

David Ethan Kennerly
Los Angeles, California
kennerly (at) finegamedesign (dot) com

about 5,000 words

Eternal Hunger

by Ethan Kennerly

At the airport taxi line, Mahmud leapt into a red Ute cab. The driver, a West African immigrant, was taken by surprise.

Mahmud said, "111 East South Temple. Fast!"

"Alright, alright." He was perturbed.

Mahmud explained, "My plane was late. Illuminated paid over \$600 for my ticket, and now I'm late for the interview."

The driver sounded the name out, "Illumi--"

"Illuminated Entertainment--a videogame company."

"Ah." The driver had never played a videogame in his life.

Once downtown, white spires pierced the pale blue sky.
"That's the temple," the driver said. "You want to know the secret to getting around Salt Lake City?"

"Sure."

"All streets are numbered from Temple Square. So, 111 East on South Temple is a block east of the temple."

On their left, the temple reminded the cab's occupants who founded this town. A Stars and Stripes studded shield followed. Finally, a megalith dominated Temple Square, whose legend read, "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints."

On their right, a white pinewood walkway protected pedestrians from the construction on the face of Zions Bank, and the ZCMI mall.

The driver said, "There is the Mormon church, and there is the Mormon bank, and there is the Mormon mall. Welcome to Mormonville."

Mahmud said, "The church owns the bank and the mall?"

"The church probably owns all of downtown," the driver laughed, "and here is your company."

Mahmud rushed from the blistering street into the cool lobby. There was nothing Mormon about this building. It was strictly business. He stopped at the security guard's counter, and asked, "Illuminated Entertainment?"

"Twenty-third floor. But you'll have to wait. The only elevator going that high is..."

The elevator door was jammed open. Delivery men had dollies full of boxes labeled Sony.

"I can't wait; I'm late."

The security guard shrugged his starched white shoulders.

Behind the sweaty delivery men, there was a back door. Instinctively, Mahmud dashed to it, thinking, stairs.

Twenty-two flights of stairs later, the black stencil on the white door before him read: 23.

Mahmud held onto the railing and heaved. His heart pounded and his head was weak. Mahmud, a pudgy, 25-year old Iraqi-American videogamer, was in no condition to dash up stairs at 4000 feet of elevation. Finally, he wheezed and walked through the door.

The doors on this floor were electronically locked, so he rang. A receptionist let him in. The first thing to greet him was a huge eye inside a pyramid. The entire wall across from Mahmud was covered by the logo: An inquisitive onyx eye that looked as if it hadn't slept in millennia. Underneath the eye, in a desecrated Courier font, was the company title:

#

Illuminated Entertainment, Inc.

#

Still catching his breath, Mahmud was led into the conference room. Another onyx eye covered the wall between the windows that overlooked downtown Salt Lake City and the jagged peaks of the surrounding Wasatch Mountains.

On the other wall was a huge flat screen television, mounted by a large webcam. Its power off, the onyx lens of the cam gazed out the windows.

For the next half an hour, Mahmud stared at the Eternal Hunger poster in the conference room. In the poster, a man in a crisp white suit radiated an electric blue aura of holiness. The black paramilitary belt and black submachine gun in his hand radiated violence. Dominionist garbage, thought Mahmud.

After half an hour, the door opened. Pale white feet in black leather sandals walked in. A man wearing shorts with long black hair that flowed down his red Tommy Hilfiger shirt said, "Hi, Mammad. Did I get that right?"

"Mah-mud".

The man sat down across from Mahmud and continued, "Sorry I was late. We're flashing new devkits for a milestone meeting with Rich on Monday..."

Mahmud didn't register the name.

"Rich Carver... author of The Mission Driven Life? The novel series No One Left Behind? Executive Producer for Eternal

Hunger? Never mind. You don't need to know. Just remember, I'm Joseph, producer for Eternal Hunger."

Mahmud nodded.

"I had the programmers look at your code sample. Impressive."

"Thanks, I..."

"Let's get down to business. You don't have any problems working on a violent videogame, do you?"

"Well, I'd prefer it if the violence serves a purpose."

"Oh, it serves a purpose. What about a game with a religious theme?"

Mahmud swallowed hard. He had been avoiding this question. He lied, "Well, it's a free country. Church and state are separated, so why not?"

Over the TV, the LED on the webcam blinked red. The electronic eye of the webcam rotated to gaze at Mahmud. The television screen came to life, with an image of the onyx eye.

Joseph jumped up and grabbed the remote control, "Sorry. New tele-conferencing equipment." He laughed, "It shouldn't turn on by itself." He mashed the remote several times before the screen dimmed and the eye went blank again.

"Anyway. Back to business: Eternal Hunger is full of hot crisis action. As leader of a paramilitary strike force, the player reclaims America for God. Easter 2007, Eternal Hunger is

gonna rock the PlayStation 3. We're committed to reaching one million consumers."

Joseph paused to inhale, then went on, "Standard NDA: Illumi, Inc. owns your mind. So, when can you start?"

Mahmud had never had a job at a real videogame company before. Since graduating four years ago, he had written a political article, "Better Violence through Videogames," and he had hacked his own GameBoy titles. But this was legit. And it was for the PlayStation 3, a system not even on the market yet! Mahmud had nothing to lose, nothing to leave behind.

Mahmud beamed with his reply, "Tomorrow."

The next day, Friday, Mahmud was scripting missions for Eternal Hunger. The first mission assigned to him was "Payback." Mechanically, this was a sequence of delivery tasks, interspersed with combat. Thematically, the player, in the role of Jerry C. Jenkins (a local parish priest in New York, turned paramilitary expert) started the mission by stopping a robbery at a convenience store. The player ended this scene by converting or killing the robbers and the convenience store owner. Convert or kill: take your pick. Mahmud's contribution to the dialogue was a kill and retro convert combo, which he dubbed the "2 for 1 special."

Mahmud skipped lunch to polish his mission. He was new, and he was an outsider in other ways. He was the only non-White

developer at Illuminated Entertainment. The only other people with brown skin that entered the office were emptying the garbage and vacuuming the floor.

By that night, he was coding lucidly. Each function name rolled off his fingertips like a magic word.

He was just about to grok the Heathen.convert function when his cell phone vibrated and broke his spell.

"My prince," Natassia said in a mellifluous tone, "I'm at the airport. Where are you?"

"Crap," Mahmud thought. But what he said was, "On my way."

He dashed to Joseph's office. "Uh, Joseph. I need to pick my girlfriend up from the airport..."

"Fine. But the milestone is on Monday. See you tomorrow."

Mahmud stammered, "I..."

"Do you know what a milestone means, Mahmud? It means if we don't have every deliverable up to spec, Illumi doesn't get paid. You're mission is on the hit list. On Monday, you're going to deliver hot crisis action."

"Okay, I'll..."

"Awesome. Don't forget your security card tomorrow."

#

Mahmud rushed to the airport, met Natassia, and rented a car.

Natassia said, "You left me waiting! Oh, what is that smell? The whole place stinks like a fish market."

Mahmud grimaced, "It's the lake."

Natassia clutched her temples, "And the air. I can't breathe."

Mahmud frowned. The climate was harsh at first, but Natassia's trenchant complaint worried him.

He touched her temple, "Natassia. Come on."

"I can't wait to leave."

Mahmud's heart sank. "But you begged me to buy the ticket."

#

That night Mahmud didn't sleep well. In bed, Natassia's complaints didn't end. "The air is so dry and thin," she said. "It's like I'm breathing through a pillow."

As he rolled over to kiss Natassia, she rolled away, "I need space." Finally, she slept on the couch; he slept on the bed.

Saturday morning, Mahmud said, "I have to go in."

"It's Saturday, and I just got here. Leaving me already?"

"We have a milestone on Monday. I'm on the hit list, and..."

She was abrupt and cold, "Your boss needs you? Then go."

He pleaded, "Natassia."

"Go."

#

Saturday night, as lightning lit the south side of downtown, Mahmud was having a hard time with the Heathen.convert function. The code wouldn't run. It was simple enough: the only information required was an ID, which the programmer had deviously formatted as a Social Security Number. But every time he used the function, the game crashed without an error message.

On screen, the dialog message read, "Would you like to tell Microsoft about this error?"

Mahmud muttered, "I'd rather tell Mephistopheles himself."

Two hours and three Cokes later, Mahmud became more curious than professional. Befuddled by the function, he scoured the source code. But when he came to Heathen.convert function, he found the code was encrypted. No, it was otherworldly. It was written in a strange language, whose vocabulary and syntax were either ancient or alien.

This only made Mahmud even more curious. As a cola-inspired joke, he entered his own Social Security Number for the parameter of the convert function:

#

```
Heathen.convert( 777-93-6911 );
```

#

Still the game crashed.

Once again, Mahmud walked to the soda fountain in the break room. Something caught his eye on the way back. Joseph had left his monitor on. A screen showed something dark green moving around on it.

Mahmud blinked and looked at his Coke, suspiciously. Looking back at the screen, he began to make sense out of the pixelated mess. A dark green tendril was wavering. Transfixed, Mahmud gazed on. A brown human leg flailed into view.

"Wow." Mahmud said to himself. He hadn't seen this cinematic before. "I knew the PS3 supported pro-pixel leatherization diffusion, but I've never seen how cool it actually looks."

The human leg was attached to a body with a bit of belly. The body was brown-skinned, and the face had a goatee. Mahmud dropped his wax paper cup. Sugary brown bubbles of Coke suffused into the gray carpet. Mahmud's eyes widened. The face on screen was his. An avatar of his body was being drawn into a black, scaly mass, with green highlights. The face of Mahmud's avatar on screen was screaming. With the speakers off, no sound was heard. The tendril thrust the avatar of Mahmud into a dark, jagged, and fanged mouth. The eyes of the avatar became glassy, as did Mahmud's own eyes.

A debug log at the bottom of the screen spilt out the program's report, "Heathen.convert ... successful."

#

Mahmud was shaken all weekend. He couldn't sleep a wink that night or the next. As he lay in bed, a black tendril encircled his heart. The palpable sensation of the cold, wet tendril hardened his heart and pinned his mind. No mere videogame could have gripped his heart. No program was capable of touching his soul. Mahmud was unable to sleep, for every time his eyes closed, the large onyx eye of that monster opened and then its mouth did, too, ready to feed on Mahmud's avatar, and on Mahmud's soul.

Minutes before dawn, Mahmud finally drifted to sleep, only to be violently awakened by the montage of a million gamers nationwide having their own nights' robbed from them, having their own souls converted.

Of course, Natassia noticed. Sunday morning, she was holding her Sony digital video camera, filming him, interviewing him. From behind the lens, she asked, "Did you sleep?"

"No," Mahmud was flat.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

Mahmud thought, "And share with you my nightmare? I'd rather see you eaten by the flies at the lake than suffer that." But he said, "You needed your space. And no reason both of us should lose sleep over what's eating me."

Natassia lowered the camera. "Mahmud," she said, "I can't see what you don't show me."

Mahmud struggled to find the words, "Natassia, what if I told you that a monster almost ate my ... spirit on Saturday night. And that I think it's going to feast on a million more when Eternal Hunger is published next Easter."

"I'd say you've sold your soul, or lost your mind. Or both."

"I think", Mahmud said, stone cold sober, "I've sold my mind and lost my soul."

"My prince," Natassia melted and touched his cheek, drawing his eyes to hers, "Never. Whatever it is that's eating you, you'll figure away to turn it around." With that, she kissed him.

#

First thing Monday morning, Joseph called Mahmud into his office. A listless Mahmud stepped in. Joseph nodded to the webcam in the corner whose black orb dimly reflected both of them.

"Mahmud," he said, "If I catch you looking at my screen again, I'll have to ask you not to come in. Got it?"

"But I was working. I already signed the NDA."

"Never mind the fucking NDA. What goes on at Illumi is secret. Got it?"

Mahmud nodded. His face was pale and blank.

Joseph said, "Jeezus, what'd you drink this weekend? Rich Carver is reviewing missions today at 11. So slam some coffee."

Mahmud walked to the door, taking his leave, feeling low.

As he left, Joseph finished him off, "And don't spill any."

The hairs on Mahmud's neck stood on end and his armpits suddenly felt hot. Through gritted teeth he replied, "I won't spill a drop."

Mahmud was not a coffee drinker; Coke sure, but coffee never. As soon as the hot, Mocha Java-flavored caffeine seeped into his belly, his eyes lit with fury. A plan had hatched, a plan to make Hunger eat itself.

Click. The security door opened. Mahmud stepped out to the elevator lobby and phoned Natassia.

"Lunch today?"

Natassia was cold, "That's what you said..."

"Bring your camera."

Natassia warmed, "Oh?"

"We need some footage--"

Click. The security door opened. Joseph stepped out, in a hurry.

Mahmud's eyes lit, and he began improvising into the phone, "What was that number, Sweetie? Hold on, I don't have my pen."

Joseph stared at him.

"Um," Mahmud said to Joseph meekly, "I forgot my card, can you ...?"

Impatiently, Joseph swiped his card. Beep. The red LED blinked green.

Joseph went to the elevator mashed the down button, repeatedly. "Come on," he said to the elevator, "Rich is already downstairs."

As Mahmud entered the suite, and the door closed, he said into the phone, "Now what was that number?"

Natassia was confused, and therefore furious, "What? Mahmud, who are you talking to?"

Mahmud whispered, "Can't talk now. See you at lunch. Bring the camera. This'll be your biggest shoot, yet."

After glancing around, Mahmud slipped into Joseph's office. The computer hadn't been idle long enough for the screensaver to come on.

Mahmud quickly typed. First, he disabled the anti-spyware software, which was installed on every Illuminated computer. Then he configured a remote assistance program, to give backdoor access to Joseph's computer. Finally, he granted permission to access the Eternal Hunger source code on the network.

Mahmud said, "Next Easter, consumers are going to get one helluva Easter Egg."

Beep. The security door opened.

Mahmud scrambled out of the office and back to his seat.

#

"Joseph," a deep, confident voice boomed, "Eternal Hunger is much more than a game. It's a religious experience." Beside Joseph, was Rich Carver. Rich was in his fifties, sporting a high forehead, and a peppered goatee. His cornflower blue tie lay over an impressive gut that was on the verge of busting out of an immaculate white, starched shirt.

As he walked into the studio, Rich Carver continued his sermon, "Consumers are hungry for a religion. War, terrorism, the economy: As the world gets worse, consumers crave something otherworldly. Maybe not church. But, as the world plunges into crisis, consumers develop a hunger to know the eternal. We're going to satisfy that hunger." He stopped beside the PS3 devkit, where Mahmud was busily pretending that he had been scripting his mission.

"In short, Eternal Hunger is going to convert the PlayStation into the PrayStation."

Like a pet dog, Joseph eagerly nodded.

Rich lay a hand on Mahmud's shoulder. It was cold, and despite his ghost-white skin with blue veins, it seemed dark.

"Son," Rich said, "today's the day. Show us what you've got."

"Well," Mahmud stammered, "Payback is a mission about stopping thugs from robbing convenience stores. You can kill them or convert them. And as a bonus, you can convert the store owners, too. There's even--"

"I like where you're going with that, but you don't need to tell me. I wrote the book, remember? Show me what you've got."

As Mahmud picked up the controller, his palms were clammy. The flat screen Sony television was blank. "I've got to boot it up first."

Rich said, "I love this part. Pure genius. See how the motion-sensitive controller can convert the PlayStation into a PrayStation?"

Mahmud inwardly sighed. He hated this part of the interface the most. The game didn't boot up unless you moved the controller correctly. It wasn't enough to press Start. You had to move the controller itself. Mahmud raised the controller to his forehead, lowered it to his groin, raised it to his right shoulder, and then to his left. He had crossed himself, like a Catholic. On screen, from a black sea, an onyx eye emerged.

Rich yanked the controller from Mahmud's hands. Clenching his fist, Mahmud watched on. He thought that the avatar on screen, Jerry C. Jenkins, looked like a younger, slimmer version of Rich, albeit bedecked with paramilitary gadgets and guns.

In the game, a thug with a submachine gun was robbing a convenience store. Rich swung the controller, as if he were using it to beat a child over the head. The avatar, Jerry, beat down the robber and took his submachine gun.

"It's good, but it needs hot crisis action. Add fire and rubble. And on that ambulance," Rich said, "replace the red cross with the number 911."

Rich squeezed the controller's trigger. On screen, the thug's head scattered red particles across the digital canvas. Rich swung the controller right; Jerry swung his submachine gun to level on the Sikh clerk's white turbaned head.

Jerry said, in a voice as dry as Clint Eastwood's, "Ready to accept Christ?" Mahmud flinched.

With an Arabic accent, the clerk cried, "Please don't shoot!"

Jerry said, "Your choice. Think about it."

Rich threw the controller on the ground and crushed it beneath his black leather loafer.

Joseph blanched. Mahmud blinked.

Rich's face was pink with anger, "The line is: 'Your choice: Convert or Die!'"

Mahmud let go, "Ready to accept Christ? Convert or die? That dialogue is worse than cliché. It denigrates both the--"

Joseph cut him off, "We'll get it fixed in the next build. Mahmud will have it ready for you after lunch. Right, Mammie?"

Mahmud bit his tongue so hard that he tasted the iron in his blood.

Joseph led Rich to the door, "Now about lunch, would you like...?"

"Actually," Rich said, suddenly becoming calm again, "I've got other plans for lunch."

Joseph swallowed.

While Rich impatiently mashed the down button on the elevator, Mahmud rushed down the stairs, phone in hand, auto-dialing Natassia.

In the lobby, Mahmud burst out of the stairwell breathless. He hugged Natassia, who was hot and irritated, but she was there. His breathless appearance caught her off-guard, and softened her mood.

Just then the elevator bell dinged. Rich Carver stormed out.

Hiding from Rich's gaze, Mahmud kissed Natassia with pursed, hard lips.

"Stop it," Natassia said. "What kind of kiss is that? And you're all sweaty."

That hurt, but Mahmud's arteries were still pumping with adrenaline. He touched her camera, "We need to trail him."

"Why?"

Mahmud eyed her camera and said, "He's our star," as he ushered Natassia out into the hot, dry sun.

Natassia loved the intrigue, and it showed as she said, "What's the story?"

"That prick Carver isn't making a game; he's making a monstrosity." He looked deep into her eyes, and said. "We're gonna slip a scene into Eternal Hunger that no player will forget."

"Mahmud, honey, you're losing me. A scene of what?"

Mahmud winked, "You'll think of something."

Beneath her sun-bleached blonde hair, Natassia's brunette eyebrows raised. She hadn't seen Mahmud so headstrong before. Or so illicit. And she liked it. She turned on the camera and began filming Rich's waddling bum in the hot sun.

They trailed him a couple blocks west, until the white spires of Temple Square flanked them. But instead of crossing right to the temple, Rich ducked left into the wooden planks and exposed iron rods at the construction site on the face of Zions Bank.

Mahmud and Natassia stood at the edge of the construction. Natassia continued filming Rich.

On film, Rich walked into a shaded corner. He stood in front of an ATM. But instead of swiping a card, he pressed a sequence of numbers.

Click. He lifted one of the wooden construction panels and lowered himself into ... what? What could be there?

As soon as Rich had gone down and the panel had been replaced, Mahmud and Natassia rushed to the ATM.

Mahmud said, "What the?" He began looking at the ATM, analyzing its mechanisms with his eyes. "We need in. Hm, I could probably hack the lock if ..."

A devilish grin spread over Natassia's face.

Mahmud continued, "But I'd need an interface into the server..."

Natassia held the camera to her eye and watched the film she had caught of Rich at the ATM. Natassia's fingers lithely danced on the number pad of the ATM, following the same sequence as Rich. Click.

Mahmud was startled out of his hacker reverie.

Natassia said, "Or, we could just say the magic word." She opened the wooden panel on the ground. A blast of hot air blew her blonde hair back. She covered her mouth and wrinkled her nose.

Mahmud coughed, almost gagging, "It stinks like ..."

Natassia said, "Dead shrimp."

#

In the subterranean sanctum, between two basalt pillars, hung a drape of black silk. Rich threw off the silk, revealing a flat-panel display that spanned from the floor to the ceiling. Deep in concentration, he extended his arms toward the basalt pillars. Blue lightning sparked from each.

In the center of the temple, Rich knelt before a silver altar. HDTV and Ethernet cables extended from it. The altar began to whir with wind, like a miniature jet. An LED on it turned from red to green. Rich lifted a silver controller, and crossed himself with it. A black sea filled the screen.

Rich raised the controller high and then lowered it to his groin, "As above, so below." He thrust the controller toward the silver devkit and then spread his arms wide, "As within, so without."

Mahmud and Natassia, having climbed down from the entrance at the tunnel, crept to through the dark hall. At the end of the hall, just outside the entrance to this temple, Mahmud whispered to Natassia, "Are you getting this?"

Natassia said sharply, "Shh." She gazed through the video camera into the ritual being performed. She was enthralled.

On screen, from a black sea, an onyx eye emerged.

Rich spoke, "O, creature whose hunger is eternal, arise!
Ancient of days, dweller beneath the lake of salt, arise!
Appear before me."

"By your true name..." Still holding the controller, Rich traced a sigil of Hebrew letters in the air, "LEVIATHAN, I summon you."

"Let this screen be thy veil. Let this machine be thy altar. Let this disc be thy sacrament. Let this controller be thy tendril. And let this consumer be consumed by thee, Leviathan."

On screen, the digital onyx eye blinked. The darkness around the eye took on the shape of shiny black scales. Although there were no speakers in the temple, the floor and walls shook with the bass of a low growl.

On screen, a digital image of Rich Carver appeared in the clutch of Leviathan's black tendril. In the temple, Rich's arms shook. The controller in his hands quaked, and dripped with cold sweat.

"Wait! It is not my time! We signed a pact. You promised me riches; I promised you one million souls. You shall feast a million times over! That I guarantee, come the day of your resurrection next spring. As each consumer prays before you, their souls are transmuted into your substance; their spirit converted into your essence."

Still the digital avatar of Rich was in the clutch of Leviathan's tendril, which was dragging the kicking and screaming avatar into a maw of fangs.

"You cannot wait to feed?" Rich quivered and could barely speak, "Then thy eternal hunger shall be satisfied." He hefted the controller that had become heavy in his hands. A text console appeared at the bottom of the screen. Rich began to type the code Heathen.convert, and then he stopped.

He then took out a sheet of paper from his pocket and scanned it quickly. He typed the number that would complete the function's parameter:

```
#  
Heathen.convert( 777-93-6911 );  
#
```

Mahmud gasped.

Natassia glanced at him, brows furrowed.

He whispered, "That's my social security number."

Then a spasm crashed through his body.

On screen, taking the place of Rich Carver, a digital avatar of Mahmud fell into the clutch of Leviathan.

In the hall, at the entrance to the temple, cold sweat ran down Mahmud's cheeks. He shook and then froze, tension consuming his body. His fingers hardened into the clutch of a

talon, as if he were the Leviathan clutching a mortal. His eyes rolled back in his head.

In his mind, Mahmud was mapping the logic of the convert function; he knew there was a way to exit the function. Jagged, branching pathways spread before his mind like blue lightning in the night.

On screen, Mahmud was almost delivered into the jaw of Leviathan.

Natassia squeezed Mahmud's cold, clammy hand. On screen, the tendrils met resistance; Mahmud was squirming free. Thinking like a computer, he traced the path of the escape condition. His fingers trembled, as if he were typing code.

The room roared. Rich blanched and meekly said, "Your hunger will be satisfied." He thrust the controller forward, and made another sigil in the air.

On screen and in the hall, Mahmud's legs gave way.

Natassia caught his fall, "Mahmud, my prince." Her video camera fell from her grasp. With tears streaking her face, she kissed him.

On screen, Mahmud's avatar shone with light and slipped away from Leviathan's clutches. In the hall, Mahmud returned the kiss, with tender, parted lips. His muscles relaxed. His eyes opened and flitted.

In his mind, he analyzed the convert function. An electronic tapestry of interconnected stars bled before his mind's eye. He traced the tapestry and unwove the spell. The stars released their web of threads; the function failed.

The room again roared. The floor itself quaked. From the ceiling, flakes of black stone fell. The basalt towers cracked, and from the cracks, lightning arced.

Natassia broke off the kiss and dragged Mahmud, "We have to..."

Mahmud nodded weakly, "We have to." But he hesitated to grab the video camera, and to look back into the hall one last time.

On screen, the huge black dragon of Leviathan was streaming with cold sweat. Its muscles pumped furiously. Stepping back from the destruction of his temple, Rich was muttering, "Your hunger ... your hunger..."

#

Back at his desk, a trembling Mahmud plugged the cable from the video camera into his computer and began uploading the edit that Natassia had hastily made. "Come on!" he hissed at the sluggish progress bar of the upload.

Meanwhile, he furiously coded the hacked version of Eternal Hunger. To avoid premature discovery by a developer, he encoded the Easter Egg into one of the math libraries, which no one ever

looked at any more. To avoid discovery by any of the hundreds of testers playing thousands of hours of Eternal Hunger, Mahmud programmed the Egg to hatch on, April 8, 2007. Easter. The hack wouldn't be seen until the game had already released.

Finally, Mahmud programmed a hook into the `Heathen.convert` function. Before pressing Enter, Mahmud admired his handiwork. "How's that for an Easter Egg?"

Beep. The security door opened. A haggard Rich Carver walked in, and combed his hair with his hands. He had a limp in his stride, but he was alive.

Joseph jumped to the door to greet him, "Back for a second round for revision? Mahmud, fire it up."

Mahmud said, "There's nothing new to see."

Rich's brow furrowed.

Joseph said, "Then there's nothing more to see. Today's your last."

Mahmud stood up, "No need; I quit. I don't want my name on this dominionist garbage. Eternal Hunger isn't entertainment; it isn't religion; it's fear-mongering agitprop."

#

On Sunday, April 8, 2007, one million videogamers unwrapped the cellophane from their copies of Eternal Hunger. That day, the greatest Easter Egg ever programmed into a videogame was triggered, which sent a shockwave across the nation.

When a player issued the patented convert command, the game played a strange cutscene of Rich Carver in a dark temple. And the target of the conversion was always the same person; not even a character in the game. It was Rich Carver.

That day in his Salt Lake estate, Rich himself was playing Eternal Hunger. He saw himself on screen, in the temple underneath Zions bank. Rich closed his eyes as sweat rolled down his pale face.

Instead of feasting on one million souls, Leviathan was feasting only on one soul, Rich's soul, one million times. Each time a zit-faced teenager converted a digital thug or bystander, Rich jerked. His Salt Lake estate shook.

"Leviathan!" Rich said hoarsely, "No, our bargain was for a million souls, not one." His voice trailed off into a gurgle. While his avatar was consumed by a dark maw, the real Rich Carver also squirmed. He writhed for hours until consumed by the eternal hunger--of Leviathan.