

A Time of Tungsten

written by

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The following are three scenes from the beginning, middle, and end of a narrative-based Twine game I made called A Time of Tungsten (<https://devin-raposo.itch.io/a-time-of-tungsten>) which are focused on two characters from one of the game's two intersecting storylines.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Two scientists work together in a lab. One, a woman, mans a standing console of some sort, typing away some arcane information. Her face shows a strained, annoyed expression. The other, a man, sits in a reclining chair with his arms resting on armrests having just exited a virtual reality simulation. He's disheveled, sweaty and confused. Their names and profession are a mystery. She looks away from the console to focus in on the man. The fluorescent lights above buzz and hum.

MAN

(rambunctious)

Hoof! Gets kinda cramped in there.

WOMAN

(snidely)

Well, gee, that was fast.

MAN

That's uh...that'll take some getting used to! Also, it seems kinda broken.

WOMAN

And what, pray tell, do you mean by 'kinda broken'?

MAN

What do you mean, what do you mean? I mean it's busted.

WOMAN

Yep, you're a rookie, alright. What did the screen say?

The woman turns in her swiveling chair back to the console to resume her typing. The man begins recounting his experience.

MAN

Well, first I saw just a bunch of nonsense text. Basically a bunch of garbage, and everything else was all black.

(MORE)

MAN (CONT'D)

It wasn't, like, words or anything like that, nothing legible. And there was this terrible noise, too. I was able to continue, but then it said something about a null pointer exception. Then the whole thing goes to shit and asks if I want to 'continue', whatever that means.

WOMAN

(snidely)

That's "null pointer exception". Garbage collection gone awry. Textbook stuff. You sure you're the guy? I could schedule an eye inspection, that way you can read the signs!

The man grunts and folds his arms.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

...or maybe we could look into scholarships to get you some proper computer science schooling...

MAN

(exasperatedly)

Just tell me how to get rid of it.

WOMAN

Well you could start by highlighting 'yes' with your retina. Anyway, I'll make a note for the real engineer when he shows up.

MAN

(under his breath)

I'll show you a real engineer...

WOMAN

What was that, sweetie?

MAN

I said: how's the room service up on your ivory tower?

WOMAN

Eh, could be better. Food's not all that.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

The man exits the virtual reality simulation. The woman ceases typing at her console and stands up out of her seat to stretch. The fluorescent lights continue to him, but the two don't seem to notice. The man wipes away some sweat from his face using his gray t-shirt.

WOMAN

Alright! Break for lunch?

MAN

(relieved)

Gladly. She's, uh, about to meditate, or go zen, or whatever.

WOMAN

Funny guy.

MAN

I try my best. You buyin'?

WOMAN

Only so you'll owe me later. Ham or ham?

MAN

Turkey on rye. Hold the mayo.

WOMAN

Mark, you know there's a shortage.

MARK

Yeah, I know. And I'd like my turkey sandwich on rye bread. And hold the mayo.

The woman exits the room to go grab lunch for the two of them. Mark sits, squirming a little in his seat. He checks his watch and sighs, his face saying: got a long day ahead of us. Cut to the automatic door sways open with a science-fiction sounding opening noise as the woman returns with lunch as Mark starts to nod off.

WOMAN

(slyly)

Got good news and bad news.

MARK

No turkey?

WOMAN

Not a one! But they did have, you guessed it ladies and gents: ham!

MARK

And all they had was ham?

WOMAN

And all they had was ham.

MARK

(sarcastically)

Ah, the perks of government labor.

WOMAN

Chin up, mate. You can have all the ham in the world when you're one of six in the galaxy with a pension.

The two eat for a minute, saying nothing to each other. The mood is cordial, if reserved.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

So, what do you think so far?

MARK

Um, about the ham?

WOMAN

Yes, lugnut, about the ham. No, about the mission! This thing we're doing. I mean, don't you think it's...kind of a lot to take in?

MARK

Well, for starters, the ham could be colder, for sure.

WOMAN

Nothin' but zingers, my friend.

Mark proudly takes a large bite and continues, talking with his mouth full.

MARK

I don't know. I guess it's...I mean, it's definitely a strange thing.

WOMAN

Anything in particular stand out to you? Off-the-record, of course.

MARK

Don't even know where to start, Nhung. Like, you're right, when you stop to think about it, we're looking through someone's private thoughts and feelings, their memories.

NHUNG

Yeah. Well, really, you kinda are and you kinda aren't.

MARK

What do you mean?

NHUNG

Well, there's the whole algorithmic linguistic treatment thing going on.

Mark sports a look of slightly exasperated unease on his face, like he forgot his wallet at home.

MARK

Damn, yes, that's right. Easy to forget about that sort of thing when you're in there, you know, doin' your thing.

Nhung squints her eyes suspiciously.

NHUNG

(suspiciously)

You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?

MARK

That obvious?

NHUNG

(shocked)

How the hell did you even get this job!?

MARK

Look, maybe I pulled some strings back at HQ. Never hurts to have rich uncles in high places. Plus it sounded like fun!

Nhung tears off a piece of her sandwich with her right hand and scarfs it down, washing it down with a swig from a water bottle. Mark can't shake a cocky smirk from his countenance.

NHUNG

(sternly)

This isn't supposed to be *fun*,
Mark. This is really serious,
cutting-edge stuff. I should report
—forget it, never mind.

MARK

Relax, rookie. We're doing great!

Mark finishes his sandwich, sits back in the reclining work chair, crosses his legs, and rests his arms behind his head.

NHUNG

Just...make sure you don't get too,
like, *involved* when you're in
there. Remember, this is routine
testing. And there's plenty more to
come.

MARK

Look, can you just quit worrying
and lay down the 411 on that
algorithm stuff?

NHUNG

Are you gonna pull more strings to
bump up my pay stub?

MARK

(smirking)

Next two sandwiches, they're on me,
babe.

NHUNG

(annoyed)

Fine. Okay, so, where to start...I
can't pretend to completely
understand it all myself. I didn't
write the thing, after all. But
basically the way it was taught to
me is like, the chip in her head
writes stores her thoughts and
memories. Every tiny little synapse
fired is marked with an
approximation of the thought and a
timestamp of when it happened, and
so you've got hundreds of exobytes
worth of data being stored on this
thing.

(MORE)

NHUNG (CONT'D)

It's more reliable and less lossy than it'd be to stream all that stuff, since you don't have to worry about workers trying to venture outside the scope of satellite connectivity. Then, before they hand the chip over to us for perusing, there's this room-scale supercomputer that goes through and—

Mark sits up in his seat.

MARK

You mean like that one they've got back at HQ? Kinda looks like how they did in old movies?

NHUNG

(confidently)

The very same one, in fact. It kind of sorts through the memory data and writes new data in a sequential manner based on the recorded timestamps of her thoughts and memories. That machine you're strapped to parses that newly-formatted narrative data and visualizes it. Theoretically, any old thing with a good enough GPU could do what yours is doing right now, assuming the software is there.

Mark places his hand in front of his lips, inquisitively.

MARK

So that's why she kind of sounds like a cartoon robot, right?

NHUNG

More or less, and it's our job to provide feedback based on what that computer's spitting out so that the engineers back at HQ can work on new versions of the narrative-generation and visualization softwares. She didn't really talk like that, that's the narrative stuff doing its thing.

(MORE)

NHUNG (CONT'D)

I guess it pulls from classical and modern works of literature to sort of rewrite her thoughts in a way that's more palatable to another human being who's used to hearing or reading sequential prose. So it's looking at stuff like Steinbeck, David Foster Wallace, Thoreau, your Marie Feltons, Morgan Schafer Zimmerman, some Twain, Harper Lee, Fitzgerald-

MARK

Okay, we get it. You've read a lot of books.

NHUNG

Audiobooks will get you through bad traffic in no time. It's the same deal with that music you've been hearing. Basically just a pastiche of stuff like early-era Brian Eno, Bowie and Byrne, Chopin, Penderecki, Philip Glass, ambient-era Gostel, and a little Mozart to top it all off. As for the sound effect stuff, that's just government-issue sound banks doing their thing.

MARK

Riveting stuff. So how come it fuses together shit from only English writers?

NHUNG

Very astute observation! I'm not sure, but the way I figure is, if you were to pull from works by non-English writers, then you'd have feed English translations of their works into the device, which could get dicey.

MARK

I guess that makes sense. I guess those English classes back in middle school are starting to pay royalties, huh? Affirmative Action be damned.

NHUNG

They've definitely got folks working on non-English patches, but yeah, you're pretty much right. Most everyone speaks English these days, regardless. You won't last long these days if you don't.

The two sit in silence. Nhung finishes her food. Mark crosses his arms and stares forward at a book shelf which tries to liven up the anemic white walls of the laboratory.

MARK

I mean, would you want someone you've never met in your fucking life knowing what you think, even if it did look like it came from the Iliad or whatever.

Nhung says nothing.

MARK (CONT'D)

Would you?

NHUNG

I mean...

MARK

Would you?

Nhung looks away toward his console and begins preparing to send Mark back into the simulation.

MARK (CONT'D)

Exactly.

NHUNG

I'd want to be as useful as I could possibly be.

Mark grabs the headpiece and brings it above his head in preparation to go back into the simulation.

MARK

At least the pay's good.

NHUNG

We're back on the clock. Anything else you want to note before we get started again?

MARK

Yeah, jot this down: she definitely seems faithful. You know, to the cause, or whatever.

NHUNG

Let's just get this thing done.

MARK

(to himself)

No turkey on rye...whoever heard of such a thing?

NHUNG

Mark, I'm sending you eight hours past where you left off based on her brainwave activity patterns. Deploying in three, two, one...

INT. LABORATORY - EVENING

NHUNG

That's enough.

Mark yanks the headpiece off of his head like it's an insect trying to gnaw his head off. He breathes heavily and grabs at Nhung's water bottle, drinking it down without thinking.

NHUNG (CONT'D)

Hey, you alright?

MARK

(exasperatedly)

Jesus Christ.

NHUNG

(concerned)

I mean, yeah, I can imagine.

MARK

I...

NHUNG

You don't need to say anything if you don't want to. We're done.

MARK

I...right.

NHUNG

Can you walk?

MARK

I...feel strange.

NHUNG

I've got more water, hang on.

Nhung gets up to walk to the cooler to grab another water bottle for Mark. She rolls her chair over by the side of Mark's reclining chair and passes him a water bottle.

NHUNG (CONT'D)

You were in there a while.

MARK

Thanks. Yeah, I guess I was, huh?

NHUNG

You've certainly put me off trying it out, that's for sure.

MARK

Nhung, there's something...as they died...I saw their names.

NHUNG

Yeah, it keeps their last names in. That wasn't the first time you saw them, remember?

MARK

No no no, I mean, I saw their full names, just before it was over.

NHUNG

That's...are you sure you're feeling okay? That shouldn't be happening.

Mark tries to wipe some sweat away on his t-shirt, but it's already soaked. Nhung passes him a washcloth.

MARK

But it did.

NHUNG

And that never happened before, not even once?

MARK

That info was redacted before, as intended. But this time, before she...you know, she kinda said her goodbyes.

(MORE)

MARK (CONT'D)

Made peace with the enormity of
what was about to happen.

NHUNG

That's...weirdly poignant.

Nhung reaches in her pocket for a pack of Marlboro's and
offers Mark one.

NHUNG (CONT'D)

Do you remember—

The automatic door opens. Nhung briskly shoves the pack of
cigarettes back into her pocket.

GADD

Agent Tsukamoto. Agent Posala. How
are things processing thus far?

NHUNG

We've just finished up with subject
#057, Agent Gadd. I made sure to
index any and all issues found, as
we previously discussed.

GADD

Ah! Good to hear. Agent Posala, I
trust your first trip
was...adequate?

Mark gives Nhung a look of ill portent. He stands up out of
the chair and looks over to Agent Gadd, their boss.

MARK

It was...an experience, sir.

GADD

Indeed, everyone's first always is.
And you were in there all day, to
boot! Before I look over the report
with Analytics in the morning, is
there anything I should know about?

NHUNG

No, sir. Aside from the captain's—

GADD

No need to mention it aloud, Agent
Tsukamoto. It's not *kosher*. Rather,
anything we didn't already know?

Nhung looks at Mark with the same look of grimness he first
shot her. She keeps her eyes locked on him as Mark stares
into the distance, himself somewhere else entirely.

NHUNG

Nothing of note to report, sir.
Anything found topside?

GADD

I'm afraid everyone's coming up dry, so far. I'm sure you've had similar luck with regards to what these strange holes are all about. Maybe they're good for something, who knows. Regardless, we'll keep looking. Anyway, I'll leave you two to clock out! See you all tomorrow, bright and early!

NHUNG

Right, then. Good night, sir.

Agent Gadd exits the room, leaving Nhung and Mark to their devices. Nhung and Mark begin to grab their things and perform the necessary tasks to power down the simulation technology in silence. Finally, Nhung speaks up.

NHUNG (CONT'D)

Let's find a restaurant. We can discuss this in private then.