

Rusty Fears 7

“Disconnected”

BY AMY HODGETTS

PROMPT: SWORD AND SORCERY

[Music]

ANNOUNCER:

Disconnected by Amy Hodgetts

[Music]

NARRATOR:

The only thing more insincere than the media outcry over Paul Spencer's death while playing Sourcery was the developer's response to it.

Terms like “unprecedented”, “unexpected”, “unusual”, and several other “un” words had been stirred into templated press releases and sent out into the world, but Frankie knew the truth of it. The only “un” word to really sum it up was “unsurprising”.

Still, protecting the business from bad press was in her best interests – particularly her financial interests. So when the request came in that she needed to investigate Paul Spencer's account, Frankie began setting up her Sourcery VR Station without a word of protest. It wasn't like she had anything else planned for that night.

The contraption always reminded her of iron maidens. It was a large metal container designed to keep the player's physical body safe and secure while plugged into the game. A series of nodes blinked at her from inside the head cavity. Frankie had no idea how they worked, other than the brief rundown she'd been given years ago during her onboarding. Understanding it was not in her job description.

Setting her phone on her overfull desk, Frankie climbed into the Sourcery VR Station and lay back as the shell closed around her with a soft thud. The tiny space came to life in a bright blue glow, and the nodes pressing against the back of her head activated. Her limbs numbed as her brain's signals shifted from her physical body to her digital avatar. The blue light clouding her vision burst with a triumphant welcome screen.

SOURCERY®: AN IMMERSIVE ROLEPLAYING EXPERIENCE.

After nodding her digital avatar's head to continue, the usual disclaimer appeared. The tiny text scurried across, barely legible, with a huge "I ACCEPT" button beneath.

"Sourcery® utilises AI technology for its non-playable characters (NPCs) in order to provide an ever-changing adventure. Sourcery® recommends players take regular breaks – do not exceed six hours of continuous play within a single session. To revert brain function to the physical body, players must log out from the menu. Disconnecting from the game by other means, including premature removal from the Sourcery® VR Station by another party, may result in injury. By playing Sourcery®, players agree to the risks involved in using the Sourcery® VR Station. Please see sourcerythegame.com for further details."

Frankie hit the accept button. A second later, soft grass pushed up under her feet. Huge trees, pruned to perfection, towered around her, a gentle fluttering of leaves and bird wings filling her ears.

Taking a moment to adjust, Frankie stretched out and flexed her fingers. While she was doing this, a small bush off to her right rustled. A tiny brown rabbit hopped out, sniffed the air, then bounded across her path.

It would make an ideal test subject.

Frankie thrust out her hand, and a wave of green magic streamed from her palm. It struck the rabbit and, with a ringing *pop*, the creature vapourised into mist.

She let out a sigh of contentment, satisfied that everything was working as it should be. The admin spells took all the hassle out of the game – they could get on with their jobs without interference, regardless of their skill level. And, naturally, no one who worked at Sourcery was any good at the game. Frankie herself had only clocked 20-odd hours, and a good 17 of them had been entirely at work.

She set off across the knoll, heading for the first dirt path she spotted winding around the hill cresting in the distance. She ferreted in her bag as she went, pulling out her scrolls to read over the messages her manager had sent.

Frankie – investigate account: Spencey. Look at playtime, modded items, etc. Report any findings of that nature. Check Woodsmill first. I've quarantined it against human players for 30 minutes. – Clive.

The subtext rang clear: if she found anything that implicated the game itself as the cause of Paul's death, ignore it.

Well, perhaps it would be a cut-and-dry case. Maybe his play session would be over the six-hour mark. Sure, no one had ever died from that before, but the odd player had experienced brain damage from overly lengthy stints. Sourcery was covered – the disclaimer was there. The players agreed before entering. And, at the four-hour mark, a pop-up always appeared suggesting they log out. What more could they do?

Frankie made her way on foot to Woodsmill, having spawned close by. As she headed through the bustling crowds of chattering NPCs, she cast a quick spell to see which of them Spencey had spoken to last. If he'd tinkered with the code, the NPCs would have made dry comments about it.

A red splotch appeared above a lady in a yellow dress tending to a fruit and vegetable stand at the market. Frankie made her way over.

The NPC smiled and waved as she approached. "Well met, traveller! The road is—"

"Pull up chat logs for player ID: 290742. Previous 48 hours," Frankie interrupted. She watched the red splotch above the vendor's head turn yellow.

"Administrator verified. Chat log for Spencey acquired. Ah, I do hope he found out where that monster came from. Scared us all half to death!" the vendor chirped before going back to

replenishing an endless amount of brightly coloured fruits to her already-full stall.

Ignoring her attempt at conversation, Frankie pulled out her scrolls again and scanned over the logs. Nothing stood out as unusual – just the standard interaction and the purchase of six Dazzling Dreamberries.

“Right...” Frankie muttered, then raised her voice to the NPC once more. “Pull up inventory and last session playtime for player ID: 290742.”

The ink on Frankie’s scroll swam across the parchment, changing from the chat log to a surprisingly short inventory list.

User: Spencey.

Level: 49

Inventory:

Basic Armour x 1.

Starter Sword x 1.

Latest session playtime: 179 hours.

Frankie read it twice over, her brow furrowing. Why was a level 49 player galavanting around with a basic sword and armour? Well, at least she had her answer – the lunatic had clocked over a week in the VR Station and had most likely died of dehydration. That would clear Sourcery of any legal responsibility.

Frankie tutted and shook her head, then pulled a red-plumed quill from her satchel to write underneath the logs.

Forward logs: Clive. Message: Here’s the reason. 179 hours! Must have dismissed a few log out warnings. Case clear.

She shoved the parchment back into her bag, considering the job done. But as she looked up again, the fruit vendor was staring right at her, her usually cheery face devoid of emotion.

“It wasn’t meant to be here,” the vendor said. “Log out now. Log out now.”

Each time the NPC repeated the phrase, she raised her voice. More chanting joined the noise – the armourer across the market square began to shout the same words, the florist to the fruit vendor’s right chiming in with the same demand.

“Log out now. LOG OUT NOW.”

Frankie staggered back, her heart hammering as the cacophony of demands rose. Every single NPC in the area yelled the same command over and over until, overwhelmed by the bizarreness of it all, Frankie hunched over and shoved her hands out with a panicked scream.

Green magic burst forth, blasting a clear circle all around her and obliterating the market square.

Gasping, Frankie straightened up. She winced at the damage she’d caused, thinking about the inevitable reprimand.

“Piss,” she grumbled, pulling out her scrolls again. As she was about to write out a preemptive apology to the dev team, however, another message appeared.

Good. But weird. Legal just sent a memo round – six more player deaths. Not made it to the media yet, thank God, but we’re pushing a pop-up for all players to log out immediately while we do some ‘scheduled maintenance’. Team will investigate. You can log out now. – Clive.

Relief flooded over Frankie, and she couldn’t help the laughter that tumbled from her lips. She scrawled back:

Jesus Christ, Clive, you could have made the log-out message a THOUSAND times less creepy. I just nuked the market square in Woodsmill.

After a few seconds, another reply appeared.

Pop-ups are creepy? Riiiiight. Whatever. Stop bullying the locals and log out. – Clive.

Chuckling to herself, Frankie tidied away her scrolls and sighed, stepping away from the circle of carnage she'd caused. The other NPCs in the village sauntered through the clearing as though nothing had happened.

As she was about to pull up her menu screen, however, a character with a player tag above their head waved at her. Frankie dismissed the menu screen, confused. How had they got past the quarantine?

“Hey! Fellow Sourcerer, right?” the stranger called as he jogged over, chainmail rattling as he went, a too-bright grin fixed on his face. He held up his hand, letting the telltale green magic dance through his fingers. “Are you on the investigation team?”

“Erm, yeah, I was,” Frankie said. Out of politeness, she extended her hand. “Frankie. Durham office.”

“Cole! New York office!” Cole grabbed her hand and shook it with such force that Frankie almost toppled over. “Man, I’m glad I ran into you, actually. I think I’ve figured out what’s happening. The NPCs were telling me about something that shouldn’t be here, and I figured maybe someone added an unauthorised element to the game. If it’s what I think it is, I’d feel a *lot* better if I had some back-up while I checked it out. Can you come with me?”

“I, erm...I was...” Frankie glanced out the village gates. She hated this damned game, but if she could find the cause of all this, it’d look really good for her career progression. “I was actually about to investigate the same thing. Yeah. The fruit vendor NPC said something about it to me too.”

Cole clapped his hands together, which set his chainmail rattling again. “Excellent! Follow me, then!”

They made their way out of Woodsmill and into the forest Frankie had first spawned in. As they travelled, Cole rambled about all his theories, occasionally checking left and right in case any players

strayed too close. But the emergency log-out recommendation had thinned their numbers, and Frankie found herself alone with Cole.

“Basically, I reckon someone’s added a script that targets player *menus*. Stopping them from logging out. I mean, what are you going to do then? Even if someone finds you, are they going to risk yanking you out of the VR Station? I guess some must, and some...well, some folks live alone, right?” Cole said.

Frankie summoned a weak smile and nod.

“Right...”

Cole stopped. His smile fizzled away, and he stared out between the trees for so long that Frankie began to crane her neck, trying to follow his line of sight.

“By the way, Frankie... I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Cole said, still staring straight ahead. “You’re a Sourcerer. So how come you only have a basic sword and armour?”

Frankie furrowed her brow, looking down at herself, a protest already dancing on the tip of her tongue. Her character had always been kitted out in a Mythril Robe, and she had begged Clive for the unlock code for her Phoenixcry Lance, and—

And right now, she was wearing a dull brown leather tunic. A bland steel sword hung at her side in a too-big scabbard.

“Wh—no, I...?”

She looked back at Cole, but instead of the chainmail-clad knight, four humongous empty eye sockets beared down on Frankie from within a mangled skull twice as tall as she was, its massive jaws parted as wheezing breaths sent its whole form shivering.

Frankie froze.

The horror did not.

It raised one spindly arm wrapped in ribbons of broken chainmail, then slammed its massive palm upon Frankie, crushing her head down through her body and into her feet.

Sheer agony ignited in a white-hot second of delirium, but almost as soon as it started, Frankie was thrown back into her digital body, as good as new once more.

Gasping for breath, she only had time to clock those four empty eye sockets again before the skull's mouth opened, acid bile pouring out and engulfing her.

Just like before, searing pain erupted through her before she landed back into her respawned digital body. The echoes of pain drove her to her hands and knees, lungs burning in memory of the torrent of acid.

The nightmare plucked her from the ground and dropped her into its open maw, subjecting her to the torture of its grinding teeth for several lifetime-like minutes before she respawned yet again.

This time, Frankie screamed and threw her hands forward, aiming to cast the deletion spell she had relied upon so often. But her hands, shaking and now scarred with teeth marks, summoned nothing at all.

A rumbling laugh coiled around her, weaving through the shadows of the trees that witnessed her torture in silence.

“PLAYING GOD FOR A MINUTE MAKES A LIFETIME AS A HUMAN SEEM SO GREY, DOES IT NOT?” the laughing creature bellowed.

Growling, Frankie gestured for the main menu, triumph surging as the list appeared in her vision.

Resume. Settings. Log Out.

Each glowed a dull blue, waiting to be pressed, save for the one she wanted.

The “log out” button sat there, a disobedient grey colour, ignoring her frenzied tapping.

“No. No, no, no!” Frankie yelled.

She would have continued hammering at the greyed-out option but for the skeletal fingers that appeared around the border of her floating menu list. With almost mocking levels of care, it prised it away, unblocking Frankie’s view of its twisted skull once more.

“DON’T BE SHY. YOU ENJOYED IT, DIDN’T YOU?” it asked. “IN THE MARKET SQUARE...”

***The NPCs?* she thought. Frankie coughed a half-stunned laugh. She stepped back from the monster, shaking her head in disbelief. Did he think she’d got some weird power-trip from deleting NPCs? From erasing a bit of code?**

But the creature nodded at her.

“AH, AGREED. I GREW BORED OF THEM QUICKLY TOO. IT IS MUCH MORE THRILLING WITH REAL PEOPLE.”

Its skeletal hand shot forward, one finger piercing through Frankie’s chest and sending her spiralling into blackness again.

For hours, her mad grim reaper doled out countless deaths upon her poor digital self. Each one blazed through her brain, a delivery of authentic pain wrapped in a too-real experience. From within the whirlwind of suffering, Frankie held on to a mantra.

Four hours. Four hours. Four hours.

But when that blessed moment crawled in and the log-out suggestion popped up, Frankie could only wail in despair.

You have been playing for over four hours, the pop-up said. We recommend you log out and take a break.

The button that ought to carry her salvation, however, sported a different message in bold letters.

BUT I AM HAVING FUN.

[Music]

ANNOUNCER:

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