



Frag Limit

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BooksForABuck.com

2009

Frag Limit by S. K. O'Toole

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Published by BooksForABuck.com

March 2009

ISBN: 978-1-60215-094-2

Chapter 2

I'd offered Pearl a ride to her mother's house, so she wouldn't have to stay by herself. Like a real little trooper she'd politely declined, stating she didn't want to wake her mom with the bad news. I didn't like leaving her alone, but she'd insisted she'd be fine. She gave me another bear hug along with a kiss that landed surprisingly closer to my mouth than my cheek, and sent me on my way.

I knew there was no point going home that night. All I'd do there would be a lot of tossing and turning. I'd think about how good a friend Jerry had been, how much I wanted to nail whoever zapped him, and how much like a bag of lumpy bricks my mattress had become.

Instead, I drove back downtown toward my office. I felt the need to be in the heart of the metropolis where the action was. There are plenty of cities bigger than Fort Worth, but none more alive with diversity. It's a city that never sleeps. It just dozes off sometimes after a big lunch.

Part of the variety this city offers is apparent in the architecture of downtown. Unlike the majority of big cities that level older buildings to make way for monstrosities of steel and glass, Fort Worth successfully incorporated the old with the new. The skyline is a magical mix of skyscrapers blended with refurbished classics of early twentieth century design.

The Sinclair Building where I office is a prime example. Built in 1929 as subsidiary to the Dallas-based oil company, the old doll was an Art-Nouveau jewel. Just before I moved in, its owners gave it a face-lift, restoring the original fixtures rather than replacing them. It's a perfect location for a guy in my business. The building conjures all the ghosts of the black and white gangster movies for clients that come to see me--clients who half expect an open bottle of scotch to be sitting on my desk. I seldom disappoint them.

I had put away the scotch and was just making my third pot of java when the mail slot on the outer office door slapped shut.

Since only disgruntled postal workers make deliveries at 4am, I dowsed the lights, grabbed my 44 and stepped warily into the anteroom. Easing back the hammer on my Smith & Wesson, I reached for the doorknob. Standing against the wall, I raised my gun and yanked the door open with my free hand.

The dimly lit hall in my line of fire looked empty.

I swung around and down, crouching in the doorway to make as small a target of myself as possible.

That side was vacant as well. Whoever had been there hadn't stuck around.

As I holstered my piece and started back to my desk, my foot sent something scooting across the floor. I couldn't help feeling waves of terror and then relief. I'd been sloppy, but whatever it was hadn't exploded.

I stepped back to the door, and turned on the lights. The package I'd booted was about the size of a magazine, wrapped in brown paper. As I picked it up, something slid around inside the box, sounding like plastic or metal hitting cardboard. Computer disks, maybe?

Turning the parcel over, a chill ran up my spine on seeing the address label. It was made out to me--in handwriting that looked all too familiar.

Every now and then I've been wrong. So, taking the package to my desk, I dug around in a bottom drawer. I came up with an old birthday card Jerry had sent me. No mistake, the writing was the same.

Someone was playing a twisted game, and they wanted to play it with me. So, I went ahead and opened the package. Sure, I was taking a chance of the contents blowing up in my face. But then, no one lives forever. Besides, whoever was rewriting the rules of engagement wanted me running their program, not splattered by a bomb. At least, that's what I kept telling myself as I broke the seal.

* * * *

Inside were three CDs, a DVD, and an 8gb flash drive. The disks were all labeled *Frag Limit*, by *Real Whirled Games*. Someone wanted to be sure I could install the game regardless of my hardware configuration.

There were no instructions or manual, but as I tilted the open parcel a sticky note came loose from inside and fell on the desk.

The writing on the Post-It was not Jerry's.

To someone less familiar with games, the words on that little yellow piece of gooey paper would have looked like nonsense. Some other dick might have wasted hours, even days, running that gibberish down as some sort of clue. I knew right away they were cheat codes. So would anybody who played as many computer games as I had.

Some PI's will tell you they don't play games. They might say that they can't afford the distraction or the waste of time. Those detectives will say, "This is a serious business that destroys without mercy any who don't treat it as serious business." I say it's all a game. Life's a crazy mixed-up Monopoly board, and everybody's on it. Everyone's either playing or being played. Sometimes you get to be the racecar. More often, you end up being the shoe. That's me, Denton Dodge. For a lot longer than I care to remember, I've been playing as what some joker long ago labeled a "gumshoe".

Tonight, someone wanted the shoe in his or her game. They'd not only thrown down the gauntlet challenging me to play, they'd given me an unusual advantage, the codes. But, were they giving me an edge or ticking bomb?

Cheat codes are part of a programmer's backdoor into the game's physics. They allow reconstruction of the way the virtual environment looks and reacts--including its effects on the inhabitants and the visiting players. Using the cheat codes in the game I could either be a god or a greasy spot on the bottom of something's foot.

I installed the program. While the files were copying to my hard drive I looked at the labels on the disks. Real Whirled Games Software Corporation was a local company that had made a permanent, global impact on the computer game industry. Their game "engine", as it was called, had revolutionized perceptions of play, turning part-time arcade enthusiasts into full-time VR addicts. Any company that wanted a piece of the pc gaming pie had to pay for the rights to use Real Whirled's engine. On Jerry's recommendation, I'd purchased a couple of their games--*Vampire Slayer* and *Satan's Temple*. They were great fun.

I usually played a game so I could vent some aggression or allow my mind a respite from a problem that eluded a ready solution. But this particular game, *Frag Limit*, was a problem in itself. Any first-person-shooter worthy of the tag *Virtual Reality* is supposed to get the old heart rate up, not stop it. Heart stoppage is considered counterproductive in a market that depends on word of mouth. But, was someone using *Frag Limit* as a cover-up for murder, or was the game really responsible? If not, maybe the big cheeses at *Real Whirled Games* were entitled to get a bit hysterical when their game started building a body count outside cyberspace.

But now, it seemed that someone was pointing the finger back at Real Whirled, implicating them in the deaths of the three men. The gesture had all the markings of a red herring and could easily have been planted by a minion of some rival software company.

There were two problems with that line of thought. A) How would someone like that know about me? And B) All the dead men had worked for Real Whirled, including Jerry whose handwriting appeared on the parcel.

Ultimately, I decided the only way to get any mileage from this clue was to play the game.

The speaker on my PC chimed its signal that the files had finished copying. I took the CD out of the drive and booted the game's readme file.

The readme indicated support for solo, team, and death match play. In other words the consumer had the option of tackling the game alone, in concert with other players, or opposing a human opponent via network.

With peripherals like Jerry had used, the game would totally immerse the player in the computer generated war-torn world of *Frag Limit*. Without the high dollar VR equipment, I'd have a sense that I was there, but suffering from a sort of tunnel vision--like looking through a cheerleader's megaphone with the real world at the wide end.

The screen simulated vision through a high tech helmet with control options around the border, including a health indicator at the top.

I didn't have the bucks for the kind of gear Jerry used. Under the circumstances, I'm not so sure I would have used them if I had. The virtual landscapes were plenty real without immersion. Teams of geeks had spent big chunks of their lives designing this. There were supposed to be seven varying terrains: plains, deserts, arctic regions, mountains, jungles, urban areas, and finally *alien* territory.

Of course, I could have gone to Big Mick's Media Mega-Store. Mick stayed opened 24 hours, and could rent me the VR gear, but something in the pit of my stomach twisted up in a big fat *no!* What if VR was part of the killing equation? No sense kidding myself into thinking I was even half the computer wiz Jerry was. If he hadn't been able to handle it, what would save me? Besides, Mick also rented porno, so there was no telling where those gloves and helmet had been.

Play started with an enemy charge against a concrete bunker defended by the gamer. According to the text, once the charge was repelled the player could advance, counterattacking the enemy.

Naturally, the adversaries progressively become stronger and less human the closer you get to the leader of the invasion. He would probably be some nasty looking alien or demon dude. I couldn't wait to rip him a new one in memory of Jerry.

The opening level was made up of plains. Even though there were no trees, the battlefield provided plenty of cover for the invading force. There were rolling hills strewn with

barbed wire barricades just below the bunker. When the enemy started coming, it was apparent they were emerging from a system of trenches dug into the scorched earth.

They advanced slowly at first, allowing me to pick them off at a distance with the M-16 provided. That wasn't easy though, since they wore brown and green, blending in with background. Still, I've always done pretty well on the firing range, and this was similar. Only these targets moved, fired back, and screamed bloody murder when I hit them. This stage gave me a chance to adjust my sights, and familiarize myself with the controls.

I intentionally took a number of hits to see what my virtual body and its armor could stand. As far as I knew, there might be the possibility of something happening to my physical body. So, I stood back from my computer while testing this. While the horde was at a distance my computer body held up pretty good. I counted three hits, indicated by my representation yelling "Jeez-Louise," each time a bullet struck. The health indicator started as a full green bar and went to a quarter of its size as I sustained damage. When I took a fourth slug, the bar went back to full, but turned yellow. This continued through yellow to red, and then into black. I noted that the closer range hits took a greater toll. I also noted that these bad guys were double ugly.

These boys made the cast of most zombie movies look like fashion models. Depicted as fallen warriors reanimated by the evil force invading Earth, most were bloody masses of shredded flesh dressed in GI uniforms. They were all huge. The one that ended the game by goring my character with a bayonet was little more than a skeleton with big bloodshot eyes.

Dying seemed to create no adverse affects on my computer or myself. So, was I wrong about the game as Jerry's cause of death?

I rebooted. This time I would play in earnest.

As before the zombies advanced slowly at first. Most of the challenge in this stage involved wasting the ghouls at the greater distances. I even had time to leave the bunker and gather ammo clips from the ones I'd killed close by. Then they brought it all on. Twenty to thirty at a time rose from the trenches. Zombie soldiers advanced in tremendous waves only seconds apart. Some broke rank in a full running charge at my position.

I'm a dead shot, even from the hip. But as fast as I am, there were just too many of them. My playing piece took so many hits in succession that his sound bites were a continuous stream of expletives.

"Sons of bitches!" "Where's that damn Medic?" and "This shit sucks!" to name a few.

I remembered that Jerry's helmet had a game supported microphone. Speech was one of the interactive features of the game. It might have been worth risking death to be able to

spout a few expletives of my own, because the health bar quickly went from green to black.

Still, my computer and I were intact. Better that I cursed without the game responding.

I started the game several more times with the same dismal results. I was getting in some good target practice, but not much progress into the game or the answers to what killed my friend. The only thing I'd accomplished was elevating my heart rate. I'd forgotten how these VR simulations fooled the senses. I could only imagine how much more intense the experience would be totally immersed.

Before I knew it, the sun came through my blinds throwing a glare on the screen. I had spent a solid three hours playing and hadn't cracked the first level.

Sorely tempted to punch in the cheat codes to clear the first map, something Jerry once told me about game play echoed in my brain. "All games are designed with a critical path to lead the player to the designed conclusion. You can beat them if you find it."

Maybe this game didn't have a critical path. Maybe that's what you were supposed to think. Maybe that's what happened to Jerry. Frustrated at the impossibility of defending the bunker, he'd cheated. That would mean the codes were the killer, not the game. *So, how do I beat level one?*

I restarted the game and just as a dozen times before quickly died a gruesome death. But, this time the program made a fatal error. It might have been an anomaly or I might have been punchy from lack of sleep. Whatever it was, it ticked me off. The ghoul on the other end of the bayonet laughed and hissed something that sounded like, "Girlie man."

Now I was pissed. Rebooting, I didn't wait in the bunker. I jumped out, firing as quickly as I could aim at the distant troops. This time *I* advanced.

By the time the charge started, I was on top of the first trench. Instead of thirty zombies, there were only five. At point blank range I couldn't miss.

"Payback, Assholes!" I laughed when they screamed and fell into piles of corrupting meat as the cyber-lead from my weapon ripped through them.

I only took minimal damage from the last trooper. He got off a shot before I could finish him. But, I had jumped into the trench. The bullet, aimed at where I had been instead of where I jumped, merely grazed the cyber-armor.

He wasn't as lucky. I used the lunge control, and ran the SOB through with my bayonet. He shuddered, shook, and wailed as he went down.

I started picking up their clips before heading to the next trench, and hit the jackpot. Underneath one of those butcher's specials was what the game text referred to as a chain-

gun. It used the same ammo as the M-16, just sprayed it about ten times faster with triple the stopping power.

My cyber-self rejoiced with a hearty, "SHOWTIME, SUCKERS!"

I agreed with my own, "*Shake & Bake!* We's havin' po'k chops fo' lunch!"

I had found the path. Only on this game level it wasn't so much a critical *path* as a critical *time line*. Defending the bunker from cover was a mathematical impossibility. The program's internal clock evidently re-spawned the trench troops. Defense of the bunker mandated the player take the offensive.

I made my way across the battlefield. Wherever the shock troops emerged I mowed them down from a distance, then quickly attacked the trench they came from to wipe out any remaining spawn. If I let up and took too much time to get to the kill, any live ghoul left in the foxhole would reanimate his trench buddies. Otherwise the field behind me, back up to the bunker, was quiet--dead quiet. I used the run control key to cut my time between foxholes.

Halfway across the plain I struck pay dirt again. In two successive lairs I found two additional weapons for my arsenal--a flame-thrower, and a bazooka with two rounds. My cyber-self was getting pretty weighed down, but didn't seem to notice. Instead, on finding each new weapon he exclaimed his pleasure. Shouting, "Smoking," and "VA VA VA VOOM," respectively.

I have to admit it. I had a real blast roasting the next three trenches full of uglies with that flame gun.

I turned to view the plains. The bunker was a gray speck in the distance. I couldn't see any more of those hellhounds, just a redbrick building on the opposite horizon. It had to be the level exit point. The level's enemy captain would be waiting for me there.

I got within what looked like two hundred yards, and the bastard began firing a chain-gun of his own. I tried to control/crouch to safety, but the damage came too quick, too heavy. My cyber-self went face down as the black bar went to empty.

Time to cheat. With more time and another can of coffee, I knew I could take the bozo in the redbrick. But, I was exhausted and more than a little steamed at myself for not saving the game once I'd cleared the field. I replayed the level back up to clearing the field. Then I reached for the Post-It with the cheats.

There were four in all: "GOODGAWD" for invulnerability or god mode, "BULKUP" for double armor and all the weapons fully charged, "CLIPCLOP" for walking through solid objects, and "MOPUP" for clearing the entire level.

At a safe distance from the redbrick I keyed in the first cheat. I used a yardstick from the other side of the desk to punch the keys. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I don't know very many breathing detectives that aren't.

"G...O...O...D...G...A...W...D"

Nothing. Well almost nothing. My cyber-self admonished me.

"Cheater!"

I stood back from the console for a minute, but no other surprises occurred.

"M...O...P...U...P"

A white flash bleached the color from the field. The redbrick house became a smoldering ruin. Then it happened.

"You cheatin' Son of a bitch!" My cyber-self turned to show his simulated face to the screen. There was no other view possible from my vantage point across the room. The head of the game piece that had been my extension into the virtual world filled the monitor. His eyes, aglow with godly power, crackled like twin dynamos. His whole face lit up like a halogen lamp until the screen itself shone like a lighthouse torch. Then my screen went blank.

It wasn't just my screen either. I hit the computer reset.

Nothing.

I turned the monitor off, and back on.

Zilch.

I unplugged the PC and then plugged it back in.

Nada.

If this was the same scenario as Jerry had played, why hadn't his PC been fried like mine? What was different?

Suddenly, I realized what I'd just seen. I had a good idea of happened to Jerry. With a little luck, and a lot of homework I could nail the bastard that had killed him.

It was almost 10am. I rang Dunnigan's cell phone.

"Hey, Cuz. Want to be a hero for a change?"

I waited till he finished cussing, and then made my request. "Stop fooling with the PC. I need you to run a full diagnostics on those fancy peripherals...."

End of Chapter. If you enjoyed this preview, buy the book now, [here](#).