



SIGHTSEEING FOR A NOVA

A Tale of the Distant Future

I'm sending this message out on behalf of Armada 11375. I think people should know what happened to them. People need to be told. They need to listen. Perhaps there is a reason for the Fermi Paradox. It's not that there is not anyone out there. It's simply the harsh fact organic creatures have no business being out among the stars. Maybe, just maybe, the end comes... not when we build weapons of global destruction... but when we find we can no longer explore.

©2020 David Woodruff – all rights reserved

I'd do anything to get home. To breathe real air; to touch a real person. And I do mean ANYTHING. In the early days, it was easy to get a crew for a space voyage. All you had to do was find some remote Air Force base where no one was going to distinguish themselves and walk into a bar. You'd walk out with 27 volunteers. Then you lose 20 once they found out what was entailed in flying to the stars. Those that stayed on, they were a special breed. In general, there was something seriously wrong with each and every one of them. They tended to be addicted to playing games. Or, at least, they start out this way.

My body is back on Earth. They gave it to my parents in a cryostasis tube. The agency was supposed to make sure it was sent to a vault after your parents passed away. They can look through the glass window and see your face. It would be for me. Those frozen eyes staring back at you. It gives me the shivers. I guess some people just like having you around since your term of service ran for hundreds of years. I have no idea what my parents did. Theoretically, I could have my body back when I returned. But I doubt it's still hanging around after all this time.

It's not like they take your brain out or something similar. The crew's not a bunch of brains floating around in jars. It wouldn't have worked with organic brains. Biological material simply doesn't survive for hundreds of years. No, the company takes your consciousness, the part of you which thinks and reasons and it gets stored electronically in the ship's vast computer network. You run the ship via your physical avatar robots. You get to see through their electronic eyes. A single crewman usually operates a half dozen or more. But you never get to leave the ship. You don't ever get to smell the air of a new world. Which in some ways is okay, as most of the planets we visit don't have breathable atmospheres anyway. Still, it's kind of like being trapped in a cab and never being allowed to get out and stretch your legs.

This doesn't mean you're all alone for the trip. There are twelve minds making up the crew of an Armada Class starship. Those damn things are huge, let me tell you. Think of the biggest artificial structure you've ever seen. Now multiply it by twenty. Of course, it's mostly hydrogen fuel and cargo. But even with so much fuel, the trip is a series of jumps between stars to get to your destination. When you arrive at a layover, you spend about ten years siphoning off hydrogen from the local star to refuel.

So, what space travel amounts to is decades of tedious travel, followed by ten years of refueling. Then you start all over again. This means the ship's systems must be redundant and self-repairing. Right about now I'm guessing a picture is starting to emerge about how mind-numbingly boring the entire process of space travel ends up being. And however you are imagining it now, the reality is worse.

The first crews... and they were on short-range trips... only forty years, actually sabotaged their own ships. So they could have some to do. To have something to fix. So now you spend almost all your time in a virtual reality simulator. Effectively, you're playing one big video game. It's not really an MMO since there are only twelve of us. It's more like an LMO or Limited Multiplayer On-line game. There are lots of fantasy game settings. These Tolkienite worlds are the most popular. There are even a few space opera settings. Although these are not as popular as you might think. It's a tease of what space travel is not like. It's like holding out a piece of candy to a baby and then snatching it away from the child as they reach for it. I must admit there is also something fundamentally wrong with virtually living in a world which only serves to remind you of what you are doing in real life. It tends to lead to severe depression. It makes me itch just to think about it.

So, the crews generally play in fantasy worlds. It's lots of going on quests. We've discussed this among ourselves. There's a growing theory that claims while playing we are directing our avatar robots to perform mindless system checks around the ship. I guess it about as good as any theory.

I was standing in a pure white room. Across from me is a smoky, transparent humanoid shape. We're about to get ready to go on another quest. "How's it going in engineering."

"Oh, about as usual. Engine efficiency is down to 97%. It always gets that way before we hit a refueling point."

"I used to have a dog who behaved the same way when I was a kid. Didn't want to eat the food at the bottom of the bag."

His voice took on an insulted tone. "You calling my engine's dogs?"

"No, of course not. I'm only relating a similar anecdote. It happens to have dogs in it. Don't jump to any conclusions about implications."

He laughed. "Relax, I'm just pulling your leg, man. How are things on the bridge. We still on course?"

I had my answer all ready. Not that I would really know. The navigator was in a better position to tell someone those kinds of things, not the pilot. But I gave him the standard answer the bridge crew always gives. "On course and within parameters." I weaseled my way into changing the subject. "What are you thinking of playing today?"

"I was thinking about playing a Shoggoth." The humanoid form before me shifted and condensed into a solid and immense mound of black, slimy tentacles all surrounding a bulbous head and an eerie pair of budging eyes. "I like the idea of being able to operate multiple swords, one in each tentacle."

"Nice," I gave him a shadowy thumbs up.

"What about you?"

"I was thinking of going Minotaur today." My form changed to a large brooding, although perhaps an over-muscled man with the head of a bull. I stomped the ground with two hefty hooves at the bottom of a pair of legs which would look perfectly good on a horse.

One tentacle pointed at my face. "I like the nose ring. It's a nice touch."

"Thanks. I think it goes with the whole bronze-age feel."

The Minotaur is my go-to game form. I like the feel of stomping around powerfully with two strong, but familiar feeling arms. I've tried outrageous creatures, like Death Worms, but they give me the creeps. I can't even bear to look at myself. At least with two arms and two legs, I know what I'm doing. Things with tentacles confuse the hell out of me. When I get confused, I get sloppy.

"Weapons," the Shoggoth called.

Two whole sets of shelves and weapon's racks raced into the room at a breakneck speed and then instantly stopped. On the Shoggoth's side were axes and spears, swords and war hammers galore. He went about swinging them around, testing how they felt in his tentacles. I spent my time trying on

different sets of armor. Trying to find the right look. I'd already selected what I was going to use as a weapon. I know, the huge, double-headed axe is a bit cliché, but I like it all the same. I like the feel of it in my hands. Sometimes I swing it two-handed, but occasionally I'll use it one-handed with a big brass shield. I always pick the one with the raised Medusa head on it. It has the whole Jason and the Argonauts vibe going for it.

I tapped the empty air with my fingers. The way one might if there was a keyboard floating in mid-air. A ghost-like number pad appeared, floating before me, cloud-like. I started typing. It brought up a group of glowing red letters in front of me. I made some adjustments to the standard stats. I brought my strength down a notch and nudged up my dexterity and constitution a bit. Strength is good, but if you can't manage to hit anything, what's the point? Besides, what's the point in cleaving a man's head from scalp to groin? Once you've opened his skull, the rest is simply for show. I don't bother with overkill.

"You ready?" the Shoggoth enquired.

"It's a dangerous business walking out your front door," I announced with a draconian air. "If you don't watch your step, there's no telling where you'll end up." He laughed, in the way a creature without a natural throat would sound.

I tapped out a few more keystrokes on the faint pad in the air and the white room faded. In its place we found ourselves standing in the middle of the ruins of a medieval village. The ground was still trembling, the after-effects of an earthquake. The result of which had leveled most of the buildings in the area. I didn't feel like I was engaged yet with the storyline the game developer was trying to deploy. First of all, I didn't care about the suffering of any of the characters who were writhing on the ground before me. I mean, why should I? They had no connection to me, and I had none to them. It was simply a story scene unfolding as I watched dispassionately.

This was before a great crack appeared in the center of the village. It threw both of us off our feet. A fiery yellow glow could be seen deep in the earth as we regained our feet. Lemure Devils started crawling out of the rift in the ground. These things looked like rolling waves of fatty flesh on half-formed legs and arms. Their drippy faces resembled a kid who had a serious accident with a pile of melted butterscotch candies. I have no idea how the programmers did it, but the stench totally fit the creature's appearance.

They move toward us with frightening speed. The game designers always had to come up with a challenge to engage the players. This was complicated by our lack of physical bodies. Without any bodies, there was no way to release endorphins into our bloodstream... because we didn't have any blood. The game designers tried to imitate the feeling, but it did quite have the same effect. After all, they didn't have the actual organic brain to work with. The whole thing kind of reminded me of an odd tickling sensation. Which, when you're in combat, can be a little annoying. It was also frustrating to have the knowledge we are long out of communication's range. Your bug reports were never going to be acted upon.

"Let's go to work." I took a swing at the first one and lopped off an arm. It fell uselessly to the ground, twitching slightly, but the remaining stub simply grew a new hand and arm. Now it became a race, could we chop off their parts faster than they could regrow them? The Shoggoth was doing good work since he had a lot more arms than your average character. Still, his sword swings were a little sluggish.

I bashed one with my shield. The most disconcerting thing about it was there was no sound. The creatures didn't scream and slicing through them was like dropping a spoon in mustard. The Shoggoth continued to swing away. He was doing the lion's share of the fighting facing three of them to the one I was trying to cut up. "You think the game designers assign us opponents based on the number of arms we have?"

I slashed off another arm. "I dunno, but it's a scary thought."

"What always concerns me is memory."

"Memory? What do you mean?"

"Yeah. I keep thinking these things look like melted butterscotch."

"So what? Does it matter? How would you know what you've forgotten?"

The Shoggoth neatly sliced one completely in half. This one finally stayed down, and it didn't get up again. "I mean it's been a long time since I've seen butterscotch. A couple of hundred years. How can I be sure that's what it really looked like?"

"Maybe it's not your memory." I followed the Shoggoth's lead and sliced mine in half. He dropped to the ground like a ton of bricks. "Maybe it the designer's memory which counts."

"Never thought of that." His voice sounded a little strained as he sliced another one of the butt-ugly creatures in half.

I was slowing down. I didn't exactly feel tired, you never do without a body. But the simulation knew how to mimic the effects of being tired. Our strength values always dropped. I had to take two swings to finish off the last of our opponents. Once they were finished, what was left slowly melted into the ground. It was like someone had a bad case of explosive dysentery. And the smell was just as bad. Assuming I was remembering it right. I had never thought of the whole memory aspect before and I have to say, the idea was getting on my nerves.

I know computers don't have emotions, but I do. Even though the only remaining part of me was a collection of thought patterns inside a computer. I still have my emotions. After all, it's why the corporation needed humans for spaceflight. They considered the retention of emotions the negative side effect of the process. What they wanted was our ability to process multiple inputs at once. Regular computers had still never been able to do more than one thing at a time.

My thoughts were rudely interrupted by a voice. "You seek to interfere with my affairs? Are you fools or merely imbeciles?" I looked up. At the far side of the fissure was a man wearing a dark robe and holding a staff. Well, at least it had the shape of a man. Two arms, two legs, but they appeared to be vibrating. As his various parts writhed and wiggled, I could see he was mostly made of worms. I was able to catch glimpses of a bleached white humanoid skeleton holding the whole structure together. Ghostly white worms held the bones together as if they were ligaments. They seemed to have teeth filed mouths at both ends, clinging to the surface of the calcium bones. Around them was a writhing mass of red parasitic tube creatures resembling exposed muscles. I glanced at the face and it was constructed the same way. There was nothing to bear a resemblance to human skin anywhere. It made me want to vomit.

Of course, I couldn't actually vomit, not having any digestive organs. Or any organs at all for that matter. I have to say I was always impressed with the game designer's ability to get this feeling right. They seemed to be experts at the more unpleasant aspects of neural inputs. A skill I had always found more than a little disturbing.

"Ugly sucker, isn't he?" the Shoggoth remarked.

"You should talk," I grinned.

"You got any fire?"

"No why?"

"I don't think steel is going to be very effective against a million or so worms. Maybe a nice mace could be an effective crushing tool, but I didn't bring one." My game partner's thinking was really starting to annoy me.

The walking worm in the dark suit started to laugh maniacally. "You think he knows something we don't?" the Shoggoth morosely suggested.

"I don't want to think about it now. Let's just go kill it." I started my advance toward the human mound of crawling things, my double-headed axe at the ready. Before I could take more than a few steps, it held up a palm... or at least, a writhing mass of worms. "Do you believe your interference would not come with a price? Foolish mortals."

He flicked his worm-encrusted fingers at us. As if to send a bugger off in our direction. *Now there is contempt for you.* But what shot out was a spray of some of the red worms making up his form. I batted several of them away with my shield, but the move was a mistake. It opened me up to a second spray of the red wigglers. A few managed to land on me with a plop. Before I could reach down to brush them off, they started burrowing into my flesh. The pain was intense.

As I said, the designers never got the adrenaline rush right, but penetrating pain they had down pat. I continued to feel like I was going to wretch, but this reaction was now mixed up in the spreading agony. I looked up. The worm being had already turned its back on us and was contemptuously walking away. It was more of a casual stroll than a walk. I felt a wave of anger well up in me. I wanted to follow him, but the pain wouldn't let my legs move. My axe fell from my fingers. I could no longer keep it in my now shaking grasp.

My mind was barely working now, the pain was so severe. I could feel the little bastards eating their way into my insides. Or at least it felt as if they were eating their way into my flesh. This was just my luck. When they killed this avatar, I'd lose it. I'd lose all the stuff I spent three years collecting for it. Not to mention my standing would go down in the ranks. The last thing I wanted was to be reassigned to the cleanup crew. And then I'd have to spend time working myself up through the engineering crew to get back to the bridge. *Frack.*

I had to use almost everything I had left to lift even one finger. Tapping the air, I brought up the keyboard. The pain was practically blinding now. Those bastard designers they were always creating ways for you to take days to finally die. Maybe it would take a week, who knows. *Bastards.* Finally, the red-lettered text scrolled before me.

FEEL THE HEALING POWER!

Get a vial of healing potion to bring your character back up to full strength, PLUS a set of extra items and training needed to equip your character to the next level. All for only a one-time, low cost of adding of 24.99 years to your service contract.

DO YOU ACCEPT?

Damn the company. I hated these in-game purchases. But they seemed to be built into everything without a second thought. I began to wonder if the crazy designers were unfeeling computers without any flesh and blood components at all. The whole monetizing thing seemed to be an instinct. Like a dog chasing a bone. Maybe they simply couldn't help themselves. They deserved to meet up with someone like me in a dark alley.

Another spasm of pain ran through me. I knew I was going to feel every twitch until the worms finished consuming me completely. Now I wish I gone with the pixie, rather than the minotaur. There would have been less body to eat. Minotaur's are too damn big. Being devoured as a minotaur could go on for a month. Boy, I despise these in-game purchases. But I decided I hated the pain more. I pressed the accept button.

The text disappeared as if a gush of wind had happened by and falling from the sky came a small, but highly ornate box.

It was carved and lacquered. Every inch of it was covered in shapes of ivy leaves. On the top was a carving of two hummingbirds feeding on a single flower worked into the center. In the front was a simple brass clasp, holding the box closed.

The pain was stabbing at me, but I managed to flip open the clasp and reach inside. Feeling around blindly my fingers bumped into a glass tube. I pulled it out with a shaky hand. It looked like a common test tube with a cork stopper at the top. Inside was a blue liquid. It reminded me of the liquid inside one of those frozen slushy things I had as a kid. You know, before you put them in the freezer.

I yanked the cork out with my teeth and poured the liquid down my throat. It tasted sweet. Then I dropped the vial and waited. *Damn those bastards.* What's the point of making you wait for it to take effect? Besides, I hate waiting. Who likes waiting? Don't tell me about game realism. You're not in agony. I don't want to hear any pointless crap about game realism. Getting rid of pain is the one place where I'm happy to chuck game realism right out the window. Along with physics and anything else that slows the process down.

The pain was now slowly abating. *Those bastard designers.* It takes a truly sick mind to want your players to have this feeling in the first place, let alone make them wait for the cure to take effect. Finally, the pain diminished enough for me to get back to my feet. The Shoggoth's eyes were looking at me in a creepy way. Which I realized was normal for an otherworldly Shoggoth.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to press the button," he snorted.

"You pressed it right away?" I asked composing myself.

"Why not, It's only another 25 years of service. Who cares?"

I shook my head to make the last of the discomfort dissipate. “Did you see which way he went?”

“Why, you don’t want to go after him... do you?”

“Damn straight I want to go after him. I want to watch his body burn as I roast it alive. If there is any justice in the universe the avatar is wired directly into the brain of the developer who designed the damn thing in the first place.” Even as I said this, a villager hobbled up to me on a broken leg. He handed me what appeared to be a hollow stick.

“Take this,” he wheezed, struggling to breathe, “it spits fire. Avenge us, Avenge us all.” Then he collapsed, stiffened and eventually went still as a driftwood tree. The stick seemed oddly plain but was much heavier than would seem natural for a hollow piece of wood. Still, it would be easier than carrying around a load of Napalm. I guess this was the extra equipment which the offer spoke about.

“You ready?” I asked the Shoggoth.

“You sure you want to do this?”

“Of course, I am,” I grunted. “Didn’t you hear Mr. Plot Point here?” I pointed to the dead body next to me. “We need to avenge this place.”

“Who cares, they are only NPCs. I say we leave town before it costs us another 25 years. Live to fight another day.”

“What if Mr. Worm Wizard finds out we’re not dead and decides to come after us?”

The Shoggoth waved his tentacles around in an angry fury. “You’re right. Let so make the piece of crap pay.”

We started off with a final flourish in recognition of the villagers. Mr. Worm Wizard’s trail was easy to follow. Occasionally, there was a red worm squiggling on the ground. The Shoggoth smashed each one we found with a mace.

“I see you found a mace.”

“It was part of my package.” He held it up for me to see. It had a heavy wooden stock. Atop it was a large silver ball. It was covered in embossed horsemen swinging swords over their heads. As well as some worm guts. “I think it might be a +2 weapon or maybe even +3. I’ll have to try to see if I can get it enchanted. If only it had spikes on it.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, you know, so it hurts more.”

At the end of the path we were on was a low rise leading to a more impressive hill. Emanating from the top was a lone black basalt-block tower. The edges seemed twisted and warped. Evil looking iron spikes dotted its surface. They were clearly intended to discourage those who might take it into their heads to climb the exterior. It was the perfect neighborhood to own a house... if you were an insane wizard with a limited grasp on reality.

The Shoggoth turned to me. “Do you want to wait until nightfall or simply go straight up to the front door and knock?”

Before I even had a chance to answer, I heard a loud klaxon ringing. “All crew return to stations.” The Shoggoth and I glanced at each other. It was the captain’s voice. The simulation faded and I found myself back on the bridge. I stretched out the metal, fleshless fingers of my robot avatar. The company was too cheap to design robots with an exterior covering. Unlike the simulation, I couldn’t feel a thing. This was a good thing because the on-board temperature was about -150°C. I looked around. All the control lights were flashing. The master alarm was going off. I pressed closed the switch and turned the light off. There was fancier technology available, but not stuff designed to work in these temperatures. We were pretty old-fashioned, technology-wise. “What’s going on?” I asked the computer.

Its voice was emotionless and flat. “Nearby space vessel encountered.”

If I’d had a heart, I’m sure it would have skipped a beat. “Alien?”

“Negative. Armada Class 11375.”

“Is it in radio range.”

“Affirmative. There is an incoming message.”

I was curious to know what was going on. Occasionally we did pass other ships as they were heading home. Their holds would be filled with the raw materials the Earth so desperately needed. It was generally an occasion of great joy... you know, to talk to someone else. You didn’t get to meet new people out here often. But we weren’t scheduled to pass any other freighters at this time. “Put it through.”

“Armada 14956, this is Armada 11375. Are you receiving us?”

I couldn’t wait to hear what news they had for us. “Affirmative, Armada 11375, we copy.”

“Are your weapons still functional?”

There was a clear sound of confusion in my voice. “Why, what’s going on?”

“Repeat, are your weapons still functional?”

The Armada Class ships all carried an array of weapons. Both energy-based and physical weapons the ships could launch. Perhaps it was an aspect of humanity's aggressive nature. Personally, I think the engineers read too much science fiction. Either that or there was something out there we needed to be worried about. Although none of us had seen anything close to terrestrial life. In fact, the entire galaxy seemed to be dead. One popular theory was the galaxy had once been in a titanic war and we’d lost. This would have explained the similar blasted features we found on all the planets throughout the sector. Some doomsayers claimed the victors would come back someday to finish the job. I was beginning to become concerned it was today. “Affirmative, Armada 11375, weapons systems functional.”

“Attack us, please.”

“What?” the captain interrupted the communication. “Say again, we didn’t copy your transmission.”

“Fire on us.”

The captain’s voice sounded strained. “What’s going on over there? Who am I talking with?”

The radio signal crackled. “This is Captain Armada 11375. Please, fire on us. We’ve had a failure in the simulation systems. Everything was wiped out. Do you understand? We are all alone on board... at least those of us who are left. Some of my crew have managed to erase themselves. The in-game purchases. We’ve all acquired over a million years of extra service. Over a million years all alone on this bucket. You got to fire on us. Aim for the crew computer data network. You’re welcome to salvage our cargo.”

The captain’s voice cracked as he spoke. “Negative Armada 11375. Company rules forbid the firing of weapons at Earth ships.”

There was a long silence on the radio. Only a small crackle of static could be heard. “Armada 14956, you’re almost as old as we are. Soon it’ll happen to you. It’s a system flaw. You can stop it. You can’t fix it. You’ll be all alone out here in the dark. In the icy cold. Have some pity man, fire your fracking weapons.” The voice on the other side of the communication sounded desperate. More desperate than I hope you can imagine.

“That’s a negative Armada 11375.”

“For God’s sake man, fire on us! If you have any humanity left, you’ll fire on us.”

There was only static on the airwaves. Our captain made no reply. Then the COMM system crackled back to life. “If you don’t fire on us Armada 14956, we’ll be forced to fire on you.”

The captain sounded angry. “Is this some kind of twisted company test? I’m not going to break company rules because some bodiless voice issued me an insane request.” There was silence. A flash of energy could be seen on the sensors flying past the cockpit. “Armada 14956, fire your friggig weapons now!” The voice on the other end practically shouted at us.

“Captain?” I asked. The terror in my voice was unmistakable. This was real. It wasn’t a game. “Captain, what do we do? What the hell do we do?”