

This Is An Ongoing Investigation

Look. It doesn't matter if you believe this account or not. At any given time there are so many unbelievable things going on, hidden right in front of us, that hardly anyone even knows about...it doesn't matter to me what you believe. I'm just reporting what I found. For the record. For the whole team at AAA Reality Games.

The following report was acquired through extensive interviews after the fact. I could not fully understand or describe the psychological effects ECHO-7 had on ECHO gamers, how it bent its victims' wills into submission to its incomprehensible schemes, but everything I found is included in this report. I will update this version if I find any more information, so if you want to know anything more, don't ask me, and don't try to find me. I don't have much time left, and there are other things I have to do now.

Everything that follows is recorded from actual observations and interviews. To protect my sources, I had to change some names of people, locations, and other items, except my own name: my name is Sean Austin, and I was there.

Sean Austin
May 15, 2012
Pasadena, California

P.S. And don't forget, this is an investigative report, not a "storybook." These are just the cold, hard facts and as much information as I could uncover. Despite the insistence of certain AAARG team members that I release this report immediately, this investigation is ongoing at echohunt.com. So, AAARG team members, if I left anything out, let me know for the next version of this report. You can always email me at seanaustin@echohunt.com, and I'll follow up on any leads.

PROLOGUE

“Fog! It’s so foggy, I can’t see a thing,” Reggie whispers as he peers around the cold granite corner of the County Courthouse. It is cold, and getting darker, perceptibly darker each minute. The streets have been abandoned by almost all humans, due to some unnatural series of events.

“Jeremy, it’s breaking. Watch our flank.”

POUND, POUND, POUND...deep, earth shaking footsteps.

“Shhhh!” whispers Jeremy, “It’s ECHO. He’s here.”

“Wait. There’s a break in the fog. I can see something.”

More fog...then another break...

A pulse blast hits Reggie in the back. He crouches in pain, grasping his SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon) tighter, as someone runs by.

“Hey, losers! I told you to back off! This one’s mine!”

“It’s just Masterson,” says Jeremy.

“What a jerk! He hit me in the back.”

They look back down the street.

“Something’s different, Jeremy. I can’t tell what, but something’s different. Part of that building...it’s gone!”

“Sh-sh-sh-sh-”

“It’s so close I can feel it.”

Zip-zip. A tiny vehicle covered with electronics appears on the sidewalk behind them. They spin around.

“SPYBOT!”

Reggie raises his SAW and it blazes with a deafening explosion. A smoking hole is all that’s left in the asphalt.

“It saw us. We are so dead!” whispers Jeremy.

Reggie can’t argue. He doesn’t know what to say.

“Can we get some help here?” Jeremy whispers into his walkie-talkie, but no one answers. “No one can hear us.”

“At least we’ll die together, little bro.”

Something new. The crystal-clear music of an ice cream truck, moving down the street, coming closer.

“Huh?”

The fog lifts, but they notice the shadow of an armored mechanized ghoul looming behind them on the granite wall. Although it is robotic, a machine, it appears angry, and its cold eyes indicate only a calculating cruelty.

The instant they turn, the mech blasts Jeremy to smithereens.

“JEM!!”

Now the mech’s gun is on Reggie.

“Where are the others?” demands the mech-ghoul in a cold, synthetic voice. Its shock-red troll-like hair stands out in brilliant contrast to the neutral, washed-out greys and blacks of the foggy, ruined surroundings. The bright, glistening color is surreal and distracting.

Reggie rips a high-tech device off his vest.

“Eat this, mech-head.”

The mech-ghoul freezes.

“That’s right! EMP grenade with your name on it!”

EMP as in Electromagnetic Pulse, the most feared weapon known to mechs. If it explodes, it’ll fry the mech’s processors and kill it, but the powerful pulse would also transform Reggie’s brain to Jell-O.

The ghoul knows this.

It mechanically clicks forward one centimeter at a time. Reggie realizes he is being tested the way only mechs can test humans. When Reggie fails to detonate the grenade, it’s obvious that the mech knows that he isn’t ready to sacrifice himself to kill a mere machine. The mech is going to charge. Reggie knows he’s doomed.

As quick as a mech, Reggie activates the grenade. The ghoul freezes—this situation does not compute—and Reggie throws the grenade up in the air and dives behind the granite corner. He hears the explosion, and feels his tooth fillings tingle from the radiation of the EMP blast as the building trembles. He peers around the corner and sees the crumpled mech.

Then he looks behind the metallic corpse. The fog has cleared and there are another hundred and sixteen mech-ghouls flat on the asphalt—all dead from the EM pulse. He had no idea they were even there.

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HOME SWEET HOME

“Whoah. Smokin’!” said Jeremy, who was watching the computer screen from over Reggie’s shoulder. Reggie was playing “ECHO’s Revenge.” He was very good at it—no, make that great.

The version was ECHO-6, and ECHO, a 35-foot tall extreme predator clad in impenetrable body armor, was hot on Reggie’s trail. Reggie knew the killing machine was there somewhere, but couldn’t figure out exactly where. The problem was that the creature was cloaked, so it was virtually invisible. At times like this, Reggie was stressed to the max, searching every detail of the scene in front of him for any mirage-like distortion that would give away ECHO’s position.

E-6 suddenly de-cloaked and materialized, its head protected by a helmet, its face hidden behind a visor shield. It appeared out of nowhere—like a nightmare of shiny, sharp, shifting, glass-like scales and armor—solidifying in thin air.

The visor retracted, revealing green, menacing eyes and a mass of razor sharp teeth forever grinding, mechanically, inside a cavernous, snarling mouth. ECHO was a perpetually traveling eating machine that was programmed to stalk and consume an endless supply of on-line gamers.

Reggie realized that ECHO-6 had been disguising itself as part of a building connected to the post office. ECHO could easily camouflage itself as a part of just about any building because it could easily shape itself to fit into any box-like form. It could also do rocks. What it couldn’t do was turn itself into flowers or leaves because they were much harder to replicate, especially when it was moving.

Eight-inch steel claws extended from ECHO’s hands as it moved forward. Its feet left an odd pattern of triangular imprints in the asphalt as it headed straight for Reggie, followed by a blurry, dispersed swarm, also apparently under some kind of invisible cloak. At first barely visible, another squad of armored ghouls now materialized out of the swarm.

“Blow the Ghouls away!” yelled Jeremy, “Then you gotta warn the other guys that ECHO’s here!”

But telling the other gamers wouldn’t help Reggie right now. More vicious, marauding ghouls were materializing like demons out of buildings and alleys everywhere. The ghouls wore less armor, and more of their scaly bodies were exposed as they had no helmets or armor below their waists. Reggie quickly analyzed his options.

“Hmmm...” he said, as if he knew all along the ghouls were going to come. He waited for the perfect moment...

From downstairs, a deep, hoarse voice suddenly exploded. It was their mom’s boyfriend, aka “partner,” Asa.

“I TOLD YOU TWO TO SHUT UP. I CAN’T THINK WHEN YOU’RE PLAYING THOSE STUPID INTERNET GAMES!”

“Yeah yeah...” said Reggie, under his breath, “we heard ya...”

“Get ‘em now!” said Jeremy.

“No, wait...”

Reggie was 14 years old, and Jeremy was 11. Reggie had been playing “ECHO’s Revenge” for five years, so he knew the game inside and out and had developed special techniques for playing the game. One technique was to hide and wait until the last second to blow his enemies away. None of the other players around the country, or even around the world, ever had a chance. Not the Russian kids who tried to reprogram the game. Not the Koreans who formed impenetrable gangs to execute their strategies. Not even the programmers who made the game. He blew them all away. When it came to playing ECHO’s Revenge, Reggie was merciless.

At the last possible second he finally fired another EMP grenade and blew a large squad of charging ghouls into oblivion.

“Objective Complete,” flashed the screen, “Final Objective: Take Out ECHO!”

“Watch out...it’s changing,” said Jeremy, as the giant ECHO morphed into a tank and advanced, aiming its huge cannon directly at them.

“Hit it before it cloaks!” said Jeremy.

Reggie fired and one of the tank’s treads blew apart, immobilizing the tank and freezing its turret, now safely pointing away from them.

But just as Reggie was about to advance, the screen suddenly froze. A flat, animated black cartoon drawing of a pair of black glasses and a big mouth full of sharp teeth appeared.

“No! It’s HAKr!” cried Jeremy.

“Man, I hate that guy!” said Reggie, “He’s always messin’ with me.”

“It’s because you got him that time with Rhino.”

The cartoon mouth split open with a big laugh and the face traveled across the screen eating everything like some sort of nerdy Pac Man as it shouted “How ya doin’ Reggieeee? Ha Haaa...”

“Man that guy’s a pain,” said Jeremy. “How does he get into the system?”

“And when will he stop messing with me?”

As suddenly as the face appeared, it disappeared. But the action in the game had not stopped. ECHO was right in front of them, and about to devour Reggie.

“RPG!” yelled Jeremy.

“I’m loading!” said Reggie.

As the creature’s cavernous mouth plunged downward, Reggie fired the rocket propelled grenade straight into its throat. ECHO immediately reared and gagged. Then its head exploded.

“Waiting For You Survives!” flashed the screen, “Final Objective Accomplished!”

“Waiting For You” was Reggie’s avatar name.

“Try to call the other E-6 players,” said Jeremy, “so they can attack the rest of the ghouls! Surround and Capture!”

“Wow!” said Reggie, excitedly reading another message on the screen. “Huh? Hey, guess what? I made it! I’m one of the top 3 players!”

“You kicked ECHO’s butt!!!”

Then a final message appeared, so briefly, maybe less than a second, that Reggie wondered if it had really been there. He thought it said *I’m Watching You Now*. Was it another threat from HAKr?

“QUIET, Dammit!” screamed the voice downstairs.

“Sounds like he’s drinking again,” said Reggie. “We better watch it.”

Jeremy panicked.

“We gotta get outta here.”

It was too late. Heavy footsteps were stomping up the stairs.

Reggie ran to the window of their second story bedroom and tried to open it. It was frozen shut. He scanned the room to find something to loosen the window with and spotted his black pocket knife. He grabbed it, cut out a chunk of ice between the window and window frame, and pulled up on the window.

The window popped open and Reggie dropped the knife outside just as Asa stormed into their room.

“Quick!” said Reggie. “Go!”

But it was too late. As Jeremy jumped out the window, Asa, his face bright red and the veins in his neck bulging out, hurled a bottle at Reggie. The bottle shattered on the wall.

“I TOLD YOU TO SHUT UP!”

Jeremy landed hard in the snow and barely missed a big rock. Reggie was right behind him. Fortunately, there was about five feet of fresh snow on the ground. When the rest of Reggie’s body landed on top of Jeremy, they both just sank deeper into the powdery soft snow.

The window slammed shut.

“Man, I smacked my head,” said Reggie, holding his hand up to his ringing ear. He felt dizzy and began to black out.

Jeremy was holding his own injured hand. He had put it between Reggie’s head and the rock just before Reggie hit it to cushion the blow.

Reggie heard a rushing sound, then a weird sort of mechanical purring hum, and then he thought he saw...was that ECHO peering at him through the trees?

“Reggie!” screamed Jeremy. “Reggie, are you okay? Wake up!”

Reggie shook his head and looked into the forest where ECHO had been. All he could see were tree branches.

“Home Sweet Home,” said Reggie.

They both laughed.

Reggie picked up his knife out of the snow and dusted it off on his pants. As they brushed the snow off themselves, a dirty, mud-covered Jeep Cherokee pulled into the driveway.

“Hey, look! Mom’s here,” said Jeremy, sounding surprised to see her.

A short, plump, disheveled 45-year-old woman with shoulder length, bushy black hair got out of the jeep. She gathered up a pile of disorganized papers. It was Reggie’s and Jeremy’s mom, Jennifer Edna, or Jeda, a name she had been called since she was a little girl.

“Hello, my bunnies!! How was your day today?” she asked in the same sugary, over-excited voice you would use with a couple of babies.

“Okay mom.”

Reggie was always embarrassed when his mom spoke to him this way in front of other people. Part of the reason was that his mother looked like a plump Raggedy-Ann doll with slightly psychotic eyes. She always wore frumpy clothes, the type an old fashioned librarian would wear. The other reason was that instead of treating them like they were grown up kids, she always babied them like they were still two.

“What are you two doing out here with no coats on?” she asked.

“Asa threw us out of the house again,” said Jeremy.

“Ooooh,” said Jeda. “Well then, get your jackets out of the garage and just stay out of his way.”

Jeda noticed Reggie putting his knife away.

“WHAT is THAT!?” she asked.

“Just a knife. Dad gave it to me,” said Reggie.

“That’s VERY dangerous!” she said, rushing over and grabbing the knife from Jeremy. “And your father’s CRAZY to give you such a thing! First he abandons us, then he gives you a knife!?”

“Mom, it’s no big deal. It’s just a tool.”

“Well, I’m going to hold onto this,” she said as she headed inside. “Your father’s head is stuck in the clouds. This is very dangerous!”

“The only thing dangerous around here is Asa.”

“Honey, you just don’t understand him. If he’s upset, you must have done something,” said Jeda as she went into the house.

The broken screen door closed behind her.

“Man, why doesn’t she ever get it?” asked Jeremy.

“I know, she gets everything totally wrong. Girls are whacked.”

“I just hope he leaves her alone,” said Jeremy.

“Don’t worry. He’ll be nice. Mom got paid today.”

“Partners” is what Jeda and Asa called themselves. Jeda worked as a social worker and Asa took care of the house and the kids when they came home from school. Jeda was always late—to pick them up or take them to school—and often completely forgot to pick them up, or get them to appointments, or even school.

Asa was like a grumpy babysitter with a powder-keg temper. He didn’t like fixing things that broke or leaked, so things were always broken and leaking around the house. He didn’t like watching the guys or cooking dinner for them, and he didn’t like making sure they did their homework or got to school on time.

Since Jeda and Asa were not married and were often fighting, there was never any peace and quiet or predictability. Reggie and Jeremy never knew when Asa would explode, or if Jeda would even show up at home before they went to sleep every night.

Reggie put his arm around Jeremy as they headed to the garage. As crazy as their two “partners” were, at least Reggie and Jeremy had each other. When Jeda forgot to pick them up, or Asa tried to beat them up, they could always depend on each other. Whenever they were left alone, they kept each other company, mostly by playing video games on-line. Reggie often wondered—who was more difficult to fight—ECHO on-line, or Asa for real?

Reggie and Jeremy constantly wondered what it would be like to be in a normal family in a normal home, where two normal parents were married and didn’t just call each other “partner.” Where things didn’t always leak or break, and where no one ever screamed, threw anything, or hit anyone.

“I’m sure glad you’re here, Reg. I don’t know what would happen if it was just me alone with those two.”

Reggie didn’t want to imagine what it would be like.

“Well, at least you’d have Dad, too,” said Reggie.

“Yeah, but he’s long gone. We’ll probably never see him again.”

Their dad, Aaron King, was a mystery. He seemed like a nice guy, but they hardly ever saw him. Their parents divorced when they were little, so they never got the real story. All they knew was they had to live with their mom, which seemed weird, because their dad seemed normal and had a job at the Jet Propulsion Lab in California. He was some kind of rocket scientist.

Reggie didn’t say anything. It didn’t make sense to him. Jeda was always saying their dad had abandoned them, but he called for Reggie and Jeremy every week, even though Jeda made a

point of not picking up the phone. And when they did talk to him, they couldn't discuss any real problems because it would cause their mom and dad to fight.

Reggie felt bad about Jeremy's hand. He noticed Jeremy was holding it like it was a broken bird. Things were so out of control that Reggie was always feeling guilty about something Asa or Jeda had done or caused. It was so unfair. So out of balance.

They put their jackets on in the garage. The jackets were the old style, big and puffy, not made of thin, modern Gore-Tex like everyone wore. There were two full backpacks embroidered with thunderbolt logos hanging on the wall, looking like they were just waiting there, ready to be used for a camping trip.

Outside, they noticed that the sun had dropped behind the trees and everything was growing darker. The valley and imposing mountains surrounding them were muted by the same cold, dreary, blue light of every other winter day in Meadowbrook. Meadowbrook, King County, Washington State, U.S. of A., Planet Earth, Milky Way Galaxy.

Reggie's head was still throbbing and he was still light-headed. Even though it was getting colder and darker, they knew they couldn't go inside until Asa had his cooling off period. It was like the day would never end.

As they walked and slid down the icy road, Reggie suddenly felt a painful "thwack" on the back of his thick coat. He rubbed his back and noticed red liquid on his hand. Was he bleeding? Then he saw a paint ball shell in the snow. He looked into the dark recess of the open door of the house in front of them.

"Knock it off, Masterson!" Reggie yelled.

Chuck Masterson, a beefy 12-year-old with short, spiky blond hair, emerged from the doorway holding a massive paint ball gun.

"Hey, freakazoids. Nice marshmallow costumes! Did your parents wear those too when they were kids?"

"Ha ha, Masterson," said Jeremy. "Butthead!"

Chuck shot at a squirrel with his gun, but missed.

"You look like big, walking, butts with heads! Ha, ha! Losers..."

"Knock it off with the paint balls, Masterson!" yelled Reggie.

"Yeah, yeah, weirdos," said Chuck, as he continued firing at the squirrel while it scampered across the snow behind them.

Reggie and Jeremy continued down the road as the paint balls zinged by.

"So, have you figured out a name for your avatar yet?" asked Reggie.

"Still workin' on it. I just can't find anything that's me. I don't want to use 'Cougar,' or something."

"Yeah, that's stupid," laughed Reggie.

"Or 'Crusher'," said Jeremy, as they both laughed.

"Spike..."

As they faded into two small, distant dark figures at the end of the icy road, a salt truck's red brake lights flashed briefly and it slowed down. It was a mechanic they knew who worked at a gas station in town and scraped the roads when it snowed. Reggie and Jeremy were always getting rides with the mechanic or other people they knew from town.

"Hop in," he nodded.

They jumped into the back of the truck and headed into town, to a burger place where they always ate when Asa was in one of his moods.

Later, they'd hitch a ride home, when Asa was sure to be asleep.