

DAN CONOVER

THE BEHOLDER

Technology changes culture, though not always along the lines imagined by ethicists, futurists and science fiction writers. One safe bet: Future politicians will still be ambitious, self-satisfied jackasses. Anyway, the technology imagined here in 2005 is practically upon us in 2008.

Pierre Boudreaux came from Alexandria, Louisiana, where his father was a judge and his mother was a hostess. It was a lovely life, attended by a two-person permanent household staff and an ever-changing array of black gardeners and caterers, all of whom waltzed through their duties on the practiced orders of Mrs. Etienne Boudreaux, as accomplished a matron as had ever graced the parish. This civilized childhood gave Pierre a cultured and hedonistic view of the world, one that Charleston, South Carolina, was now inexplicably grinding to a nub.

Like this particular night: He had wrapped up at the solicitor's office by 6, caught a quick bite at a French restaurant just off Upper King Street with fellow first-year assistant Lydon McLeod, parked his hybrid at his utterly modern 19th century renovated condo and then strolled down Broad Street to meet a girl at a bar. It was a perfectly pleasant evening's arrangement, and yet nothing

he did seemed to get him anywhere in this town. McLeod had spent most of their meal on his pod phone, the bar was loud and crowded, and the object of his affection was showing no interest in the kind of intimate conversation he'd imagined. Plus he was drunk again. Real life was just so messy.

For all its reputation as an antebellum paradise where people moved slowly and enjoyed the finer things in life, Pierre found the city disappointingly normal. Even here, in the cradle of the Confederacy, life had accelerated to the speed of data transmission, and no matter how hard he tried, Pierre just couldn't keep up. His life in Charleston was a two-wheel drive sedan spinning its wheels in the marsh and rapidly sinking toward the axles.

He regarded his date across the wrought-iron patio table behind The Blind Tiger and tried to reduce her to one image, like she had been when he arrived. Too many gin and tonics had doubled her, so that Sherri Lee Pinckney and her ghostly twin floated side by side, chatting over their shoulders with Eric Carr, the handsome gallery owner who wore his sunglasses around his neck in permanent affectation. It all seemed a losing proposition, and Boudreaux's daddy had always taught him to

be gracious in the face of obvious defeat. Pierre ultimately conceded his pseudo-date to the better-looking Eric and rose to leave.

It was hard to let her go, particularly when there were two of her on display: She was a vision in a little black dress, Lowcountry style: 26, blonde, trim and sinuous. Sherri Lee was the refined embodiment of a social system that stretched back to 1670, well-mannered and graceful, but with a bit of sass programmed into her genes. She was made for galas and book club meeting, oyster roasts in winter and long summer days on the beach, and the first time he saw her, on the rooftop bar at the Harbor Club, Pierre had gazed at her and imagined an entire life together, a happy, productive marriage of bayou Cajun and sweetgrass Lowcountry. Only after he had envisioned them celebrating the birth of their grandchildren did he walk up and introduce himself.

Two basically uneventful dates had led them here, but now the drink made him dizzy and the gypsy jazz trio in the bar's ancient walled courtyard swirled musical figures and ghosts through the gin-addled mists of his brain. Pierre found himself drifting not unpleasantly over the courtyard, back through the open doors of the former speakeasy, back through the mass of attorneys and trust-funders and Confederate re-enactors. They morphed and shifted, a Broad Street kaleidoscope, and by the time he'd finally reached the sidewalk he remembered that he had to pee.

He was leaning against a brick wall in a narrow alley and producing an impressive stream of urine when Sherri Lee materialized at his back. "Pierre? Is that you?" He finished, zipped and adjusted before turning around, presenting himself as proudly as was possible under the circumstances.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"My dear Sherri Lee," Pierre said, sucking in his belly and stretching to his full 5 feet and 10 inches, "I am merely doing to Charleston what Charleston has done to me."

"You drink too much, Pierre," Sherri Lee

Pinckney said. "And your charming act is too... Foghorn Leghorn, okay? So that's it. Goodbye, Pierre," she said, and turned on her heel toward State Street and her parked BMW.

"Okay then," he mumbled feebly after her as she stalked off. "Call me!"

That was the end of their third date, and that was all for Ms. Sherri Lee Pinckney.

He arrived home an hour later, around 2 a.m., having stopped twice along his weaving route to vomit. He made it up the stairs to his renovated Edwardian condo overlooking Colonial Lake and collapsed on the bed, fully clothed in his tan, summer weight prosecutor's uniform. There he slept until well past 9.

As he woke to his Saturday, the thought dawned on him that the only real relationship problem in his life was the having-to-relate-to-other-people part. And it hardly seemed fair: His father had gone through his entire life without having to relate to a soul, and he died a happy man with his own boat.

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Josh Tabor, the district Solicitor, was an atypical Charleston attorney. His family wasn't from the Lowcountry, he had not grown up in the Lowcountry, and his ambitions lay beyond the Lowcountry. In fact, were it not for these qualities in his boss, Pierre Boudreaux might never have gotten his job prosecuting cases as an assistant solicitor.

Most of the young assistants in the Charleston office of the elected 9th District Solicitor were sons and daughters of the peninsula and the islands, with the occasional social-climbing North Charlestonian thrown into the mix for all those nasty drug-court cases. But Tabor was an Upstate-born Baptist who arrived in Charleston after college with his eyes on bigger prizes: the governor's mansion, the Senate, then ... who knows? He had swept into office on the governor's Republican coattails, promising to restore Christian conservative values to a solicitor's

office with a penchant for homoerotic sex scandals.

Pierre originally had considered him just another mostly harmless Bible-thumper, but now, after only six months on the job, he simply viewed Tabor as Satan incarnate. It wasn't the man's religion that offended Pierre, as that was the least objectionable of his character traits: He was venal and stupid, an inveterate snoop and a paranoid control freak. Tabor's standards shifted constantly, and his ill-advised interventions typically kept everyone in the office on a low boil.

So when Tabor's face popped up on Pierre's plasma screen to alert him of an incoming call from his boss, Tabor cursed. Wasn't it enough that he had to spend 10 hours a day with the insipid twit? And to call in the middle of the live broadcast of the Heritage Classic? It was just bad form.

"Boudreaux," Tabor said when his voice came up on the apartment's sound system. "They've found their way around the Family Protection Act! And this time they're aiming straight at our youngsters!"

Pierre scratched his belly and spoke to the image in the lower righthand corner of the screen as if it were actually Tabor and not just his icon. "Who has?"

"The pornographers! They've made a *porn video game*, Boudreaux! And I have it on good authority that this game is being sold *right here in Charleston*."

Good authority usually meant whatever political newsfeed Tabor was tracking that particular week.

"It's Saturday, sir. I'm watching golf in my underwear. What would you like me to do about it?"

"I want you to drive up to that big-box retailer in North Charleston, the chain with the bright blue logo that always boasts about having all the newest titles first. Then buy yourself a copy of a new game called "Porn Tycoon II: Virtual Studio." I want you to review it this weekend and come to work Monday ready to brief the staff on all the possible avenues of prosecution for the retailer and the manufacturer."

Pierre shot a glance over at his game rack. Somewhere in there lay a copy of the original "Porn Tycoon," which had caused a minor ripple of outrage when it appeared on the market a couple of years before. For all its titillating set-ups, the game was really just derivative softcore RPG: Players tried to build a porn empire from scratch, all while fending off the mafia, the FBI, jealous husbands and the IRS. The casting scenes were suggestive, but not explicit, and the publicity stirred by protestors was both free and priceless.

"Why me, sir?" Pierre asked. "I'm not sure I'm the man for this assignment."

"You're the first man I thought of," Tabor said. "You've got one of those things... what's it called? An E-On? Those gaming systems. My kids keep asking for one, but I'm not about to spend money on that filth. Not that I'm saying it's wrong for an adult to own one, but you understand what I'm saying, Mr. Boudreaux."

Actually, Pierre's gaming system was an E-On-Extreme, and it was a state-of-the-art gamer station. The thing had cost him a car payment, but it was money well spent. On the better games, with the graphics optimized, E-On-Extreme offered high-definition rendering that was practically film quality. His generation had grown up playing electronic games. Come to think of it, all the young assistant solicitors played them.

"Sir, most of the assistants are gamers. Or at least grew up gaming."

"Yes, but you're from New Orleans. Reviewing pornography shouldn't offend you too much, not in the way it would an Anglo-Saxon. See what I mean?"

"Alexandria, sir."

"What?"

"Alexandria. I'm from Alexandria, not New Orleans."

"But that's close to New Orleans, right? It's in Louisiana, I mean."

"Yes."

"Exactly," the solicitor concluded, as if winning

the point. "Louisiana culture is based on the culture of the French people, which accounts for its dissipated and immoral institutions. No offense against you or your Catholic church, Mr. Boudreaux."

"Of course sir," Pierre said. What he wouldn't do for a good voodoo curse ...

"Anyway, just go get the product and study it carefully," Tabor said. "I'm told by good sources that this so-called 'game' is a child-molester's dream come true. We're going to show these porno-punks that they can't peddle their filth in the 9th Circuit. I want to send a message. Do you get my meaning, Mr. Boudreaux?"

"Loud and clear, Mr. Tabor."

And that meaning was: *Tabor for governor.*

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The box lacked the lurid, semi-comical cover art from the original "Porn Tycoon" game, as if the manufacturer were not merely updating the franchise but moving it in a new direction. Yet there was nothing about the packaging that would violate any reasonable community standard for retail display, so there went an obvious line of attack: The cover was just a computer-generated blonde, looking back over her tanned shoulder at the viewer with a provocative expression. A large yellow warning sticker shouted the game's unsuitability for children.

"Virtual Studio," said the sales clerk with an approving tone. He dragged the bar code across the scanner. Pierre checked over his shoulder to make sure there was no one looking at him, but the clerk prattled on, oblivious. "Excellent. Just came out yesterday, but we got pre-releases last week. Perk of the job. You'll dig it, man. State of the art. Got any I.D. on you?"

That surprised him. Pierre Boudreaux was 32, and with his grown-up haircut and paunch he looked older.

"Sorry, dude," the clerk said, checking the date on

his driver's license. "The boss makes us check."

Damn. Another perfectly good opportunity for a charge shot down in its prime.

Pierre exited the big box and tucked the game into his man-purse shoulder bag, scanning the parking lot on the off-chance that someone he knew might shop there.

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With his curtains closed and the AC on full-blast, Pierre's condo made for quite the comfortable home theater. He stood by the balcony window for just a moment before closing the curtains, soaking up the sun-saturated historic district, the concrete-banked tidal lake, the crazy mid-day joggers sweating under the legendary blanket of Palmetto State heat and humidity. *I really need to get back to jogging*, he thought, *maybe join a gym*. Only he was busy these days. He drew the blinds.

His plasma screen warmed in the still room, bathing the wall in an ambient glow that mimicked the color palate of the image on screen. First, the E-On-Extreme logo, followed by the logo for Sinergy Games. Pierre settled back on his couch in his boxer shorts with his wireless game controller. On the coffee table he'd placed his legal pad and a box of tissues. If the game was as good as he'd been told, he saw no reason why he couldn't combine a little business and pleasure.

Instead of a menu, the first screen featured the live-action blonde from the cover, only she was wearing a bikini and lounging by a pool on a sunny day. The woman rose from her chair and walked directly toward the camera, stared provocatively through the plasma screen at him and then smiled as if she were being naughty. "Hi. I'm Jenny. And I want you to make a movie with me. Want me to show you how?" A yes-no toggle appeared on the right and Pierre clicked it.

"Would you like a demonstration of what I can do for you?" she asked. He clicked the "yes" toggle,

and a “Quick Start” menu appeared, providing a list of explicit sexual acts. “Just tell me what you want and I’ll do it for you.”

Pierre felt his heart rate increase, and he hesitated to select an action. Instead he rose and walked toward the screen, marveling at the virtual porn star’s lifelike skin and movements. She looked at least as real as most of his erotic memories did, but with the advantage of being utterly flawless. Even Sherri Lee Pinckney had some over-large pores, come to think of it.

“Come on, big boy. What are you waiting for? Give me a command,” she whispered. “I like it when you tell me what to do.”

Nervously, Pierre clicked the fellatio button.

“Oh, so you want my mouth?” the computer porn actress purred. “Well let’s see what you’ve got for me.” The camera panned down as the animated woman knelt before him. At least his virtual self was well endowed. “Mmm,” the computer girl cooed approvingly. “This is gonna be good.”

As the blonde went to work on his computer persona, Pierre’s real-world jaw dropped. It stayed there.

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‘A and you can make them do whatever you want?’ McLeod asked over the phone.

“Oh yeah,” said Pierre, who was using the game controller to direct the activities of a threesome while he told his fellow solicitor about the PT2VS set up. “There’s a menu of options for every scene: position, tempo, attitude, you name it. You want her quiet and sweet, she’s quiet and sweet. You want her screaming and begging, she does it. There’s even an orgasm button: L for girls, R for boys.”

“All from your POV?” he asked.

“Oh no,” Pierre said, pausing to rearrange the computer-generated actors. He had them set on gentle, so that the woman accepted her second lover slowly with barely a whimper. Pierre grinned at what he had wrought. “I mean, you can watch it from your POV, but you can see it from any angle,

change camera positions, even change characters in the middle of an orgy. You could even be a chick if you wanted to be.”

“And you say it looks real.”

“Hell yes. The production values are film quality. Your average porno is digital video crap, no lighting, no sound quality. This is ten times better.”

“Somebody is gonna get rich off of this one,” McLeod said.

“Not if the boss has his way,” Pierre said.

Pierre heard loud crunching noises through the receiver. “Jesus, Lydon, what are you eating?”

“My kid left a bowl of cereal out before his nap and I’m finishing it,” McLeod said. “Is that some kind of crime?”

“No, it just sounds like you’re walking on baskets over there.”

“I’m thinking,” McLeod said. “I can see why Tabor wants a piece of this politically, but the thing is, I haven’t heard anything yet that sounds even remotely actionable unless we pushed some weak-ass community standards rap and tried to get them on an obscenity violation. I don’t like our chances on that one, not even in the 4th Circuit. Do you see anything else we could try?”

Pierre didn’t respond immediately: he had increased the pace and intensity of the sex on screen to fast and rough, and he was so enthralled by the action that he hadn’t noticed McLeod was waiting for a response.

“Yo, Boudreaux,” McLeod said. “Quit jacking off for just a second and answer my question: Do you see anything that looks obscene by a reasonable community standard?”

“Oh hell yeah,” Pierre said. “This thing has it all.”

McLeod’s voice dropped a register. “What about anything, you know, for *couples*? I mean, me and Erica, we used to watch a little on DVD, pay-per-view in hotels, that sort of thing. But now it’s all so juvenile, and the music is bad, and it just isn’t really inspiring for her.”

Pierre pressed the L button and held it, using the camera joystick to pan slowly around the female

actress as he controlled her orgasm, stretching her ecstasy to absurd lengths. “Lydon, I think Erica could get exactly what turns her on out of this thing.”

“Cool,” McLeod said. “Not that I’d ever do it. Couldn’t ever get the game system away from the boys.”

“Give it a thought,” Pierre said. “This thing is amazing. Anyway, I’ve really got to go. I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“See you Monday,” McLeod said, and hung up. Pierre increased the intensity another notch, working himself frantically for several minutes, and pushed the R button at just the right instant.

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The conference room in the solicitor’s office was paneled with dark wood, and portraits of Strom Thurmond and other great South Carolinians beamed down upon them. Pierre’s only childhood memory of Strom was a 90-something senator struggling to pronounce the word “condom” during congressional hearings, but he’d been in South Carolina long enough to know that the randy old pol would have loved this scene: A room full of lawyers watching a demonstration of a computer-generated orgy.

“So let me get this straight,” Tabor said, his pale, boyish face signaling nothing but disgust. “You can direct the action using that controller?”

“Yes sir.”

“And that would include commands that would include various forms of illegal sodomy?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“Fellatio, cunnilingus?”

“Yes sir.”

“Anal sex? Group sex?”

“That’s correct, sir.”

“Could one instruct the computer to animate sex with an animal?”

Pierre had to sit forward and check the documentation he had downloaded. He thumbed

through the index. “Nope. Nothing in here to indicate a setting for bestiality.”

“And what about homosexual acts?”

“Yes sir. Here, you simply press the B button on this menu, the “Select Actors” screen, and get to the “all male” or “all female” options. After that you just follow it through as you would the heterosexual actor development screens: body type, hair color, height, weight, etc. Or you can simply select from one of the bisexual or homosexual scenarios.”

“I see,” said Tabor. “So there are stock scenarios. Do any of them involve teachers and students? Scoutmasters? Catholic priests? Things of that nature?”

“No sir,” Pierre said. “I checked the scenarios carefully for anything that looked like it might be some kind of code name for child erotica.”

“I find that term offensive,” said Tabor. “Please don’t use it again. This is child pornography. Child smut. Child abuse. Don’t dignify it with the term ‘erotica.’”

“Sorry sir.”

“How about that ‘actor creation screen’ you were talking about. Could a sexual deviant use those variables to create what looks like a child and then abuse that image to satisfy his perverted urges?”

“In theory...” Pierre began, but then Rose Simms, a 40-year-old assistant solicitor, interrupted him.

“Yes, but where’s the line on that?” Simms asked. “Looking young is one thing. I don’t see how we can prosecute someone for child pornography when no children are involved.”

“You leave that up to me,” Tabor said. “Mr. Boudreaux says the system can be used to create little boys as playthings for gay pedophiles.”

“Actually, I really don’t know that, sir,” said Pierre. “I haven’t really pushed those variables.”

“Well see that you do, Mr. Boudreaux. Because that’s exactly what the perverts are going to be doing. They’re going to be pushing and pushing and pushing the envelope, because they are sick, and these so called ‘games’ feed that sickness. I actually feel sorry for them, in a way: It must be horrible

to be so compelled, so consumed by dark lusts. But that's what's going to be happening in homes across the country unless we step up now and do something about it."

The assistants exchanged silent looks around the table.

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That night, alone in his condo, Pierre spent more than an hour toying with the Actor Creation Screen, lovingly perfecting his replica of Sherri Lee Pinckney. There was no exact match with a Charleston alleyway, but Pierre adapted a setting called "Film Noir," which included a gritty urban set that looked somewhat similar. After that, he typed in dialog, which was a slow process if you wanted customized sentences, and by the time he had established the rules for his scenario it was almost 10:30.

Yet Pierre was wide awake. He punched the play button and the game system rendered the movie he had imagined in precise detail: the Pierre-like male actor stumbling into the alley to pee; the Sherri Lee Pinckney look-alike following him there.

"What are you doing, Mr. Boudreaux?" she asked, then gasped when the male actor turned around, revealing himself.

"O my God, Mr. Boudreaux!" Sherri Lee gasped. "You're so bad!"

"I'm not like your Charleston boys, Sherri Lee. And I think you like that."

She approached him boldly, then kissed him and stroked his crotch.

"You're not a boy, Pierre. You're a man."

Pierre replayed the alley sex scene over and over, toggling the variables up and down, changing camera positions, occasionally switching sexual acts, but typically making the sex increasingly rough. At the upper range for intensity and speed, the virtual Sherri Lee Pinckney's lovely face contorted in a combination of concentration, pain and utter bliss.

It was his masterpiece.

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Theory wasn't enough, and that was the problem. Tabor wanted kiddie porn that would sicken a jury, but he didn't want to fiddle with it himself: He wanted Mr. Boudreaux to do it. And Pierre, for all his many faults and imperfections, was not a pedophile. As amazing as his collection of Sherri Lee Pinckney adventures was becoming, he was flop as a man-boy porno director.

"Okay, see, that's disgusting, but that's still not it," Tabor said, dissecting Pierre's latest work as if the on-screen sex had zero effect on him. "The boy appears to be enjoying it. Can't you make it seem like the pedophile is enjoying the boy's suffering?"

The rest of the assistants turned their eyes away from the screen, scanning the portraits in the conference room and wishing it all away.

"I can go into the dialog box and change the words if you like. But there's no rape scenario in the programming if that's what you're looking for. No S&M, no bondage."

"But you can make it harder, right? More extreme?"

"Sure," said Boudreaux. "There's a toggle right on the screen where..."

"Good," said Tabor. "Good. Now see if you can bring up a grimace on his face. Something a little more pained."

Pierre tinkered with the controller, and found himself growing nauseous.

"That's much better," Tabor said as the gaming system rendered the newly tweaked scene. He borrowed Pierre's controller and clumsily swapped camera angles, exploring the virtual perversion they had created.

"You see, ladies and gentlemen?" Tabor said, gesturing toward the plasma screen. "You all laughed at me for pursuing this – and don't tell me you didn't, I'm not stupid – but look at what we've created: A moving image so disgusting and vile that

you little tender-hearts can't even look at it. Well, look at it: What do you see?"

"I see a pot-bellied nightmare having anal intercourse with a young-looking adult male," McLeod said. "I see a creation of our imaginations. That's what the defense is going to say."

"I see a cartoon," said Simms. "And that's what the appellate court is going to see, too."

"Ah, but that's where you're all missing the boat," said Tabor, smiling now. "Because what's important is what the jury is going to see: rape and buggery. The obscene, forced defiling of a child. Because ladies and gentlemen, by the time I get this scene dialed in just right, by the time I introduce it with my particular skills, every single man and woman on that panel is going to think they are witnessing the debauching of their own offspring, virtually rendered by frustrated old perverts just looking for a little flame to stoke the banked fires of their sick obsessions."

Simms tossed her hands above her shoulders in frustration. "What's the point of that?" she said. "Even if we win here, it's going to be overturned on appeal. I mean, you know that, right? We're talking years of litigation, millions of dollars of taxpayer money..."

"Yes, that's right," Tabor said. "But we're on the side of the angels, Ms. Simms. It will all be worth it. Think of the cost of *not* doing it: The cost to society, to women and children – heck, even to the men who are debased by their obsessions. We need to send a message to the world: This line will not be crossed, and this line is drawn here, in Charleston, South Carolina. And I want to be the first to draw that line."

Simms rose from her seat, shaking her head sadly. "I just can't do it, Josh. I think you're a good man and all that, but everybody in this room knows you're doing this for political exposure. You want to run for governor, or congress, or whatever it is you're after, have at it. But I'm not going to be part of your campaign. Not when we've got real cases going without attention. The docket is more backed

up than it was under your predecessor now, and sooner or later a reporter is going to learn how to use a computer and then we'll have stories about our plea bargain fiascos."

Tabor went cold-eyed and reptilian, sinking back in his chair and coolly knitting his fingers together before his lips. "Ms. Simms, it seems you're accusing me of putting politics ahead of my duties, duties which I swore before God to attend."

"Yes," she said, fixing her eyes on her boss. "That is, ultimately, what I am saying."

"Then I accept your resignation with sadness," he said, cutting his eyes away from her. "Mr. Boudreaux, please escort our former colleague to the security desk. They'll help her pack up her things."

"Oh no," Simms said, refusing to budge, her voice rising. "I'm not making it easy on you, you self-righteous bastard. You want me outta here, you're going to have to fire me."

"Okay then," Tabor said, not looking up. "You're fired. Mr. Boudreaux, please escort our former colleague to the security desk. They'll help her pack up her things."

Simms picked up the case files in front of her and pitched the stack at her former boss, then stormed away.

"She's going to regret that," Tabor said.

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From codebanker.blogplanet.com:

no surprise on this one: seemz a district attorney in birmingham, alabama, has decided to grab a little pub for hisself today by prosecuting e-on and the makers of PT2VS. didn't take much to predict this would happen – and sinergy games was waiting on it, too. the company posted this statement within five minutes of the notification of filing in bamalama: "PT2 Virtual Studio is an adult simulation game made for adults, by adults, within the confines of all applicable statutory restrictions. Sinergy Games, Inc., plans to defend itself and its product vigorously

against these misleading and manipulative charges.”

yeah, yeah, whatever. listen: sinergy would have to be run by retarded bonobos not to have recognized the inevitability of this bullshit obscenity charge. they've built a multi-million dollar marketing scheme around being sued, and everybody was just waiting to see who would provide the suit... in fact, the only losers here are the DAs in greenville and macon and charleston and jackson that were rumored to be racing toward their respective courthouses with similar suits.

here's what you're gonna see, campers: sinergy is gonna milk all the bad-boy angles it can out of this. they're gonna get free pub out of this they could never possibly afford otherwise. and it's gonna make PT2VS one of the biggest selling games of the year.

plus, we got a beta copy here at codebanker, and brother, let us testify, because this mo-fo will have you pounding some serious pud... so if you're asking us for stock tips: BUY SINERGY! BUY BUY BUY!!!

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Phone rings.

Boudreaux: Hello?

Caller: Hello, Pierre Boudreaux?

Boudreaux: Speaking.

Caller: Hi, Mr. Boudreaux, I'm Paul St. Germaine from NewsNet. Have I caught you at a bad time?

Boudreaux: Uh, I'm late for a deposition...

St. Germaine: Oh, yeah, I see, sure. Listen, Mr. Boudreaux, I just wanted to get your comment on these reports that your boss assigned you to configure PT2VS to simulate homosexual kiddie porn.

Boudreaux: (Inaudible)

St. Germaine: I'm sorry, what?

Boudreaux: Where'd you get that?

St. Germaine: Couple of sites have posted it in the last... I dunno, twenty minutes? Half an hour. You didn't know?

Boudreaux: I've been in court.

St. Germaine: Well, you might wanna try that gamer news blog, codebanker. They're collecting

all this shit and they've got you in there. Are you looking at it now?

Boudreaux: I've the site up now. Jesus. Where'd they get those screen shots?

St. Germaine: You know gamers – unruly punks. Look, man, I can understand the position you're in: You've got a boss who wants a little prurient pub, and he has you go do the dirty work. Keeps himself arm's length, so to speak. But, um, what I need to know for the post I'm working on is, is that your work in those screen shots? Because that is one ugly old fat dude you put on top.

Boudreaux: You know I can't comment on that. This is an ongoing criminal prosecution, or... well wait. It's not even filed yet. How'd you get this?

St. Germaine: Bloggers. Gamers. Anarchists. Whatever. I'm just telling you it's out there, Mr. Boudreaux, and we're monitoring the pings and tracks, and the traffic on this is high. Very high.

Boudreaux: Oh my God.

St. Germaine: What?

Boudreaux: I'm looking at this blog. They're calling me “Buggery Boudreaux.”

St. Germaine: I'm sorry. That was below the belt. So to speak.

Boudreaux: Why are you calling me?

St. Germaine: We want your side for NewsNet. I mean, the news on the Alabama criminal charges in Birmingham was the big gaming industry story yesterday, but that didn't have screen shots. These are going everywhere. Do you know who might have leaked them?

Boudreaux: I have a pretty good idea.

St. Germaine: Because it's usually a disgruntled coworker. This person have a name?

(Beeps)

Boudreaux: Hold on just a second, I've got another call coming through.

(Clicks)

Hello?

Caller: Hi, I'm calling for Mr. Pierre Boudreaux?

Boudreaux: Speaking.

Caller: Hello, I'm Frank Resny from DataAge,

and I write the most widely read electronic ethics blog on the net. Are you aware that you're being called "Buggery Boudreaux" in connection with those PT2VS vids that are circulating around today?

Boudreaux: I really can't...

Resny: Because my real question is pretty simple, Mr. Boudreaux: If your boss is correct in his assertion that this stuff is kiddie porn, then how come you haven't been charged with a felony?

(Click)

Hello?

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Josh Tabor was on the phone in his office when Boudreaux entered, except it was hard to tell. The solicitor's earpiece was so small that Boudreaux often suspected Tabor was merely talking to himself. He strutted around the room with an agitated gait, past yearningly nostalgic prints of realistic Civil War themes, past his prized limited edition of Gen. Stonewall Jackson at prayer, signed by the artist.

"Listen, just because I care about enforcing obscenity statutes doesn't mean I'm a closet pervert, and that's just cheap talk," Tabor said into the microphone, catching Boudreaux's eye and motioning politely to him to have a seat. "You've seen what that game can create. Sick stuff, isn't it?"

Boudreaux slipped into one of Tabor's rough linen chairs and settled back. The one-sided conversation lasted for another solid five minutes.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Pierre," Tabor said as he took the earpiece and folded it back into his shirt pocket. "NewsNet is doing a big piece on us. Thing is, I know that Teddy Markbright down in Birmingham, and he's an opportunistic sonuvabitch. Yeah, he got to file the first criminal charge, but he's brought practically zero evidence, I mean, no case at all, Pierre. But who does the press focus on? Alabama. Teddy Markbright. Bunch of buffoons."

"Boss, I think Simms has been slipping private documents and images to the media."

"Say what?" Tabor asked.

"I think Simms is trying to avenge herself on you by leaking documents from our case file. We're all over the net."

"Simms?" Tabor shook his head, laughing. "Don't be silly. I leaked those documents, those screen shots, those vids. Simms didn't have the brains for to think of something like that."

Boudreaux's jaw dropped. "You called me Buggery Boudreaux?"

"Of course not," Tabor said. "The liberal media came up with that on their own."

"But why?"

"Well, you've got to admit it's alliterative."

"No," Boudreaux said, shaking his head in frustration. "Why did you leak your own internal materials?"

"Use your head, Pierre. Alabama, okay? Markbright files the first charge, right? He's got almost an entire news cycle to establish his case as the important one, and I had to do something to get us back in the running. Understand? It's not that complex."

"So why would you want that anyway? Sinergy is ready to spend millions on this trial, just to keep their product in the media. Even if you win, you'll have cost the taxpayers millions, given your opponent priceless publicity and bogged down your own docket. Besides, by the time any verdict comes back around on appeal the game will have run its course and they'll be selling entirely new games."

"Boudreaux," Tabor sighed, stopping in front of his oak desk and leaning back, "I'd have expected more from a Louisiana boy. Is it so wrong for me to use Sinergy's marketing strategy to keep my name in the press? Do you know how much it costs to run for statewide office? Do you have any idea how many dollars I have to be raising per day right now if I want to have any chance in the primary? Pierre, this is the way the Lord's work gets done. Don't you understand? Everybody wins!"

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In that night's installment of the Sherri Lee Pinckney Story, Pierre had moved the couple deftly forward into their prosperous and erotic future. The antebellum setting he'd selected from the scenario menu was pure High Battery mansion, and he'd even added a few womanly pounds to Sherri Lee's frame to suggest the births of their imaginary children. He found that he liked her even better with voluptuous hips and breasts, and the little belly he gave her added a surprisingly arousing air of vulnerability.

"Just come to bed, silly," she said. He had dressed her in a flower-print cotton nightgown, but she made even the simple things sexy. Sherri Lee lounged seductively on their four-poster rice bed with the harbor lights twinkling through an open balcony door behind them.

"It's been a tough day," his virtual self said.

"You're the solicitor," she said. "It's a tough job. But I'm proud of you. The kids are proud of you."

His virtual self sat on the bed and held out its hand to her.

"But do you love me, Sherri Lee? I mean, yes, I

want you to be proud of me. I want you to enjoy all these things we have. But in the end, I just want you to love me. So do you?"

Pierre hit the POV toggle on his controller so that he was staring straight at his virtual wife from the perspective of his virtual self. Her computer-generated eyes sparkled and beckoned. He wanted to fall into them, and the longing for her touch welled up inside him, misting his eyes with emotion and tears.

"You know I do, Pierre Boudreaux," Sherri Lee said, and then she leaned forward and kissed him sweetly. "That's why I've invited one of my girlfriends over tonight. I thought you might like a little something... *special*. Erica! Would you come in here?"

Pierre thought the transition he had wrought to the threesome was still a little tacky. Then again, he'd never been good at graceful transitions, which was why he'd probably never be a great trial attorney. He didn't blame himself: There was nothing he could do to change who he was now.

Thank God Sherry Lee understood. He drifted off to sleep later under her loving gaze, spent and funky, and all was right with the world.

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