



VIRTUAL REALITY GAME

A Tale of Horror

He gave me a grin I found unbelievably disturbing. I mean it had the look of pure malevolence to it. I mean pure, 100% evil.

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I can still see it. I can't stop seeing it. The display billed it as the most completely immersive experience ever. Sadly, they were not mistaken. I first saw it in a store, on a big flat-screen TV. It wasn't particularly special. The effects weren't impressive, but they weren't exactly chintzy either. It was supposed to turn your house into a haunted mansion. Somehow ghosts didn't look real streaming out of a well-lit table of laptops.

"It looks much better if you put the headset on." I turned and found one of the store's staff behind me. You know the type, wearing a close-fitting polo shirt with the company logo on it over the breast. She smiled at me. "When I first saw it, I wasn't impressed either. It kind of has a late-80s vibe to it. Then I put on the headset and ... wow. It blew my socks off."

She gave me another smile and held out the headset. "You want to try it?" She was one of those sales girls ... well, you know the type.

I'm a hard sell and horror isn't my cup of tea either. I shook my head no.

"Look," she said sweetly, "You'll be helping me out here. My manager is watching. It's no big deal. You take a look, you don't have to be impressed. Then you can go home, and no harm done, right?"

It was a convincing argument. I was betting it really didn't look any better with the headset on. I took it from her grasp. She smiled again as I slipped the VR goggles over my head.

I couldn't have been more wrong. The effects were astounding. The creatures floating around the store were better than anything I had seen in the movies. They seemed to interact with everything in the store. No uncanny valley ... nothing. I felt like I could reach out and touch them. The oddest thing was their avoidance. They'd move out of the way just as my fingers approached.

But it wasn't the only thing. I could smell the damp air like I was in a cemetery. I could hear owls screeching and strange scratching noises on stone. That's when I realized my uncle Hank would love this. He was a real horror buff. True Forrest J. Ackerman class. A collector you might say. And because it was Halloween, Christmas was just around the corner. I bought one and drove home.



I had the strangest feeling once I got home. I had intended the set as a gift, but somehow, I just had to try them out again. I opened the box and placed the VR goggles over my head. If anything, it was even more real than it had been in the store. The creatures were horrible. I mean enough the scare the living daylights out of anyone. One of them floated right up to me. He didn't have any eyes and his head looked more like a skull than a head. His teeth seemed like carpet tacks coated with white enamel.

"Hello, my name is [Static]."

Okay, this was getting weird. His voice did sound like it was coming from the headset speakers, but from outside, as if he was actually in my house. "Hello," he repeated, tilting his head to the side, "my name is [Static]."

Before I realized it, I was replying. "Your name is what?"

“My name is [Static].”

I couldn't make out what his name was. Every time he said it, all I could hear was [Static]. All the other sounds were clear as a bell. Everything but his name. “One more time,” I asked.

“My name is [Static]. Would you like to play a game?” he blinked. It was odd. Only then did I remember, none of the other apparitions on the store flat-screen had blinked. I was astounded. This was VR technology on a totally different level.

Blood was coming out of the walls; dripping down the wallpaper. When I reached over and touched it as continued to drip down the wall ... it felt warm and ... wet. When I looked at my fingers, the tips seemed covered in genuine blood.

“Do you want to play a game,” he repeated.

I wanted to see how in-depth this reality went, so I replied: “Sure, why not.”

“This game is called torture.”

“Odd name for a game,” I replied tentatively.

“Oh, but it's very accurate.”

“How so?”

He gave me a grin I found unbelievably disturbing. I mean it had the look of pure malevolence to it. I mean pure, 100% evil. “This is where we start torturing you.” [Static] smirked.

This was enough, the designers had gone one step too far. I mean really, this was over the edge. I reached up to put off the goggles. Only they wouldn't come off. I yanked and I pulled ... but it had no effect. Then the pain started. Searing, liquid pain. I could feel the goggles melting into my head. It must have gone on for at least ten minutes. All the while with me desperately trying to remove them. Finally, the pain died down. It didn't go away, it simply dimmed. As if my nerve endings had gotten used to it or my brain had decided to dial it down.

When it was over, the creature looked at me. “There, now we can proceed without any interruptions.”

I grabbed for the box. There had to be some kind of technical support number I could call. I ransacked through reams of paper. The Getting Started instructions, warranty information, ads, and a catalog for other games by the same manufacturer. I had to be getting close, the pages turned to maggots in my hands. The creature, whatever it was, [Static], didn't want me to find it.

There, there it was. On a smallish piece of paper, slightly larger than an index card. it read:

IF YOU HAVE ANY PROBLEM WITH THIS UNIT,
PLEASE RETURN IT TO THE STORE WHERE YOU PURCHASED IT.

Damn. No number. No technical support. Then the paper started burning as I held it. In a flash, the flames spread to my fingers. The pain was intense. This is when I started screaming. I stuck my hands under the couch cushions to extinguish the flames. I let the pain subside before I pulled them out to access the damage. As soon as I pulled them out, they burst into flame again.

I ran straight for the bathroom. It was a struggle to turn on the tap while my fingers were burning. But I finally got the water to flow. It doused the flame, but then the water itself started burning. It wasn't water at all but alcohol. I threw myself backward and plunged my hands into the toilet.

I needed help. I needed help now. Rushing out to the car, I started the engine. I was praying they would be open this late at night. [Static] tried to kill me several times during the trip, blocking my view at critical moments ... and once even turning the steering wheel. I almost hit a tree, a lamppost, a retaining wall at the edge of the highway and even a dog.

Damn, I said to myself. All the lights were out in the parking lot and there were no cars.

"Are you looking for something?" [Static] asked. He laughed as if he was enjoying this way too much. "I don't think you'll find it here. The warranty explicitly states that tampering with the device voids the warranty. I think melting the goggles into your head probably counts, don't you?"

I rushed to the door.

It was boarded up as if the place had been closed for years. Some of the windows were broken, their jagged edges gaped into the hole like [Static]'s teeth. I pounded on the door to no avail. The noise started waking up the neighbors. They started yelling.

"Hey, get away from there."

"I'm gonna call the cops!"

I had to get help. Back in the car, I headed for the emergency room. A tire blew out, but I just kept driving on the rim. Flames started licking their way above the hood from the engine, but I just kept driving.

[Static] was sitting in the passenger seat. "You know you're not wearing your seatbelt ... someone could get KILLED driving around without a seatbelt."

The car swerved and I folded the back end around a telephone pole. It fell on the car, sparks flying everywhere. The driver-side airbags exploded and forced me back against the seat. I couldn't breathe. The airbags wouldn't deflate. My lungs started screaming for air. I struggled, but it was pointless. You know you can't bite auto airbags ... it's useless. Drawing on my last ounce of desperate panic-filled strength. I pushed backward and broke the seat. In the end, I managed to struggle out of the back door of the car.

Crawling on my hands and knees I got away before the car exploded. Plumes of black smoke filled the night sky. I got back to my feet and half ran, half limped the rest of the way to the emergency room. The light looked warm and inviting. Help at last.

I practically fell on the door. My heart leaped with joy as it opened to admit me. I stumbled inside. But this wasn't the hospital, it was my kitchen. This was the second time I screamed.

There was [Static]'s face. His evil laugh, the malevolent grin. I had to be rid of it.

Faltering, I headed toward the utensil drawer. Opening it, I removed a spoon. You wouldn't think it would be possible for a man to scoop out his own eyes with a spoon, but it is. I know. I did it myself. But I can still see it. I can't stop seeing it.

"Shall we play a game," [Static] suggested. "This game is called torture ... and it's just beginning."