expecting to see a blackened stump, but all that had happened was the hairs on the back of my hand were frizzled. Burnt carbon tainted the air.

Genissa clutched me by the arm. "Did you feel it?" she breathed.

I certainly did. A trembling seized me momentarily as I thought about what I'd done. But along with that, which was only natural, was something I hadn't expected. A strange euphoria. A triumph I'd never had before. I had put my head into the lion's mouth and come out smiling. No, laughing.

I turned and we caught each other up in a tornado embrace, then she raced me back to the bedroom where we made love as though inventing it.

Later, we went out for another drive and Genissa asked me to take her to see the Battery. It's an unfrequented area. The old guard who stood at the door was surprised to see visitors. He activated screens and generally began to look the part.

"Name?"

"Oct."

"Oct what, sir?"

"Oct Oct. Surname Jones." (That shut him up.)

We spent half an hour looking over the massive generators. They hummed quietly but never looked as though they'd be woken from their centuries of slumber. Apart from the guard the rooms seemed empty.

"I don't know," I grunted. "The characters who wasted money on all this armament must have received their training manual from *Astounding Stories*."

Genissa ran her hand along the flank of one of the engines but only nodded.

"I mean," I continued, "what did they think was out there?"

(*The Mekon*, whispered Axel. *Creatures from the id*, murmured Vera.)

"And if you ask me, the same dewy-eyed idealism was responsible for the whole project. Who are we? Where are we going? What's the point of all this, and of us?"

Genissa gazed into the cavernous chamber. "It's for us to make a point," she said quietly.

On the drive back to Banalsville Genissa asked, "Why do you call yourself Oct? Everybody's Oct."

"Except the very old, or the very young."

"But it's dehumanising. I don't see the point."

I turned to her. I swear I could see Vera's perfect profile in the flow of facial lines.

"I'll tell you, *baby*," I said. Calling forth one of Axel's terms of endearment. "It's because everybody, more or less, is called Oct, as you say, and everybody tries to forget about that. They say, I'm Gert Smith, accountant, because I choose to be. I'm happy living my own life and just getting on with everyday things. Well, I'm Axel Jones, eighth of that name, who used to be a lousy poet, but who was never in control of any part of his life. His father was called Sep Axel Jones and his son, if he's dumb enough to propagate, will be Nov Axel Jones, and all I hope is, he can see a way out of this shuttle to nowhere!"

I realised I was trembling with passion, real or supposed.

"Besides," I said, quieting down into irony as usual. "My life is a work of fiction. It bears no resemblance to anyone else's, living or dead."

She was quiet for a while, but it was a balming quiet. Finally she said, "I can see that. Tomorrow, let's go see the Scope."

I watched the sunrise this morning. It was over a place called Benares, and you guessed it, it was on the biostat. This time the screen said late C21 Earth, but I'd have guessed that one too. A dried riverbed in the foreground, some heavy pall over the town like solid clouds and the few people looked diseased and starving. But the sunrise, which opened this part of the recording, momentarily transformed the whole picture and at the same time revealed better than any words the whole ludicrous waste of it all.

Then the last scenes of the biostat: gleaming metallic stanchions in space, silent ceremony as the hopes of all mankind slipped away aboard the *New Hesperus*. Axel and Vera would have been on the station watching the ship slip its moorings and start its long, long journey. That would have been just before they turned to each other – I imagine Axel wiping a tear from her face and smiling, and Vera smiling through as well, before walking back, arm in arm, to his quarters for a last kiss. There was something terrible about the shot of the sunlight dribbling along the great hull as the huge tomb – as it seemed to me – moved slowly into free space. I could believe myself saying, “O father, why have you forsaken me?”

It took me a while to psych myself into moving at all after that, but Elsa had suggested lunch so I went on over. I was still haunted by one of the images on the biostat: a creature called a buffalo, hunted nearly to extinction and then, although reprieved, existing as a kind of anachronism in a different world. I felt a little like that as I pushed the door open to Elsa's world. I think I said something about maybe starting in with a little gardening out in front of my place, although I don't think I really meant it, and she said, “Oh, gardening. They used to do that on Earth once, didn't they?”

That so-final past tense hit me hard. I wondered if it were a deliberate phrase (after all, she can orchestrate symphonies): an obscure jealousy to offset my obscure guilt?

Later Genissa drove round to my place and picked me up. I think my head was still full of mountains, lakes and woods covered in snow; light fell across my face as we drove and for a second I thought it was the sun setting. But it was only a reflection of the same dead light I've been living with all my life.

Business was not exactly brisk at the Scope. No doubt the crowds had been and gone in the last few weeks. In any case, as I'd seen with Ribo, plenty of people just want to forget about being on the *New Hesperus* entirely and concentrate on living their lives somewhere on downtown Earth, several centuries ago.

We stood up against a rail while a bridge officer made a few explanatory remarks. Some collection of spacemen! Most of the people there couldn't tell the difference between parallax and anthrax. So the commentary was pretty straightforward. A new star had just emerged into the visible. And there it was. Wow.

We watched for a while, then wandered away like everyone else. At least it was like a breath of fresh air to see the cosmos out there. But then the realisation of the so-slow journey through it returned.

Genissa said, "Crosby and his girl vowed to end their lives at perihelion. Twenty-seven storeys up he said to her, let's meet the sun together."

I looked back at the Scope, then back into her dark eyes. Vera. Axel.

"How can we?" I asked.

We drove home.

Last night she spoke of her most serious game. Must admit I'm interested.

She said, "You know it's possible to get a coracle and go right up to the 'roof' of this ship? The weightlessness up there allows you to swim around in the air."

I said, "Sure, but that's a game for juniors."

She smiled, almost girlishly. "Yes, but there must be a critical point where, if you jumped from the coracle, you might be safe and you might not. Do you see?" Her eyes were sparkling.

I must have looked doubtful, because she took my hand and said, "I thought poets were always true to their loves."

I said, "Let's meet the sun together," and we lost ourselves in each other again.

So that's about it. Tonight we're off to share a coracle and try out Genissa's latest game. I'm sure Vera would have understood. If we make it, we've planned another night of celebrations. If coming through death isn't worth celebrating, what is? And if not, that'll be okay too.

I think I'll go back for another look through the Scope today; it's as good a preparation as any. Oh yes, and Genissa and I have arranged to drop by the Bank today, so there's a possibility after all that the old family line may be continuing. In fact, if you're viewing this record, I should really be saying hallo, son. So: hallo, son. (Or daughter, of course, but I always thought in terms of a son. If I'm wrong, accept a father's apologies.)

If you've been able to make sense of this place, that's great. Ignore these deranged wanderings and delete this file. But if by some chance you're anything like your father, you'll find the ancestor biostat in the record library.

Just look under J for Jones.