

The Greenblatt Model

A young man struggling to complete a work project inadvertently starts a war with creatures living deep underneath his desk.

Jake's head hurt, he hated fluorescent lights, and he had a rat problem.

Somewhere outside his cubicle, he could hear printers clacking and people murmuring and papers shuffling. This was not even Jake's life, but rather the life to which he aspired.

If he could complete the complex modeling project in front of him by the following Friday, all of this could be his. Jake was contract-to-hire, retained on a trial basis to model this problem. The Greenblatt model, as it was known.

There were rats in Jake's cubicle. There may have been rats in the whole office, but it had literally been six work days since he had spoken to a co-worker, so he had no way to inquire.

This job was Jake's last and best chance to get married. He and his girlfriend, Amber, had spent almost six years rubbing at one another's inhibitions until only Jake's remained. Knowing nothing whatsoever about marriage, he had determined beyond a shadow of a doubt that he must first be gainfully employed.

Jake's present boss, Sam, a meaty guy whose pastel oxfords always made him look like a giant Easter egg, had not hired him and did not seem pleased to meet him. When Jake reported for work, Sam handed him a stack of papers.

"The problem," Sam said flatly. "If it's done by the 21st, we will negotiate your salary. You can have whatever problems you want after hours, but here you only have the Greenblatt model. No extraneous crap. Until you work it out, I don't want to hear about what you want. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," Jake answered.

Jake came in to find a protein bar beneath his chair, its wrapper savaged and the contents half-eaten.

Later that morning, Jake dropped a pen with which he was fidgeting and kicked it under his desk in a clumsy attempt to catch it. On his hands and knees, Jake patted around the floor, hoping to catch his pen before it escaped to greener pastures.

Suddenly he patted nothing.

Puzzled, Jake felt around the edges of a hole. It was square, perhaps a foot square, perhaps a little less. He dropped a pen into the hole. For a few seconds, he could hear it falling, bouncing off the sides as it went, and then it simply stopped making noise without ever making the signature sound that Jake would consider hitting bottom.

If the pen fell at about 9.8 meters per second as it should have, then the fact that it never audibly hit bottom meant...what, Jake had no idea. Deciding he needed something louder, Jake ducked into the next cubicle and grabbed a coffee cup off of Helen's desk. She had eleven.

He dropped the coffee cup and counted again.

By the time Jake reached forty one thousand, he had to admit that he was not going to hear the coffee cup. Either the hole had a feather-soft bottom or it extended to the earth's core.

Jake was sure that rat infestations and bottomless pits counted as "extraneous crap," so he said nothing. On Friday the 14th, he brought in a rat trap and baited it with a piece of cherry Danish.

Late in the afternoon, with much of the office vacated, Jake waited patiently for The World's Slowest Printer to print the results of an array he was running.

Then, SNAP.

An otherworldly squeal exploded through the office. Thin, high, and weirdly musical, the noise curdled Jake's blood even as his heart pounded from the shock. He stood frozen for several moments before rushing into his cubicle. The Danish was slightly disturbed, the trap sprung, and they were splatters of blood visible on the deck of the trap and the carpet. Something was pinned underneath the murderous arm of the trap and Jake took it gingerly between two fingernails and held it up in the fluorescent light.

It was a very small glove.

By Monday, Jake flowed to his miserable cubicle in a Zen river. The weekend with Amber had been tense and unpleasant, but it was a bigger hurdle than the Greenblatt model. The model was done. It was probably good enough now, and he had a whole week to put it through its paces, to make sure it would hold up to a PhD committee.

Jake paused before he turned the corner to his cubicle. He could feel the tear in the fabric. The river ran dry. He knew in some indefinable way that something was wrong.

When Jake saw his computer, he went numb. His head tingled and his vision went a bit fuzzy around the edges. He grabbed his cubicle wall to keep from falling to the ground.

Placed across his desk with military precision were bits from the inside of his computer. Some were whole bits, some were half bits, and some were divided into bits significantly smaller, like dust. Jake's skills were more software than hardware, but 9 out of 10 dilettantes could have identified the many discombobulated bits of hard drive.

Jake's life was effectively over.

His only option was to work 24 hours a day until Friday and hope that was enough time.

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Oswald climbed passage 45T6-2. He was the fiercest warrior in the colony. Even before scouts were allowed in a newly dug area, Oswald cleared it for traps, dangerous creatures and other hazards.

On the rare occasions when the colony had an actual conflict, Oswald handled it.

Now he had the singular displeasure of performing the ceremonial pacificum with the person at the top of 45T6-2. The person, who had never showed himself to be unfriendly, had set a rodent trap for them and nearly killed Jenna. Jenna was a simple food gatherer and had not recognized the trap and had not exercised appropriate caution because the area had been cleared by Oswald himself only a short time earlier.

Besides seriously injuring Jenna, an act of supreme cowardice as she was a strict non-combatant, the trap was an unthinkable insult to the colony.

But now it was time for the pacificum. It was right and it was the way. Oswald had seen it proven so many times that he fought down his natural aggression. For the pacificum, he would ceremonially offer his weapon to the enemy. The person had struck, and then Oswald had responded, destroying the person's work machine, which he knew to be all-important to people in general and to this person in particular.

He knew the person was at the top of the passage and that he was alone.

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It was after 2 am and only the small bank of soul-sucking fluorescent lights over Jake's cubicle was on. It was Jake's island.

Bleary and miserable as he was, Jake allowed himself a grudging satisfaction at all he had been able to accomplish. It had taken him almost four hours to properly configure Helen's stupid footstool of a computer and to run down and load the appropriate software, but since then he had worked quickly and efficiently to rebuild the Greenblatt model.

Almost done for the evening, Jake felt a tap on his leg. He looked down and pushed his wheeled office chair back into his cubicle wall in shock. Standing there was a small, furry creature a little larger than a squirrel. It was a light gray and stood on its hind legs. It was dressed in a dark red robe or toga-looking thing, but appeared to be covered in hair.

It was cute, like a Mogwai or an Ewok. When Jake pushed his chair back, the thing had jumped back in alarm, but now it came forward, making conciliatory gestures and twittering softly. Jake started to grin a little in disbelief. He must have caught one of these in the rat trap, they must have destroyed his computer in revenge and now they came to bury the hatchet. It all seemed very reasonable.

The little furry thing continued to twitter. He stopped in front of Jake's right foot. Jake wondered what the appropriate response was, but felt compelled to pick the thing up and pet it.

Suddenly, with no pause in its happy warbling, the creature took out a wicked-looking sword about the size of a large pocket knife and held it poised above Jake's foot.

So Jake kicked the thing back under his desk.

Jake sat frozen for a moment, afraid the creature would attack him again, then decided that it might be prudent to take the offensive. He grabbed an inspirational paperweight left from some previous Greenblatt flunkee and chased the little furry thing under the desk.

It was gone.

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Oswald had taken a couple of turns of the sun to heal. The person at the top of 45T6-2 assaulted him. Trained warrior though he was, Oswald never could have conceived of being attacked in the middle of the pacificum. It was not done, it was not permitted. Only the most depraved combatant would do such a thing.

While Oswald mended, the Supreme used his power to find the place where the offending person slept. The Supreme was a wondrous force in the colony. A crew had worked diligently to open supplementary A2G, a temporary passage with specific properties that allowed the transportation of objects apparently much larger than the passage itself. The passage would be deconstructed as soon as the transport crew was finished. 45T6-2 would have to be closed down, as well, but that could wait for a few turns.

Oswald smiled grimly. They might be big and have many wondrous technologies, but this was one thing that people could not do.

Even though Oswald was still technically convalescing, the Supreme in his wisdom allowed the warrior to head the transport team. Oswald was pleased to have some measure to assuage the unseemly bloodlust that rose within him when he thought of the person who had so disrespected the colony.

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8 pm on Thursday the 20th. Jake pulled up in front of his small bungalow. Amber was on her way over, and Jake was going to give her a ring. Everything was all right. Everything would be better.

The Greenblatt model was not what it could have been had the scary little creatures not destroyed his computer, but he was confident that it was far better than the many previous attempts. He had slept 10 of the previous 88 hours, a tab he kept with tick marks on a pad next to his keyboard.

And yet, as he put his key in his front door, he experienced the feeling of dread, of impending doom that he had 86 hours before. Everything was not all right. Something about the booming echo of the opening door told him what he would find when he turned on the lights.

Click.

His furniture was gone.

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The Supreme climbed 45T6-1. He had an important meeting with the Almighty High Person or whatever he called himself. The relationship had both enriched the Supreme's understanding of the people world and created an illusion of omniscience about him for all he knew.

He had a crew shutting down 45T6-2, and quickly, as it was being compromised by the other side.

He did not want to offend the Almighty High Person, but something had to change.

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Sam took the pickaxe from Jake's grip with surprising tenderness and then helped him out of the hole in which he stood.

Jake stood on a pile of debris and surveyed the scene. He blinked.

The office looked like the aftermath of a tornado, where an orderly bunch of stuff was suddenly flattened out and spread over a much larger area. The pieces of Jake's cubicle lay on the floor around a hole about seven feet in diameter. Past that, a crawl space edged by the mangled ends of aluminum conduits of various sizes led to a slab of concrete, through which Jake had managed to pound a hole to exposed dirt, into which he had dug a couple of feet. The carnage was awesome.

Faced with an empty house, an incredulous girlfriend, and no greater inspiration, Jake had told Amber the truth. He could not even present her with the ring since it had been in the top drawer of his dresser. He watched her grow increasingly less impressed as he told the story but could not stop himself. The cathartic rush of telling the story after weeks of isolation developed momentum like a flash flood.

Somewhere in the afterglow of truth, Amber left him. She said something about the stories to which he had resorted to avoid marrying her. She used the word “outlandish.” Who talked like that?

Unable to see that he had anything to lose, sleep-deprived and angry, Jake gathered the tools he borrowed for the ill-fated renovation of his backyard the previous spring. Sledgehammer, pickaxe, reciprocating saw. And he went back to the office to take the fight to the creatures.

Finally, Jake found himself back on the street, literally and figuratively. Sam escorted him out and deposited him on the sidewalk outside the building. Jake’s tools were not returned to him.

An odd set of niceties washed over Jake. Thank you for all of your hard work. Your last check will be mailed to you. Go home and get some rest. If you ever come within one hundred feet of this building, I will not hesitate to call the authorities.

Alone, sore, single, unemployed, exhausted, but improbably not incarcerated, Jake was indeed beginning the first weekend of the rest of his life. As his first official act of the rest of his life, Jake decided to go home and sleep.

On the floor.

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Sam unbuttoned his sleeves, collapsed in his chair, buried his head in his hands, heaved an enormous sigh, and laughed. Building maintenance was going to have a fit, and the amount of paperwork inherent to rebuilding the office would be overwhelming. He did not have the heart to press charges against the kid. Sam assumed Jake had been through enough.

Sam shook himself, still chuckling, and pulled his chair up to his computer. In addition to his normal duties, he needed to orchestrate a major building repair and to find a new egghead.

He felt a tap on his leg and glanced down.

The Supreme pulled himself up to his full height beneath Sam's desk. He was about the same size as Oswald, and his hair was so white it was almost clear. His shapeless garment was purple and he spoke tentatively, his mouth poorly adapted to human speech.

"My respects," the Supreme proclaimed.

"And mine," Sam replied, turning his attention back to his computer.

"The new guy," the Supreme managed.

"Yes?"

"He's not working out."

Sam smiled. He nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "No kidding, Greenblatt."