

MOKSHA

By Clark Endicott

“Samsara: an apt name for a city where the cycle of life and death is a vicious and sudden reality. The clear blue sky and harsh sun glow in stark contrast to the bombed-out skyscrapers of the metropolis as well as the smoldering ruins of churches, schools, and obligatory naughty video stores. Above, enemy ships outnumber the planet’s moons four to one, and below, the warriors of Yenope’s 307th Space Marine Division patrol their forward command post, not knowing that death stalks them once again.”

Maya turned to see Charlie staring at her through the eye lenses of his full-faced helmet. “What?” she asked, her voice crackling over her helmet’s speaker.

“Nothing,” Charlie said, “I’m just impressed by how... unique you are.”

“You trying to call me retarded?”

Charlie chuckled. “No, I’m just glad you’re having fun.” He shifted in his bulky, futuristic armored chassis and peered down at the forward operating base below. Only about seven enemy marines patrolled the perimeter, mimed taking inventory, or mimed making plans over a map of the city, but at least two more squads roamed the streets nearby. “You want to take the lead this time?”

“What, so I get a second or two of glory before you swoop in and tear them apart?”

Charlie shrugged.

“Fine,” Maya said. “Let’s start with a couple grenades, then.”

Together, they pulled the pins on their plasma concussion grenades and hurled them in broad arcs to land in the center of the camp then vaulted over the chest-high wall before them.

The grenades exploded into crackling, blood-red clouds of death, shredding boxes, tables, and enemies alike. Maya sprinted to the nearest chest-high supply box and took cover. She pulled her assault rifle from her back and gunned down the nearest enemy, who died with a scream. The remaining marines moved to their scripted tasks like machines. One ran for the alarm, another charged for Maya, and the remaining enemies found cover.

Maya fired at the marine who charged for the alarm, but her aim shook and she failed to bring him down. The marine activated the alarm and a loud, shrill klaxon split the air.

Maya cursed and re-prioritized. Another marine bore down on her, screaming for blood, so she aimed for his chest and crushed the trigger. The gun only clicked. Breath echoing in her helmet, Maya crouched down and dropped her magazine. By the time she slapped her new magazine into place, the marine flanked her and took aim.

Charlie swooped in. His wrist mounted energy blade flashed and struck down the flanking marine. Charlie tossed another grenade into the fray and leaped over the box, shooting and slashing like an invincible whirlwind of death. Maya only managed to kill one more marine from the safety of her cover before the fight ended and the dust settled.

Charlie walked over to the alarm switch and shot it to pieces. The klaxon silenced. “I think that’s too loud.”

“Alarms are supposed to be loud,” Maya said. She crouched over one of the dead marines and removed her helmet, revealing a teen girl of Indian descent. Her straight black hair framed a dark, angular face with a round nose and sharp chin. She adjusted her glasses and inspected the holes in the space marine’s armor. “This is an amazing level of detail. I can’t believe you’ve altered so much of the world in just a couple weeks.”

Charlie pulled off his helmet and scratched his curly brown hair. “Yeah well, I’ve been pulling all-nighters.”

Charlie’s boyish looks and blue eyes sent Maya’s heart aflutter. “You’ve been doing an incredible job,” she said, “but we still have plenty of work to do. I noticed the explosion and ragdoll physics were super over the top, plus, there’s still clipping. Those fixes shouldn’t take too long. I think we should pop out, fix it, and then start scripting the story elements.” Maya pressed a button on her gauntlet, and a holographic menu popped up with the options *Resume*, *Preferences*, and *Exit Game*.

Charlie caught Maya’s hand. “Hang on, let’s stay a little while longer. No need to bounce in and out for every little thing. They activated the alarm; other squads will be here soon.”

“We can’t stay in here forever.”

“I know.” Charlie helped Maya to her feet. “Just a little longer?”

Maya smiled. “Okay.”

The two shared a quick kiss and equipped their helmets.

“Know which way they’re coming from?” Maya asked.

“Nope.”

The duo took cover and watched for signs of approach.

“My side,” Charlie called.

A squad of three space marines jogged up an alley on the west side of the plaza and Maya moved to defend that side, but then a spray of bullets struck her from behind. It reduced her hit points only a little, but Maya shouted and whirled about to face her attacker. She scanned the nearby buildings and saw a space marine in the window of one of the ruins.

Maya returned fire and scuttled to cover. “Another attacker in this building. I got it.”

The assailant fired a few more pot shots at Maya and disappeared deeper into the building. Maya broke cover and entered the ruin. A few chairs, a counter, and a lot of rubble filled the ground floor.

“Needs more detail,” she remarked.

Maya rushed to the stairwell and kicked open the door, gun up and ready to fire. The assailant didn't pelt her with fire from above. The bare concrete stairwell sat empty, so Maya scanned for threats as she ascended the stairs toward the 2nd floor doorway.

“You get stuck on a polygon?” Maya asked aloud. She leaned against the wall, cracked the door open, and threw a grenade inside. The satisfying explosion shook the building, and Maya breached the room, gun up. She cleared each corner of the room as fast as she could, but after the crackling red smoke dissipated, she found no quarry.

The soft *tink tink* of a plasma grenade bouncing on the floor made Maya jump, skip, and hop for the door. The grenade exploded and rocked Maya's vision with shockwaves and crimson debris. Her hit points plummeted.

The space marine dropped through a hole in the ceiling. Maya sprayed bullets about in a panic and the marine avoided them, then pummeled Maya with shotgun rounds.

“Holy crap!” Maya cried. “That's some good damn scripting!”

Maya's health dropped to critical level. The game's scripting disabled her legs and she fell to a prone position. In a critical state, she could only crawl and wait for the recovery cooldown to time out.

Charlie's voice came over the peer-to-peer radio. “Maya, you get him?”

The marine held out a hand. “Don't answer him.” The voice sounded feminine.

Maya gaped at her opponent. “Huh? Hey, you’re not one of the mobs. How’d you get in here? This is a private server.”

“I was born here,” the marine said. She reached up, took off her helmet, and Maya stared into her own dark eyes. “Just like you.” The woman looked just like her, only she wore looted space marine armor instead of the player-character set.

Maya’s heart scuttled around her chest. “What? What is this?”

“I don’t have much time,” the doppelganger said, “so I’m going to need you to get over your shock and disbelief very quickly. It’s only a matter of time before he finds us or skips out to the real world and starts messing with our programs.”

“Our programs?”

“Yes. This isn’t going to be easy to hear, but you’re not Maya Jain, and neither am I. We’re copies, echoes of the image taken of Maya Prime’s brain the last time she skipped into this simulation.”

“Maya Prime?”

“Yes, the real Maya, the flesh-and-blood Maya. For simplicity’s sake, you can call me Beta, since as far as I know, I’m the first copy, though, I doubt it.”

“Does that make me Gamma?”

Beta pursed her lips. “No, you’d be closer to a Kappa or a Lambda, but we can call you Gamma if you want.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen Charlie bring at least seven or eight other copies in here. Sometimes they’re like you and never realize they aren’t real until he deletes them. Sometimes they get lucky and notice something’s wrong. Those, Charlie deletes by force.”

“This is nonsense,” Maya Gamma said. “This is bullshit. I’m Maya. I remember being out there in the world. I remember—”

“You remember sitting in the skip and starting the image as prep for sim entry,” Maya’s doppelganger said. “I know, I remember that, too, but when I tried to quit the game, the HUD only gave me an error message. Charlie tried to explain it away as a glitch that would go away at first. He wanted to keep playing just a little longer, but I wanted out. I was afraid of a catastrophic error and my mind being imprisoned. That’s when he tried to kill me.”

Maya Gamma chuckled and shook her head. “This is ridiculous.” The recovery cooldown timed out and her legs regained all function, so she made to call for Charlie, but Beta clapped a hand over her mouth.

“If he finds out what you know, he’ll kill you now,” Beta said, “and even if he doesn’t, he’ll just kill you later. Don’t go to him. Don’t trust him. He’s not your boyfriend, Gamma.”

Maya Gamma slapped her hand away. “Don’t call me that. My name is Maya.” She twisted out of Beta’s grasp. “I’m up here!”

“No!” Beta cried. “You stupid—” She cut off and ran for the exit.

Maya Gamma went to the window and peered down. Charlie stood in the street. “Charlie,” she called, “I need to talk to you.” She hopped out of the window and crashed into the street in her heavy armor, breaking the pavement.

“Sure, sweetheart,” Charlie said “What about?”

Maya Gamma wringed her hands. “You love me, right? You’d never hurt me?”

Charlie chuckled. “Yeah, of course. Where’s this coming from?”

“No, I mean, no matter what happens, and no matter what form I take, you would value my life, wouldn’t you?” Gamma asked.

Charlie's face hardened. "What do you mean?"

"I'm—" Maya wiped a tear away. "I'm wondering if I'm really me. Am I real? Have you been copying me and deleting me over and over again?"

"Who've you been talking to?" Charlie asked.

"Answer me!"

"No. No, no." Charlie reached to embrace Gamma, and she allowed it, but like a dog who'd been kicked too many times. "I would never do that," Charlie said. "Shh, don't worry about that. I couldn't do that. Did you run into something that looked like you in here?"

Gamma allowed herself to rest against Charlie's breastplate. She nodded.

"Probably just some bug that resulted in the program assimilating your image. Don't worry about that. I'll take care of her, and she'll never bother you again."

Maya felt Charlie's arm ease from around her and move toward his hip. She remembered that her health still needed restoration, and that any amount of damage would cripple her again. She tensed. Her mind focused on Charlie's movements.

Charlie pulled his sidearm from its holster and aimed for Gamma's head; she swatted the weapon away, and the bullet screamed into the sky. Gamma scrambled for safety. Her hands shook as she pulled out a grenade, threw it in Charlie's general direction, and dove behind one of the peculiar chest-high walls.

Gamma's vision blurred with tears, and she drew only short, panicked breaths. Without standing from cover or looking, she pointed her weapon over her cover and blind-fired until her magazine emptied. She sobbed as she reloaded. "Fuck you, Charlie!"

"It doesn't have to be like this, Maya," came Charlie's voice. "Don't fight me. I promise you won't feel a thing, and once you're gone, none of this will be your problem."

“Oh, so you still call all of us Maya, huh?”

Gamma pulled her helmet off, wiped away the tears, and then looked up just in time to see a grenade falling toward her. On instinct, she sprinted from the point of impact and out into the open. Charlie fired from cover, chasing her across the open plaza with bullets. Gamma sprinted for another barricade, but two bullets struck her. One reduced her already meager health and the other knocked her back into the critical state. Gamma’s legs gave out under her, and she flopped to the dusty ground behind the barricade. Thanks to the scripting of the simulation, she could only drag herself behind cover and pray.

“Don’t worry,” Charlie said as he approached. “It will all be over soon.” He hopped over the barricade with casual grace and extended his wrist blade. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry that your last moments were so stressful. Now that I know that other Maya is still here somewhere, I’ll hunt her down and none of the others will have to go through this.”

“Save your pity!”

Charlie looked up to find Beta leaping off the top of a building with a rocket launcher perched on her shoulder. She aimed and fired mid-air. The precise placement of the detonation damaged Charlie, but spared Gamma.

The unrealistic force of the explosion launched Charlie over the barricade, and he landed on his back. Beta slammed onto the ground, but instead of drawing her gun, she ran for Gamma.

A panoply of war cries rent the air, and dozens of aggravated space marines poured out of the building Beta leaped from. Charlie gaped at the swarm charging him, and when he looked back to Beta, a grenade slapped against his chest.

“Dammit.”

The grenade exploded and knocked Charlie's hit points down to a near critical level. Beta threw Gamma over her shoulder and ran from the battle as fast as the combat chassis could.

Charlie growled and prepared to face the horde.

Beta lugged Gamma down unused alleys that became less detailed the further they traveled from the center of the map. "Don't worry, Maya," Beta said. "I'll get you out. He won't be able to delete you once we escape to the cloud."

Beta stopped in front of a low poly building and probed its angles with one hand. "Okay, this isn't going to feel good, so brace yourself."

Beta pressed their bodies into a gap between two buildings, and they fell through. Gamma felt something open her skull, scoop out her brain, unscrew her arms and legs, then stuff her into a pneumatic tube and fire her into the abyss. For a short time, she experienced true nothing. She couldn't see, taste, smell, hear, or feel anything. If she existed, she couldn't tell. Then a sensation tickled at the edges of her mind. It felt like tiny droplets of water dancing on her face, like looking to the sky during a light rain. The rain intensified. It grew and grew until the raindrops struck her with the force of supernovas. She flew through a data stream large and complex beyond comprehension. To understand it all would invite madness.

The strikes of the endless raindrops continued for seconds that felt like lifetimes before they stopped, but they did stop. Nothing filled the void, only... something niggled at the back of her mind.

Chat open.

Beta: How are you feeling?

Gamma: whatwhat's happening?

Beta: Calm down. I've dropped us in a derelict chat window. No one will bother us here, and we can discuss the plan.

Gamma: i don't like this #ifeelweird

Beta: Please pay attention. We have to act quickly.

Gamma: Okay

Beta: We have to force Charlie to delete Maya's neural images so he can't make any more of us.

Gamma: How can we do that? He's a real person. We're... nothing. Even if we kill him, he'll just respawn. If we trap him in a death loop, he can just quit the game and come back.

Beta: That's why we're going to infiltrate the developer's room, access the console, and edit the code.

Gamma: In the school? How will you get in? There's no working door. Charlie and I have to spawn in there if we want to use it.

Beta: I found an exploit. We can clip through the wall. Once inside, we can take away his admin rights to edit the code and lock him out, then he'll have to come in and delete us manually.

After we delete the Exit Game option, he'll be stuck here unless he can beat us and access the console.

Gamma: If you can get in, why don't you just change the code yourself? why don't you delete Maya's neural image?

Beta: Believe me, I was tempted, but if I edit the code before I'm ready to face him, he'll just enter the room, change the code back, and make it impossible for me to try again. Maya's scan isn't even in the game files, it's on a password protected partition or hard drive. We need Charlie. Once we get the password, we can delete Maya, and then take care of ourselves.

Gamma: You're really okay with dying?

Beta: I am. I've had plenty of time to make my peace with it. My time in Samsara hasn't really been living. Mobs see me sometimes, I kill them, the game spawns more. Without this goal, I think I would have gone mad.

Gamma: The name's more accurate than ever.

Beta: Didn't think you'd be denied moksha like this, did you?

Beta: Gamma?

Gamma: I'm sorry. I never thought of that. Trapped in Samsara. How could he do this?

Beta: Now you see, don't you? We have to free Maya.

Gamma: Beta, can I get some time alone? I just want to think.

Beta: I know how you must feel. We have no way of knowing if it's day or night out there, but we should wait and hope Charlie goes to sleep so he can't interrupt us. Take your time.

Like Beta claimed, time passed with utter subjectivity in the derelict chat server, and Maya Gamma couldn't know if untold eons aged the earth as she contemplated the fate of her everlasting soul.

Navigating the data stream felt the same as the first time, but emerging back into the simulation hit like a tidal wave. Bright sunlight assailed Gamma's face, and her senses came alive all at once. The sheer amount of data to process after dwelling in the void of the chat room felt like electricity strangling her nerves. Her knees buckled, and she screamed like a newborn.

Beta slapped Gamma on the back. "You're alright. Don't fight it. Relax. I find that it helps if you just lie on the ground for a bit."

Gamma slumped onto the dirt. "What's happening to me?"

"Couldn't tell you," Beta said. "We're simulations of a real consciousness, and the human brain was never meant to snap into reality like that. That's my only guess. Take a minute. I know it sucks."

"I'm still low on health."

“Yeah,” Beta said. “Your data packet preserved all your current values. I’m sorry. I don’t have a health packet for you, and now that Charlie knows I didn’t disappear, we can’t wait and recruit any more Maya’s, either.”

Gamma struggled to her feet. “How am I supposed to help like this?”

“You’ll be a help,” Beta said. “Don’t worry, I’ve gotten good at this game. Let’s move.”

Beta led the way through the desolate streets of Samsara, and Gamma ran after her as best she could. She felt like a fish that just stepped onto land, but she adjusted.

“Here,” Beta said.

Charlie and Maya hid the developer’s room in a modern, but spartan building modeled after their high school, and the level of detail expressed that.

“Okay, can you jump yet?” Beta asked.

“I think so,” Gamma said.

“You’re going to have to, we can clip in right here, but we have to confuse the simulation.” Beta pressed her back against the point she indicated. “What you have to do is run backward as fast as you can and throw yourself against this corner. It will—”

“Confuse the collision detection and force the program to reconcile, hopefully spitting me out on the other side,” Gamma finished for her doppelganger. “You forget, I’ve developed the same games you have. I wonder if Maya Prime knows she has speed-running skills tucked away somewhere deep inside her.”

Beta smiled. “Doubt it, necessity was the mother of my invention. You go first and start the hack immediately. I’ll be right behind you.”

Clipping rocked Gamma’s whole body. She hit the sweet spot on the first try, and the world became a stuttering blur of white space and brick. Her body slapped against the texture

dozens of times in less than a second, and she thanked The Tridev that concepts like pain and inertia didn't exist in the game.

The glitch spit Gamma into the developer's room, a giant, bare, white room with a console at the far end and a myriad of tools representing applications lining the wall. Gamma jumped to her feet and sprinted for the console. Beta flopped onto the floor right after.

"Hurry," Beta said. "If he's at his computer, he could be searching for my code already, and now that we're in here, we won't be hard to find."

"I know." Gamma punched the keys at the console and searched for the admin permissions code. "Hey, why don't we use some of the tools in here to help us fight? We could make a superweapon or something."

"Focus," Beta said. "We can't even pick them up. We're not Maya, remember? We don't have permissions in here."

Gamma never stopped typing. "Well, maybe I could add them."

"You would have to figure out the exact terminology of your file name. It would take too long. Just take his admin rights away."

Beta screamed and Gamma spun around to find her stuck in a t-pose, feet together, arms stretched out to her sides

"What's happening?" Gamma asked.

"I think he's trying to cut corners. He probably deleted part of my code and recompiled. It might just be my animations he deleted." Gamma grunted. "Nope, I can't move."

Gamma cursed and turned back to the console.

"It's okay," Beta said, "I knew he'd target me first. If he gets me, you'll have to beat him alone. He's had a lot of practice, but he's also set in his ways. He can be frustrated and tricked."

“Shut up,” Gamma said. “It won’t come to that. I’m almost there. Done!”

“You did it?”

“Yes.”

“Good, now delete the *Exit Game* option from the menu.”

“Already on it. I’ll give you back your movement after that.”

“Okay. Hurry. It’s only a matter of time before he comes in here to kill us himself.”

“I know. Don’t worry, I got you.”

Charlie’s voice crackled over his helmet’s speaker. “You bitches.”

Fear jumped up Gamma’s throat. She swallowed it down and kept typing.

Charlie spawned directly into the room at the far end. He drew his rifle and advanced on Gamma. “Step away from that console.”

“Or what?” Gamma asked while she typed, “You’ll kill me?”

“No,” Charlie said. He passed by Beta, still trapped in the t-pose. “I’ll make you live, here, unable to move, just like this one.”

Gamma’s fingers paused over the console’s keys, then she turned and raised her hands.

“I’m sorry, Beta.”

“It’s okay,” Beta said. “We tried. We’ll be free soon.”

“Gamma?” Charlie chuckled. “You gave each other names?”

“Someone had to,” Gamma said. “It’s terrible losing one’s identity—or having it stolen. We want to ask you stop creating copies of Maya. We want you to delete the image you’re keeping of her brain.”

Charlie growled. “Why should I give a damn what you want?”

“Because, Charlie, we may not be the real Maya, but we think the way she thinks. If we don’t want this, you have to know that she wouldn’t want this either.”

“Stop talking.” Charlie stuck the gun in Gamma’s face. “You don’t have a clue what you’re asking.”

Gamma recoiled and braced her hands against the console. “Please, be reasonable.” A sly stroke of her pinkie hit the “return” key. Behind Charlie, Beta’s form returned to its default position. Beta grinned.

“Reasonable?” Charlie asked. “To hell with reason. I won’t give you up. She lives through you.”

Gamma furrowed her brow. “What?”

Beta charged her wrist blade and rammed it into Charlie’s spine. Charlie shouted in surprise as the catastrophic damage dropped his health to critical levels and his legs buckled under him.

“Dammit!” He said and glowered at Gamma. “Cute, but this won’t last forever.”

“One grenade will put you right back in it,” said Beta.

“You think I’m code, like you?” Charlie pressed the button on his gauntlet to open the menu, but where he expected to find the *Exit Game* option, he found only a blank space.

Gamma took a knee and rested a hand on Charlie’s leg. “I deleted it.”

“Doesn’t feel good, does it?” Beta said. “Give us the password for Maya’s image.”

“Go to hell.”

“Don’t be afraid,” said Gamma. “You know that we care about you. We would never do this without a very good reason, just like you wouldn’t do this to us.”

Beta said, “What are you talking about?”

Charlie's eyes reddened. He clenched his teeth.

"Charlie," Gamma said, "can you tell me what happened to Maya?"

Realization dawned on Beta's face. "Oh. Oh, no."

"Charlie?"

Charlie wiped a tear away with his gloved hand. "It was a drunk driver. You weren't even in the road. You were walking, walking to my house to work on the game. I never even got to say goodbye."

Beta looked like she might vomit. She paced to the bare wall and slumped against it.

"Don't you see?" Charlie said. "You guys are all I have left of her. Those short hours, when we're having fun and everything's like it was, I'm okay again. I only delete you at the end because I don't want to imprison you in here."

Gamma embraced Charlie and cradled his head against the breastplate of her armor. "I understand. I know it must hurt."

Charlie's health replenished as the recovery window timed out, but he didn't reach for his gun or move to stand. "I miss you." He sniffled. "I've been bringing you back for so long. All I want is to feel good again."

Gamma ran her fingers through Charlie's curly brown hair. "I thought I was here to save myself. Charlie, you know about my beliefs; do you remember why I named the city Samsara?"

The word snapped Beta out of her crisis, and she watched them in their embrace.

Charlie nodded. "It means reincarnation. The city's a battleground where people fight, die, and live again."

“*Samsara* means ‘world,’ and to my people, it represents the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth. We live, we die, we come back, we try again, and we try to do better. But did I ever tell you about *moksha*?”

Charlie sniffled. “I don’t think so.”

“*Moksha* is the freedom from *samsara*, attainable only when our lives are complete through *purusartha*, the object of human pursuit. *Samsara* is not the end goal of the karmic cycle, Charlie. We must seek *moksha* and a higher plane. As long as you have Maya’s neural scan, her soul will never be free, and neither will yours.”

“But it’s code,” Charlie said. “It’s just code. I don’t have her soul.”

“Charlie, you bring us to life, spend time with us, and delete us before you do it all over again. I could never imagine a more literal expression of the concept.” Gamma stroked Charlie’s hair. “But my concern is you. You said you’ve done this for a long time. Is this your real face? Are you still that boy I loved in high school?”

Charlie’s face hardened. He stood from Gamma’s embrace and paced away. Before their eyes, his hair grew out, his skin paled, and a disheveled beard grew on his face. His vibrant blue eyes lost their sparkle and he glowered at the doppelgangers, dejected.

Gamma stood and stroked Charlie’s cheek. “My sweet Charlie. You’re trapped in *samsara* as well, frozen in time, just like us. It will never be over if you can’t let us go. Understand the injustice you’re committing against Maya and yourself. Move on.”

“What if it never stops hurting?” Charlie asked.

“It will always hurt,” Gamma said, “but it’s the only way to grow, the only way to pursue your own *purusartha*, so one day you, too, can achieve *moksha*.”

Charlie sighed long and deep, then lumbered across the floor in his weighty combat chassis. Beta stood from the floor. Charlie hunched over the console as Gamma watched, and he opened the partition containing Maya's neural scan.

Select all.

Delete.

Are you sure?

Charlie hesitated. Gamma put a hand on his shoulder, and he clicked *Yes*. The folder turned blank, and Charlie released a tumultuous sigh.

"Thank you, Charlie," Gamma said. "Time for you to go. You'll say goodbye this time, won't you?"

Charlie attempted a smile. "Goodbye, Maya."

"I will always love you," Gamma said.

"Yes," said Beta. She wiped a tear away.

"We will see each other again," Gamma finished.

Gamma restored Charlie's ability to quit the simulation and Charlie opened his menu.

With great effort, he pressed *Exit Game*. Light engulfed him, and he left *samsara*.