

eXistenZ

a screenplay by David Cronenberg

Fourth Draft
October 1, 1996

ALLIANCE PICTURES
301 N. Canon Drive
Suite 321
Beverly Hills, CA 90210
(310) 887-5212

INT. COUNTRY CHURCH - NIGHT

The man facing us is bearded, sweating, intense, joyous.
Jacket and tie, jeans, fortyish. His name is Wittold Levi.

LEVI

eXistenZ.

Levi turns to a chalkboard on a tripod and writes the word.

LEVI

Written like this. One word.
Small e. Capital X, capital Z.

He turns back to face an as-yet-unseen audience.

LEVI

eXistenZ. It's new, it's from
Antenna Research, and it's here,
right now.

We now see Levi's audience, about seventy-five people, some standing, some sitting on plastic folding chairs. They are of very mixed age and type, but they all cheer and applaud enthusiastically.

We are in the central playing area of a small, deconsecrated country church, and Levi performs on a broad, low, carpeted plywood dais. At the far end of the dais, a man and a woman - assistants to Levi - are carefully laying out about two dozen plastic modules that look somewhat like high-tech ski boots.

LEVI

My name is Wittold Levi, my
friends call me Witt - and I'm
the project manager for eXistenZ.
I recognize some familiar faces -
that's all right, that's all
right. We won't throw you out. We
encourage consumer loyalty, and
we want you to help us with our
product testing. We're a team,
Antenna and you.

A delighted stir from the crowd.

LEVI

Those of you who have come to our
invited seminars before will know
that I normally lead the group
through our new games, but
(more)

LEVI (CONT'D)

tonight, it won't be me. No, for the test launch of eXistenZ by Antenna, we have brought you a seminar leader who is rather special.

An unbelieving, excited stir. Could it really be?

LEVI

Yes, it is. The world's greatest game designer is here, in person, to lead you, the first test enclave, through her newest creation, eXistenZ by Antenna...

The small crowd is now tremendously excited, wide-eyed, murmuring, one or two have actually gotten on their knees.

LEVI

I give you, the Game-Pod Goddess herself - Allegra Geller!

Levi moves to the edge of the crowd, works his way into it until he has reached a small, unobtrusive figure who up to now has hardly been noticed. She stands next to a security guard who is dressed in a suit and tie but carries an electronic wand of some sort. His name-tag identifies him as Ted Pikul (rhymes with "Michael", not with "pickle"), and we will see more of him later.

As Levi takes her hand and gently leads her out of the crowd, her fans applaud softly, touch her hem. They part like water as she passes amongst them, clutching her own personal game-pod case with both hands. She mounts the dais like a blind person led by her seeing-eye dog.

Allegra Geller, early thirties, conservatively dressed, is bright, acutely aware, but wary and controlled. When she speaks, she is deliciously, sexily shy, serious, melodic.

GELLER

The world of games is in a kind of a trance. People are programmed to accept so little, but the possibilities are so great.

(pause)

You probably thought that tonight, we were going to test a new game that I designed.

Excited murmurings from the crowd.

GELLER

But there is no new game to test,
at least, not in the usual sense.

Confused, slightly disappointed mutterings.

GELLER

No, no, it's going to be much
better than you expected, because
eXistenZ is not just a game. It's
an entirely new game system.
Antenna Research and I developed
it together - the eXistenZ System
by Antenna - and it involves a
whole lot of new toys, which you
are going to be the first to try
out.

The crowd's spirit rises again. Levi steps forward, smiling,
playing off the renewed energy.

LEVI

MetaFlesh.

Levi turns to the chalkboard and writes the word.

LEVI

Written like this. One word.
Capital M, capital F. MetaFlesh
is what our new toys are made of
- the MetaFlesh Game-Pod, only
from Antenna Research. It
connects with any industry
standard bioport, which I know
you all have or you wouldn't be
here...

(chuckles from the crowd)
...using, however, a very non-
standard connecting device which
we call...

Levi turns again to the chalkboard.

LEVI

...we call an UmbyCord. Spelled
like this.

Levi writes the word out and then turns back to his by-now-
salivating audience.

LEVI

I guess you can tell I started
off as a schoolteacher.

(appreciative chuckles)

But I never had anything quite so
fun or so revolutionary to teach
as what Allegra and I are going
to teach you all tonight.

With a theatrical flourish, Levi whirls around to face his
two assistants, who have finished laying out their devices
on the back table and are now standing crisply at attention
at either end of it.

LEVI

Are the MetaFlesh Game-Pods by
Antenna Research ready?

ASSISTANTS

(together)

Yes, Mr. Levi.

LEVI

And how many of these precious
prototypes did we manage to bring
with us?

FEMALE ASSISTANT

Twenty-one, Mr. Levi.

Levi's face clouds slightly. The audience does not hear the
following exchange.

LEVI

(sotto voce)

Twenty-one? I thought we had an
even two dozen.

MALE ASSISTANT

The first three we opened were...
unhealthy.

LEVI

Really? Any chance that some of
the others...?

FEMALE ASSISTANT

We think we're clean.

LEVI

(restrained fury)

God-damn better be.

Levi turns back to his audience, radiant once more.

LEVI

We have twenty-one prototype MetaFlesh Game-Pods, and that means that for our first wave test enclave we need twenty-one volunteers who will port in these slave units with the Game-Pod Goddess herself...

Levi doesn't need to finish his pitch. Every hand is waving in the air, and every pair of lips is saying, "Me, me, oh God, please, let it be me!"

Geller can only stand by modestly and beam at the intensity of the small crowd's enthusiasm.

INT. COUNTRY CHURCH. MINUTES LATER - NIGHT

A SHORT MONTAGE as the twenty-one volunteers mount the dais and are fitted with their game gear:

The assistants undo the heavy-duty snap locks and split open the ski-boot-like plastic modules on the back table. Inside, resting in a lining of dense foam, are what look almost like living kidneys: the MetaFlesh Game-Pods.

Coiled in each boot toe is the Y-shaped, multi-player UmbyCord that comes with each pod, a split twelve-foot connector cord that resembles an umbilical cord, twisted, translucent, blue and red veiny vessels running just below the surface.

The volunteers watch in hushed reverence, as though about to receive communion.

The game-pods are gingerly lifted out of their cases.

The UmbyCords are uncoiled and plugged into ports in the back of the game-pods.

The shirts, blouses, and jackets of the volunteers are lifted at the back to reveal their owners' bioports, which are small, soft-plastic, flesh-coloured permanent spinal jacks positioned just above the belt line.

Twenty-two folding chairs are placed in a circle on the dais. As each volunteer has his UmbyCord plugged into his bioport, he takes one of the seats and places his quivering, rippling game-pod, now connected directly to his nervous system, on his lap.

The last chair is taken by Allegra Geller, who is fussed over and settled by Levi as she unpacks her own master game-pod with exaggerated delicacy and is then ported in to the players on either side of her.

We END the short MONTAGE with the security guard, Pikul, standing with arms folded near the church's side door, watching the proceedings with fascination.

A loud knocking at the door forces Pikul to turn away from the action on the dais. He walks over to the door and opens it. A hyper, exasperated fan almost tumbles into the church. Pikul immediately raises his electronic wand and bars his way.

PIKUL

Hold it. Not so fast.

In response, the fan thrusts a card at him.

Pikul takes the card, a complex invitation card which includes a holographic photo of the fan under which floats his name, Joel Dichter. Dichter anxiously looks past Pikul into the depths of the church, nervously adjusting the vinyl case slung over his shoulder.

DICHTER

Oh, god. I hope I'm not too late.
Did I miss the port-in?

PIKUL

It's just the first wave. You can
be part of the second wave.

(rereads the invitation)

OK, Joel Dichter. Put your arms
up. I have to scan you. Metal and
heavy synthetics can't come in.

DICHTER

(incredulous)
A weapons check?

PIKUL

More for recording devices. Lotta
money invested in these games.
Industrial espionage happens.
What's in this case?

DICHTER

I brought my game-pod. It's got
original Marway tissue
architecture. It's kind of
obsolete but I was hoping,...
(more)

DICHTER (CONT'D)
even though I couldn't afford the
Antenna Fifteen upgrade, I
figured out a method of virtual
porting that I thought might...

Pikul uses his wand to scan the vinyl case, then opens the
zipper and feels around. In the case is a more solid,
rubbery version of the new MetaFlesh pods.

PIKUL
You won't need it tonight.
Everything's provided for.

Dichter suddenly spots Geller on the dais. He almost faints.

DICHTER
Migod! Is that who I think it is?

PIKUL
(with paternal pride)
Yeah, that's her. She's
something, isn't she?

DICHTER
But why would a star like her
come to a product seminar in a
little one-horse town like this?

PIKUL
This is where the real people
live, Joel. Her real fans, like
you.

DICHTER
Yeah, well, you said it. Just
like me.

Dichter has scanned OK. Pikul waves him into the church to
join the spectators who will form the second wave and re-
locks the door.

On the dais, in the center of the circle of linked game
players, Levi nods at Geller.

LEVI
Everything's in order. Are you
ready, Allegra?

GELLER
(pumped)
Sure. This is my favourite part.

There is giddy laughter in the room. Geller looks at every player in the circle as Levi steps down off the platform and retires to the far edge of the small, watching throng.

GELLER

I'm ready to download eXistenZ by Antenna Research into you all now. I'm warning you, it's going to be a wild ride, but don't panic no matter what happens. I'll see you all back here in no time at all.

Now the giddy laughter goes a touch nervous, uncertain, but it's too late. Geller depresses a nipple-like protuberance on the game-pod on her lap, and all the players close their eyes and go rigid, like members of a seance who have suddenly been contacted by the spirit world. The pods in their laps begin a rhythmic, peristaltic rippling.

At the edge of the crowd, Pikul sidles up to Levi.

PIKUL

(to Levi)

She seems to be very shy. It never occurred to me that a big star would be shy.

LEVI

She spends most of her time alone in a room designing her games. I think she'd like it best if she never had to show them to anybody.

PIKUL

Really? She doesn't enjoy all the adulation?

LEVI

She hates having to port in with her fans. It's too intimate.

PIKUL

Then why does she do it?

LEVI

(laughs)

We make her do it.

PIKUL

By "we" you mean, the game company, Antenna Research?

LEVI
That's what I mean.

PIKUL
Why?

LEVI
(suddenly suspicious)
Are you with us or did an independent security company send you?

PIKUL
Me? Oh, I'm with your own management training program.
(shows him a card)
I want to end up in marketing and public relations.
(holds up security wand)
The only thing I know about security is how to switch this thing on.

LEVI
(satisfied)
Well, for example, we've spent a fortune developing eXistenZ, but we all know it's a risky project. She might have to make changes. It's the only way we can convince her that there might be a problem.

PIKUL
(puzzled)
A problem with her new game?

LEVI
eXistenZ is a lot more than a game.

PIKUL
Yeah, right, it's a game system. I heard that.

LEVI
And we're worried that it's too intellectual, too complex, too weird, too artsy. That argument never bothers her until she faces her fans. She hates to be rejected in the flesh, so we make her come out sometimes to take the heat.

PIKUL
(admiringly)
I've heard that she's very
sensitive.

A strange, choral humming begins to fill the church. Pikul and Levi turn their attention to the dais, where the fans rock and sway with the pulsing of the pods in their laps.

PIKUL
What are they doing?

LEVI
(laughs)
It's the new Antenna Research
theme song. We thought this would
be a good way to launch it.
Everybody who plays eXistenZ is
going to be very familiar with
that tune.

Haltingly, but gamely, Pikul tries to hum along.

PIKUL
Catchy.

Levi helps him out, and soon the whole room is humming along happily, warmed by the Antenna Research corporate theme song.

The whole room, that is, except for Joel Dichter, who, at the edge of the dais, is more concerned with fumbling around in the vinyl pod-case hanging from his shoulder.

In the case, we watch as Dichter tears open his obsolete game-pod to reveal a bizarre weapon, a pistol made of bone and gristle, almost like the half-decayed body of a small mammal - whose snout is the barrel, whose rigid hind leg is the trigger.

Dichter takes his weapon out of its case, shakes off a few gelatinous strips of game-pod flesh, and steps up onto the dais.

Pikul is the first to notice this. He glances at Levi, who's still blissed out and humming, then launches himself awkwardly through the crowd.

Now in the middle of the circle, Dichter makes his way towards the blissfully unsuspecting Geller, raising his weapon as he goes.

DICHTER
Death to eXistenZ! Death to
Antenna Research! Death to the
demoness Allegra Geller!

PIKUL
(to Dichter)
No! Don't do it!

Dichter turns to see Pikul stumbling through the small crowd, scrambling onto the dais. Distracted, Dichter hurriedly raises his weapon again and fires it at Geller. The first shot hits her in the shoulder and spins her off her chair, which collapses over her and takes the second bullet on its seat rim.

The circle of players on the dais moans as one, swoons and jostles: they are all feeling the neural surge of Geller's traumatized nervous system. Peeking out from under her folding chair, Geller's eyes are wide with fear and confusion. She clutches her shoulder without being aware of it. Blood seeps in between her fingers

Now Levi and his two assistants scramble onto the platform to get at Dichter, who fires wildly, hitting two of the players nearest Geller. The circle of players immediately goes spastic, screaming and twitching and dropping to the ground and writhing. Many of them are clutching their shoulders in the same spot as Geller, sympathy pain transmitting through their UmbyCords.

Pikul manages to tackle Dichter, then starts whacking at him with the security wand. Dichter twists around and raises his weapon at Pikul, who immediately backs off in terror. But before Dichter can pull the trigger, the two assistants produce small, normal pistols from hidden holsters and empty their clips into the prostrate Dichter. Dichter manages to squeeze off one last shot at the approaching Levi, hitting him squarely in the chest. Levi goes down and is lost amongst the jostling feet.

The watching fans pile onto the dais and begin to help the players unplug from the game-pods which are obviously causing them distress. Three of the players attack the dying Dichter, dragging their game-pods after them, kicking at whatever part of him they can find in the confused mass of bodies.

In the turmoil, Pikul is knocked to the ground. Amid the stamping, sliding feet, he finds himself lying across the stricken Levi. Levi clutches Pikul desperately.

LEVI

Get her out of here! Save her!
There might be more of them! Go
on!

PIKUL

Me? Me take her?

LEVI

(urgent, pleading)
We have enemies in our own house.
Trust no one. Trust no one...

The wide-eyed Pikul scrambles to his feet and promptly trips over the all-but-dead Dichter. He falls painfully to his knees, struggles up again, and finds the bizarre bone gun in his hand. Pikul stares at it, fascinated, horrified.

He turns back to Levi, but Levi's eyes are rolling back as he loses consciousness. The two assistants are making their way towards them through the shoving, shuffling throng, guns cocked, faces set hard. Panicked, Pikul jams the bone gun into his suit pocket and jumps off the platform, wildly looking around for Geller.

She and her chair have slipped off the dais in a heap only a few feet away, and she is in several kinds of agony. Pikul unports her, which immediately brings her some relief and a lot of clarity. Pikul wards off a couple of fans with one arm, screams at them.

PIKUL

(screams)
She's coming with me! I'm
responsible for her! She's
supposed to come with me!

To his surprise, Geller laughs a dazed, hearty laugh.

GELLER

(laughs)
Am I? With you?

PIKUL

(quietly, firmly)
Yeah, you're coming with me.

Pikul pulls her to her feet, but she immediately dives back to the floor to find her game-pod and UmbyCord.

GELLER

(suddenly near hysteria)
I can't lose this! I can't lose
this!

She finds the game-pod still under the folding chair, a bit flattened on one side but in one piece. She grabs the game-pod and its UmbyCord and stuffs them into her MetaFlesh pod case which has been knocked to the edge of the dais. As she clutches it to her, Pikul takes her hand and hauls her through the crowd, which is now spilling off the overcrowded dais and clutching at Geller fitfully, like Velcro. They head for the door, fighting everybody off as though they might be lethal.

As they leave through the side door, Pikul sees five or six fans, shrieking like monkeys, still stomping and kicking the body of Dichter viciously, hysterically, while Levi's two assistants carry him to the safety of the church's apse.

EXT. COUNTRY CHURCH - NIGHT

Pikul and Geller spew out of the doorway and find themselves standing alone in the weedy parking lot of the church. The church itself stands isolated on a country road just outside a town which is not much more than two gas stations and a crossroad.

Pikul and Geller look around wildly. The vehicles in the parking lot are country, pickup trucks, rusted vans, 4x4s. Across the road, aloof, maybe too high-class for the parking lot, sits a Land Rover Defender 110, the one with the roof cage and the seven seats and the winch hanging off the front. Geller gestures towards the Defender.

GELLER

Let's take my limo.

PIKUL

(wild)

No, no!

GELLER

Why no?

PIKUL

I don't trust the driver!

GELLER

You drive, idiot!

They cross the road and jump in the Defender. Frances, the driver, sixtyish, a retired lady farmer who moonlights, is apprehensive.

FRANCES

What's the commotion, Miss Geller? Say, are you all right? What's goin' on in there?

GELLER

We need this vehicle, and we need it without you. But with the keys.

FRANCES

I can't do that. I can't abandon my vehicle.

Geller pulls the weird gun out of an astonished Pikul's pocket. She points it at Frances.

GELLER

Get out, Frances. You can say you were hijacked.

FRANCES

(chuckles)

It'll take more than a dead squirrel to get me out of this seat.

Geller fires two shots. One rips a hole in Frances's headrest.

FRANCES

(getting out of her seat)
You have to push the shift lever down to get it into reverse.

GELLER

Thanks, Frances.

They drive off down the country road, leaving Frances in the dust.

INT. DEFENDER LIMO - NIGHT

Pikul drives. He can see why the limo is an off-road vehicle: the road is terrible, dirt and gravel, stutter potholes and sharp ridges, the occasional fallen tree.

PIKUL

(manic, scared)

I normally like the countryside,
don't you? Normally, the country
is relaxing and calm.

GELLER

Only if you don't really know
what's going on.

PIKUL

What do you mean?

GELLER

There is great stress and anger
and violence in the countryside.
Thousands of life forms all
screaming ME ME ME and trying to
kill and dominate and devour the
other life forms. It's terrifying
and exhausting.

PIKUL

(lamely)

Well, I like the countryside.

GELLER

That's good, 'cause you might end
up spending a lot of time here.

PIKUL

I might?

GELLER

Sure. If you go back home to the
city, they'll probably be waiting
for you.

PIKUL

They?

GELLER

Yeah. My assassins. They'd want
to have a little talk with you
about where I am.

PIKUL

I was hoping that was just one
crazy guy.

GELLER

Did you hear the way he screamed
at me? He wasn't alone.

PIKUL

Everybody likes a conspiracy.
It's more satisfying than just
one crazy guy doing one crazy
thing.

Geller goes silent.

PIKUL

Well, what are we going to do out
here? Do you know your way
around? You know any country
people?

GELLER

Not country people. Games people.
The countryside's full of games
development people, project co-
ordinators, little factories -
you name it.

PIKUL

That's weird. I never knew that.

GELLER

The city's full of bad
microwaves, bad thermals, bad
electro-optics. You can't shield
from it anymore. You can't get
true readings. The whole industry
moved out of the city years ago.

PIKUL

So you know your way around. We
can hide out.

GELLER

Maybe. But it seems I have some
enemies I didn't know I had.
"Death to Allegra Geller." How'd
you like to hear somebody with a
gun screaming, "Death to Ted
Pikul"?

PIKUL

Wow.

(reflective pause; then)
Hey, how'd you know my name?

GELLER

(indicating his name tag)
You're labelled.

PIKUL

Oh. Yeah.

(pause)

How did you know how to fire that gun? I've never seen anything like it.

GELLER

It has a trigger. I pulled it.

PIKUL

Can I see it?

GELLER

Later. I think I'm gonna use it in my next game. If there ever is a next game.

Pikul glances at her. He hits a pothole and she bounces around in her seat, exposing her far shoulder to him. Her shirt is soaked with blood.

PIKUL

Migod, you're bleeding. I forgot you got hit.

There is an urgent buzzing from somewhere in Pikul's breast pocket.

GELLER

What's that?

PIKUL

It's my pink-fone. I'm not sure I should answer it.

GELLER

Answer it.

Pikul pulls the pink-fone - it's soft surgical plastic, palm-sized - out of his pocket. When he squeezes it open, a diffuse pink light swells up from deep inside it.

PIKUL

(into phone)

Ted Pikul.

(pause)

What happened? Some fan went crazy and started shooting up the place. I don't know why. He was just nuts. Allegra Geller? She's with me. We're OK. Yeah. Yeah.

(more)

PIKUL (CONT'D)

(pause)

You're kidding me. You're kidding me! God. I can't believe it. I can't do that. No, how can I do that? Well, I'm not really sure where we are because...

Geller grabs the pink-fone from him. She fumbles around with it, trying to find the power button. She accidentally summons up a read-out, which she pauses to look at. What she sees makes her glance up at Pikul.

PIKUL

What? Can I have my pink-fone back?

Geller finds the power button and pushes it. The pink inner light flutters out. She unceremoniously throws the pink-fone out the window. It lands in a rain ditch full of frogs.

PIKUL

(in shock)

What did you do that for? That was our lifeline to civilization.

GELLER

That was a rangefinder. As long as you have that, they know where you are.

PIKUL

They? You mean head office?

GELLER

I mean anybody.

(pause)

I heard what Levi said to you. He said, "We have enemies in our own house." He said it as he was dying.

PIKUL

(flustered)

I don't think he died. I mean, do you? I think he maybe fainted... Maybe he went unconscious...

GELLER

Who was that on the phone? What was he saying to you?

PIKUL

That was Alex Kindred, head of publicity and marketing, at Antenna HQ...

(wistful)

...on that very expensive pink-fone you threw away.

(deep sigh)

He said that some bizarre fanatical group called the Anti-eXistenZialists has put a price of 5 million dollars on your head, payable to anybody who kills you. It's been released to all the media now. Everybody knows about it.

GELLER

(in disbelief)

Anti-existentialists?

PIKUL

No. Anti-eXistenZialists. Capital X, capital Z. They somehow found out about eXistenZ and they want to kill you for creating it. They say that the eXistenZ game system will "finally destroy reality", or something totally nuts like that.

GELLER

(strangely satisfied)

Yeah.

PIKUL

It makes sense to you? You're not suprised?

GELLER

I hear things. It's hard to surprise me.

(pause)

And what else?

PIKUL

Kindred said that I'm your bodyguard and the company is holding me totally responsible for your safety.

GELLER

(pause)

Pikul, why don't you have a gun with you?

PIKUL

What?

GELLER

You're not armed. They told me you were my security but you have no weaponry.

PIKUL

Who told you that? I'm just a marketing trainee. My clinic master thought I'd learn something about marketing if I moonlighted as a security guard on one of your test previews.

GELLER

Fuck. I'm marked for death and they send me on the road with a PR nerd.

PIKUL

(realization setting in)
Jesus! Marked for death!

GELLER

Don't sweat it, Pikul. I'll handle it. We just have to disappear for a while. And right now, we have to stop.

PIKUL

We do? Why?

GELLER

(deadpan)

So we can have an intimate moment together.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

The intimate moment involves Pikul digging the bullet out of Geller's shoulder with a Swiss Army knife while kneeling in front of the idling Defender's headlights. Pikul is being squeamish and not getting the job done.

GELLER

(irritated)

C'mon. If you're gonna do it, do it.

PIKUL

OK, OK.

He grits his teeth and digs in with a bit more gusto. Something yellow and white, like a kernel of corn, flips out of her wound and onto the road's shredding asphalt. Pikul feels around for it, finds it, holds it up to the light.

PIKUL

I got it. Wow. Did somebody bite you?

GELLER

What do you mean?

PIKUL

What I just dug out of you. It's a tooth. A human tooth.

Pikul holds the tooth out to her, but she just glances at it, then rummages around in her MetaFlesh game-pod bag.

GELLER

Lemme see that weirdo pistol.

Geller pulls the strange weapon out of the bag. After a moment of study, she expertly pops the magazine out of the grip. The gristly magazine is packed with teeth.

GELLER

Yep. The bullets are human teeth. Look - this one's got a cavity.

PIKUL

That thing was designed to get past any kind of metal or synthetics detector. It's all flesh and bone.

GELLER

I suppose the smaller caliber pistols would have to fire baby teeth. The tooth fairy could go into the arms business.

PIKUL
(incredulous)
That guy really came there
tonight just to kill you.

GELLER
(with irony)
Amazing, isn't it?

EXT. MOTEL - NIGHT

We follow the Defender as it parks outside the Salmon Falls Motel. Pikul jumps out carrying two paper bags of Perky Pat's takeout. He knees the truck door shut and walks over to motel door #5.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Inside the very basic motel room, Pikul sits hypnotized, reverentially watching Geller as he obsessively packs the greasy remains of their Perky Pat burgers into the smallest possible paper bundle.

Geller is sitting in the middle of her twin bed, her pod before her on a hotel towel which is draped over her lap, UmbyCord jacked into her bioport, a second towel slipping off her shoulders leaving her almost naked, her shoulder wound livid in the 25-watt light of the night table lamp.

Her hands twitch delicately over the surface of the pod like insect antennae, so delicately that we are not sure that she is actually touching the pod. Her eyes are half-closed, and she is obviously in some kind of trance-like, ecstatic state.

Finally, she comes out of it and unplugs her UmbyCord, discretely rearranging her towels in the process. She sighs and speaks, not exactly to Pikul.

GELLER
The whole gamesworld is in a kind
of trance.

PIKUL
Yes. I remember you said that at
the church.

GELLER
People are prepared to accept so
little. They're in a cage formed
out of their own limited
(more)

GELLER (CONT'D)
expectations. They have no idea
what amazing things could be
theirs.

PIKUL
Where were you just now? What
were you doing?

GELLER
(a worried frown)
I was wandering through eXistenZ
- the new system, I mean.
(a shy, sexy smile)
I like it in there. Of course,
without another player you're
only a tourist. It's frustrating.

PIKUL
Why won't you let me contact
Antenna? They've got to be going
crazy, wondering what's happened
to you. I mean, it's not like
we've done something wrong. We
just ran because we didn't know
how many of them there were,
right? I think we owe it to
Antenna to let them know you're
all right, to get them to send
somebody to help you who knows
what he's doing... And besides, I
can't... I can't just keep doing
this, whatever it is, you know,
forever, not having any idea when
it's going to be...

Geller gets up and goes over to Pikul. She pulls up his
shirt.

PIKUL
Hey, what are you doing?

GELLER
Where's your bioport? Don't tell
me you were never fitted. I can't
believe it.

Pikul shrugs his shirt back down, starts tucking it in.

PIKUL
No, I was never fitted with a
bioport. What do you care?

GELLER

You're hoping to get into the biz and you've never played one of my games. You've never played any game. That means you have no idea what a genius I am.

PIKUL

(lamely)

My clinic master told me I don't need to play a game to know how to sell it.

GELLER

Bullshit. Posturing. You don't play my games, you don't work for Antenna Research, I'll make sure of that.

PIKUL

Look, I've been dying to play your games. But I have this - phobia about having my body penetrated - surgically. You know what I mean.

GELLER

I'm not so sure I do.

PIKUL

Getting a bioport fitted... I dunno. I can't do it. It's too freaky. Makes my skin crawl.

GELLER

God, c'mon. They just pop your spine with a little hydro-gun. Shoot the port-plug into it. They do it at malls, like getting your ears pierced.

PIKUL

Yeah, sure. With only an infinitesimal chance of permanent spinal paralysis. I've read all about it.

GELLER

It's your chosen profession, geek.

She pauses, then moves very close to him. She breathes her words slowly, intimately, into his ear.

- - - - -

GELLER

(hotly)

There's an intimacy involved in playing eXistenZ that is beyond description. It has to be experienced. And frankly, the two-player version is the most exquisitely intense. Wouldn't you like to play with me?

PIKUL

(his resolve is crumbling)

Well, yeah, of course, but... Let me, uh, let me call Antenna...

GELLER

(a gentle threat)

They wouldn't want to talk to you if they knew you had never had a bioport installed. It's company policy, you know. They want you to be passionate about your work.

(very seductive)

Besides, once you're ported, there's no end to the games you can play.

PIKUL

(he's sweating)

You can't seriously want to play games now. Not here. Not while we're being hunted down by crazy people.

Geller sighs, then switches into her explaining-the-facts-of-life-to-a-child mode.

GELLER

(cradling her pod)

My baby here took a huge hit in the church, Pikul. You see how she's quivering?

Pikul takes a look. The pod is, in fact, quivering like a terrified hamster.

PIKUL

It... she, yes, she's quivering.

GELLER

(emotional)

When those UmbyCords got ripped out of her in the church, ripped
(more)

GELLER (CONT'D)

out just as the game architecture was being downloaded from her to all those slave pods... that's a very vulnerable time for her. She could be crying out for help right here, right now.

(choking up)

The only way I can tell if everything's OK - the game's not been contaminated, the pod, my baby, is not about to be crippled for life because of my negligence - the only way is to play eXistenZ with somebody friendly. Are you friendly, or are you not?

PIKUL

(pause)

Sure, all right.

(he might have found a way out)

Let's do it... let's do it now. Let me see.

(checks his watch)

To get an illegal, unregistered bioport installed at about midnight - we just drive up to your local country gas station, right?

EXT. COUNTRY GAS STATION - NIGHT

The Defender is parked by the pumps. A gangly pump attendant - his name, embroidered on his overalls, seems to be Gas - fills the truck as Pikul and Geller hover nervously.

GAS

Anything else I can do for you?

GELLER

Well, Gas, you could check your bioport-plugs.

GAS

The what? The sparkplugs?

GELLER

You heard me. My friend here has a bioport problem.

GAS

(cool)

A bioport, now, that's a sort of a hole in your spine, isn't it? Lotta assholes 'round here, but that's generally it. I don't know why you'd be talking to me about that, lady.

Geller smiles a knowing smile.

GELLER

Sure you do.

Gas looks at her closely for the first time. His eyes widen in disbelief. He pulls a greasy wallet out of his overalls and flips out the card holders. Amongst various family photos, hot rod photos, fishing photos, is a photo of Allegra Geller clipped from a glossy magazine. Under the photo is the legend "Genius In A Game-Pod".

Gas takes her hand in his and kisses it.

GAS

Allegra Geller. You changed my life.

INT. GAS-STATION GARAGE - NIGHT

Pikul sits on a mouldy, greasy, plump, wingback chair in the corner of the gas-station garage, watching Gas balance shakily on one leg as he puts on a fresh set of overalls.

PIKUL

What was your life like before?

GAS

Before?

PIKUL

Before it was changed by Allegra Geller.

GAS

I operated a gas station.

PIKUL

But you still operate a gas station, don't you?

GAS

Only on the most pathetic level
of reality. Geller's work
liberated me.

PIKUL

Liberated?

GAS

Did you ever play her game
ArtGod? One word, capital A,
capital G?

PIKUL

I don't have a bioport, remember?

GAS

"Thou, the player of the game,
art God." Very spiritual. Funny,
too. God, the artist. The
mechanic.

(chuckles to himself)

Funny.

Gas zips up his fresh overalls.

PIKUL

(uneasy)

Those are sterile, are they?

GAS

Not to worry. The way they set
things up, you could fire in a
bioport in a slaughterhouse and
not generate an infection.

PIKUL

Then why the clean overalls?

GAS

It's a mental thing. Helps me
focus. The one thing you don't
want to do is miss with the stud-
finder.

PIKUL

Oh, God.

GAS

(big smile)

God, the mechanic.

Gas slides open a drawer of his red metal mechanic's rolling toolbox and pulls out a greasy device that looks like a carbon-fibre voltage meter.

GAS

We call this thing a stud-finder.' It locates the spot on your spine where the x intersects with the y. We don't want to be even a micron out of whack. That's when you get troubles. It's a little radar/sonar/laser thingee. Marks you with a special range-finding dye.

PIKUL

Never say dye.

GAS

Lift up your shirt and turn around.

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

In the heat of the summer night, game-pod case still slung over her shoulder, Geller wanders around the periphery of the gas station, touching things - trees, the ground, grass - at random, her expression suggesting that everything she sees is amazing and delightful and slightly disturbing, like someone who has wandered into a sculpture garden where everything is perfect in every detail except that everything is made out of bronze.

INT. GAS-STATION GARAGE - NIGHT

Gas pulls the trigger on the stud-finder, then removes it from Pikul's back. We see a small purple flower-mark, like the kind that marks sides of beef, on the skin over Pikul's spine just above the belt line. Pikul stands up from his kneeling position on the wingback chair. He stretches, twists. Everything seems to be all right.

GAS

See, that didn't hurt, did it?

PIKUL

I didn't expect that to hurt. I expect the next part to hurt.

Gas pulls the bioport insertion gun out of another drawer, this time a locked wooden one bolted under his metal-topped work bench. It is a scary thing, like a hydraulic jack designed by Giger, only smaller.

PIKUL
Yeah, that's what I expect will hurt.

GAS
I've never crippled anyone yet.

PIKUL
How many have you done?

GAS
Three. Well, you'll be the third.

EXT. GAS STATION - NIGHT

We are close on a bizarre insect which sits unsteadily on the chrome of a gas pump handle. Geller's hand comes into frame and gently eases the creature into its palm. Geller floats her hand closer to her face and studies the creature with an expression of rapture on her face.

The insect is large, praying mantis-sized, and it has two heads, neither of which seems to know how to deal with the other one. Each time it attempts to move, it falls over in an awkward heap because its legs are all different sizes and shapes. It beats its large, papery wings wildly in order to pull itself upright and then begins the whole clumsy process all over again. Eventually, its wing action lifts it off Geller's hand - more by accident than will, it seems - and the creature disappears in the darkness surrounding the gas pumps.

INT. GAS-STATION GARAGE - NIGHT

Geller enters the garage and sees Pikul with his back to the wall of the service bay and a large wrench in his hand, poised and threatening. Gas stands twenty feet away, his insertion gun at the ready. A Mexican standoff.

GELLER
What's going on, Gas?

GAS
Hell, he's acting like I'm attackin' him. People usually pay me to do this, you know.

PIKUL
Yeah. All two of them.
As you can see, I've decided not to have a bioport installed.

Geller walks over to Pikul and puts her face quite close to his. He watches her lips move from the corner of his eye. They are full and moist and convincing.

GELLER

This is it, you see. This is the cage I was talking about, the cage of your own making which keeps you trapped and pacing about in the smallest possible space forever. Break out of your cage, Pikul. Break out now.

INT. GAS-STATION GARAGE. MOMENTS LATER - NIGHT

Wearing mechanic's work gloves, Gas fires in the bioport plug. Its impact knocks the breath out of Pikul, like being kicked in the spine; he can't even scream. When Gas pulls the insertion device away from Pikul's back, we see the glossy plastic head of the bioport plug. It's surrounded by a small, angry-looking volcano of rashy, irritated flesh.

GELLER

That swelling doesn't last for long. Tomorrow, you won't even notice it.

PIKUL

I love it. Great.

Pikul tries to get up from the wingback chair and promptly collapses into the arms of Geller and Gas.

PIKUL

(panic-stricken)

What's going on? I can't walk!

GAS

The procedure comes with its own epidural, just like when you have a baby. Kinda like instant paralysis from the waist down? That's why it didn't hurt you. It'll wear off in about twenty minutes.

As they ease Pikul into a sitting position in the chair, Gas almost drops the insertion gun which he has been holding in one hand. He leans it against the wingback chair, and Pikul notices blood and flecks of skin on Gas's work gloves.

PIKUL

You're looking more like a
butcher than a mechanic.

GAS

Things do get kinda confused
these days, don't they? I'm gonna
go wash up. You two make
yourselves at home.

Gas strides off towards the washroom with an air of great
satisfaction. Geller eases her game-pod out of its case and
starts to attach its two-player, Y-shaped UmbyCord to it.

PIKUL

What are you doing?

GELLER

We don't have to wait for the
swelling to go down.

PIKUL

You're going to port into me?
While I'm paralysed?

GELLER

You wanted to play my game,
didn't you?

PIKUL

Yeah, I did, and I do, but...
Here? Now?

GELLER

It's an instant-on world, isn't
it?

She lifts up his shirt to reveal the new bioport. It already
looks a bit less angry than it did before. Geller caresses
it, prods it, plays with it. Then she takes out a little
bottle of WD-40 and sprays it around and into the port.

PIKUL

What's that for? It feels cold.

GELLER

New ports are sometimes a bit
tight. Wouldn't want to hurt you.

PIKUL

How come bioports don't get
infected? I mean, they open right
into your body...

GELLER

Listen to what you're saying,
Pikul. Don't be ludicrous.

PIKUL

(very nervous)

Don't you think you could call me
Ted?

GELLER

Maybe afterwards.

Geller gently works her UmbyJack into Pikul's bioport. She locks her eyes onto his, then squeezes her game-pod's ON teat. Instantly, her pod convulses and begins to flash and spark and crackle. White electronic smoke seeps from its crevices and a kind of bioelectronic fat sputters from its pores.

Geller leaps up from the arm of the chair and rips her UmbyJack out of Pikul's spine. He can't feel it, but the furious force of her move twists him in his chair.

GELLER

(furious)

Shit, Pikul! I can't believe
this! I trusted you and you blew
my pod! You must have neural-
surged!

PIKUL

What do you mean?

GELLER

(in despair)

I jacked you into my pod and you
obviously panicked. Now it's
totally fucked! This is a
disaster!

PIKUL

I... I was nervous, but I didn't
panic.

GELLER

(fighting hysteria)

I was forced to trust you and you
panicked and you neural-surged,
and you blew my pod.

PIKUL

You can get a new pod...

GELLER

(her heart is breaking)
Pikul, in this pod is the only,
the original version of eXisten2,
an entire game system that cost
thirty-eight million to develop,
not including pre-release
marketing costs. And I'm locked
outside of my own game! I can't
get it out, or me in!

PIKUL

Are you serious? This is the only
version that exists?

GELLER

Security is everything these
days. It's the only one and its
stuck inside and it's your fault.

Geller uses her sleeve to clean the drool off the pod with
tragic gentleness, as though it were an injured child.

GELLER

(fighting back tears)
I've devoted my five most
passionate years to this strange
little creature. And I've never
regretted it, Pikul, because I
knew that it was the only thing
that could give my life any
meaning...

PIKUL

But why is it my fault? I'm
telling you, I didn't, I did not
neural-surge. I didn't. I didn't
feel any surging.

Gas strolls into the garage, still wearing his work gloves,
which now hold an agricultural-looking shotgun. It is
levelled at Geller.

GAS

It isn't your fault. It's my
fault.

Pikul looks at Gas in disbelief. His feet begin to writhe in
circles, but he still can't get out of the chair. Geller
backs away from Gas, clutching her pod protectively.

GELLER

(quietly)
Oh, no, Gas, not you.

GAS

I wouldn't try to use that bioport again, 'cept maybe for a toaster or something.

GELLER

What's going on?

GAS

You're worth a lot of money. If you're dead.

PIKUL

What are you talking about?

GAS

You know what I'm talking about. It's all over the countryside. Five million for her dead body. No questions asked.

PIKUL

But, but... she changed your life.

GAS

Yup. And now I'm gonna change hers.

PIKUL

(stalling)

But wait... Why did you install a bad port into me?

GAS

Seems there's a big bonus for killing Allegra Geller's latest game, or whatever it is. I think I just did that, didn't I?

Geller decides to try another tack. She stops backing away and begins to slowly approach Gas.

GELLER

But can you kill a person? Can you do that, Gas? Can you kill me? Hide my body. Contact the crazies. Trust them to pay up. Hand over my now-decaying, fucking grotesque corpse. Really expect them to hand over 5 mil cash? Don't you ever go to the fuckin' movies?

GAS

I like your script. I want to be
in it.

Gas cocks his shotgun. He's really going to do it. Except that Pikul shoots him right in the mastoid bone, just behind the ear, with the bioport insertion gun. The back of Gas's skull shatters and he goes down hard. Pikul drops the gun and launches himself out of his chair. He falls to his knees beside Gas's body.

PIKUL

Oh, God, I think he's dead. I
thought I could just distract
him.

GELLER

You did distract him.
(to Gas's body)
Plug your toaster into that hole,
corpse!

INT. DEFENDER - NIGHT

Geller drives. Pikul hangs on in the passenger seat.

PIKUL

He wanted to kill you.

GELLER

Yep.

PIKUL

That's two people in one day who
wanted to actually kill you.

GELLER

I've never been more popular.

PIKUL

Allegra, we need help.

GELLER

You're right. I've got to get
this pod fixed.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - DAY

The Defender winds its way up a heavily wooded mountain
road.

EXT. CALEDON SKI CLUB - DAY

The Defender turns off a dirt road and rumbles through an open gate. The stone gateposts bear a coy rustic sign which reads, CALEDON SKI CLUB - PRIVATE ROAD.

INT. DEFENDER - DAY

PIKUL

We're going skiing?

GELLER

Nothing in the countryside is what it seems. It's all appearance versus reality, and the reality here is something unique.

EXT. CALEDON SKI CLUBHOUSE - DAY

The Defender pulls up beside the chalet-style ski clubhouse.

As they get out of the truck, the same bizarre insect that Geller was playing with the night before lands on the truck's side mirror, narrowly missing Pikul as it flops around in the air.

PIKUL

Look at that huge bug. It's got two heads.

GELLER

They breed them here. They're not supposed to get away.

They get out and walk towards the clubhouse.

PIKUL

What if somebody comes up here and really wants to ski?

GELLER

Nobody actually physically skis any more, Pikul. You know that.

PIKUL

I've watched some ski shows. Downhill racing, Austrian Alps.

GELLER

(contemptuously)
Yeah, right.

INT. CALEDON SKI CLUBHOUSE - DAY

Pikul and Geller enter the clubhouse. There is nobody around. It looks like a real ski clubhouse, complete with racks of ski pants and ski boots. But when Pikul examines the goods, he can see that they're old and cracked and falling apart. They've been there for years.

A man comes out of a back room, early sixties, authoritarian air, eastern-European. He is Kiri Vinokur, and he lights up when he sees Geller.

VINOKUR

My darling Allegra. I am so pleased to see you here.

They embrace.

GELLER

Kiri Vinokur, this is my bodyguard, Ted Pikul.

VINOKUR

Hello, yes, I heard the ridiculous story about this fatwa against you. The company is desperately trying to find you. Is it really serious? Are you in danger?

PIKUL

If I'm her bodyguard, then she's in grave danger.

GELLER

There have been a couple of attempts on my life already.

VINOKUR

(shocked)

No! That's unbearable. The company must stop this. They owe you every kind of protection.

GELLER

I don't know if they can do anything about it. It seems to be open season on me.

VINOKUR

Well, you will be safe here, I can assure you of that. I will contact Antenna right away and have them send some people to come and collect you.

GELLER

Kiri, no, don't. You mustn't let anybody know we're here unless you have to. I can't be sure that Antenna is completely safe for me.

VINOKUR

I understand. Yes. The company draws many eccentric people into its fold. You can hide in one of the guest chalets. As long as you like. I will make sure you get fresh towels...

Geller pats her game-pod case.

GELLER

...and make sure I don't lose everything I have in here.

INT. WORKSHOP CHALET - DAY

In the strange atmosphere of the workshop chalet, Vinokur is taking Geller's pod apart. It is more like surgery on an alien life form than computer electronics. The room feels like a weird combination of a hi-tech operating room and a woodworking class.

A cherubic middle-aged man - Landry - who looks more like a farmhand than an electronics technician, assists Vinokur as he works.

VINOKUR

What did you port into?

GELLER

Pikul's bioport.

VINOKUR

Really? That's what did all the damage?

PIKUL

It was a flawed installation - my first. It... it neural-surged. Allegra says you can fix it.

VINOKUR

It fried some very expensive nerve boards. See? Here. These are kaput. It's a complex thing.

PIKUL
Nerve boards?

VINOKUR
We use the nervous systems of specially-bred insects to create the electronic circuits on our motherboards.

(smiles)
Only Antenna Research has it.

PIKUL
Wow. And where do the batteries go?

VINOKUR
Very funny.

GELLER
He's not kidding. He's a total PR nerd.

(to Pikul)
It ports into you, and you are the power source. Your body, your nervous system. Your energy. When you get tired, run down, it won't run properly.

VINOKUR
Landry here will finish up the pod-work. Meanwhile...
(to Pikul)
Let's get that nasty bioport out of you and get a nice, fresh one in there. We have guest chalets out back. You're both welcome to stay. Now where did I put my bioport-plug puller...? Here it is.

Vinokur hauls out a device that looks like a pair of spring-loaded fire tongs.

VINOKUR
(to Pikul)
Lie down on that couch and pull up your shirt.

INT. GUEST CHALET - NIGHT

In their chalet, a cozy and inn-like space, Pikul and Geller examine his new bioport while sitting on one of the chalet's twin beds. The region around the port looks swollen, bruised and tender.

PIKUL
It hurts. I think it's infected.

GELLER
It's not infected. It's just
excited. It wants action.

She attempts to jack her pod into his port using the Y-shaped UmbyCord, but he twists away from her.

PIKUL
But I really don't think that I
want action. Me, I mean. The
bearer of the excited bioport.
What I want is... not now. Not
here. I feel too... too exposed.

Geller sighs, then switches into her explaining-the-facts-of-life-to-a-child mode. They are both aware that they are replaying an earlier moment.

GELLER
(cradling her pod)
My baby here has now taken three
major hits, one in the church,
one in the gas station, and one
on the operating table. The only
way I can tell if everything's OK
- the game's not been
contaminated, the pod's not
fucked - is to play eXistenZ with
somebody friendly. Are you
friendly, or are you not?

Pikul swallows nervously, then turns his back to Geller so that she can port in.

PIKUL
You're telling me this thing will
run off my body's energy?

GELLER
(porting in)
That's how they work. See? You're
hummin' along already.

Sure enough, he is. Geller deftly twists the second jack into her own bioport and takes a deep breath.

GELLER
All right. eXistenZ. Only from
Antenna. Here we go.

PIKUL

(apprehensive)

You've got a bit of an unfair advantage, don't you? How can I possibly compete with the designer of the system?

GELLER

You could beat the guy who invented poker, couldn't you?

Geller flicks the game-pod nipple, and the chalet begins to melt away around them.

INT. GAME STORE - NIGHT

The chalet melts away and is replaced by a scruffy game store. A lot of kids and strange adults mill around amongst the dusty racks and pinball machines, examining packages of weird games and game devices, muttering secretively to each other, and it is amongst these dull rows of shelves that Pikul and Geller find themselves standing.

A cashier works away behind an old-fashioned cash register that sits on a tall counter. The cashier, a gangly, sallow young man, glances at Pikul and Geller suspiciously from time to time.

Pikul feels himself, his clothes, moves his arms, his tongue. He feels around behind him but there is no game-pod or UmbyCord in sight.

PIKUL

That was beautiful. I feel... just like me. Is that kind of transition normal, a kind of smooth dissolve from place to place?

GELLER

Depends on the style of the game. You can get jagged, brutal cuts, slow fades, shimmering little morphs...

PIKUL

This is amazing. I had no idea. We... we're still ourselves, but we're in the game. Where are we?

GELLER

It's basically a game store I
used to hang out in as a kid.

PIKUL

(enchanted)

Are you serious?

GELLER

We're ported into a game-pod
together, remember? eXistenZ has
complete access to both our
central nervous systems. Its game
architecture will be based on our
memories, our anxieties, our
preoccupations...

PIKUL

(disenchanted)

Are you serious?

GELLER

You keep saying that.

(examines a game-pak)

Look at this. Games I've never
heard of. Biological Father. Hit
By A Car. Viral Ecstasy. Chinese
Restaurant.

(reads pak back)

"In Viral Ecstasy, you are a
virus invading a specific human
body. You create ingenious viral
strategies to cope with the
efforts of the body's immune
system to destroy you..."

PIKUL

Wait a minute. That reminds me.
What precisely is the goal of the
game we're playing now? I mean,
the rules, the objective...
Nobody's ever really said
anything about what you have to
do in eXistenZ.

GELLER

The beauty of eXistenZ is that it
changes every time you play it.
It adapts to the individuals who
are actually playing it. The
result is that you have to play
the game to find out why you're
playing the game.

PIKUL

But that's kind of cheating,
isn't it? Not to say confusing.

GELLER

Not at all. It's a much more
organic approach to gaming than
classic, arbitrary, rule-
dominated games. It's the future,
Pikul. You'll see how natural it
feels.

PIKUL

(distracted)

Look at this. Could this be the
future too?

(picks up a game-pod)

Ever see anything like this
before?

They are looking at a game-pod in a gel-pak that is even
weirder than a tissue-pod. It has a logo and a name -
CORTICAL SYSTEMATICS.

Suddenly, a hand reaches into the frame and takes the pak
away, puts it neatly back on the rack.

Pikul and Geller look up at a man in his early fifties,
graying, thinning hair, beefy, generally harried and
pugnacious air. The man is Dorsey Nader.

NADER

These are delicate. You have to
be careful.

PIKUL

Yes. I can imagine.

NADER

Cortical Systematics is the
latest and the hottest. Not just
a new game, but a new system.

GELLER

Will it work with an industry
standard bioport?

NADER

(ignores her question)

I haven't seen you two before,
have I? This is my place.

Haimische, isn't it? Funky?

PIKUL
We're new in town.

NADER
Welcome to Dorsey Nader's Game Emporium. I'm Dorsey Nader. Is there anything I can help you with?

GELLER
We're just looking.

NADER
(furtively)
I have what you're looking for.

PIKUL
You do?

NADER
Follow me.

Nader turns his back on them and walks to the back of the store. He stops at a warped and dirty door, turns, beckons to them urgently, trying not to be noticed by the preoccupied patrons.

As Pikul and Geller follow Nader through the door, they do not escape the notice of the sour-faced young cashier, who writes something down hurriedly on a pad with an air of vengeful self-importance.

INT. STOCKROOM. GAME STORE - NIGHT

Pikul and Geller find themselves in a stockroom jammed to overflowing with packaged and naked game-related merchandise. They are alone with Nader, and they are all sitting on wooden crates.

Nader rummages on the shelves behind him for a moment, then turns back to them with a gel-pak in his hands. He studies them for a moment, hefting the gel-pak in his hand.

NADER
(pause)
Who sent you?

PIKUL
(instant response)
It's none of your business who sent us. We're here, and that's all that matters.

Pikul is shocked at his own response. He turns to Geller in horror, worried that he's blown the game already.

PIKUL

Oh God, what happened? I didn't mean to say that!

GELLER

(giggling)

It's your character who said it. It's a kind of schizophrenic feeling, isn't it? But you'll get used to it. There are things that have to be said to advance the plot and establish the characters, and those things get said whether you want to say them or not. Don't fight it. Just go with it.

PIKUL

But should you be saying that in front of him? Nader?

GELLER

Look at him.

Pikul does. Nader doesn't seem to have heard him. In fact, he doesn't respond at all other than to hum the Antenna Research corporate song and tap his fingers repetitively, caught in a small behavioural loop. Geller chuckles at Pikul's confusion.

PIKUL

(re Nader)

What's he doing?

GELLER

He's gone into a game loop, he's locked up, and he won't come out of it until you give him a proper game line of dialogue.

PIKUL

This is tricky.

GELLER

Start by repeating your last line. Include his name so he knows you're talking to him.

PIKUL

We're here, Dorsey Nader, and that's all that matters.

Nader immediately comes out of his loop. He chuckles.

NADER

You're right. That is all that matters.

Pikul smiles, delighted. Now he takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, relaxes. The line comes.

PIKUL

Well, Nader, you said you had what we want. We're waiting.

NADER

You're going to need these micro-pods to download your new identities. I assume that you both have had those industry standard bioports you mentioned installed.

GELLER

Yes, of course, that's right. We both have bioports.

Here she pauses, looks at Pikul.

GELLER

We do, don't we?

PIKUL

I assumed we did. I mean, here. In the game. Of course, we might not.

GELLER

We'd better check.

While Nader goes into game lock-up, Geller lifts up her shirt. Pikul takes a look. Her bioport is there, although slightly rougher, puckered, more organic than in non-game life.

PIKUL

Yeah, it's there. Looks a little different, but it's there.

Geller grabs Pikul's shirt and lifts it. His is there too.

GELLER

I see what you mean.

(to Nader)

Yes, we both have bioports.

NADER

(unlocking)

Good. Port in and this'll tell
you all you need to know for now.

Pikul and Geller examine the pak, which bears the Cortical Systematics name and logo. It seems to be a miniature version of their real-life game-pod.

NADER

I'm going to leave while you
finish up here. It wouldn't be
good for us all to be seen
together.

Nader gets up to leave, pauses at the door.

NADER

Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

Nader chuckles a very theatrical chuckle, then leaves.

PIKUL

I assume that Nader is our entry
point into the game.

GELLER

Yeah. Kinda disappointing.

PIKUL

Nader?

GELLER

Yeah. Not a very well-drawn
character. And his dialogue was
just so-so.

PIKUL

Yeah.

(pause)

Do we blame ourselves for that?
The bad dialogue? Or would it be
bad no matter who was ported in?

GELLER

The game engine is just getting
used to us. It'll get more daring
once it warms up.

Geller fumbles the micro-pod out of its vacuum-pak shell. She reads the instructions on the back.

GELLER

OK. The pods are so small they
plug directly into the bioport.

Geller delicately twists the end of the micro-pod into Pikul's bioport. The micro-pod changes colour, pulses, ripples, and then slowly flows and wriggles its way into Pikul's bioport until it has completely disappeared.

GELLER

God!

PIKUL

What happened?

GELLER

The whole pod just disappeared
into your back.

PIKUL

(panicky)

It disappeared into my back?!
It... it's in my spine? It's
winding its way around my spinal
cord?

GELLER

Don't panic, it's just a game. Do
you feel anything yet?

PIKUL

(controlling his fear)

No, I don't. Not a thing. I don't
feel a thing. Uh, do you want me
to do you?

They change positions. Pikul ports in the micro-pod and it duly crawls its way into Geller's bioport. Tenderly, as though kissing a cut to make it better, Pikul kisses her back, low near her bioport. Geller whirls around with sudden anger.

GELLER

What the hell was that?

PIKUL

(confused)

That wasn't me. That was my game
character. I wouldn't have done
that. Not here, anyway.

She pauses, then kisses him on the mouth, hard.

GELLER
You're right. Our characters are obviously supposed to jump on each other. Probably to create emotional tension when danger happens. No use fighting it.

PIKUL
(fighting it)
What about our new identities? Do you feel yours yet?

GELLER
(caressing)
They'll take care of themselves.

PIKUL
(pause)
I'm very worried about my body.

Geller stops, sits up.

GELLER
Your what?

PIKUL
I mean, where are our real bodies? Are they all right? Are they hungry? What if there's danger?

GELLER
(kissing and caressing again)
They're just where we left them, sitting quietly, eyes closed. Just like meditating.

PIKUL
(reluctantly kissing and caressing back)
I don't know. I feel really vulnerable. Disembodied.

GELLER
Don't sweat it. All your senses are still operating. You'll pop right out of the game if there's a problem.

They begin to make seriously hot love amongst the game paks and cartons of replacement UmbyCords. And then the game store melts away around them.

INT. TROUT FARM. ASSEMBLY LINE - DAY

Pikul finds himself sitting at an immensely long bench in the process of assembling insect motherboards along with many other workers. Pikul can still feel the warmth of Geller's body, but she's nowhere to be seen. A gritty, narrow conveyor belt runs down the middle of the bench, upon which floats an endless stream of motherboard parts which the workers pick off as they need them. The belt begins and ends in the anonymous smoky innards of the building.

The place, a high-ceilinged pre-fab, long and narrow with hundreds of blanked-out windows, houses a game-pod assembly line. Pikul looks down to find himself wearing a photo-ID card clipped to his shirt pocket that tells him he is somebody named LARRY ASHEN. He has to twist the card around because, of course, from his vantage point it is upside down.

NOURISH

Tryin' to remember who you are?

Pikul snaps his head up to see a long-haired, morose-looking worker sitting next to him, snickering. Mocking Pikul, he twists his own card around, comically bunching up his work shirt so he can read his own name, which is YEVGENY NOURISH.

NOURISH

Hey, it works! I must be Yevgeny Nourish!

Nourish leans over to squint at Pikul's name tag.

NOURISH

And you... you are new to the Trout Farm.

PIKUL

Yes. I... I'm... very new. Did you say trout farm?

NOURISH

You know - raise baby trout from eggs and then stock the rivers with them.

(broad gesture)

Entire place used to be a trout farm. Seems like most everything used to be something else, doesn't it?

Pikul looks around him. The place is humming, but Geller is still nowhere in sight. The workers are small-town locals of a wide range of ages.

Pikul looks down at his own hands, which seem to know what to do: place glue on the boards, glue them down to a resin frame using a template, insert needle-like electrodes into the bodies of certain epoxied insects. The insect boards, Pikul notes, are actually whole insects coated in epoxy and frozen together like a sick collage. At least, here in the game they are.

Pikul is now automatically doing flashy moves with the odd materials in front of him with great dexterity. Nourish takes note of this.

NOURISH

(with admiration)

You might be new but you seem to know what you're doing.

PIKUL

(genuinely perplexed)

It surprises me more than it surprises you.

Nourish moves back to the insect motherboard that he has been working on, then leans over again exactly as he did the first time. It has the effect of an instant replay, but not in slow-motion.

NOURISH

(with admiration)

You might be new but you seem to know what you're doing.

Pikul realizes he hasn't given the right answer. He now just lets it come without thinking.

PIKUL

I, ah... I've been trained by the very best.

Nourish unlocks and looks around with a delicate furtiveness.

NOURISH

(furtive)

So have I. Where do you plan to have lunch?

PIKUL

I'm new here. I have no plans for lunch.

NOURISH

I suggest the Chinese restaurant in the forest. Everybody knows where it is. Just ask.

PIKUL

Won't you be going there too?

NOURISH

I have other plans for lunch. But I do suggest that you order the special. And don't take no for an answer.

PIKUL

All right, I'll do that.

Nourish turns back to his task and begins to work away as though Pikul didn't exist.

Pikul takes this cue to go back to his own board and is soon preoccupied with testing the board's circuits by porting it into a test UmbyCord that uncoils from the center of the bench. His strange reverie, watching himself work on autopilot at this bizarre task, is soon interrupted by a worker pushing a canvas and metal cart with bicycle wheels. The worker parks the cart behind Pikul and taps him on the shoulder.

WORKER

Larry?

PIKUL

(startled)

Yes?

WORKER

They need this in the back room.
They asked for you.

The worker shuffles off, leaving the cart behind him. Pikul turns to Nourish.

PIKUL

What's that mean?

NOURISH

(gestures)

It means that they want you in the back room. They need more insect boards for the pod assembly bays.

PIKUL

Should I just get up and go there?

NOURISH

Yeah. I'll take care of your incoming boards.

Pikul gets up to go. Nourish grabs him by the arm and whispers intensely.

NOURISH

Remember. The Chinese restaurant for lunch.

PIKUL

I order the special.

INT. TROUT FARM. POD ASSEMBLY BAYS - DAY

Pikul enters the huge back wing of the Trout Farm and walks along a rampway, pushing his cart past the pod assembly-bay area. There, pods very much like the one he and Geller are ported into back home are being assembled - motherboards inserted, internal ports connected, fleshy housings like the corpses of small amphibians sewn up - by small teams of workers.

The bays themselves are old horse stalls with straw still covering the dirt floors. But because the pods are primarily organic, the teams are more like groups of masked surgical workers in a series of impossibly small and filthy operating rooms than, let's say, auto-assembly teams in a progressive Saab plant.

As Pikul wheels his cart past each stall, he digs into the cart's canvas bag and delivers insect boards wrapped in brown wax paper to the eagerly awaiting pod teams.

In the last bay, one of the masked surgeons grabs him by the hand instead of taking the proffered motherboard and leads him to an isolated corner. Her ID card says she is BARB BRECKEN, and her photo says she is Geller.

GELLER,
(slipping off her mask)
I saw you make contact, Larry
Ashen. What did the guy on the
assembly line say to you?

Pikul's expression shows that there is a return game line
welling up in his mouth, tickling his tongue, perhaps.
Perversely, he fights it, but it comes out anyway.

PIKUL
He told me where to have lunch.

EXT. CHINESE RESTAURANT IN THE WOODS - DAY

A ragged stream of pod-assembly workers trickles along a
densely wooded gravel path towards a very un-Chinese
Victorian red-brick farmhouse. A small river flows not more
than fifty feet from the restaurant, mimicking the movement
of the line of workers.

The workers all file past a sign on the lawn in front of the
building which reads, MONA ZHANG'S BEIJING CUISINE.

INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT IN THE WOODS - DAY

Pikul and Geller are seated at a round Formica-covered table
with a lazy Susan serving wheel in the centre of it, all
very Mandarin in style. Other workers sit sullenly at their
table, wordless, suspicious.

A restaurant dog, a mongrel with a lot a heavy, collie-like
fur, lies basking in a pane of sunlight in a corner.

The waiter, a young, athletic Chinese man, comes over
bringing rice and tea.

WAITER
We have nice sea bass today.
Shall I bring it for everyone?

Pikul and Geller exchange a look. Pikul shrugs OK.

PIKUL
We want the special.

The waiter looks stunned. The others at their table look
distressed. The waiter seems to lock up, almost freeze-
framed.

PIKUL

Did you hear me, Chinese waiter?
(slowly)
We want the special.

The waiter unfreezes, smiles grimly.

WAITER

The special is for special occasions. I cannot give you the special.

PIKUL

But this is a special occasion.
It's...

Pikul pauses, waiting for the proper game line to materialize in his mouth. Finally, it does. He gestures towards Geller.

PIKUL

It's her birthday.

The waiter locks up for a moment, then unfreezes.

WAITER

A birthday is a special occasion.
I will therefore bring the special for everybody.

The waiter walks away. The others at the table get up and move away, drift over to other tables with occasional furtive backward glances at Pikul and Geller.

PIKUL

I guess the special isn't very popular.

GELLER

I guess.

PIKUL

But you know, really, don't you?
You don't have to guess. I mean,
it's your game, your little universe.

GELLER

I don't know. You have to understand that, to understand what we've really created with eXistenZ.

PIKUL

You're telling me, for example,
that you don't know what the
special is?

GELLER

Correct. I don't.

PIKUL

Or why we ordered it.

GELLER

We ordered it because another
game character told you to.
That's a clue we can't ignore.
But that's just basic games
playing.

PIKUL

I want to put the game on pause.

Geller just looks at him, puzzled. Pikul panics.

PIKUL

(panicking)

The game can be paused, can't it?
I mean, all games can be paused,
right?

GELLER

Sure, yeah, but why? What's
wrong? Aren't you dying to see
what's special about the special?

PIKUL

I'm feeling a little disconnected
from my real life. I'm kind of
losing touch with the texture of
it, you know what I mean? I mean,
I actually think there's an
element of psychosis involved
here. I mean, I don't know where
my body really is, or where
reality is, what I've actually
done, or not done.

GELLER

That's a great sign. It means
your nervous system is fully
engaging with the game
architecture. The game is a lot
more fun when it starts to feel
realer than real.

PIKUL
(pause)
Yeah.

Pikul stands up and screams at the top of his lungs.

PIKUL
(screams)
eXistenZ is paused!

The Chinese restaurant melts away.

INT. GUEST CHALET - DAY

The guest chalet melts back up around them. Pikul looks around. They are still sitting on the bed, ported into Geller's pod together.

PIKUL
Did I do that? I guess I did.

GELLER
So how does it feel?

PIKUL
What?

GELLER
Your real life. The one you came back for.

PIKUL
Just sitting here, it feels completely unreal. I'm sure you knew that would happen.

GELLER
You're stuck now, aren't you? You want to go back to the Chinese restaurant because there's nothing happening here. We're safe. It's boring.

PIKUL
Worse than that. I'm not sure here, where we are, is real at all. This feels like the game. And you... you're beginning to feel a bit like a game character to me.

(more)

PIKUL (CONT'D)

(pause)

Did we really make love to each other?

GELLER

(sharp)

Definitely not.

PIKUL

It feels like we did.

GELLER

Our characters did. I'm sure it would be very different if we did.

PIKUL

I... I'm actually just like that in real life. You got the real Ted Pikul there, in the stockroom of the game store.

GELLER

Well, you didn't get the real Allegra Geller, I can tell you that.

PIKUL

I didn't?

She kisses him gently.

GELLER

No. In real life I tend to lose control. It can get messy.

(pause)

Let's go back.

Pikul looks down at the pod. He flicks the PLAY nipple. The room melts down around them and is replaced by the Chinese restaurant.

INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT IN THE WOODS - DAY

Pikul and Geller are back at their table in the Chinese restaurant. The waiter is approaching their table. He proudly sets down a series of dishes on the lazy Susan.

WAITER

Special order for the birthday girl. Hope you enjoy it very much.

In the dishes are a variety of cooked reptiles, amphibians, fish and birds, all weirdly mutated and presented in a bizarrely beautiful fashion.

PIKUL

I think I've lost my appetite.

WAITER

A shame. Mutant creatures provide new and previously unimagined taste sensations.

(significantly)

Shall I clear all this away?

Geller sees that this is a crucial game moment.

GELLER

No, it looks terrific. Thank you. We're happy.

The waiter nods.

WAITER

Very good. Enjoy.

The waiter leaves. Geller watches him go, suspicious. When she turns back to Pikul, she is shocked to see that he has served out most of the creatures to himself and is avidly stripping the meat off their bones.

GELLER

Pikul, what are you doing?

PIKUL

I don't know. I find this disgusting but I can't help myself.

GELLER

Oh, good!

Pikul looks up from his big bowl, which is rapidly filling with creature parts. His fingers are slimy and sticky, but he doesn't stop, his fingers working expertly on their own.

PIKUL

Good? You think this is good?

GELLER

Yeah. It's a genuine game urge.
It's something that your game
character was born to do. Don't
fight it.

PIKUL

I am fighting it, but it isn't
doing me any good.

Pikul is now snapping together bits and pieces of bone,
gristle and flesh, a grotesque Lego set. When he's finished,
he's made a gun very much like the one that was used in the
attempted assassination in the church.

PIKUL

Omigod, this looks awfully
familiar. You sure this is OK?

GELLER

(not sure)
It should be OK.

Now Pikul reaches into his mouth, pulls out a bridge of
three teeth - one of them gold-filled - and loads them into
the gristly magazine.

GELLER

Do you have that bridge in real
life?

PIKUL

Absolutely not. My teeth are
perfect. Don't ask me how I knew
this thing was in my mouth.

GELLER

It probably wasn't until you
ordered the special.

He slaps the magazine into the handle, then pulls the slide
back and releases it so that there is now a toothy round in
the chamber.

Then with a smile, Pikul points the weapon at Geller.

PIKUL

(casually)
Death to the demoness Allegra
Geller.

GELLER

(suddenly very uncertain)
That's not funny!

Pikul looks at Geller and sees that there is genuine terror in her eyes.

PIKUL

Sorry, I couldn't resist. But you know... I do feel the urge to kill someone here.

Geller grips the edge of her bowl of hot-and-sour soup - the handiest weapon she has.

GELLER

(tensing)

Who?

PIKUL

I need to kill our waiter.

GELLER

(relieved)

Oh, well, that makes sense.

(calls out)

Waiter! Waiter!

(to Pikul)

When he comes over, do it. Don't hesitate.

PIKUL

But everything in this game is so realistic. I don't think I really could...

GELLER

You won't be able to stop. You might as well enjoy it.

PIKUL

"Free will" is obviously not a big factor in this little world of ours.

GELLER

It's like real life - there's just enough to make it interesting.

Pikul spots the waiter making his way across the room towards them, a big smile on his face.

PIKUL

He's too nice. I won't do it.

The waiter arrives at their table.

WAITER

What can I do to make your lunch more pleasant?

Pikul lifts the gun and points it at the waiter.

PIKUL

I found this in my soup and I'm very upset.

Pikul fires. The tooth-bullet hits the waiter in the cheekbone. A chunk of the waiter's cheekbone comes off and his head jerks back like a fighter taking a stiff jab.

The waiter's sweet face instantly transforms into a hideous, angry, snarling mask of hatred. He pulls a meat cleaver out of his jacket.

Geller immediately throws her bowl of hot-and-sour soup into the waiter's face. The waiter screams, then wildly wipes the noodles and goop out of his eyes. He raises the cleaver over his head.

The waiter swings and lunges across the table, managing only to hack the tip of the gun off. Pikul is shocked to see the gun begin to bleed. The waiter, sprawling across the table, screams as he tries to reach Geller with his cleaver. Pikul fires into the waiter's shrieking, open mouth - a tooth-bullet into teeth.

A piece of the waiter's skull comes off like a piece of coconut, the gold-filled tooth now flattened and embedded in it. The gun is bleeding all over Pikul's hand now. He drops it in disgust.

The restaurant dog comes out of nowhere, picks the gun up, and runs off with it under a table, where he crouches down and starts to gnaw on it, growling.

Pikul stands up shakily, begins to become aware of the strange, tense stillness of the other patrons in the restaurant.

PIKUL

(loudly, to room)

It's all right, just a little misunderstanding over the check. Pay no attention and enjoy your meal.

To his surprise, the patrons actually turn back to their meals, albeit with a certain sinister reluctance.

Pikul looks around wildly.

PIKUL

I feel a serious game urge to get
out of here!

Through the porthole in one of the pair of metal-clad
kitchen doors, Geller spots someone wearing a chef's hat,
someone who is wildly beckoning to them.

GELLER

Through the kitchen! That way!

INT. KITCHEN. CHINESE RESTAURANT - DAY

Geller and Pikul enter the kitchen and take a look around.

There are mutant amphibians and reptiles hung up everywhere,
in bowls and on chopping blocks. The kitchen workers have
all turned to look at the intruders.

Suddenly, a cook steps forward from around the door. We can
now see that it is Nourish in a chef's outfit.

NOURISH

Did you like the meal I prepared
for you?

PIKUL

Yes. It was very... revealing.

NOURISH

It certainly was for me. You both
passed our little test with
flying colours.

GELLER

Why did the Chinese waiter have
to die?

NOURISH

A waiter hears many things spoken
when people are relaxed and
eating. A waiter has many
opportunities for betrayal.

PIKUL

He betrayed you?

NOURISH

He betrayed us. Out this way,
quickly!

They go out a side door, and find themselves walking along the river that links the Chinese restaurant and the Trout Farm.

EXT. THE RIVER - DAY

The trio walk along the bank of the river that feeds the Trout Farm. Nourish points out a connected series of rock-lined, internally-lighted pools, some stagnant, like ponds, and some clear, with river water running through them.

NOURISH

See there, the breeding pools.

The pools are all alive with strange creatures, mutated fish, amphibians, and, along the small, muddy terraces that border the pools, reptiles. Like the dysfunctional insect at the gas station, these creatures do not work very well. They float and swim belly up, lie on their sides at the bottom of their pools, flop and flounder around, and in general, ostentatiously fail to function.

PIKUL

Is that where you caught today's special?

NOURISH

(laughs)

The restaurant is controlled by us. We raise these mutant creatures as food and that is our cover, but of course, we are also raising them as components for undetectable and hypoallergenic weapons. Right under the noses of our enemies. And speaking of our enemies, it's important that you go back to work at Cortical Systematics. We need to maintain as many agents there as we can. I'll take care of the mess at the restaurant.

GELLER

The Trout Farm is owned by Cortical Systematics?

NOURISH

Yes.

(more)

NOURISH (CONT'D)

(bitterly)

Their corporate slogan should be,
"Enemies of Reality".

A glazed look comes over Pikul. He begins to speak like a robotic orator.

PIKUL

(robot-like)

Reality is a fragile thing. Most people think that reality must of course be the most solid thing, but it isn't. Reality is threatened now more than ever. It is being eroded and it is washing away in the deforming storm of non-reality, which masquerades as reality, and eventually replaces it. Deformed and crippled and limping and hideous, threatening to engulf us all.

Geller looks at Pikul in admiring disbelief.

GELLER

(sotto voce)

Where did that come from?

PIKUL

The game made me do it.

GELLER

I'm impressed.

Nourish is also impressed. He smiles broadly, then takes Pikul in his arms and hugs him, then Geller.

NOURISH

(passionate)

We love you two now, now that you have proven to be true and trustworthy Realists. We'll be in touch.

Nourish turns around and walks back towards the restaurant.

PIKUL

"Enemies of Reality"? Or does it really mean, enemies of eXistenZ? Are the Realists the game-life version of the Anti-eXistenZialists, who desperately want to kill you?

GELLER

I wouldn't take it too seriously.

PIKUL

Of course you wouldn't. But maybe you should.

(pause)

But why is the name Cortical Systematics familiar?

GELLER

We saw it everywhere in Dorsey Nader's game store, remember?

PIKUL

Yes. So that makes it the game-life version of our own company. Cortical Systematics is equivalent to Antenna Research in the real world.

GELLER

That's probably fair to say.

PIKUL

So, then, do we meekly go back to work and say nothing? It sounds as though Nourish and his Realists are preparing to sabotage the Trout Farm. Before you know it, they'll be planning to assassinate game designers.

GELLER

We're just characters in here. Don't mix your real-life loyalties into it or you'll lose for sure.

PIKUL

Then what do we do next?

INT. GAME STORE - NIGHT

We are close on a Cortical Systematics logo on a game-pak. As Pikul and Geller pretend to examine the merchandise, they scan the game store for Nader. The store is quite crowded - same style of customers, maybe even some of the same faces, different clothes. They don't see Nader.

Geller goes up to the cashier, the same gangly, sallow, bespectacled young man who was there the first time.

GELLER

I'm looking for Dorsey Nader. Is he here?

CASHIER

Say that again?

GELLER

Is Dorsey Nader here?

The cashier glances around the store, then locks the register.

CASHIER

Come with me. He's in the back.

The cashier leads them through the store towards the stockroom door. As they move amongst the customers, both Pikul and Geller feel that they are being scrutinized carefully by shoppers who turn their eyes away from them at the last moment, so that they can't be absolutely certain.

And as for us - have we glimpsed some characters from the game that we have already seen? Possibly even Wittold Levi from the first scene in the church, and Frances the limo driver, and Gas? We aren't positive.

INT. STOCKROOM. GAME STORE - NIGHT

The cashier closes the door behind them, then gestures towards the back of the stockroom.

CASHIER

You want him, there he is.

Nader lies dead, the unnatural purple of his face eerily matched by the veiny purple streaks in the UmbyCord around his neck.

PIKUL

Migod!

GELLER

What happened?

In response, the cashier starts rummaging around on one of the shelves. He soon finds what he was looking for, and turns around to face them. In his hand is a grotesque, slightly chewed gristle gun - the one Pikul assembled in the Chinese restaurant - in his hand.

CASHIER

You shouldn't have killed the Chinese waiter.

PIKUL

Why not?

CASHIER

He was your contact at the Trout Farm. A damn good man.

(pause; he waggles the gun)

His dog brought me this.

The cashier toys with the gun's claw-like hammer.

PIKUL

But we were contacted there by Yevgeny Nourish. He seemed to know exactly who we were.

CASHIER

That's because Nader tipped him off that you were coming. Nader was a mole for Cortical Systematics.

GELLER

You're with the Realist underground.

CASHIER

Yes. I was placed here to keep an eye on Nader.

The cashier puts the gun back on the shelf.

PIKUL

If Nourish isn't our real contact, who is he?

CASHIER

Nourish is a double agent for Cortical Systematics. He was working with Nader to subvert the Realist cause, and doing it rather well.

(snorts contemptuously)

After all, he got you to assassinate your own contact. But now you're going to put a stop to him.

PIKUL

We are?

CASHIER

I assume that you both have had spinal port inserts, bioports, installed.

PIKUL

We do.

CASHIER

(passionate)

Do you both realize that neither of you can be buried on hallowed ground because of these... these mutilations? Does your bioport manual tell you that?

GELLER

Are you trying to talk us into having them removed?

CASHIER

No, no. In fact, you would be useless to us without them. We Realists are forbidden to have them, and so we have to use people like you on occasion.

GELLER

I don't understand. Are you wanting us to jack a game into our bioports?

CASHIER

Game? No. Not a game. A weapon.

(a creepy smile)

You go back to the Trout Farm, and in a familiar place, you find a mouldy old wicker basket with a thread-bare canvas cover.

PIKUL

How will we know what to do?

CASHIER

(an even creepier smile)

Even a child would know what to do.

Someone begins to knock loudly on a door very near by. The cashier is oblivious, but both Pikul and Geller hear it. The stockroom begins to morph away as its objects are replaced one at a time by chalet objects.

INT. GUEST CHALET - NIGHT

Someone is knocking at the chalet door.

VINOKUR(O.S.)

Sorry to interrupt you kids, but .
I thought you'd better have
something to eat. We knocked on
your door a few times to invite
you to dinner...

Pikul and Geller sit on the bed, game-pod between them,
UmbyCord joining them to each other and to the pod. They
look at each other. Pikul shrugs.

GELLER

Come on in.

The door opens slowly to reveal Vinokur, who stands there
uncertainly, holding a large tray.

VINOKUR

...and when we got no answer, I
figured you were playing eXistenZ
to try out your new pod, and your
new bioport. Everything's all
right, I take it?

An awkward moment, as though Vinokur has caught the pair
having illicit sex. Vinokur moves into the room towards the
table.

VINOKUR

Can I leave this here for you?
Don't bother unporting. I just
had to be sure our star designer
was in a good place and that
she'd recovered her multi-
million-dollar game system from
her defective pod.

Vinokur puts down the tray, which holds several plates
covered by smaller, inverted plates to keep the food warm.

GELLER

Thanks so much, Kiri. This is
very sweet of you.

VINOKUR

(awkward pause)
So I take it she has.

GELLER

Has what?

VINOKUR

Recovered. eXistenZ.

GELLER

Oh, yes, sure. That's why we're so spaced out.

(to Pikul)

We were right into it, weren't we?

PIKUL

Yeah, we were. And it's amazing.

VINOKUR

Well, that's a relief. I'll leave you two alone. You can leave the tray outside your door when you're finished.

PIKUL

What is that you've brought?

VINOKUR

Believe it or not, it's Chinese food. There's a great Chinese restaurant on the other side of the escarpment road.

Vinokur turns to go.

GELLER

Kiri?

VINOKUR

Yes?

GELLER

Have you heard anything yet? I mean, about the eXistenZ test seminar and the shooting?

VINOKUR

Oh, yes. It's come over all the media now. You've never been more famous. Your face is everywhere, which of course just makes it worse. I...

(a disturbed pause)

GELLER
What? Tell me.

VINOKUR
They've announced the possibility that Antenna will delay the release of your new system indefinitely, until they can determine how widespread support for this fanatical group really is. I don't approve, myself. I don't think we should bend one degree to extremists.

GELLER
Support for the fanatics? What does that mean?

VINOKUR
Well, you know. They're all coming out of the woodwork now.

GELLER
Who is?

VINOKUR
(heavy, defeated sigh)
A lot of people are taking the opportunity to jump on the anti-game bandwagon. They've now heard rumours about what the eXistenZ system is, and they say we've gone too far psychologically, medically, socially, you name it. And I'm afraid I wouldn't put it past our competitors to be involved in this, to try to whip up public opinion and kill our new system before it gets born.
(pause)
You're sure you don't want me to contact Antenna, even just to see what they have to say?

GELLER
(shaken)
Not yet, Kiri. Thanks.

Vinokur smiles gently and leaves.

PIKUL

(gesturing towards the
door)

Your friend Vinokur is getting
shaky. I think he's going to turn
you in to Antenna.

GELLER

Sounds like you might approve of
that.

PIKUL

It might be the safest thing. Are
you hungry?

GELLER

Are you kidding?

PIKUL

Me neither. I'm terrified to look
under the plates.

(pause)

This "support for the fanatics"
thing doesn't sound too good.
Maybe we should stop...

GELLER

We can't stop. I've been noticing
some new... glitches. I'm not
sure what they mean. I'm not sure
the game is OK.

PIKUL

(gently)

Listen, to be honest, I find your
game very confusing. I'm not sure
I want to go back in there,
because I'm not convinced I'm
going to keep coming out. Do you
really like that feeling?

GELLER

(with passion)

Yeah, I love it.

(deliciously musing)

When eXistenZ is released, it's
gonna wipe the competition off
the face of the earth.

PIKUL

Will it?

GELLER

It really will do that, yes.

(heavy pause)

Don't hurt me, Pikul. Don't make me go back in alone. Play with me.

PIKUL

Allegra, I'm worried that your game will wipe me off the face of the earth. I'm thinking I was right never to have a bioport installed.

GELLER

(sly, quick smile)

But you have one now. And you're ported in.

She mischievously flicks the pod nipple, and the chalet melts away around them.

INT. TROUT FARM SECURITY - DAY

Trout-farm workers shuffle along a murky pre-fab corridor towards a smoke-enshrouded security checkpoint. A puffy-faced woman with a clipboard is walking down the lineup checking faces and ID cards. With her we discover Pikul and Geller, once again wearing their ID cards which identify them as LARRY ASHEN and BARB BRECKEN.

PIKUL

That was cruel. I don't want to be here.

GELLER

It wasn't cruel, it was desperate. C'mon, Pikul. You've just got a bad case of first-time user anxiety.

PIKUL

I don't like it here. I don't know what's going on. We're blundering around together in this unformed world, whose rules and objectives are largely unknown, seemingly indecipherable, or even possibly non-existent, always on the verge of being killed by forces we don't understand.

GELLER

That sounds like my game, all right.

They are now close enough to the security cubicle at the end of the corridor to see the workers ahead of them being frisked by hand, then scanned by a wand similar to the one that Pikul used at the church.

PIKUL

That sounds like a game that's not going to be easy to market.

GELLER

(laughs)

But it's a game that everybody's already playing! Existence, it's wonderful!

INT. TROUT FARM. ASSEMBLY LINE - DAY

Pikul and Geller have passed through security and now enter the assembly-line arena. They see Nourish at his accustomed place on the line, hunched over a pile of insect motherboards and now seeming, somehow, menacing, predatory in profile. The pair skirt the assembly-line area, carefully scanning as they go, but there is no wicker basket to be seen.

INT. TROUT FARM. ASSEMBLY BAYS - DAY

Pikul and Geller walk down the aisle connecting the assembly bays. Other workers drift casually in and out, preparing for their day in a desultory fashion.

PIKUL

The cashier said it would be in a familiar place. Is there such a thing here?

GELLER

My assembly bay.

They make their way to the last assembly bay and slip inside it. There is, for the moment, nobody else there, but several pods have been left on the work tables half-assembled.

Pikul spots it first, in the far corner: a large, mouldy wicker basket in the opposite corner. Something lumpy in it is covered by a thread-bare canvas sheet.

PIKUL

Is that it over there?

They stroll over to the basket. Geller kneels down and carefully begins to unwrap it while Pikul stands guard.

GELLER

I'd say it's exactly as advertised.

The final wrap comes off. In the basket is a necrotic, purpled, very diseased-looking pod.

PIKUL

God, it's ugly. Even for a game-pod.

GELLER

(pause)

I have a terrible urge to port into it. What about you?

PIKUL

(he thinks she's joking)

Oh, sure. Yes. Desperate to port into it.

Geller steps over to a bunch of UmbyCords draped over a peg and strips one off. She sits down on a rotting wooden folding chair next to the death-pod's basket and ports in one end of the UmbyCord.

GELLER

Here we go. Wanna give me a hand?

PIKUL

(horrified)

You're not serious! I mean, that's a diseased pod! Once you port into that, you become, you... you...

GELLER

(a quick smile)

Exactly. Help me.

Pikul kneels beside her as she pulls up her shirt to reveal her bioport. Geller hands him the free end of the UmbyCord and he ports it into her.

PIKUL

How long does it take for the infection to take hold?

GELLER
No time at all.

PIKUL
And then you quietly port into
all the other pods and spread the
infection to them...

GELLER
(pale, shaky)
Oh, God!

PIKUL
What's happening?

GELLER
(swooning)
Something's wrong!

PIKUL
(supporting her)
I'm gonna unport you now.

Pikul tries to unport Geller, but her bioport has swollen
and seized the jack. He gives the UmbyCord a tug.

GELLER
(in sudden pain)
O, God, don't! That really hurts!

Pikul lets go. The death-pod, triggered off by Pikul's
attempt to disconnect Geller, now begins to convulse in
peristaltic waves in its wicker basket. Pikul looks around
desperately and spots a clutch of tools hanging from nails
on the wall.

PIKUL
(rising)
I'm going to cut you free!

GELLER
No, don't, I'm afraid!

But Pikul seizes a crude linoleum knife used for trimming
oversized motherboards and, with three erratic slashes at
the quivering UmbyCord, hacks her loose. Blood immediately
pours out of both ends of the severed cord.

GELLER
(wide-eyed, quietly)
Pikul. I'm bleeding to death.

Panic-stricken, Pikul steps on Geller's end of the cord to stop the bleeding. It seems to work, but Geller moans horribly.

PIKUL
(terrified)
I'm sorry! I don't know what else to do!

NOURISH
I know what to do.

Pikul twists awkwardly around to see Yevgeny Nourish standing just behind him. He is in the process of slipping a large propane torch off its wall hook.

NOURISH
I know exactly what to do.

Nourish unscrews the gas valve and ignites the torch.

NOURISH
Death to Realism!

Nourish turns the blazing torch on the pod in the basket. Where the cone of flame hits the pod, it begins to shrivel, crackle, sputter fat. The pod itself tries to ripple away from the searing flame as though it were alive. Nourish laughs and begins to play the cone over the entire surface of the pod.

Geller sinks to the ground in exhaustion, holds on to Pikul's leg.

The death-pod now swells and bubbles under the torch's flame, then explodes with a dull whump.

INT. TROUT FARM. ASSEMBLY LINE - DAY

A huge cloud, speckled black and gray, billows upwards and floats out over the intersecting walls of the stalls and into the main area of the Trout Farm's assembly line, where it begins to settle like granular ash on the startled workers.

INT. TROUT FARM. ASSEMBLY BAYS - NIGHT

Horrorified, Nourish watches the thick cloud of infectious spores floating out of his reach.

NOURISH
(horrorified)
No, no!

Gathering up her last shreds of energy, Geller suddenly shoves a startled Pikul off her cord and picks up the linoleum knife from where Pikul dropped it.

Trailing her bloody cord, she lunges at Nourish, driving the rusty, curved blade into his back with great force. Nourish turns to Geller, the torch circling towards her, wavering. He tries to touch her with the flame, staggers.

NOURISH

(dying)

Death... death to the demoness
Barb Brecken... to the...

PIKUL

Death to who?

(he fingers his ID card)

Oh, yeah... Barb...

Nourish drops the torch, falls to the ground and snaps into the foetal position. A wall of flame roars up around him, fueled by the straw, wood, canvas, pod-oils. Pikul jumps over to Geller and picks up the trailing cord, twists it in his hands until it stops bleeding.

All four walls of the assembly bay are on fire now. The doorway is a flapping sheet of flame. Mixing with the swelling rush of the flame are the sounds of the entire plant going on alert: yells, screams, sirens, running feet, doors being slammed open and closed.

Pikul holds Geller tightly. She is limp, weak, drained in his arms.

PIKUL

I think we just lost the game.

But now, strange, anomalous objects begin to appear out a nowhere in the flames - a chair, a tv set, a bath tub, a table, objects emerging into the game from the guest chalet.

After a moment's confusion, Pikul smiles.

PIKUL

Or maybe not.

And sure enough, the Trout Farm and its flames and its black cloud melt away.

INT. GUEST CHALET - NIGHT

As the guest chalet melts up around them, Pikul finds himself back on the bed, as he expected; but he is still embracing the swooning Geller, which he had not expected.

PIKUL

Allegra, we're back home. What's the matter, what's wrong?

As Geller swims back up into full consciousness, she begins to talk, mumbling at first, then with terrible clarity.

GELLER

(barely coherent)

Pikul. It's here, it's happened. It's come back here with us. We brought it back with us from eXistenZ.

PIKUL

Brought what back? I can't understand what you're saying.

GELLER

(with clarity)

We brought the disease back with us. My pod is diseased.

As though realizing the implications of what she's saying for the first time, Geller twists away from Pikul and begins to fumble with her UmbyJack.

GELLER

Oh God, I'm really going to lose it, I'm going to lose my game! Unport me! C'mon, unport me!

Pikul unports her, then begins to tug at his own jack. When he takes a close look at the pod, he can see that it looks - unhealthy.

Geller jumps off the bed and yanks open her bag on the table. She pulls out a tiny hypodermic syringe, unwraps it, flicks the bubbles out of it, falls to her knees beside the bed.

GELLER

(to pod)

I'm coming, I'm coming!

Geller jabs the pod with the needle. As she pushes in the plunger, she starts to massage it with her free hand, rub it, prod it. She's so close to it we think she might give it mouth-to-mouth.

PIKUL

But this can't be possible. How
can a game event emerge into real
life?

GELLER

(panicking)

There's a very weird reality-
bleed-through effect happening
here. I'm not sure I get it.

Pikul finally gets his UmbyCord unplugged.

PIKUL

What's in that needle?

GELLER

It's an anti-viral serum. It
sometimes works if you get it in
time.

Unconsciously, Pikul scratches at his bioport. Geller fixes
on him with strange intensity.

GELLER

Lemme see your bioport.

PIKUL

What?

GELLER

Lemme see it!

Pikul turns and shows it to her. She begins to examine it
with microscopic, clinical attention.

GELLER

I know what happened. It's
Vinokur, that bastard.

PIKUL

Vinokur?

GELLER

He gave you a new bioport, didn't
he?

PIKUL

Oh, no.

GELLER

He gave you an infected bioport
so that my pod would die and so
would my game-system.

PIKUL

I'm infected? Wait a minute!

GELLER

(in tears)

The poor thing was trying to tell
us that it was sick by
introducing the theme of disease
into our game.

PIKUL

The theme of disease? I'm fucking
really infected! Is it going to
crawl up my spine and rot my
brain?

GELLER

(suddenly all business)

All right, don't panic. I've got
something that will help you.

Brusquely wiping away her tears, Geller goes over to her bag
and takes out a cork-shaped plastic capsule. She snaps open
the capsule to reveal a knurled, plug-like electronic
device.

GELLER

I'm going to seal up your bioport
with this anti-viral resonator.

Geller bends over Pikul and works the device into his
bioport until it's flush with his skin.

GELLER

(inserting the device)

It uses the Umby pick-ups for
power. Should cleanse all your
porting channels of infection in
a few hours. It'll give you a
little skin buzz when it's done.
Of course, we can't play until
then.

PIKUL

(controlling his panic)

Yeah, great. Now, listen. This
could be critical. Were you
really saying that Vinokur is an
(more)

PIKUL (CONT'D)
 agent of the Anti-
 eXistenZialists? Because if he
 is, if he's with them, then we
 are really...

GELLER
 (wailing)
 Oh, God! Pikul, my pod's dying.

Sure enough, the thing is quivering, rippling, convulsing,
 turning purple.

GELLER
 (wailing)
 I can't help it! I can't do
 anything for it!

Geller falls to her knees beside the pod.

As though triggered by this action, an explosion in the
 nearest chalet blows the windows and the door out of the
 guest chalet. Pikul and Geller are knocked to the floor by
 the impact of the blast.

Waves of heat and debris billow into the room.

A moment of eery silence, and then Pikul and Geller peek
 wide-eyed over the edge of the bed. Flames now engulf the
 nearby chalet, all too clearly visible through the
 shattered window frames.

Sounds of pandemonium begin to well up from the hills below,
 and then a figure steps boldly in through the doorway. When
 the flamelight flickers over his face, Pikul and Geller are
 stunned to see that it is the cashier, and he is cradling a
 real-life submachine gun in his arms.

The cashier screams at the bewildered and terrified pair.

CASHIER
 (screams)
 The uprising has begun! The whole
 place is on fire! Let's go!
 You've got to get out of here.
 They'll be looking for you.

PIKUL
 (to Geller)
 The cashier? He's a game
 character! How can he be here?

GELLER

I don't know! I don't know!

The cashier strides into the room and pulls her to her feet. She tries to pick up her pod, but the cashier tugs her away from it.

CASHIER

Leave that rotting piece of meat here. It's done its job. Let it die.

GELLER

But my game! My game's inside it.
I don't want my game to die.

The cashier unslings his submachine gun, cocks it, and blows the pod into streaks of slime, flesh, and slivers of insect-board. Geller is in shock. Pikul turns her to face him, speaks forcefully right into her face, shuts everything else out.

PIKUL

Allegra, listen to me. I think we're still inside the game. I think your real pod's out there somewhere, somewhere safe. I think it's OK to let go of this one, this pod. It's not the real one.

A Molotov cocktail comes sailing into the room and shatters against the bed. The bed ignites with an explosive whump.

CASHIER

Everybody out! now!

The three of them scramble out into the fiery night.

EXT. CALEDON SKI-CLUB COMPOUND - NIGHT

The cashier leads Pikul and Geller out of the guest chalet and down the mountain path. The chalet next to theirs begins to implode as they scurry by it.

As they flee, they realize that all the chalets are on fire. There are people trying to fight the fires, running frantically everywhere with hand-held extinguishers. There is also scattered gunfire, but who's firing on whom is impossible to tell.

EXT. HILLTOP - NIGHT

The cashier now leads them up to the top of a hill.

CASHIER

Up here. We can see everything
from here.

PIKUL

What is it that we're seeing?

CASHIER

(gleeful)
The victory of Realism. And you
were part of it.

GELLER

(desolate)
The death of eXistenZ. And we
were part of it.

The cashier turns on her with his gun. He snaps out his old
clip and slams home a new one. He cocks the gun.

CASHIER

There's just one more thing.

PIKUL

(horrified)
What are you doing? We're on your
side.

CASHIER

(fierce)
How could you be? How could
Allegra Geller, the world's
premiere game designer, be on our
side?

(off their bewildered
looks)
Oh, yes. We know who you are. You
can't hide inside a game forever.

PIKUL

Something's slipped over the
edge, here, Allegra. Something's
all wrong.

CASHIER

(smiles)
There. You see what I mean. You
see the problem.

The cashier raises his gun to fire at Geller, but before he can pull the trigger, he jolts backwards and falls twitching to the ground.

From the shadows of the trees, backlit by the fiery landscape below, steps Kiri Vinokur. In his hand he holds the gristle gun which Pikul assembled in the Chinese restaurant.

VINOKUR

I tried to find you. Thank God I got here in time.

(pause; waggles the gun)
My dog brought me this.

GELLER

(backing away)

You didn't get here in time. My game is dead.

(focussing)
You murdered my game.

VINOKUR

(laughs)

No, just your pod. I replicated the entire contents of your pod when I fixed your nerve boards. They're in safe-keeping. They're all in one piece.

GELLER

You copied eXistenZ?

VINOKUR

(soft, pleading)

Allegra, come over to Cortical Systematics. Yes, yes, Cortical Systematics. I'm defecting and so are all the Antenna Research top brass, Pellatt, Melzack, Sherrin, everybody good.

GELLER

You're a spy for Cortical Systematics.

PIKUL

(confused)

Wait a minute. Cortical Systematics is just the game version, it's only...

VINOKUR

(ignoring Pikul)

Not a spy, exactly. I think of myself as a personnel exchange engineer. If you want to be reunited with your creation, you'll come over to us. eXistenZ, by Allegra Geller. Only from Cortical Systematics.

GELLER

(defiant)

Only from Antenna Research.

VINOKUR

But why stay with them? Look at that mess down there. How could you trust Antenna again, when they've endangered you like this?

Geller seems to have lost the thread. She wanders over to the cashier's body and disentangles his submachine gun from him.

GELLER

(referring to cashier)

You know, this guy was actually going to kill me.

Vinokur looks to Pikul for support.

VINOKUR

(to Pikul)

Can you talk to her? I mean, we can take you with us too.

But before Pikul can respond, Geller, now sitting next to the cashier's body on the grass, opens fire at Vinokur with the submachine gun. Vinokur falls with a startled expression on his face.

Pikul, absolutely horrified, runs at Geller and kicks the weapon out of her hand, picks it up himself.

PIKUL

What the fuck are you doing?!
You've killed him! Are you gonna kill me next?

GELLER

(laughs giddily)

C'mon, Pikul. He's only a game character. And I didn't like the way he was messing with my mind.

PIKUL

(suddenly calm)

Didn't you? You didn't like that and so you killed him?

GELLER

He was only a game character.

PIKUL

(quietly)

But Allegra. What if we're not in the game anymore?

GELLER

(confused, childlike)

Huh? If... if we... we're not?

PIKUL

(strangely hard)

If we're not, then you just killed someone real. A real person.

(pause)

You see what can happen. It's important for me that you see that.

GELLER

Why?

PIKUL

(standing over her)

It wasn't an accident that you and I ended up on the run together.

GELLER

Not an accident?

Pikul hefts the submachine gun in his hands.

PIKUL

No.

GELLER

(cold)

That's why you never had a
bioport. You were one of them.

PIKUL

I still am one of them.

GELLER

But you have a bioport now.

(ironic)

I thought that was forbidden to
Anti-eXistenZialists.

PIKUL

I made the bioport sacrifice to
get close to you, to make love to
my enemy.

GELLER

Why would you do that?

PIKUL

To understand what I have to
kill.

GELLER

(quietly)

Then, understand this.

Geller produces a tiny electronic remote controller from the
pocket of her shirt.

GELLER

Understand that I suspected who
you were from the moment you made
that fake phone call to yourself
in the limo. Understand that I
knew you were my real assassin
when you pointed the gun at me in
the Chinese restaurant.

She flicks up a safety cover on the remote's tip, revealing
a toggle switch. Pikul's hands tense around the submachine
gun.

GELLER

And understand that you're dead.

Geller flips the toggle switch. The base of Pikul's spine
blows out, his shirt billowing with blood as his bioport
explodes.

A delighted Geller dances to her feet as Pikul staggers backwards.

GELLER
(gleeful)
Death to the demon Ted Pikul!

His eyes frozen in a death stare, Pikul falls, rolls down the hill into the underbrush. Smoke creeping up from the fires below curls over him like a blanket.

Arms raised in the air, Geller dances around on the top of the hill, looking down on the flames and the chaos.

GELLER
(confident, laughing)
Have I won the game? Have I won?
Have I won?

The hill, the trees, the flames melt down around her.

INT. COUNTRY CHURCH - NIGHT

We melt back up into the church, which we last saw in the first scene. But there are many differences between then and now.

Geller is sitting in her chair on the dais as before, her eyes just beginning to flutter open. But Pikul is sitting next to her, also playing the game. And next to him is Nourish, whom we are even more surprised to see in this context.

And in fact, the players who are sitting in the circle of chairs on the dais are all characters who have been in the movie up to this point: Nader, the cashier, Dichter, Gas, Vinkokur, even Frances, the limo driver.

The players are all emerging from a game that has just ended - the movie we have been watching - and they begin to stir in their game gear, which is nothing like the organic pod-technology we have just seen.

On the contrary, the gamers are wearing head-gear with electrodes, more like normal clunky Virtual-Reality equipment, and are linked by mundane wires. In their laps they hold, not game-pods, but sleek plastic game modules, each about the size of a walkman, with holes into which their left thumbs are inserted - a simpler and cruder version of the bioports we have become used to.

Watching the proceedings from down on the church floor are two security guards, neither of whom is Pikul, of course. On a leash, one of the security guards holds the dog that, in the game, picked up the gristle gun in the Chinese restaurant.

Also monitoring the action are a woman, Merle, who is the game's actual project manager - the real-life version of the game-character Levi - and her two assistants.

There is a collective sigh as the game finally releases the players, and now they are free to remove their thumbs from the game modules and slide their head-gear off.

The two assistants - the real-life ones are both matronly women - begin to help everyone unplug, neatly gathering up the equipment in padded bags as they go.

A broadly smiling Merle mounts the dais and stands in the centre of the ring of players.

MERLE

Are you all back?

The man whom we knew in the game as Yevgeny Nourish immediately stands and takes charge. But it is a different Nourish, exuberant, sensitive and artistic.

NOURISH

We're back, Merle. Although I have a feeling some of our crew might not realize it yet.

Shaky laughter from some of the players.

Throughout the following round of comments from the gamers, whom we now realize have been, up to now, playing characters in a game, we hear nothing from Pikul and Geller. These two, who sit next to each other and are now holding hands, remain enigmatically silent.

WAITER

Wow. Anybody here want a bowl of hot and sour soup?

(laughter)

VINOKUR

I will, if you make sure there are some insect boards in the rice.

(laughter)

FEMALE ASSISTANT
How long were we gone?

MERLE
About twenty minutes.

DICHTER
It seemed like days. That's
fantastic.

FEMALE ASSISTANT
Yeah. If you stayed in the
gameworld for most of your life,
you could live to be five hundred
years old!
(laughter)

CASHIER
The twists and turns at the end
made my head spin. Maybe there
were too many, to fast to absorb.
(to Pikul and Geller)
Hey, but you two were fantastic.
You guys are game divas! I think
you both deserved to win.

There is general agreement amongst the gamers about this
compliment to Pikul and Geller. The pair just smile sweetly
and bob their heads modestly at the smattering of applause.

GAS
(a little jealous)
Well me, I was really bummed out
at first. I got knocked out of
the game so soon. It was fun to
watch the rest, though. I liked
that part where the ones who got
knocked out of the game early got
to be spooky customers in the
game store.

LEVI
But you were so wonderfully bad.
So scary and crazy. I had a lot
to do in that first scene in the
church but I thought my character
was kind of boring.

GAS
Well, you know, I'm a gas-jockey
in real life, so I was kind of
disappointed that I was basically
the same thing in the game. A
little more fantasy, there,
fellers.

MERLE

(nodding sagely)
Interesting. Interesting. Hold
that thought for the focus group.

FRANCES

(indicating game module)
Can I keep this? I've never felt
anything like it! And I love this
little thumb-hole. It's
fantastic!
(appreciative laughs and
applause)

NOURISH

(laughs)
Nice try, but you're going to
have to turn them in because
they're beta versions, pre-
production hand-made specials,
and we need to study them after
use for wear and tear and other
things. But you'll get a
certificate for helping us out
here - I'm right about that,
aren't I, Merle?

MERLE

(nodding enthusiastically)
And that will entitle you to
reserve one of the first batch of
the TranscendenZ by PilgrImage
game modules to hit the market,
and at a seriously discounted
price. You're gonna love it.

Amidst applause and general excitement, Merle turns to the
tripod-mounted chalkboard standing, as in the first scene,
at the back of the dais. There we see the words that she has
already written: TranscendenZ by PilgrImage.

MERLE

Remember - it's written like
this. Capital T, capital Z.
TranscendenZ. It's new, it's from
PilgrImage - capital P, capital
I, and it's coming soon.

Allegra Geller now stands up, walks over to Nourish and
gently takes his hand. He turns to see who's got him, then
smiles broadly.

GELLER

(shyly)

I'd just like to say thank you to Mr. Nourish for giving me the chance to play the role of a star designer. I guess the game picked up on my ambitions to be like you.

NOURISH

Well, let me first say that I'm kinda glad I lost this game. I don't usually play such nasty characters.

(laughter)

And, Allegra, you were so good in that role that I suspect it won't be long before Pilgrimage is after you to sign a designing contract.

(applause and laughter)

And maybe you should take your friend Ted, here, Mr. Pikul, with you. He's obviously good in a crisis, and when you design games, there are plenty of them.

Amid the renewed good-natured laughter, Geller blushes. She reaches out for Pikul's hand.

GELLER

I guess you all could tell that Ted and I had a relationship prior to our coming here. We really do like to play together.

PIKUL

(shy but determined)

We do, but I'd like to assure everybody here that Allegra wouldn't really jump into bed with a security guard unless he was me.

(laughs from the security guards)

Merle holds out her hand in a gesture of appreciation towards Nourish.

MERLE

Well, what do we say to our brilliant, award-winning game designer, Yevgeny Nourish? Does he have another winner on his hands or not?

Wild applause from all gamers, including Geller and Pikul.

MERLE

All right, now, I have to ask you some questions, before the game half-life wears off. First, let me thank you for taking part in this test seminar. PilgrImage wants to deliver nothing but the finest to the game enthusiast, and you have all been a proud part of that process tonight. When we've collected all the head-sets and game modules, we'll be handing out a questionnaire to each of you, and I'd like your answers to the questions to be as honest, as brutal, as clear as you can make them. Don't hold back. After that, we're going to form a focus group where we'll discuss details of each of your experiences playing Transcendenz. You've all had different but interlocking lives in the game, and I think you'll be amazed when you hear each other's stories.

INT. COUNTRY CHURCH. MOMENTS LATER - NIGHT

While the questionnaires are being handed out by the assistants, Nourish confers with Merle in a corner.

NOURISH

(intense)

Merle, I was very disturbed by the game we just played.

MERLE

What do you mean?

NOURISH

It had a very strong, very real anti-game theme. I mean, it began with the assassination of a game designer.

MERLE

Really? But that's very creative.

(pause)

But on second thought, I see what you mean. It makes me nervous. You think it must have come from one of our game players?

NOURISH

It sure didn't come from me. The tone of it in the game was very, very passionate, fanatical. And the atmosphere of paranoia and betrayal was overwhelming. The whole thing felt unstable, dangerous, volatile. But worse than that, there was a kind of industrial espionage subplot. Stealing game-systems, jumping ship from one game company to another. That kind of thing.

They both reflexively begin to scan the gaming group, who are all innocently dealing with their question cards.

MERLE

So which one of them did these elements come from?

NOURISH

Let's probe it when we do the focus group. I think we might have been infiltrated here, and if we have, we've got a big security problem.

Pikul and Geller, questionnaires in hand, wander over to the wary Nourish and Merle. Pikul is now leading the dog that the security guard was holding for him earlier on, the model for the game dog in the Chinese restaurant.

PIKUL

Hi. We were just wondering if we could ask Mr. Nourish a question, away from all the others.

NOURISH

Sure. Shoot.
(chuckles)
Long as you don't ask me to fill in your questionnaire.

PIKUL

(no chuckles)
We've played your game now, and so we can finally agree with the others that you are the world's greatest game artist.
(ominously)
We weren't sure before.

NOURISH

(professionally modest
smile)

Well, thank you so much.

GELLER

(no smile)

Yevgeny, don't you think you
should suffer for all the harm
you've done, and intend to do, to
the human race?

NOURISH

(stunned)

What?

PIKUL

Yes. Don't you think the world's
greatest game artist ought to be
punished for the most effective
deforming of reality?

MERLE

(nervously)

I don't think this is very...

(looks towards security
guards)

Boys? Could you come over here -
right now!

But it's too late. Geller reaches down and pulls a flap of
false fur and skin away from the dog to reveal two semi-
automatic pistols strapped to the dog's flank. Pikul and
Geller grab the guns, pull back the slides, and coolly
execute Merle and Nourish, who bump grotesquely together as
they slump to the ground.

In the stunned silence that follows, only the clatter of the
last few shells bouncing around on the hardwood floor can be
heard. Pikul and Geller glance at each other, pumped, then
fill the silence.

GELLER

(screams)

Death to the demon Yevgeny
Nourish!

PIKUL

(screams)

Death to PilgrImage! Death to
TranscendenZ!

Now a hesitant shuffling of feet causes Pikul and Geller to whirl and catch the security guards coming at them with their pathetic scanning wands. The guards stop in their tracks, raise their hands, and start to back away as the place suddenly explodes in screams and pandemonium.

As Pikul and Geller in their turn back towards the front exit, they glide past the young Chinese man who was the waiter in the game. The waiter stands flattened out in fear against a pillar with his questionnaire and his pencil in his hand.

They ignore the waiter, but stop to wait for Pikul's dog to trot calmly past them, heading for the door.

Now Pikul and Geller are just about to turn and follow the dog when the waiter unfreezes and takes a step away from the pillar towards them. They immediately swing their pistols over towards him. The waiter stops and raises his hands.

WAITER

No, wait, you don't have to shoot me. I just wanted to ask you a question.

GELLER

(wary)

What?

WAITER

(innocent)

Hey, tell me the truth. Are we still in the game?

Pikul and Geller look at each other, then into the camera. The church melts down around them into blackness.