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Geoffrey Oliver Donovan

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Fifty-one-year-old Geoffrey Oliver Donovan leaned back in His chair and balanced on its two hind legs. With one of His hands, He brushed a wisp of white hair away from His eyes and contemplated the image on the computer screen in front of Him. An animated space-ship attempted to dodge a pair of armed, nuclear heat-seeking missiles. At the very top of the screen, in bold white letters, was the word 'DEMO.'

Nudging His eyeglasses further up the arch of His nose, Geoffrey watched as the weapons slowly drifted off course. The ship had formed a thin coating of space ice on its surface. Ah, the joys of programming the subtleties, He reflected. A passing comet, however, quickly melted the ice, and the missiles were soon back on course. Without warning, one of them suddenly burst forward with the flare of a rocket engine and exploded on impact with the ship. The screen dissolved into a myriad of tiny colored dots and a smiling mushroom appeared in the center of the screen. The mushroom laughed and pointed at its T-shirt, which read, 'You Lose, Buddy!'

Geoffrey looked appreciatively at the game and breathed a sigh of satisfaction. The work He had done so far had been excellent, but for some reason it just didn't inspire Him to write anything further. No matter how you do it, he thought, it still looks like a souped-up version of 'Space Invaders.' That's the problem with modern-day video games, they're all variations upon the two basic themes; 'Space Invaders' and 'Pac-Man.'

It's high time to put them to rest, He decided. 'Pac-Man' is only going to be able to eat so many dots before he finally throws up, and who knows what the environmentalists will think of trying to exterminate an alien species?

He shut the computer off and gazed into the blank terminal. Losing Himself completely, deep in thought, He tried to go beyond the basics of past computer games and take a totally fresh approach. For over twenty minutes, He sat pondering, when suddenly The Idea occurred to Him. Solving a few simple mathematical equations in His head, Geoffrey analyzed His prospects. Difficult, He surmised, but well-worth the risk — even if The Project was a failure.

Exactly twenty-four hours later, He finished the outline to His Program. The details would have to be filled in later, as time permitted. But for now, He was more interested in starting The Program than He was in completely designing It.

He pushed the power knob of the computer on. The hundred-megabyte hard-disk drive whirred to life and loaded the disk operating instructions. It was a good thing that He had such a large capacity storage unit, because it appeared that He was going to need a significant portion of it in order to run The Program.

His first task was to key in the equation for light. In a section of the main memory, a small cosmos flared up, and 'Project Alpha' was born. Good, he smiled, it's going well already.

For five more days, Geoffrey labored almost continuously at the keyboard of the computer, taking very little time-out to eat or catch a quick nap. He programmed with an obsession.

At the end of the sixth day, He had completed the framework for The Program. He made a decision to run The Program and see what had developed when He woke up the next morning. He knew that since The Project was running on a computer, the speed at which the processing would be done would be incredibly fast.

A few hours later, around the middle of the night, Geoffrey sat down in front of the computer again, deciding to add a feature which He had hesitated installing during the initial development. Pressing the key marked 'BREAK' on the right-hand side of the keyboard, He added a solitary line of code. Restarting The Program from the point of Its interruption, paradoxes suddenly collided and 'Project Alpha' was thrown into temporary turmoil. In a matter of moments, the line of code He had just added was killed off by another element in The Program.

He sighed deeply and went back to bed, leaving The Program running.

The next morning, when He went to check on The Program, It appeared to be in total chaos. Pieces of code were running rampant, wildly destroying other vital pieces, and the screen was a mess. Unknown bits of information were being stored on the disk drive in a haphazard manner. Because He had written a self-modifying code, The Program had overwritten almost all of its original lines and become practically useless. Countless generations of data had been produced and destroyed. There were very few useful lines left. He broke into The Program again and salvaged what was left of the good code before the bad lines could wash them out as well.

So much for 'Project Alpha.' Maybe the other program He had in mind, 'Omega,' would turn out better. He sighed again and walked into the kitchen.

Somewhere out on The Disk, one of the unknown series of bits began to evolve.