

FIFTEEN MINUTES

Turn on, tune in, log off.

BY ALEX SHVARTSMAN

BEGIN-LIVESTREAM/CHANNEL-17473453/02-04-2117-17:30>>>

You will not be entertained. Here I sit, in an empty room, staring into a camera lens. The small screen above it displays what the camera sees: a gaunt, worn-down frame, a permanent scowl and crazed eyes set deep in a wrinkled face framed by dirty clumps of hair. If I were you, I wouldn't watch me. Truthfully, I want nothing more than to throw this so-called opportunity in whatever passes for the face of our artificial overlord, but I'm too hungry to be proud. On the off chance that a real-life person is actually watching this stream, I'm going to tell the truth.

Before the Resource Wars, someone had quipped that in the future everyone would get their 15 minutes of fame. With our luck, he turned out to be right and all the ancient optimists who had hoped for flying cars and interstellar travel turned out to be wrong. A century after that phrase was coined, humans were too busy killing each other over the remaining food and fresh water to engineer flying cars. Our ancestors would've finished the job too, if the AI hadn't taken over. The great and powerful artificial intelligence that has been running every aspect of our lives ever since. I call it AM, like the computer from a story I once read.

You all believe AM is benevolent because it stopped the wars and kept the farms and factories running, even though it needs humans like a dog needs fleas. Me, I think it's a sadistic son-of-a-tin-can, just like the AM in the story. Because we don't really get to live, we only get to exist.

People like me who don't have a job are given an allowance of 1,600 calories a day, and nothing whatsoever to do. And how does one get a job when AM has automated everything that could possibly be automated? AM encourages everyone to draw pictures or write poetry or some shit. It claims pursuing artistic endeavours leads to a fulfilling life, but some of us aren't into that.

And then there's this streaming business. Twice a year, each of us gets to go online and broadcast our talents to the world. Some of you sing, or dance, or read those terrible poems you wrote. A few of the more attractive ones shed



their clothes and show off the goods, because that's bound to be popular for as long as there are humans. And then there are poor saps like me who don't have a single artistic bone, and trust me, no one wants to see me naked. But I still have to perform like a nice circus monkey, because if you happen to like this stream, you can press that big green button on your touchscreen and a calorie is added to the monkey's account. Supposedly some of the best performers eat like kings, but even a useless boring monkey like me can hope to earn an extra banana or two.

Of course, that's only what AM wants everyone to think. There are ten billion of us monkeys on the planet, and everyone gets their semi-annual 15 minutes in front of the camera. So who would bother to watch this shit instead of accessing the old films and books? I'll tell you: AM, that's who. We're its trained pets, slobbering over ourselves and performing stupid human tricks for a treat.

I looked it up, and would you believe the story about AM was published within about a year of when they made up the

15-minutes-of-fame quote. The evil computer in the story tortured the few remaining humans, but at least it was honest about it. The way I see it, the real-life AM is far worse, because it's convinced everyone to accept their miserable lots instead of fighting for something better.

So I won't waste any more energy acting out this pointless charade. I'll just sit here and wait until the camera shuts off, then check my account to see how many calories AM's algorithms deign to issue. I'll fill my belly, hating AM in the process, railing against its heartless, soulless, malevolent mind, which has turned all humanity into its plaything. And when the extra food runs out, I will come to hate myself as I count the days until the next opportunity to proverbially sing for my supper.

I have no talent. And I must stream. ■

Alex Shvartsman is a writer and game designer from Brooklyn, New York. Read more of his fiction at www.alexshvartsman.com.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY