

FAST, NIGHTLIKE

00. The App

*The truth is much more terrible and
awe-inspiring than anything any of us
could ever have depicted with our pens.*

Otar Chiladze

The writer received her assignments live on air, in front of the whole universe, sometimes from half-forgotten dreams and sometimes from the app. With its rules and statutes, the app was more like an ancient, secret sect; a forge where storylines and unusual collocations were hammered out week by week, and words were sent out by the ton all over the world. The writer was also known as a content creator, or simply a “creative”, rated 9 out of 10 by her readers, and perhaps only she and a tiny minority of her readers could sense the depth of the divine darkness hidden behind the advertising slogans and tabloid stories.

The app was managed by a program, which was managed by no one other than itself. By analysing data from tens of thousands of users and with the aid of complex integrals based on archetypal events, the program developed a basic understanding of people’s destinies and needs, an understanding that was perhaps more accurate than anyone realised. It was the program that generated the assignments, basing them on any of the hot topics that fell within its remit, such as the latest wars and humanitarian crises, the rising statistics of the dead—their cold corpses as blue as the sky—and the lonely, the vicissitudes of fashion, the latest news from life’s gutter, and the most recent

prediction as to how much longer tower blocks built in the Soviet Union would remain standing. The program generated the assignments in code and sent them out to the offices, where the so-called “developers” translated them into human language and forwarded them to the writers who were registered with the app. It was a cold, inhuman process, fully programmed, and yet there was something magical and prophetic in the contrails left by the airplanes passing overhead and the memories of cities never visited. After decoding the programmed assignments into human language, the developers sent them to the writers, and after receiving their assignments, the writers began to write.

The readers, meanwhile, could be divided into myriad categories: office workers dreaming of a life as carefree as Peter Pan’s; potential suicides desperately clutching at final straws; girls no longer girlish, consumed by thoughts of radicalising their lives; melancholy drug addicts; wild teenagers staring out to sea beneath the blazing sun, completely under the control of the hormones coursing through their brains and yet still convinced they were free to choose whether to somersault or run until they fell down; and so on and so forth.

The number of users/readers grew by the day—after all, as writers have always known, everyone needs their daily dose of narrative, their share of the fairy tale or reality. For the writers, the whole process was like making up a horoscope, although for some this took the form of a haiku, for others a single sentence, and for others a novel or specific instructions on how to make it through the day.

The writer was already fully grown, one might even say old, like a dim streetlamp at the break of dawn in a two-thousand-year-old city, giving off a blood-tinged,

yellowish glow. At her age she was already well aware that deep, loving human relations, and indeed reality as a whole, are merely collective hallucinations, and that everyone, loved ones and strangers alike, lives their life according to a script set down in childhood. She knew that words, like life itself, are finite, that there are only so many ways one can arrange words and only so many letters in the alphabet, and she sometimes wondered when the day would come when all combinations of words had been used up. Who would write the last news article? The last novel? The novel after which writing would become pointless because everything had already been written? And what would come next after we ran out of words? When there were no more emojis, no more Gifs, no more Chinese characters, no more feelings and no more combinations of written or unwritten letters? She wondered if there was a computer that could tell her when we would run out of words. Who would be the final author? Would we sing his praises or drag him to the ground? Perhaps he would be lynched by the mob, sentenced for the crime of taking our final reserves of words from us.

The assignments—both those from the app and those from dreams—were handed out each Monday and were due back the following Monday: the geometry of pain, the disappearance of trafficking victims, how to get your life back on track when it veers off course, calls for a revolution already doomed to failure, the latest news from the black markets of technology and people, atheism and its associated problems... Articles on all of these topics, as well as many others, were written on the app in accordance with the content of the program and sent out to the readers in the form of encrypted signals. There were no censors and no editors, and none of the texts were sent to anyone specific. Everything was distributed randomly, meaning the writer had no idea who read her texts and who didn't. Because of this, she tended to write

intuitively rather than follow a predetermined scenario. She began by simply jotting down words, and before long the words themselves led her to her subject. Which was just as it should be.

Those who had the app never had to wait for the muse to strike. Equipped only with their own machinelike unconscious, they created new stories bang on schedule, even as the world changed at the speed of light. After all, as the writer also knew, writers are merely machines—opinion generators, cybernetic spectres, biological tools for producing metaphors.

In the twilight, the reflection of a notification glimmered in her eyes. The text looked more like it had been generated by the program than written by a human developer.

“We require a novel mytho-ritual terminological system that is accurate and functions like a magic spell → to be employed as a generator and recombiner of new archetypal stories that will be used to indoctrinate experimental subjects → to be realised in a software format based on the working 58 of astrology and the Sansara Karma Casino.

We also require a guinea pig (one with an entirely dysfunctional mind is also acceptable) who is willing to renounce all layers of the self and be transformed into a crystal-clear portal through which it will become possible to infiltrate our pre-ontological background in the manner of guerrilla soldiers and lay different mines to be used for space manufacturing, at the risk of merging the mines into this background. If you are willing, press the “No” button (this is also part of the strategy).”

“Beginner developers are just like beginner writers,” thought the writer. “They prefer epigrams to functionality.”

For a moment or two her fingers hovered over the keyboard of her laptop, but then she began thinking about the people—somewhere far away, in Jakarta or Silicon Valley—whose job it was to convert the tasks that the algorithm came up with into a form that could be understood by humans. She enjoyed completing the tasks: within five minutes of receiving a notification, her fingers were scurrying over her keyboard, tapping out the clattering melody that was familiar to all writers, that strange rhythm at which new storylines are spawned and characters are killed off or spared.

“Only write what you know,” she said to herself. “What you’ve experienced. Remember why you became a writer.”

Tbilisi was sunk deep in the purple night, in a state of constant readiness for the impending war.

01. Suspicious Events

There is a realm of the human soul
for which no one has ever volunteered.

Men are sent there only by force

Lev Shestov

From the rooftop of the video game centre Sansara, the sunset illuminates the horizon, looking like a Coca-Cola advertisement from prehistoric times. One puff of a cigarette leaves the taste of reality in your mouth. A drone makes another round in the sky. Far away, between the glimmering skyscrapers, a dirigible criss-crosses the sky, announcing that “There are just 23 days left till the apocalypse”. As each day draws to a close, it shrieks like a ship’s siren, lamenting the night’s lack of night. Hopefully today some savage little kids will finally come and shoot it down with their catapults.

So this is derealisation: as if objects and phenomena have upped and disappeared, gone somewhere far away, towards the stars, where our dead fathers live, towards the event horizon, beyond which no one knows what happens, where truth begins to resemble an animated dream and the only thing stopping the solitary silver thread that connects you to reality from snapping is what a certain author called belief in the certainty of your own existence. For if we compare thought to a piano keyboard, as another author said, divided into many sets of notes.

Vomiting out text and quotations from literature is a completely normal symptom seen in those returning from out there. The narrative designers are trained in writing code, forging destinies, and the study of literature. If you want to organise

reality, you have to know how to organise a narrative. If you want to build connections with dead people and understand what they are telling you, you have to know literature. It's completely normal for the virgin snow to blanket the river in indigo from the bridge—after all, consciousness once again flows into the body that it appeared to have left only half an hour before.

“Where is mother?” The control question. Code.

“She might be washing the dishes, or preparing for war,” I hear my voice reply from somewhere outside myself.

The taste of murder, like rust; a dealer in hallucinatory visions; a system as despairing as migratory birds; digital blood on an eye monitor; a blueprint of the minotaur's labyrinth; insurmountable orgasmic highs; the corporate memory of a horizontal line; a museum of deep psychological crises; the weight of a weapon slung across your shoulder in the Garden of Eden—not to be associated with an avatar! Champagne and Dendy games with subscribers to the nostalgia group.

“What is the wind called?”

“There will be a moderate westerly wind, with precipitation expected only in some areas,” I hear my voice hissing from afar as the neurochip burns in my skull.

Derealisation and depersonalisation are the two most overwhelming symptoms you experience when you come back from out there: dysfunctional thoughts after every session, thinking you're going to lose your mind after every session. So you undergo crude psychological tests, cigarette in hand, the cigarette smoke resembling the truth, like when you wake up in the middle of the night and your trembling fingers feel like someone else's.

It's difficult to convey in words how the plot and characters of video games are stolen, especially if they've been infected with consciousness. Narrative and the perception of time have no bearing on the progress of the session for it is then that consciousness and all five senses are converted into intertext, computer code, transformed into an avatar whose purpose is to fully diagnose the character and, when it is found that the character has been mismanaged, liquidate it. Liquidation means taking away the purpose of the game, and today it is Louis who is in charge, diagnosing me and dishing out the treatment. Only after he's finished can the character be kidnapped.

"What happened tomorrow?"

"All the butterflies are blind", I say, repeating the words of a certain author.

After every session we go up on the roof: the psychometrics, the narrative designers and the liquidators, all of us together. A herd of feral little savages has clambered over from the adjacent tower block, which is so close to ours we could almost lean out and kiss it. They are flying drones and trying to hit them from below with catapults; they ask us what loot we've managed to bring back with us this time. It's entirely possible that one of the characters could end up teaching a class at their school, if we manage to get it reprogrammed, and if no one will buy it.

I have the feeling that something strange happened during the session, something exceeding my comprehension, something resembling the scent of early autumn or a burnt-out hologram the day after the last day of summer, or the first dose of ephedrine running through the veins, or falling pregnant during the apocalypse. Louis

sits at the edge of the roof like a Lego jaguar; he looks like Belgium, or like aerials in the shade of distant palms.

“Which one is yours?” I hear a weak child’s voice coming from the direction of the sunset, accompanied by a thunderclap. Maybe that’s what the God of the Bible sounded like. The sky is darkening—there will probably be some atmospheric precipitation soon.

“Mine’s the fifth disciple,” I reply automatically without taking my eyes off Louis, anticipating the impending danger. I wonder if I should try decipher his thoughts from a distance, as code.

Disciples—that’s what we call them here, the characters stolen from online video games, both live and computer-generated, although the latter have also been deemed alive by both the Holy Fathers of the Empire and the opposition. That’s probably the only thing that unites those two groups: the belief that video game characters have souls.

“Are they going to buy the stuff we got today?” I ask Louis, feeling, alongside the danger, a great sense of pride in the fact that we work together. His nickname, “Louis”, is known to gamers all over the world.

“A kidnapped moon wouldn’t be much use as a lamp in a virtual interrogation room, but we might still be able to use that boy from the open field for something...”

A moon and a little boy on a green field—our booty for the day. Usually, we either sell the characters we steal from abandoned online games to the dreamers or put them to work for the residents of Tower Block City. It depends on what we manage to bring with us from over there. Here, in Tower Block City, we are in no-man’s land,

free from all demands of the law and all pangs of conscience. About the only thing that limits us is the date of the apocalypse, and just like everyone else, that is something we don't have the exact answer to, although to be honest no one takes it all that seriously, not least those already living through it.

The dreamers use the characters for training, to reaffirm to their initiates the illusory nature of reality.

A presentiment that something bad is about to happen is like a dream where a loved one dies and you wake up in tears, bawling like a baby, and for a few moments you don't know who and where you are. Presentiment—we learned on the roof of our five-storey block—can be a warrior's best friend, as long as he can separate it from personal worries and cares. I know this is a feeling I mustn't keep hidden.

“Louis, do you feel like something happened back there too? Or is it just some code I've brought back with me?”

When code stays with you, it's like having an itch but not knowing where to scratch.

“Yeah, that boy had unusual code. I'm feeling a bit melancholy myself.”

Melancholia after a video game is a sure sign that the character was keeping something secret.

“I understand that it takes at least a day to stabilise, but I'll never be able to rest until we interrogate them... both the moon and the boy. What was he doing there, in that field all alone? It's crazy the way the game draws the characters in. I mean, you

saw him, right? As if he was waiting for something, although obviously not another character...”

“He hasn’t got a tracker. We already tested him back there... You tested him yourself... I don’t think he’s a Trojan horse either, although he might be infected. What did the rest of you see?” Louis asks the others, as if he’s only just discovered our tribe.

Denny is a thirty-year-old psychometric, a redhead and a psycholinguist by profession. He blew our minds when he told us about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. That’s why he always tries to speak pure Georgian—so that he can use his mental apparatus to explain the absurdity of the world through language. His job is to choose the game and monitor us while we’re out there, doing all the weights and measurements. The sunset takes on an unusual hue in his red hair.

Roy005 is the group’s newest member. He’s a tall, skinny teenager from the depths of Tower Block City—he took refuge with us after the hackers from the City of Light turned all our parents into advertisements for shampoo and hand cream. The games mean everything to him. When he’s creating simulations in which we transport characters out of games and the wind ruffles his long hair like the flag of an unknown land, he feels he has a purpose in life.

Nina, with her feline grey eyes, is responsible for carrying out EMDR assessments on us when we come back. Hers is the first voice we hear when we are “reborn”, and for me she’s like a mother figure.

Louis, who looks like a Lego jaguar with a cuboid face, appears as if he’s swallowed a TV and the TV is broadcasting loving care. He’s a legendary diver, a pioneer of pirated narrative designs. It was Louis who founded our video club, giving

us all a new purpose in life and the desire to fight. They may not know our real names, but they whisper our nicknames in the farthest-flung cities of the Empire, the programmers and the players, the dreamers by their lake, and maybe even among the ranks of the opposition.

“The moon adorned in beams of pearls seems like a queen divine, but that boy is obviously hiding something,” I say, continuing to vomit up words and confirming my diagnosis of acute literary inflection.

“The moon is pure. The boy is called Rene, he’s the main character of the game you were in. He’s got quite an unusual aura—there’s a pretty big chance he’s infected,” mumbles Denny.

The thunder is drawing nearer, and with it I can sense the danger increasing. I slip a couple of benzos under my tongue and wait for the wave of calm to flood over me.

“Louis, let me interrogate him. Please.”

“Today? No way! You haven’t even completed stabilisation yet. And anyway, you heard what Denny said. He could be infected.”

“Louis, please. I’ve got a really bad feeling about this.”

“No. We can’t go against protocol. Take today to rest, and we’ll get started tomorrow. I can see you’re a bit out of sorts, I am too, and I agree with you, he’s got really unusual code, but personally I don’t think there’s anything to be alarmed about. Take my word for it, you’ll feel a whole lot better if you rest today.”

There's no point in arguing, and I am actually very tired—it takes at least one night to stabilise. I can feel my knees buckle as the benzos kick in and the atmospheric precipitation comes pouring down from the heavens, the deluge washing clean both the rooftop and the memory on the blue horizons of the game. The colour of the sky after the rain is #0008b, according to the ancient CSS textbook they used in school to teach us the aesthetics of the worldwide web, and sleep takes hold of my body like a drug.

translated by Philip Price