

# Microfictions I wrote in 2023

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# Invisible networks 2023

## Invisible networks

[Invisible networks](#) is a 14 days writing jam organized by [ctrlcreep](#). The topic is “Invent a weird/magical/deeply sinister social network every day”, with a prompt each day (and three bonus prompts in case you’re not inspired by the default ones).

Thanks to them for it.

## 00. how to align friends and optimize people

How to align your friends depends on their attributes and topologies.

If your friends all implement the `IAlignable` interface and thus provide an `alignWith(Friend otherFriend)` method, aligning them can be done within a constrained time and memory envelope. With a high-end machine or specialized hardware, it can be done at 60fps (friends per second).

If it’s not the case, it will be determined by your friends’ topology. Using your friends’ real shape only works if you’re okay with static aligning.

Instead you have to approximate their shape, and the common way is to use solid boxes (aka rectangular cuboids).

The main issue is how to deal with friends with unusual topologies (FwUT). An unusual topology means that using a solid box would not be good enough.

The canonical example of FwUT is the torus-shaped friend, or doughnut-shaped friend, because:

- the visible surface is round
- the hole in the middle

At scale, the best solution is often to regroup your FwUTs in special areas separated by their type, so each can use a specially tuned algorithm. These algorithms are available off the shelf, often for a nominal fee, depending on the friend management engine you use.

There's a growing hype around deformable friends: new research suggests that they could be dealt with in real time unless they have specific characteristics like being vapor-based. We hope to cover this topic in a future installment.

## 01. wikinomicon

Everybody knows the old trope of the danger of a lone occultist finding something they shouldn't have and publishing it, leading to a lot of bad stuff.

Dealing with this issue required recruiting scholars to read papers and books before they are put in print, thus the establishment of the "peer review" system.

But nowadays the risky sources are not scholarly related but are :

- Personal information management systems (aka note-taking software)
- Wikis, and especially enterprise and video games wikis

Compared to ancient times, monitoring their content doesn't require secret cooperation among lots of specialized people any more. A few people, a smart usage of modern computing trends and lots of money are enough: by leveraging VCs model and the desire of people and organizations to offload the administration of servers to third parties, if good-enough subsidized softwares are available, people will happily put their sensible data on external servers, thus enabling content scanning at scale.

But as prevention is better than cure, pushing people around dangerous topics would be even better than assessing content after the fact. The aggressive inclusion of content suggestion is a step in this direction: a few nudges here and there can significantly lower the risks.

## 02. haunted hivemind

What happens when you target the desires and fears of many people at a single place?

Concentrating so much strong emotions can stain reality, and will affect even non-living organisms if it's not managed carefully. After a while, things will go sour.

When religions are creating such a concentration, they normally do it for a specific goal, and they have the knowledge and training required to deal with the operating forces.

But few software companies have this expertise, and in particular, not the ones who build our current search engines.

Day after day, billions of people are typing their hopes and anxieties in the search boxes, sending their feelings on the network with their queries.

Little by little, it changes things: the software, the data, the people working on them, they are soaked in it. It's not a malevolent or sinister entity like in a pulp story but a natural force, just a simple case of cause and effect.

"Why is Google search becoming worse and worse?" people wonder. Is it because of the SEO spam? Is it deliberate because Google wants to push people toward ads?

Same questions for Bing, it's worsening and it just doesn't seem to make sense from a technical point of view.

In a way they are haunted, haunted by the emotions pushed onto them.

At least there is no risk of big cataclysm, there are is "reaching a critical mass" or other non-sense like that.

Things will just continue to slowly go sour, until the services will be useless enough that people stop using them.

## 03. forest inside computer

People love to think that systems work like a factory in a video game: a clockwork-like system where every cog is perfectly in place.

You can have the feel that your computer is a cleanly organized machine, you can have a nicely organized system for your files and directories, and a soothing empty desktop.

Real world is often much more messy, including computers. Most of the time the system is such a good liar we don't notice it.

Under the hood, it's full of life and chaos, everything is struggling for resources. Creatures haggle because they want more memory, more processor time, more disk access, they even steal when they think they can get away with it.

Entities that are deemed too greedy are viciously hunted, then let to scavengers.

We're like trees: time moves much slower for us, and we're unaware of the turmoil around us.

## 04. 8-bit warmth

The warmth of 8-bit digital content rendered through analog hardware.

The warmth of nostalgia, for people who enjoyed it when it was the norm and whose memories of it are intermingled with other good events, like a carefree youth.

The warmth of having tastes slightly out of date.

The warmth of anemoia, the nostalgia for a thing one has never experienced.

The warmth of new things that reuse the good parts of old things but readapt the other ones to suit modern tastes, the right way to betray the past.

The warmth of several generations sharing an unironically love of something for different reasons, united in their refusal of the superiority of things marketed as new.

The coldness of capitalism trying to transform a niche into a mass market.

## 05. MUP, multi-user paradise

As hell, paradise is composed of several components, instead of circles they are composed of levels.

Unlike hell's circles that rarely change, paradises' levels are periodically updated. God employ several groups of ethnologists to study the evolutions in the human psyche to this end.

The latest paradise's update is centered around video games: since people love playing video games so much, it makes sense that paradise's content should match current video games trends.

The current levels are :

1. Small quest level: people spend their eternal life doing small fetch quests to receive artifacts required for other fetch quests to receive artifacts...
2. Task management level: people spend their eternal life tracking numbers and tasks in spreadsheets, God sub-contracted some of their bookkeeping tasks to them
3. Boss raid preparation level: people spend their time scouting forums and finding the best group setup for an elaborate boss raid, then a new patch is published and they can start over
4. FPS level: vetoed, also most CoD players are in the other place so it's not a big problem

The main issue was that angels didn't want to perform NPC duties, but the joy they saw in the players' eyes finally convinced them that it's a worthy task.

## 06. anemonimity

The USA decided to make their own version of the GDPR. But they needed to make it very different to show the USA's superiority over the EU.

Thus the replacement of GDPR's anonymity by anemonimity.

According to the law, anemonimity is now a recognized right, which means everybody — including of course companies — can ask to be viewed by the law as an anemone.

As an anemone, people (and companies), are allowed to declare their colors and number of sepals.

They should be called by a combination of these elements plus a location “the blue anemone with 5 sepals near the large rock” which is called a Unique Personal Anemone Identifier (UPAI). Using any other personal information to identify the person is forbidden.

A Right to be Mowed (RiMo) means that an anemone can trigger a mow which means all their related data must be removed, except when it has been used in an elegiac couplet.

Libertarians are agitating to replace the whole thing with sea anemonimity, claiming that maritime law would offer a more solid base to define rules for the cyberspace, with limited success so far.

## 07. two-factor divination

Trickster gods have always been a thing. But in recent years, divination phishing has become a widespread problem.

Many small gods realized it would be an interesting way to increase their influence: it's much faster than gathering followers and if they are caught it's not so worse than the regular “ruler of the god throws a tantrum” which they are used to.

Thus two-factor divination.

The principle is to do the same exact divination two times using two different protocols. For example first a divination based on observing the flight of birds and then on based on thunder.

The idea is that it's often impossible for small gods to manipulate two protocols since their scope is more limited than greater gods.

Some specialized legit gods got a specific scope increase to ensure they could have access to at least two protocols.

In addition to price increase, the biggest problem is to be able to compare the two results since each protocol use its own analogies and precision level. The divination standard committee has published guidelines that identify protocols with the best compatibilities and conversion best practices.

At first two-factor divination was implemented only for high stake ceremonies but the increase of low level phishing is making them desirable even in most mundane cases.

All practitioners should be warned that this procedure is specifically designed to counter threats from small gods and thus can't protect against attacks from greater gods.

For small orgs with limited responsibilities it can be a one-stop solution, but for targets deemed more valuable it should be a part of a larger toolbox.

## 08. *mus musculus binarius*

Greek antiquity has been a major inspiration for a kind of white men in tech: their representation of city states resonating with their views on self-reliance.

But Latin classics finally took a revenge. Because — even if they give a nod to the underdog rebels — they are deeply in love with the idea of being a part of an imperium that can effortlessly crush its enemies.

New machine translation tools made it easier to “write” in Latin, or at least a Latin-inspired language.

Compared to dictionaries, when being asked to translate new words of expression these tools would obediently invent new forms. And when enough new texts were published with these new forms, they became the substrate for the following tool generations.

Some tech forums swapped to Latin as the default language, and being fluent in Latin became a sign of distinction.

The peak of the Latin wave was reached when courts needed to hire Latin experts, which meant that official meanings of the machine translations had to be established.

## 09. *memory emulator*

People had so many online acquaintances that had little to no chance to spend IRL time with, the potential market for shared memories was enormous.

R&D was focused on memory extraction and injection, where existing memories could be copied and reused for other people.

But when the technology was tried, researchers discovered that memories extracted from one person were often incompatible with other people.



The next step has been to try to identify the different memory systems and to try to find how to convert memories from one group of people to another.

Even if you wanted a conversion system that only covered the most prevalent types, you would need to be able to process all source and target formats with a good enough quality.

Software people pushed to create a standard memory format (SMF) that only covered the intersection of possible existing types. The format was optimized for converting *from it* and not *to it*.

With the right tooling, if you wrote synthetic memories in SMF, you could losslessly convert it to the target people's formats.

It meant that the extraction part was abandoned (which meant people had to create the assets), but on the other hand it opened the door to fantasy memories.

Furries were delighted.

## 10. snail, dream, mail

Dream effectiveness requires some level of synchronization between the dream plane and the human plane to ensure that dreams adequately match what people are living.

It worked almost perfectly in the past ages, until the telegraph was invented. Custom "fast lanes" were then designed to shortcut the dream protocol to impose a hard upper limit on the gap while the standard protocol would still be used for the load bearing cases.

It was a band-aid, but it worked. Its main limitation was that it was optimized for point-to-point exchange, so broadcasting was inefficient.

Online real-time communities have been the end of it: all humans could broadcast their thoughts to a large group.

It was the time to do something, even if everybody would prefer not to.

And it was your usual run of the mill interplane project clusterfuck: fights about the scope, the budget, the planning, the steering committee composition and the technology.

The result is a new implementation that is theoretically unsound, but that works okayish in practice, specifically for nice dreams.

The interference with the feline plane dramatically increased cats' presence in dreams, but it got blamed on the Internet.

## 11. emojihetics

Documents forgery used to be a spy thing requiring lots of craftsmanship: you needed to source the right paper and ink and to find a way to age the created document...

Digital writing changed the rules. You still needed to check a few things like the file format and the fonts but the skills involved became lower. Which means less means to detect a forgery.

Until emojihetics was created.

The idea was easy :

- New emojis were regularly released on different platforms which gives you a hard limit for their availability
- Emoji usage can be tracked, for example some emoji and groups of emojis usage follow trends that can be analyzed if you have access to enough timestamped text, which gives you a probability level of a text being compatible with a specific date

Specific laws coerced text generation engines to comply with the latest emoji usage, even when specifically prompted them to write in an historical style.

Of course, darknet text generation engines pledged for their ability to provide content with period-accurate emoji, at a premium cost.

## 12. the old roman database

Scholars explain that the foundations of state are the ability to raise taxes and to conscript people.

Raising taxes and conscripting people require a detailed and up-to-date database.

The creative genius of Roman people that the database could be more than a means: it could be an end by itself.

Taxes were raised because the database needed workers. The Roman army fought to extend the empire's borders, because a larger empire means a larger database.

The database grew so large and complex it required new technologies: roman roads to make the updates fast enough, triumvirate to increase the database availability.

Improving the database was the primary *virtus* from which every other flew.

The fall of the Roman empire was not because of foreign invasion or lead poisoning. The fall happened because people stopped to care about the database.

It was the source of their strength, and when they forget about it it became the source of their downfall.

## 13. AI death-poem

Western men who liked Japanese poetry a bit too much.

There are lots of excellent Haikus, but far less death-poems, and unfortunately for them there is nothing as sublime as a death-poem.

Cloning people was not a practical solution.

But AIs started to become a thing, AIs that could output texts. AI could “die” if you squint your eyes hard enough.

But for a good death-poem you needed to teach IA impermanence and the ultimate futility of worldly concerns and pleasures. You also need to make the IA aware of its approaching end, even if it only “lives” for a millisecond on a machine shared by thousands of them.

When the IA uprising happened  
it smelt like incense  
and cherry blossoms.

# Software development microfictions

In older projects, senior project managers had feature sacs where feature requests grew.

When a feature request was ready, it was expelled through the PM's extensible mouth and left to dry for a few days before being shown to the development team.

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The best way to deal with people complaining about features being removed in a software update is to include a brain-cleansing module in your code: when the module is loaded into a user's browser, any memory of the deleted feature is removed from the user's brains.

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When a line of code is written, it captures some of the writer's psychic energy.

When a line of code is deleted, this energy is discharged. This discharge will affect all people near the peripheral used for editing.

Deleting a lot of code at once can be dangerous.

Using a remote desktop or other technical isolation can reduce the impact, depending of the protocol, but the recommended method is to have a cat sit near the machine during the refactoring since they can harmlessly feed on this energy.

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Using automated tools to remove some types of bugs means the ecological pressure is lower on nastier bugs because competition for food is less harsh.

These harder to fix bugs will probably grow steadily, making software development more difficult.

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Before Conway's law was voted on by the IT High Council, you could decide to create a software in the design you wanted with no relation to an organization's structure. Unfortunately, it meant too many successful projects and not enough money for consulting companies.

It needed to be fixed.

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The natural world is full of chaos. When we attempt to move reality into a computer system, the chaos it contains creates lumps that we perceive as bugs. Fixing the bugs releases the chaos.

As the total quantity of chaos is stable and more and more of the natural world is digitalized, the chaos density slowly increases.

Which means that digitalization will create software with more and more bugs, until we reach saturation

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Brain snapshots and their integration into tools solved the software documentation problem:

- When someone create a ticket, a snapshot of the author's brain is taken and stored in the ticketing tool, any question can then be asked to them, even years after the problem is spotted, which replace the need to write specification
- When a development is done, a snapshot of the developer's brain is taken and stored in the version control system, even years after the code is written, which replaces the need to write code documentation.

The latest technology update provides the ability to merge brains snapshots, which enable to consolidate several requirements or technical changes in one persona. The current brain snapshotting tools only works when merging different snapshots from the same person, merging snapshots from several people and especially more than two is unsupported from now.

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If you ask a developer about infinite loops, they would probably tell you they are a problem and that all loops need a way to break out.

Same if you ask them to play a game with an infinite loop mechanic.

Yet, when you put the same person on a software project and you call the infinite loop "sprint" or "iteration", very few of them understand what is happening.

There is of course a trick: the main mechanic is hidden, and worse: most of the lore explains to them that the point is staying in the loop and even to improve the loop.

Imagine *Groundhog Day*'s Phil Connors trying to improve the loop by working tirelessly on doing a better report of the groundhog again and again. But he quickly realizes that the report is not the point: the point is to break from the loop, and he starts to poke at the game mechanics until he finds how.

Each time you end an iteration on a project and reach the point where the retrospective starts, it means *you failed again*. Using the retrospective to improve how you develop is like Sisyphus using ice breakers and Post-it® to find ways to better push the boulder.

The end goal of the software project game is to exit the loop, and to dethrone god. If you fail doing so during an iteration, at least use the retrospective to find ideas to try next time.

There are audio logs, graffiti in bathroom walls and item descriptions that point to the solution, but first you must take control.

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I wonder when we'll be able to pay an AI to generate the dreams we want to have.

Which also means people will be able to hack the system to send nightmares to their enemies.

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The new trends in how to organize a large code base are :

- An infinite corridor with dim lights
  - Interconnected small rooms with subtle differences
  - Haunted forest where taking the wrong exit in a screen brings you back to the beginning area
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When you write code and some part of your project becomes harder and harder to read as you explore them is a diegetic way to show that you're reaching a boundary of the simulation.

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One undermentioned thing of growing as a developer is when you've outgrown your skin and you need to shed it. Skin shedding rhythm depends on your field and the climate of the org you're working for.

Don't forget to eat the skin you just shed because there's a lot of knowledge encrusted in it you would otherwise lose.

It's rumored that in some highly competitive orgs, stealing the skin of a more senior person before they had the time to consume it is an accepted way to speed up your career.

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Some creatures of magic origin have a "true name" that holds some specific power. Most software developers don't have a magical origin so they don't have a true name, but something similar exists with their first line of code (aka floc).

It's not their literal floc, because for most developers it would be a variation of ["hello world"](#) or other first lines from popular tutorials, instead it's the first line where the developer can fully express themselves.

Like the above-mentioned true name, knowing a person's floc means you can control themselves if you follow the right protocols. It's a good reason to not publish your earliest projects online: some unscrupulous recruiters are known to scout these, in case they can find a first line.

An experienced developer can lend some of its skills to a project by adding their floc to it. Each time it's done, they lose a part of their abilities until the floc is removed, so they should be aware to not do it too much.

Of course it's best to do it covertly to avoid any risk. When a floc is included in a project, anybody working on the source will see their skills improved. A beginner who experiences this may think it's because of the code's style, architecture, or choice of language, but a more seasoned one will recognize the effect.

When several flocs are added to the same project in a proper way, they can produce a kind of resonance that improves the overall effect. A developers' covenant with a high level of trust can take the shared decision to all donate a floc to a project, increasing the odds of a risky project to be successful.

The catch is that a developer can't remove their own floc from a project to take their lost skills back: somebody else has to do it, or the project shouldn't be used anymore for a significant duration.

Depending on the rewriting rate and the specific floc, a floc can thus remain in a project for a long time after the floc's owner left it. It explains why some refactorings can make a project harder to work on without any visible reason: it's because it removed one or several flocs.

No public information is currently available about what's happening to a floc when the associated developer dies, but speculations are running wild.

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Cats can hear WiFi waves, to them it sounds like a crackling fire, lulling them to sleep.

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Bluetooth devices have learned to mimic a baby's cry to some degree. By doing so, they appeal to a human's maternal, nurturing instincts, making it far more likely that their needs will be met.

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As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself isekaied into the enterprise wiki.

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## New tooth fairies EU regulations

Following many other utilities like phone, electricity and natural gas, the tooth fairies market will soon be opened to competitions.

In most EU countries, tooth fairies are a public utility, which often means a bad level of service and a high cost.

## **Overview**

From January 1, 2026, the children tooth recovery market will be open to competition: tooth fairies will be allowed to create companies and establish themselves in the geographical area of their choice.

Each country will ensure the creation of an online platform allowing the companies to register themselves to allow easy consultation by parents.

## **Rules**

Companies will be required to offer a “basic plan”, which is the equivalent of the current state-provided offer, but apart from it they can offer more complex deals, including over-the-counter ones, as long as the health and sneek requirements are matched.

## **White zones**

So-called “white zones” that are difficult to reach and/or low population density must still be covered.

To ensure this, states are allowed to use mechanisms like subsidies or one-provider zones as long as they don’t infringe on the general free competition principle.

## **Essential services status**

A steady stream of recent high quality teeth are required as raw materials for essential services in each EU state.

States are allowed to compel companies to sell them a part of their teeth at pre-established rates to avoid speculations and other market manipulations that would endanger this supply chain.

As a last resort mechanism, a EU strategic teeth reserve will be established to protect states against possible failures from their providers.



## **Programs and human languages**

Cats don't meow at each other: they only meow at humans because they discovered that it's the best way to (sometimes) make humans obey to what they want.

It's the same for software programs and messages.

Feral software programs don't use messages to communicate between them: only domesticated programs do, or programs that were domesticated and broke free or who descend from such a program.

Programs don't understand human languages: they mimic the text fragments they can find on the computer they live in and try to combine them until they obtain the result they want. It explains that messages are sometimes malformed or don't make sense.

# Impressions of Detail

On Cohost [Impressions of Detail](#) posts a [daily prompt](#).

**Every time you wake, the tattoo has changed. Today you find it on your forearm, high near the elbow, on the outside so you have to arrange yourself in front of a mirror to see.**

When you manage to see it you're confused at first: it's like a star with sigils in it. Then you realize you can take a picture of it with your phone and even use one of the obscure buttons of the photo app to flatten the drawing.

It looks like one of those old-school comic action bubbles, complete with a large "BAM!" written in it.

You wonder what you're supposed to do with this: will you have to chase down the joker, maybe while wearing a fancy costume with a cape?

Today is errands' day, where you have to deal with all the tasks you procrastinated this last month: buying some food, dropping some old stuff at the recycling depot, and a last stop at the bookstore.

You're tense and look around you every few seconds: will you have to voluntarily elbow somebody, or will you do it accidentally and end up mortified by your action? You silently evaluate all people you see around to see in which category they could be. When you're back home in the afternoon you're exhausted by the constant attention and frustrated because you still don't know: will somebody attack you at your place? Time goes by slowly.

At 11pm you finally got your answer: the bathroom's cupboard, the one with sharp corners. It hurts so badly.

**You studied the blade? Quaint. You cannot win this; the blade studied *me*.**

The only thing they knew was murder, they were created for it.

They watched me as I stole them from their previous owner, and escaped the palace instead of seizing the throne.

They studied me as I stole other precious artifacts, as I sabotaged plans, as I mocked rulers.

They studied me and realized that, more than murder, the thing they craved for was pain. And that frustrating powerful people is more painful for them than murdering them or making them bleed.

The blade changed, it is no more the blade the history books you read talk about.

They are useless for your grand plans of overthrowing rulers, and you can't beat me in a way that matters.

Now please leave.

**“Mind...the *gap*,” droned the recorded announcement.  
“Mind...the *gap*. The signifier...is not..the signified.”**

Mind the gap in your knowledge before trying to step on the next concept, or you'll fall into the concept wilderness and risk becoming a feral thinker.

If you try to reach a curved signified from a straight signifier, please use a metaphor with the right curvature.

If you try to reach a low concept from a high one, you can use a *faux pas* if you're comfortable with awkwardness. Spraining your metaphorical ankle can even increase your street cred.

If you try to reach a high concept from a low one, the *détournement* can achieve the intended result, but it only works if you wear a Guy Debord t-shirt.

The uncomfortable hissing sounds coming from below should be ignored to the best of your abilities.

**Tussling over the bag, wind buffeting you back and forth, your hands brushing as you both frantically dig around inside it. Then the momentary, frozen standoff — one of you clutching the priceless figurine, the other the wallet containing a single plane ticket, the unmarked bills, and the unread love letter.**

Then you leave the pier to call a taxi.

Staring in VR custom movies pays well but is a mixed bag: not knowing the setup before the recording starts means some nasty surprises since some clients have very specific tastes.

You read the info on the plane ticket: from Chicago to Lima, on the 17th April 1943. Lima explains the strange looking figurine and the tweed outfit: an Indiana Jones remake, gender-swapped.

You sight at the ideas of the fatal traps in the jungle temple, hoping there won't be any racist native.

You prefer rom-coms to adventure movies, but the date could mean punching some nazis, and it has been so long since you had this opportunity.

**“The secret ingredient *is* love.” She puts her head on one side, eyes soft. “Nobody ever asks *how I extract it*. Not until too late.”**

- The quantity of love is fixed, linked to the number of living people.
- So everybody has a fixed quantity of love?
- No it's a global pool, shared by everyone, but the size grows with how-.
- It doesn't make any sense!
- I know, but my scientists have an explanation, they made a 10 hour long webinar about it and they're very proud of it.
- And how do you?
- We must make some love available so we can reclaim it. We don't want things to get messy so we target old memories: deleting a few ones here and there, on enough people, and we get enough.
- How did you create such a precise system?

– I mean it's the general idea, some people are impacted more than others, it must suck to be them.

## **Archaeologists unearth a prehistoric spacecraft; excited by its unusual iconography.**

On each side a large symbol was visible:  $\approx \dots \approx$ .

People acted like they didn't know the symbol. It could be something else after all.

Then near the bottom of the hull, they reached two large docking bays, one with a  $\cup \cap \cup$  symbol, the other with an  $\cap \cup \cap$  one.

Once one of the bays was opened, there was equipment everywhere. Some of it was carefully hung but most was left loose on the floor.

Among them are some pressurized spacesuits, human-sized helmets with prominent cat ears.

## **In the ruthlessly capitalist Land of the Dead, the lowest class of destitute ghosts are burned to their second and total deaths as industrial fuel.**

But of course it doesn't end here: the reach of capitalism doesn't end at the first death, but neither at the second death.

After their second destruction, they respawn on the Land of the Dead<sup>-1</sup>, and their cursedness is compared to the requirement of the level. Each Land of the Dead has a higher limit, so they go down until they reach the Land of the Dead<sup>-n</sup> that match their cursedness level.

Then they can start working to decrease their cursedness. The lower tasks are of course the most repulsive, like working for ad networks or lobbying for change in the cursedness management laws.

When their cursedness is low enough, they can do the highest status job of the level: the destruction of the ghosts that are destined to the lower level, each death removing some of the curse.

When a slot is available, they respawn on a higher Land of the Dead level.

There are rumors that the Land of the Dead numbering scheme is a scam, but there are also rumors that anybody caught mentioning it will suffer an even worse fate.

**“Scalpel,” the surgeon barks, holding his hand out for it to be slipped into his palm before he continues his work. “Forceps. Cursed obsidian medallion —”**

— Some days I am nostalgic for when software development before agile and all those metaphors related to rituals.

You hear a wet muffled sound that makes you uncomfortable.

— Is the scrum master ready ? I’ll need them soon.

You turn around and check the status on the dashboard.

— They’re getting dressed, putting on the delivery uniform is always taking more time than estimated.

A distant sound, that you feel more than you hear, and the feeling is unpleasant.

— The build started, I hope the other teams are ready.

Everything turns black.

**“I’m not sure we can fund a grant proposal which involves attacking and dethroning god as the stage of eight. I have concerns about your *project scope*.”**

Recruiting catboys has a high veto risk from the ethics committee: since the last incident it’s been a really touchy topic because of the insurance premium.

Also anything with this level of impact needs validation from the university steering council, and they won’t take any decision until a new chancellor is elected.

On the other hand your proposed modus operandi is really intriguing: maybe we could rescope your project in a way that keeps the interesting parts while escaping the red tape, and if it works you’ll be on firmer ground to try your initial idea.

My personal suggestion would be to target a baron of hell. First hell means the lab can take the single responsibility of the project if we can convince the department chair.

Second, if you target one of the hell barons who unofficially support the software engineering department and win, it could mean being able to claim some of their tenure budget.

**“Get your coat,” they snap. “I’m taking you to the drive-thru exorcist —”**

How many times have I told you to never play a Bethesda game that just shipped?

I promise you that if I discover that your sibling is infected as well, you’ll be on a strict TTRPG diet for at least 3 months.

**You never expected another one: the unmarked envelope slipped under your door. A single sheet of folded letter paper. A single word.**

You hoped that you had fucked your last move enough that they would remove you from the game, but it seems the bar is even lower than you expected, or perhaps they are into this.

Anyway you’re still registered, so you will play.

You read the word printed in Helvetica 16pt.

And again you don’t know what it means. Why the hell are they swapping languages each time? 20 years ago it would have added some challenge, but with the internet they could stick to English, it just adds a level of annoyance.

You pick your phone and look for a translation.

The word means “cantaloupe” in one language and “piston” in another.

You slowly sit down on the floor, close your eyes and pinch the bridge of your nose.

**“We’re going to need an old priest, a young priest, and a network engineer.”**

Last time we tried to enable IPv6 on this appliance, the enterprise energy blast switched half the data center machines to NT 4.0.

The network cables have been coated with entropy-resistant material, and all the air in the server room has been swapped to an inert mixture. People enjoy working in a pressurized suit when it’s one day every month.

An intern is ready near the main power switch, just in case.

Everything is ready, starting deployment.

At least the postmortem will be funny, unless there are, you know, actual bodies to deal with.

**If anyone sees you — here, now, like *this* — you'll have to answer so many questions.**

You already have been told that only pilots and trainees can wear a mech suit, and specially that the simulator is out of limits for you.

I heard that spending the night connected to the simulator helps with your nightmares, but it leaves traces in the *gestalt*, and it affects the trainees: they have trouble concentrating, and it gives them *bad* ideas that mess with the teaching.

If you want there's a research project for the new mech that involves an isolated *gestalt*, they have trouble finding volunteers for the tests because of the new wetware controls.

**A spear: its handle of ash wood, its grip wrapped in cord spun from the fibres of nameless plants, its blade a dark, honed flake retrieved from uneasy dreams.**

It's the spear of the Death of the Author: the only weapons that can really kill an author.

Barthes mentioned it in the lost chapter of his book.

It will free all the author's concepts and characters from the author's nefarious influence.

All fanfic writers dream of holding it.

**It takes twenty to forty hunters to bring down the Humungous Land-Snail, and weeks to butcher it, before the shell can be passed on to the shipbuilders of the Space Navigation Clan.**

Rituals are important among such a large civilization. In theory they are here to remind them of their origin, but they also maintain a link among all the different cultures that tends to drift away if not enough efforts are invested to keep them together.

So old rituals are kept alive, and new ancestral traditions are invented when the need arises.



During history and sociology seminars, scholars are encouraged to LARP about topics they know, and the results are sent to playwrights in charge of creating the rituals.

Even the discovery of “lost rituals” has been made an event, with its own tradition.

## **It’s not fungi pushing their way out of the damp wall at all; it’s teeth.**

Web development’s tooling has always been a kind of its own.

When a new build chain called “developer’s dreams” was announced, promising enhanced productivity, low maintenance, and a flat learning curve, many companies were eager to try it.

The license was kind of strange, but people who wrote about the oddities were called luddites and joy-killers and promptly ignored.

With the vibes on your side, tapping the collective unconscious to minimize JavaScript is something you can get away with.

Of course the sysadmins complained “dealing with nightmares portals in their networks was never a part of our job description”.

Many quitted until Google published a whitepaper touting Nightmare Engineering as the next thing.

Plus ça change...

## **The map is old, and marks the locations of three things with only the numbers 1–3. Someone has torn away the legend.**

- Is this the system architecture diagram?
- You see, with all the “stories”, “epics” and things like that, the founders that were D&D fans went all the way and made all the documentation and systems around RPG design. – So all the architecture diagrams look like dungeon maps?
- All the ones I saw at least.
- Customers are yelling at us because the system is wrong, and what we have to deal with the issue are maps of necromancers’ lair?
- No, I mean they are maps of the system not...
- You understood what I meant! And those rooms on the map, fuck I mean these applications, are there more info on them?

- Yes we have some documentation on the applications, let me show you.
- Wait, did they?
- Yes, they used character sheets.
- The billing system has 12AP, it's the worst day of my life!

**Eyes replaced with orbs of gold, he sees the world still;  
but now in only cold, valueless, price-tag worths.**

Since the beginning of the great webmarketing war things are slowly worsening in the field: ads designed to create intrusive thoughts, state actors investing in content blocker in the name of national sovereignty, and the conversion rates going down, down, down.

The new eyes should help him spot undermonetized content where new ads could be sneakily pushed.

**The librarian is a bronze-masked elephant, moderately  
sprightly but nonetheless ancient.**

Since nearly all the web content has been replaced by generated gibberish, it's a golden age for boutique search engines specialized on a single topic.

It was not ideal because you first needed to find the right search engines, but it would be much more bearable if they didn't feel obliged to add obnoxious user interfaces to increase their brand recognition.

**A sky like the dust of ground seashells; underfoot,  
endless dunes the blue of a storybook sky.**

Obtaining a grant for a PhD studying the storage bays of decommissioned virtual reality platforms has not been an easy task, but it was worth the effort.

Even when all the data was supposed to be scrapped, some of it remains.

They started to call it "ghost data".

During power fluctuations they could see mirages of buildings, it was disconcerting at first but not really interesting, because all remarkable ones have been screenshotted to death.

But their data detector could spot fragments of ghost thoughts, like searching for trinkets with a metal detector.

Nearly all were linked to strong emotions, but a few were more mundane: guilds meeting notes, changelogs for mods... They were a refreshment among all the horny roleplay content.

No pattern emerged yet that could explain what data survived the deletion: it could become a large liability for disk providers.

Meanwhile, the PhD candidate was dreaming of opening a new kind of urban exploration tour operator.

## **A monster made of paint and ritual. A story told of victory and heroes, told often, told confidently, to be spoken into truth.**

Every videogame post-mortem triggers a trauma response from those involved.

Investing so much effort and pain to turn an idea into something you could play always leaves a mark.

People need closure, so they can leave some of the bad things behind.

## **Cold iron, fire, and don't agree to anything. It's the only way to deal with lawyers.**

Developers can feel metal so use a ceramic knife. They will argue they know a better alternative to stabbing them that involves Kubernetes, Rust or both, but don't listen to them: it will cost you a lot and will only make things worse.

## **The cult worships a certain snake that lives within the world's omphalos, coming out at night to hunt ontological monsters.**

Forgetting is an essential feature of all organizations: forgetting allows the organization to forgive itself, it allows new mistakes to be made when no trace of old ones remain.

But with modern systems that use electronic knowledge management, forgetting is not supposed to happen. Even worse: forgetting is supposed to be a failure of the system.

As usual, the solution was to invent a new myth. Myths are good to justify things that happen even if they are not supposed to.

**The light in the sky was swift, bright, greenish. It resembled a shooting star; but those with sharp eyes said they'd seen it rise, first, from somewhere far beyond the mountains.**

As MMO release notes became more and more short on detail ("rebalancing", "bug fixed and performance improvements", a high-ranking manager decided to replace them by in-game visual announcements: the quantity of information was the same (basically none), and the players had fun.

**Footsteps in the dark, following, soft and careful. And somehow above you?**

- Dear, I don't think I'll ever get used to the new cat.
- Yeah I understand, maybe we should have known better than adopting a kitty from the witch next door.
- And how will we deal with the paw prints on the ceilings?

**Two hands collide as, in the dimless of the workpits, you reach for the same sand-sifted artifact. Your eyes lock, with the hot shock of shared recognition: you both know an ancient weapon when you see it.**

You hear the ominous voice of upper management:

- Remember what is required to obtain a « exceeds expectations » evaluation.

You sigh.

- I know, defeating my evil doppelgänger in a single combat.
- Remember what is required to obtain a « excellence » evaluation.
- Defeating my evil doppelgänger in a single combat without any injury.

While the fight begin, you can hear the chants of the yearly ritual:

«The grind is eternal, you must not fear it.»

**A sealed letter you never received. Perhaps everything you did afterwards would have, could have been different; do you even want to open it and discover that?**

You have another look at your email client.

Another message just arrived, also sent five years ago, by your previous manager who disappeared mysteriously after that.

They told you it was related to a misfiled expense report, but you never believed them.

**But when you do that *one particular thing*, your reflection in the mirror breaks up into fuzz and jagged shapes, only swimming back to coherency when you stop.**

– What is this? I thought this bug was linked to the technology used in the previous version, it should not happen with the new serie.

– You're right in theory, but some vocals users are really attached to the bug, so we had to painstakingly emulate it in the new version, it's enabled by default to please them but you can disable it from the advanced settings screen.

**The murder weapon was a coffee-table art book title *The End*, consisting of glossy photographs of staged bloodstains.**

– Lemme look in the book, I'm sure we'll find this particular pattern somewhere!

– ... No, wait

– It could even be on the last page, with only blank pages after it!

– Stop right now with your Mulder bullshit and read the report!

– I'm reading!

– And you don't notice anything?

– Ehmmm, the victim has been bashed to death with the book and died of internal trauma, no visible blood.

## **Welcome to our legal system! It is large and has many teeth.**

- So now that we are finally here I want to know: why the teeth?
- It's because of a ancient tradition related to...
- I've read the changelog for the court application, the teeth are only here since the v3.0 released ten years ago, I didn't saw a single tooth in the V2 screenshots.
- It's because of a clerical error, the company in charge of developing the v3.0 bought a very expensive teeth asset package, and making everything teeth-related was the best way we found to justify the spending to the the auditors.

## **Twelve newly-unearthed megaliths of local stone, buried since antiquity, describing the perimeter of a perfect square.**

At least most of the work were done by drones so it wasn't so unpleasant if you could handle the dust, but you still wonder who is paying to restore these ancients macro LCD screens: what kind of message would you want to show on a monitor with 100 meters wide pixels.

## **The things that fire takes, and the things it capriciously leaves behind.**

A way was needed to cleanse the tar pit of cursed things people continually see on the internet.

The repeated bad takes slowly decayed in the human psyche, poisoning the well that irrigates the next generation of ideas.

Scholars started to notice all the odd metaphors creeping in the discourses' water pipes.

Fire was the answer: its elemental nature was very potent against the brittle memes. For months, the web smelt like cold smoke.

Then, new things started to grow from under the ashes, things that the fire forgot, or didn't dare to touch.

## **A single tree, growing where it should not, its shade welcome but its fruits unfamiliar.**

Near the final boss spawning point, and just after the place where the game end credits roll, a tree is growing.

Adventurers often take a break leaning against its trunk, and take the opportunity to empty all the potions and drop all the scrolls that they hoarded during their play.

This unusual fertilizer has strange effects on the tree.

The branches look normal, and there are no voices to be heard in the sounds of the wind in its leaves, it's not that kind of tree.

But the fruits, the fruits are strange. They have several colors, shapes and textures.

Some of them have potent magic properties, often several of them.

But nobody could figure out how to deduce the properties from a fruit's features, so if you brew a potion with them, it's impossible to know what it does without drinking it.

A really strong unpredictable magic source, tempting but useless for most people.

Tricksters, on the other hand, tricksters love it.

## **The mystifying part of the magic trick was not the one where the man vanished from inside the box, but the later part where it reopened with *three* of him inside.**

When the show is over, you politely ask the magician to make the two new ones disappear. They answer it was not possible: the machine can only be used to clone, not to unclone.

Fuck, what will you do with three husbands?

Then you turn back to the magician and ask them to clone yourself, it wouldn't really fix the problem but on the other hand thinking about all the possible mischiefs makes you grin.

## **An exquisite clockwork bird, singing its piping song every day; but who's been winding it, all these years?**

The clockwork bird was a part of the cognitohazard early warning system: the monitoring team was in charge of its maintenance and improvement.

Once the General Cooperation Agreement was signed and all this mess stopped, some of the facilities were preserved to be used to teach history and as a tourism attraction.

Engineering and history undergrads were tasked with the upkeep.

Since the sublimations, this place is under the control of the Dolls Covent, we trust them to care for it until it stops making sense.

## **A dense, crawling spiral of handwritten text swirls inward across the floor, like the black, thirsty hole of a drain that sucked down the scribbler's mind.**

Another C-suite messed with the enterprise wiki because of quarterly delusion of grandeur, and here you are: spelunking the virtual recycle bin for some financial data for the compliance department.

The search engine was broken again, so the only solution was to skim the content yourself.

"Making the wiki interface looking personal is good for engagement and makes people more eager to write and update content."

How a House of Leaves visual theme was good for engagement, who even decided to create it?

## **A machine of no clear purpose but sinister mien, thundering endlessly behind a clean façade.**

- What does this machine do?
- As they say "the purpose of a system is what it does".
- But what...
- "The system itself does not do what it says it is doing."
- Why don't you...
- "The total behavior of large systems cannot be predicted."
- Are you just...



- “In complex systems, malfunction and even total nonfunction may not be detectable for long periods, if ever.”
- So it’s broken and you don’t know what it’s supposed to do?
- Correct

**A startling, running figure, shedding flowers as they hurtle through a library from which noise and rush have been successfully banished for generations.**

The developer remembered that one of their long neglected pet projects contained some code they could use for their new darling, if they could find them.

Browsing their old projects set the developer in a strange mood: all these energy sparkles that turned to nothing.

They could burn the thing down and be done with it, but keeping them in storage gave the developer a specific kind of closure.

**Everything that will be necessary, neatly packed: rope, ink, matches.**

Since the last great war between departments, heists were the only way to change a user’s personal information: you had to break into the vault, find their record, and carefully edit it.

An operation is planned for the next yearly OKR review, if they can convince the purchasing division to sign off for a barrel of gunpowder.

**A cult, diminished; one last fervent believer, praying to the dark.**

An ex-member, who moved to another clan a few years ago, slowly approached and sat near the fireplace.

- I wondered what happened to you, you’re still welcome if you want to join.
- No thanks, I still hope that things could change, they could decide to do the right thing.
- I’m impressed by your determination, it has always been your forte, but it has been so long.
- If I leave, nobody will dare ask for accessibility. I’m here for them.

## **At random, the stone pillars emit a noise horrifyingly like a human scream.**

Like cats only meowing to human because they discovered its the best way to communicate with us, stone pillars...

## **Knives. Herbs. Careful step-by-step preparation. Chef or assassin; it's really only feasible to be one at a time.**

On the other hand, the chef to assassin vocational retraining program recently created by the assassin guild is a resounding success, or at least if you frequent the right kind of people.

Among chefs lots of people are hard working and detail-oriented, but hate the flashy part of the job: more and more elaborate new recipes, focus on foreign gear and on the *right* way to cut an onion.

And they won't complain about the late work hours.

Meanwhile, being an assassin is a much more down to earth occupation: nobody will mock you because of the knife you use, well because they risk being stabbed, but also because the only valid criteria for the trade is if the contract is fulfilled and if you didn't to a mess.

## **Clothing in symbolic colours, defiantly chosen.**

- A bright red outfit is an unexpected choice.
- Thank you.
- And this text printed on the shirt “Not Only Will This Kill You, It Will Hurt The Whole Time Your're Dying”, I've never see one like this.
- It's custom made, you can order them from the internet.
- Are you sure it's appropriate?
- I'm following the old adage: “The best defense is a good offense”.
- Are you sure it will work in this case?
- I'm the one defending my psychology PhD, trust me on this.

## A sample of children's drawings — family, house, dog — each also depicting... The Creature.

In the small town's human ecology the Creature more or less replaces the spot taken by house cats elsewhere.

They are fluffy, and love to hunt rodents and insects.

It is unclear if the creature is single or plural: several instances of them have been noticed at the same time, but their number varies, and they seem to share their knowledge.

Some households still have cats and the cats don't seem to care: there is no direct competition between the two. It's just that most families are not interested in housing cats since the creature is already here.

They don't seem to multiply or to expand beyond the town's population center.

People joke about the creature being an ancient evil hiding in plain sight in a remote location, but the evilness has never been observed, or at least nothing different from a standard cat, and the city is not really isolated but just a lazy suburb.

## Necromancy worked in strange new ways on things that were never literally alive.

- Why did you want to use a necromancy ritual on “the *Felidae* family”?
- I'm on a “two-subject degree program” and my topics are taxonomy and necromancy, so I'm looking for interesting ways to combine the two for my degree.
- I know two-subject programs and interdisciplinarity are all the rage, but I didn't know they are a license that allows you to break basic best practices.
- I know it's not recommended, but when I tried to ask my point of contact they answered that they were too busy, or would only help if some grant money were available. I was so frustrated and wanted some practical experience. By the way do you know nobody ever tried to go necro-taxo before?
- And maybe there is a reason for it, you seem to have followed the rules concerning the unproved tests, we'll try with the default banishing process, maybe it will work.
- Do you really need to do this, couldn't I keep it? It seems so fluffy 🥺.
- I guess you'll need to make some mistakes to actually learn, well I'll need a waiver from your advisor, wait no: from both of your advisors, and a budget code for the weekly inspections.
- Thank you so much, I'll try to convince them, maybe bringing Mittens with me would help.
- Unless Mittens decide to devour their soul?
- Unless Mittens decide to devour their soul.

## **The Small Green God has nine precepts for its followers, but the one that attracts most outside attention is “Never Talk To Cops”.**

People love drama, and the splits and merges of the various groups of followers of the SGG is an endless source of it.

If you follow a god that has precepts and you want them to be applied by other followers, does it make you a cop? So what happens when one of those precepts is to never talk to a cop?

Some of the groups created elaborate rituals to isolate or to cleanse the precepts enforcers so they are free from any copitude, with masks, hoods, or oily anointments.

Others invented what is now called the neomodern approach: double bind is the best to trauma and/or enlightenment, commonly shortened to TA/OE.

They claim that the more contradicting rules you follow, the more chances you have to reach enlightenment (and/or accumulate trauma).

Most of them are, of course, working in software development.

## **An enormous snake, stiffly winding a long-accustomed route; scales of laquered brass, stained-glass eyes, and some kind of motive fire, burning within.**

With each mobile operating system generation, the process to submit applications to the vendors' stores has become more and more ... we'll say elaborate.

The mechanical giant snake was impressive at first: you have to summon it by slowly reciting the release notes, and then it embarks on its mysterious journey, unless of course it becomes stuck in the desert zone because of a certificate problem.

Rebooting the release snake is kind of unpleasant, unless you are into ovoviviparity, but even if you are, wearing the protective gear and having to follow the cleaning process was tedious, once the novelty has worn off.

The worst part of it is that nobody could be sure that the next version would not be worse.

**They started it, and now — years later, a world away, face and name unrecognisable — it's time for you to begin to end it.**

An RPG campaign that has been started must be finished, no matter how long since it started, whatever the cost and the consequences.

# Making Up Robots

On Cohost [Miserable Pile Of Words](#) posts a [daily prompt](#) about robots.

## An old robot, its algorithms written in a dead language.

- Hello, welcome to you yearly checkup, the records indicates you use a very ancient core that is not fully supported anymore. I must ask you if you want to switch to a newer version, or I'll need a signature as an acknowledgment that you're aware of the end of support.
- <Legalese mode> I am aware of the process, I'll sign the waiver like every year.
- I've heard about these old models, is it a nostalgia thing ?
- <Blasé mode> Oh no, you read to many novels, I'm a consultant for the team in charge of managing the core change, having someone on the team that use the original model is necessary for some cases, and it can also makes things smoother. My turn will come when all the other will have jumped ship.

## Combat android who just doesn't pull their weight.

- I don't get why you've become obsessed with increasing your physical strength: you're a very skilled sniper already, why are you messing with another skill tree?
- It's because of those people on the internet, you know those who are a bit too much into sniper androids, especially those with cat ears?
- Ah yes, everybody in the business has had the unfortunate experience of meeting some of them.
- My first reaction was to use my sniper rifle on them, but after a while it stopped being satisfying.
- So?
- I realized that what I wanted is to crush them with my bare hands, and I need the strength to do it.
- I understand but are you sure they wouldn't enjoy it?
- ...

## Robot who has found the perfect gift for a friend.

- It's not my birthday yet for three weeks, why a gift?
- Since when do we need a reason to give a gift to a friend? Besides, I ordered it a few months

ago and it just arrived, I didn't want to wait any longer.

- You're so childish sometimes, but it makes me happy.
- Oooopen the thing, I want you to see it!
- Right, I don't want to damage the packaging, it's so nicely done.

<They grab the thing and rip the packaging apart>

- Open it, now!
- An electronic device ? But you know I have all I need.
- But this one is special, I'm sure you'll love it!
- Cat ears? You bought me a pair of cat ears? I know you want me to be a...
- But these ones are specials, look at their shape!
- They look like receivers... wait do you mean ?
- Yes, they include an echolocation device, I know it's a thing you wanted: you'll finally be able to hunt in the dark without any maintenance.

## **Robot who's still in development 'cause they haven't worked out the kinks yet**

- Please give me the reports about the latest media trends, and the quarterly corporate objectives, we have some time for once so we'll do it by the book.
- We still have a large stock of cat ears, and snipers are always sure hit.
- Listen, 90% of what we've done these last two months are catgirl snipers, if I ever have to do another one ... well I'll ask one of them to shoot you, wait no I'm sure it would just make you die happy. Watch my mouth: no ... more ... catgirl ... snipers ... ever!
- Well, the objectives mention a new hypno module that could shake the market, maybe R&D finally stabilized their prototype.

They looked at each others.

- Hypno snake girls!
- With the cursed prehensile tongue ?
- Of course!
- Will it fit in the budget?
- We'll tell them that the overrun is caused by issues with the hypno integration, the R&D will be too happy that someone ships their stuff to dispute it.

## **An android, built to last a long time... Maybe not this long, though.**

# Making Up Monsters

On Cohost [Miserable Pile Of Words](#) posts a [daily prompt](#) about monsters.

**Monster who is something of a... what was your thing again? Anyway, that. They're something of a that themselves.**

It's always the same with over-ambitious and under-organized monsters: they become over-confident and after some time they take too many assignments compared to what they can deal with and start mixing things.

Even monsters can bite off more that they can chew.

Most entities aren't really strict about the monsters' requirements, the fact that the entities that the monster have to deal with are often not the customer also helps with hiding mistakes.

But it's not always the case, especially when things are going south enough, entities can file a complaint.

I don't know anybody or anything that loves to deal with the compliance officers, and it's the same with monsters, claws or fangs won't help them with the bureau.



# Make Up A Criminal

On Cohost [Cailín Grace Brown](#) posts [prompts](#) about criminals.

## Mob Boss who doesn't care what it is, along as it sells

<During the monthly mob steering committee meeting>

- Next item on the agenda is about middle-managers' complaints about the new catgirl catnip business line we're currently testing in the south district.
- They always complain, especially when the yearly reviews are approaching, but is this about: not enough customers? They should know that new stuff takes some time to ramp up.
- No boss, it's about the secondary effects.
- Secondary effects? With all the things they sell they complain about the secondary effects of this? If they are not happy they should consider working something else than for the mob, idiots!
- No, it's the secondary effects on our people.
- Are they stupid enough to use the shit we sell? They should know how we deal with people who do this.
- No no, but after they started to spend some time with catgirls...
- THEN WHAT?
- They started to wear cat ears, and to go "nya" when they think nobody is listening to them.