

What happens when virtual reality becomes as convincing as the real world?

Jack, Megan, Ayo and Cameron are the Raid Mob: four teenage misfits whose lifelong friendship involves obsessing over old movies, surviving school bullies ... and secretly being four of the best gamers on the entire planet.

When the release of radical VR technology draws them deeper than ever into *Distant Dawn*, the Raid Mob's precious online anonymity is shattered. Now, they've got everyone's attention.

Including that of an extra-terrestrial menace, who's been watching them from across the stars ...



#GAMEOVER2022

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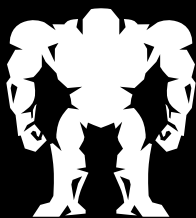
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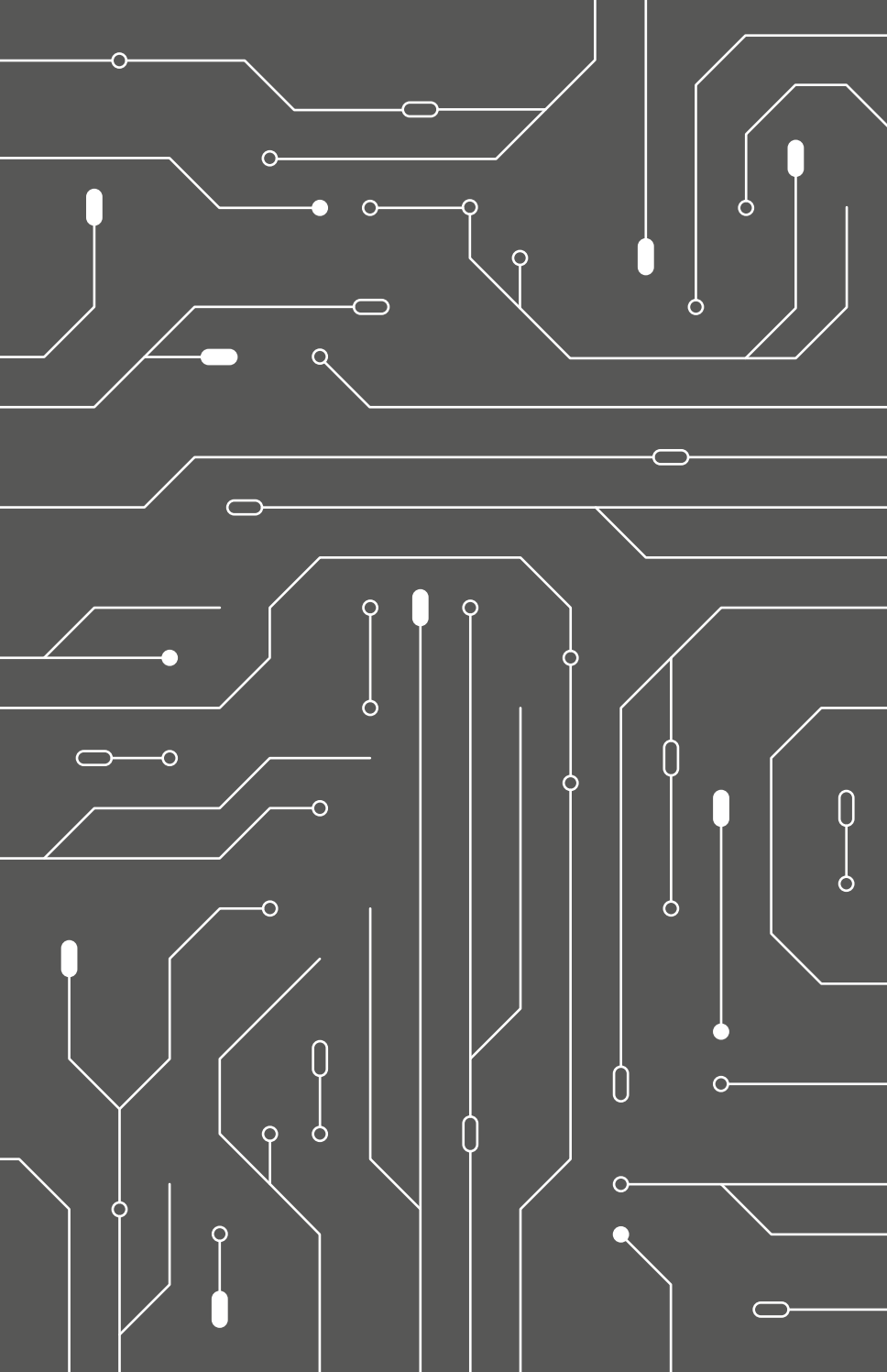
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GAME OVER

RISE OF THE
RAID MOB

M. J. Sullivan





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GAME OVER

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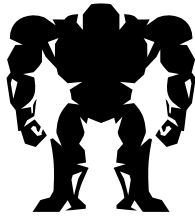
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**GAME
OVER**



**RISE OF THE
RAID MOB**

M. J. Sullivan



For Claire

The Zelda to my Link

The Princess Peach to my Mario

The S Tetromino to my L

GAME PROGRESS ... 0%

Level 1: Distant Dawn

Liquid light dripped from the largest moon in the sky, trickling through gaps in crimson clouds and splashing across the robot's armour. The metal plates that formed the WarMech's chest distorted the reflection of Polaxia – the fifth and largest of the moons orbiting Rotec. Smaller sections of armour cut the light into silver slithers that danced like the shifting shards inside a kaleidoscope. The only parts of the metal being that didn't reflect the light were its eyes: cold black orbs that snuffed out the moon's radiance.

The WarMech stood dead still.

It was waiting for something.

'YO! Are you doing the broody robot thing on purpose? Or are you in the bathroom? AGAIN?'

A thunderous crack tore across the barren landscape, ripping through boulders and throwing up coils of

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violet sand. When the debris eventually cleared, a second, massive machine was revealed. It was nothing like the first. The moonlight could not dance across its armour, because every panel was either scarred from battle, plastered with blue camo print, or covered with retro console and cartoon logos. The red-and-black *ThunderCats* icon adorned its chest like a badge of honour, and *Konami*, *Atari* and *Sega* stickers were pasted all over its limbs.

As the giant robot dusted off chunks of broken purple rock, a line of holographic characters appeared above its head.

Zuul

In response to this dramatic drop-in, the first robot turned, slowly, until it faced the graffitied machine. A group of letters materialised above its head.

ForgeFire666

Then it spoke.

'S-sorry, Zuuly! Too many Sh-ShockSodas.'

The voice didn't suit the menacing mech one bit.

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It was too whiny; too soft. By contrast, the reply it got was sharp, scolding, and matched the character of the grungy mech perfectly.

'Jeez, Forge! Your toilet bowl must take more enemy fire in a day than your WarMech sees in a week! Your bladder deserves its own ShockSoda sponsorship.'

'Actually, they did, err, offer me a c-contract. Well, I mean, they offered F-F-FForgeFire666 one.'

'Which, as a loyal member of the group, and a ... semi-sensible human being, you didn't take,' said another voice.

This rasping speech was the only sound that betrayed the arrival of a third mech. For its size, it moved with unnerving agility and control. Following its near-silent landing, it took a few final, barely-audible steps towards the other two mechs, and the holographic text above its angular grey head instantly became the most eye-catching thing about it.

Hephaestus

'Oh goody! Doctor Buzzkill has arrived!' said Zuul. 'Just in time to make sure we all get our daily dose of back-down-to-Earth.'

The matte grey stealth mech stood absolutely still, regarding Zuul with simulated scorn.

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'I'm looking out for our best interests. Anonymity is our ally. You've seen what happens. Publicity and exposure bring—'

'Fame? Adoration? *A butt ton of money?*'

'... Trouble.'

Those two clipped syllables signalled the end of that discussion. Hephaestus quickly moved on to a more pressing concern.

'What's delaying him this time? The mission starts soon.'

'What *is* the mission, anyway?' Zuul asked.

Hephaestus barely bothered to stifle its frustration. 'Did you not watch the General's briefing?'

'Mate – those cutscenes go on *forever!* I know Hailstorm probably paid top dollar for Tom Hanks to do the voice, but honestly ... he goes on a bit, don't you think? It's like watching paint dry. In a doctor's waiting room. With no Wi-Fi, and only a tiny TV showing vegetable slicers and vacuums with faces on the shopping channel ...'

Hephaestus was about to begin a lengthy recap of the mission briefing when orgeFire666's mech interrupted him with a sound that made the stealthy robot wince: the sound of crisps being munched.

'It's another *CRUNCH* mining protection op. The Nograki scouts have found the *CRUNCH CRUNCH* teslate deposits. They're sending in kill squads to take out the miners and—'

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'And-we-must-take-them-out-firs -and-secure-the-mines,' spat Hephaestus, cutting through Forge's snack-soaked explanation. 'Now, where is—'

'*Sorry!* Sorry I'm late, everyone. Well, not late, really. Technically bang on time. Ready to go. *Totally* in the zone. Sooo ... what's the mission?'

A weighty sigh swelled across the violet terrain. This fourth, clunking WarMech looked older than the others. Its hinges creaked as it landed heavily and lumbered forwards. The panels of its armour were all severely dented; patched-over lacerations and deep, rusted scars criss-crossed over every surface. A glowing handle appeared above its head.

tHeScOuRgE

'Paper round?' said the clipped voice of Hephaestus.

'Yup,' replied tHeScOuRgE.

'Flat tyre?'

'Second one this week.'

'*And* the second time you've nearly missed the start of an Elite Campaign. Double points, remember? There's not much separating the Top Ten; someone could quite easily take your spot. You might try avoiding the risk of disqualification very now and then ...'

At this, the voice behind the battered WarMech

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altered. The cheery, slightly-out-of-breath enthusiasm vanished, replaced by curt frostiness.

'Not everyone has a rich mummy and daddy to buy their upgrades, *Phaesterer*. I'm here, aren't I? I'm ready. And last I checked, I rank *above* you. So, why don't you worry about your own spot, and who might be looking to take *you* down?'

tHeScOuRgE nodded towards Zuul with a creaking flick of its head. A new block of text emerged, floating above the purple landscape.

DISTANT DAWN: MISSION 3A-56.2 THE MINES OF MAROK

ELITE MISSION COMBATANTS

POSITION	I.D.	XP
PLAYER 1	_Carbon_Shift_	78,975
PLAYER 2	BunnyQueen12	78,223
PLAYER 3	ForgeFire666	78,109
PLAYER 4	tHeScOuRgE	77,312
PLAYER 5	Hephaestus	77,144
PLAYER 6	Zuul	76,263
PLAYER 7	Th£D£V@ST@TOR	76,005
PLAYER 8	SaiboTron	75,768
PLAYER 9	HudsonNotHicks	75,476
PLAYER 10	Jeeroy-Lenkins	75,306

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'So ...' tHeScOuRgE said, pausing to let the table punctuate his point. 'What's our mission?'

'Protect *CRUNCH* teslate mines. D-destroy the *CRUNCH* Nograki kill squad *CRUNCH*.'

'Thanks, Forge,' said the dented robot, the cheeriness in its voice returning as quickly as it had disappeared.

'Have you completed your pre-mish bathroom checks?'

'Very funny. And yes ... y-yes I have,' came the reply, followed by the scrunching of an empty crisp packet.

Hephaestus reassumed command. 'Okay, Raid Mob. Systems check and readiness report. The mission timer is ticking. Sixty seconds 'til go-time.'

'He loves this bit, doesn't he?' said Zuul, as the camo-covered mech's panels began to whirl and shift. Plates on its forearms opened up like mechanical fl w ers, revealing dual pulse phasers on one side and a plasma-powered railgun on the other. From the top of Zuul's shoulder armour, laser-guided cannons loaded with Nograki-piercing rounds rose on rotating turrets. A giant *Ghostbusters* logo on its back split in half, releasing two propulsion vents that fi ed exhaust fumes into the ground, one glowing red and the other burning bright blue. A swirling purple cloud engulfed the WarMech, and from the midst of the sand, a wild laughter grew.

Then the other WarMechs began to arrive.

SaiboTron's mech dropped first, all sleek surfa es and sharp angles. Although it was stuffed to the brim with weaponry, it had little need for any of it. The sharpened

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edges of its limbs allowed it to rush its opponent and slice them to pieces, like razor blades swirling in a tornado.

The mech that landed next to SaiboTron looked more likely to crush its enemies with brute force. BunnyQueen12's robot was by far the largest: a leaden bruiser able to shift its massive density on command. If it wanted to stomp a Nograki into the ground, it could transfer 80% of its weight to the sole of its giant metal foot. Or, if it wanted to send an alien soaring into orbit, it could load its fist with eight times its usual weight and swing that thing like a turbo-powered wrecking ball.

The HudsonNotHicks mech was next: pure military spec, decked out with a striped green camo skin and glinting dog tags around its thick neck, topped-off with an army helmet that had 'STATE-OF-THE-BADASS-ART' stencilled across the back. It oozed military might, and could call in weaponised satellite strikes and drone cover fire during battle.

Jeeroy-Lenkins had a medieval-knight-meets-Optimus-Prime thing going on, with a custom coat-of-arms cape and a lance that doubled as a laser sight for the stockpile of nuke-tip projectiles nestled within its chest armour.

The £DEV@ST@TOR looked like an advert for every stick-on upgrade it was possible to purchase. But it was `_Carbon_Shift_` that drew the most attention ...

The top-ranked WarMech stood at a distance from the others, as if it were a little too good to hang with the rest. Although it wasn't the largest mech in the field, it

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seemed to take up the most space. It was cloaked by a shimmering golden aura, which in the world of *Distant Dawn* was referred to as "The Glow".

'You know they've boosted The Glow's power-ups, right?' said Zuul. '1.5 XP, double points for tier-3 and higher kills, not to mention bigger mag capacity, quicker reload times, boosts on sprint speed *and* duration. I think someone's overcompensating ...'

'... For the recoil on those cannons, I'd g-guess,' replied ForgeFire666, naively. 'But it's not f-fair – he doesn't even need it. He's already f-f , he's already f-f-fir ... h 's already at the t-top of the table.'

'We wouldn't complain if one of us had The Glow,' said Hephaestus. 'The most sensible thing we could do at this juncture is to–'

Hephaestus suddenly fell silent. The aura from the golden orb mounted behind blast-shielding in *_Carbon_Shift_*'s chest began to change. It surged down the flanks of the giant WarMech, and panels began to shift. Weapons were revealed the likes of which the Raid Mob had never seen. Quad-barrelled pulse cannons sprung from each arm; lasergate ray shooters extended from thick metal fingertips; a recess opened below the orb mounting, and inside were *five* nuke-fuelled rocket launchers stacked like ShockSodas in a vending machine. KPS long-range rocket systems, Inciner8 heat flares, remote detonation drones on jet-powered launch mechanisms – *_Carbon_Shift_* had weapons that had,

until now, been the stuff of whisperings on *Distant Dawn* forums.

'Well ... I mean ... *that's* just not fair,' said Hephaestus.

'At least Golden Boy is on *our* side for this mission. Is he streaming?' Zuul asked.

'Yup – as always. And with The Glow armour and all those mods, he's getting more attention than a grumpy cat meme,' replied tHEScOuRgE. 'Have you *seen* his sub count?'

'Just passed fi ty million, hasn't he? His Twitch streams are always top rated.'

'I h-heard he bought a new house with the mmm-money from his last sponsorship deal. He must be rolling in ... he must have so m-much ... he must be so *rich!*' ForgeFire666 stammered.

'Yes, but he did that because the entire internet found out where he lived. He's been doxed and swatted twice this year. *Anonymity*, my friends. It's worth more than you realise.'

Hephaestus's words of wisdom went whistling into the wind as the mission timer reached zero. The sky darkened. The WarMechs glanced upwards ...

The Nograki dropships were here.

The light of Colaxia was blotted out by three enormous vessels. Each had an arachnoid body with a shell-like exoskeleton, tapering to a sharp point at the rear. Limbs jutted out from the hull, pulsing with extra-terrestrial energy as they propelled the crafts forwards. The bow

of each ship glowed red hot, still smouldering from their entry through Rotec's churning thermosphere.

The vessels came to a hovering halt a few hundred metres away. As if by instinct, Zuul's shoulder-mounted cannon popped up, and an armour-piercing round slid into the chamber ... but no shot was taken. In the early days of *Distant Dawn*, these ships had been a fraction of the size, and the Nograki invaders had abseiled from their bellies on long tentacles. Any mech with a keen aim could take them out before they even hit the ground. Now, the aliens were fixed out in pods that, while susceptible to damage, travelled at such a speed that it wasn't worth wasting the ammo. Zuul knew that it was better to wait until the Nograkis crawled out into the open.

'Ugh. They never get any better looking, do they?' said tHeScOuRgE.

'Maybe that's why they're so angry all the time,' Zuul mused. 'Poor body image, social media pressures, a ravenous lust for human flesh ...'

ForgeFire666 let out a chuckle. Hephaestus didn't make a sound. A glowing red filter swept across the stealth mech's visor: a specialist upgrade for those with a sniper shot-to-kill ratio of 10:8 or higher. With it, the mech could zoom further, shrinking the rugged landscape and drawing the enemy right into its sights.

tHeScOuRgE was right. It was not a pretty picture.

Whoever – or whatever – had created the Nograki scouts hadn't been too concerned with looks. The

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fearsome monsters stood around four metres in height, though their elongated legs made them appear even taller. These lower limbs had joints that were hinged at all the wrong angles, with root-like tendrils for feet that made the scouts fast over any terrain, hard to knock down, and lethal at close range. Four upper limbs sprouted asymmetrically from their torsos. The top arms fi ed long range, focused energy blasts, the lower limbs could switch between a single shotgun-like spray of burning mucus and a machine-gun hailstorm of the same armour-melting secretion. And the closer they got, the clearer their most deadly feature became.

Two gland sacs underneath their elongated heads fed bile into four huge fangs, one in each corner of their terrifying jaws. This terrible toxin could tear through a WarMech's internals in seconds, melting it from the inside out. No combatant wanted to see a Nograki scout up close. Its six beady green eyes and dripping mandibles were the stuff of digital nightma es.

'You know what I've always wondered? Why are these things – beings from a technologically advanced predator race – totally fine with running a ound a battlefield ompletely naked?'

None of the other mechs responded, so Zuul pressed the point.

'I mean, is it a Bugs Bunny scenario? Then again, even he put a towel around himself whenever he got out of the bath. That was weird, right? And these things

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don't even have fur, or feathers. Do you think they *know*? Maybe we could use it against them ... harness the power of shame!

'Zuul?' said Hephaestus.

'Yeah?'

'Shut up.'

Zuul fell uncharacteristically silent, noticing what the other mechs had already spotted. It was detaching itself from the hull of the furthest dropship, like a gigantic leech falling free after gorging itself on the blood of its host. It was at least three times as big as any of the Nograki scouts, and it stood on six, tri-hinged limbs, each covered with hundreds of spikes that throbbed with the same toxin that flowed through the scouts' deadly fangs. Its underbelly was split into thick, rough plates, with narrow gaps between each that glowed molten orange. A single green eye was set deep into its scaly forehead, and endless rows of needle-pointed fangs lined the inside of its menacing mouth.

'Oh-kay then. Never seen one of *those* before,' said Zuul, bravado faltering with each word. 'Any suggestions? Other than bowel evacuation?'

Eventually, tHeScOuRgE took a creaking step towards the Nograki invaders. The mech's thick metal fingers curled into a fist.

'Let's rumble.'