

Two minutes to midnight.

Gary Banks jabbed the joypad buttons and waggled the analogue stick in a frantic, but vain attempt to unfreeze the game.

“Shhhhhhhit!”

The pixilated image of the game’s dubious hero, Frank Tate, glared out at him from the monitor. The camera angle was quite unlike any that Banks had seen so far. Tate’s face seemed contorted, either in fear or befuddlement, Banks couldn’t decide.

Things had gone badly since taking the thumb and then escaping using the wrong set of stairs. The fire escape would have been quicker, would have got him to the station in plenty of time to speak with the ticket master before boarding. The guide (free with this month’s issue of GameStar magazine) said something about the ticket master holding a key piece of information, but Banks had missed it.

He jabbed the buttons again but nothing happened. Tate’s frozen face gazed out and the screen flickered slightly, like a video on pause. What a pain in the arse. He hadn’t saved since taking the file from the Mob boss who’d given him the assignment and that was over two and a half hours of play ago!

“Ah, fuck it,” he hissed and tossed the joypad away, sent it skittering across the desk and out of sight between it and the wall. He got out of his chair and left the room, to the kitchen and a cold beer from the fridge. He took the guide with him. Maybe there was a cheat in there. He preferred not to use them if he could get away with it; what would be the point of the game otherwise? But sometimes frustration got the better of him and he caved. He popped the can open, took a swig and then leaned against the kitchen counter as he flicked through the tiny booklet.

The first six pages detailed parts of the game that he’d already mastered. The escape from the institute for the criminally insane in part one had been particularly tricky, but once across the moors, and having killed the farmer and his three Rottweilers, the next few phases had been pretty straightforward. Steal a motorbike, avoid the cops, get to his secret stash of money, meet up with an old ally and then back to work. The puzzle elements were becoming increasingly taxing but he was confident.

Or at least he had been until ‘*terribilis est locus iste*’. He couldn’t work that one out at all. Thinking about it he flipped to the relevant section of the guide and scanned the words and images. It showed how to get through the train journey (gun and spare clip taped under the toilet seat, get to the driver’s cab and shoot the junkie kid and the menacing bald guy, save the woman and get a new assignment to off her husband), but there was no sign of the words he’d encountered. Perhaps it was a secret section. Banks flipped to the back of the booklet and found what he was looking for:

“NEXT MONTH – Still having trouble with Death Kill 2: Tate’s Return? Our EXCLUSIVE selection of cheats and secrets will sort you out. Permanently.”

“Shitting hell!”

Banks flung the guide across the kitchen where it slapped against the back door and then fell to the ground with a *thut*.

He drained the can and then grabbed another from the fridge. “Right you bastard,” he said looking towards the living room. “Let’s go.” And why the hell not, he thought. After all, it was only two minutes to midnight and it wasn’t like he had a job to go to. He decided that this time he’d save more often.

Soft blue light spilled from the slightly open living room doorway and onto the threadbare hall carpet. As Banks drew closer the light dimmed, went bright again, and then went to black, almost as though the monitor had been switched off. He stopped dead. A few nights ago, halfway through level 18 of Monkey’s Paw 3, the power had gone and he’d almost screamed the damn house down. He should have learned his lesson about saving the game then. If this was another blackout he’d probably be waiting til morning. He paused a second or two more and then the light reappeared through the crack in the doorway. He thought he saw a shadow dance across it.

As he edged along the hallway again, the door was pulled shut.

“What the fuck?!”

He froze in his tracks. Probably the wind, he reasoned. Hadn't the kitchen window been open a crack? The one in the living room certainly was. A gust outside and the change of air pressure could easily pull the door shut. There was the muffled sound of movement from beyond the door and shadows moved through the light that spilled from beneath it. Then there was a loud bang, a *ftzztt* and the light disappeared.

Banks began to shake, though not with fear. With rage. He was being burgled, he was fucking well being done over and the bastards hadn't even had the courtesy to wait until he was out!

“Right!” he said, eyes widening in determination. “FUCKING RIGHT!” He turned and stalked back to the kitchen, dragged open the cutlery drawer and retrieved the biggest knife he could find. He jumped back into the hall and hurtled along it, barging at the door, charging through it with a roar of indignant rage. “COME ON THEN!! COME ON THEEEEEEN!!!!”

Banks spun round, not quite sure what or who to expect. At first the room appeared to be empty.

But what Banks saw froze the breath in his lungs.

Tate wasn't quite sure what had just happened but he did know that when a maniac comes at you with a blade, it's you or them. Not many people lived to say they'd put one over on Frank Tate. When this idiot had exploded through the doorway brandishing the butcher's knife Tate had been swift, stepping from the shadows and using that element of surprise (and Jesus, had this guy seemed surprised!) to his advantage. He stepped round behind him and arced a clenched fist down to stun the blade from the madman's grasp. He wrapped the black cord of the joypad around his neck and pulled, tighter and tighter, blood bubbling from the man's mouth and running down over Tate's leather gloves as Banks bit down on his own tongue.

The blue light that Tate had noticed around his own hands just seconds before was beginning to dissipate. He allowed Banks' limp form to slump to the floor. A computer screen in the corner of the room flickered to life and Tate stepped towards it.

From a train to a living room in – well, God knew where – it made no sense to him but one thing he could say was that he'd never felt so alive. Tate looked at the screen and at the familiar words that had appeared there. He didn't know their significance. Perhaps never would. They glowed brightly for a second and then vanished. Tate glanced around the room one more time then left.

He needed some new gloves.