

ADVENTURES IN A VIDEO GAME

*MY FRIEND
FROM THE FUTURE*



DUSTIN BRADY

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DEAR ADVENTURER,

We understand that you may be skeptical of the so-called “trapped in a video game” technology pioneered by the now-defunct Bionosoft Corporation. Several years ago, Bionosoft sold their technology to an evil villain, trapped children inside of video games, and nearly destroyed civilization as we know it. All those things are bad. Not just bad. VERY bad. We shake our heads in disappointment at Bionosoft.

However, just because Bionosoft did bad things with their technology doesn't make the technology itself bad. We, like many others, think it sounds super rad.

Because of this, the U.S. government has unveiled a brand-new agency dedicated to safely exploring the final frontier of entertainment. The Agency of Virtual Adventure Regulation, Inspection, and Compliance Enforcement (a.k.a. AVARICE) will make virtual adventures safe for all.

After much deliberation, we at AVARICE are thrilled to announce that we will begin licensing Bionosoft technology to private companies under one condition: Those companies must promise not to use it to trap people inside of video games. We are confident that this step will be 100 percent effective in keeping future adventurers safe while also making a boatload of cash for everyone involved.

So, please enjoy your adventure in a video game, resting confidently in the AVARICE motto: “Nothing could possibly go wrong now!”™

**SINCERELY,
YOUR FRIENDS AT AVARICE**



CHAPTER ONE

BEST DAY EVER

Sometimes, the worst day of your life dresses up as the best day.

“THIS IS THE BEST DAY EVER!” Bentley Carmone screamed.

Young Bentley did indeed appear to be having the best day of his life. You see, Bentley’s parents had just gathered sixty kindergartners to celebrate his sixth birthday at Polly’s Funtime Pizza Palace. For two hours, those kindergartners skinned their knees inside crawling tubes, sweated all over trampolines, set low scores in the arcade, and screamed blindly through the laser tag arena. No one could possibly imagine a better time.

“THIS ONE’S MY FAVORITE!” Bentley led his best pal Zo to an arcade game called *The Legend of Polly*.

“CAN I PLAY?!” Zo asked.

“YES!” Bentley replied, bouncing on his toes.

This conversation might have taken place at normal volume earlier in the evening, but now with the Disney music blaring and sugar flowing, every word was being spoken at a near scream.

Zo swiped his arcade card and grabbed the joystick. Bentley pointed to the girl on-screen with poofy hair and a futuristic jumpsuit who bore a striking resemblance to the logo of Polly's Funtime Pizza Palace. "THAT'S POLLY!"

"I KNOW!" Zo replied.

"YOU GOTTA GET THOSE GUYS OVER THERE WITH YOUR . . ."



“I KNOW!” Zo interrupted before immediately dying.

“I WAS TRYING TO TELL YOU . . .”

“I KNOW!” Zo swiped his arcade card again.

“You must be the birthday boy,” a warm voice interrupted.

Bentley spun around to see someone way too old to be a guest at his party. A man with white hair and bushy eyebrows held out his hand to greet Bentley. Bentley was too shocked to shake the hand. When the man noticed Bentley’s shock, he patted the birthday boy on the back instead. “I’m Dale. Dale Parker.”

Bentley knew who Dale Parker was. Everyone knew who Dale Parker was. As the owner of a five-billion-dollar chain of gas stations as well as one awesome pizza palace, Mr. Parker was the most famous person the small town of Adamsford, Indiana, had ever produced.

“I see you’re playing my favorite game,” Mr. Parker said.

Bentley tried to squeak out “mine too,” before nodding instead.

“Have you won the Polly Pop yet?” Mr. Parker asked.

Bentley shook his head no. Then, Zo died. “COME ON!” Zo kicked the machine.

Bentley’s eyes got wide. “NO!”

Zo turned around, then gasped when he saw the man standing behind Bentley. “MR. POLLY!” he shrieked.

“Polly’s my daughter,” Mr. Parker replied with a chuckle.

“I DIDN’T MEAN TO KICK IT, MR. POLLY!” Zo said.

“Don’t worry,” Mr. Parker assured. “You’re not going to hurt it. I just need to know one thing.” Mr. Parker leaned closer. “Are you having fun?”

Both Zo and Bentley nodded vigorously.

“Good. That’s the one rule here—you must have fun. It’s what my Polly would have wanted.”

At that moment, Mr. Carmone rounded the corner. He looked relieved when he spotted his son. “Hey, Bentley, they want you to light the beam now.”

“What’s the beam?” Bentley asked.

“You’ll love it. It’s—Oh!” Mr. Carmone nearly fell backward when he spotted Polly’s founder standing right next to him. “Mr. Parker! I thought—aren’t you supposed to be at the retreat? I hope it’s OK that we’re using the place.”

Dale Parker shook Mr. Carmone’s hand. Even though Bentley’s dad was taller than Mr. Parker, he somehow looked small next to the man. “Are you kidding?” Mr. Parker exclaimed. “Nothing makes me happier than sharing this place with my team. However . . .” His expression got stern. “Your son tells me he’s yet to win a Polly Pop.”

Mr. Carmone shrugged with a satisfied little smile. “You told us to make it tough!”

Mr. Parker turned to Bentley. “You know your dad built this game, right?”

Bentley beamed at his father with pride.

“Tell him I said he’s gotta teach you the secret to beating it, OK?”



Bentley nodded.

“CAN I KNOW TOO?” Zo asked.

“Maybe on your birthday,” Mr. Parker said. Then, he turned to Mr. Carmone. “I came here to ask for your help with a special project. It has to do with this game.”

“Anything,” Mr. Carmone said. “What is it?”

“Not now,” Mr. Parker replied. “You’ve got a beam to light.”

“Are you sure? I can spare a few minutes.”

Mr. Parker slapped Mr. Carmone on his back. “Enjoy this time with your son. Believe me. These are the moments you’ll treasure for the rest of your life.”

Mr. Carmone smiled and took his son by the hand. He led Bentley under the indoor go-kart bridge to a comically large button sitting atop a pedestal in the center of Polly’s Funtime Pizza Palace. The rest of the partygoers were already there. “Can I have your attention please?!” Mr. Carmone shouted.

Someone turned down the loud *Moana* song so everyone could hear Bentley’s dad. “I don’t know if any of you have been to a birthday party here before, but it’s been a Polly’s tradition for twenty years that the birthday boy or girl gets to light the Best Day Ever Beam. Bentley, do you want to do the honors?”

Bentley stepped up to the pedestal, rubbed his hands together, and slammed the button. Instantly, a bright-green spotlight shot up through a window in the ceiling. It glowed in the Adamsford night sky as if it were summoning Pizza Batman. The *Moana* song returned. The crowd cheered.

“BEST! DAY! EVERRRRRR!” Bentley screamed.

Bentley was sadly mistaken.

This was not the best day ever. It was, in fact, the worst day dressing up as the best day. You see, that evening—after the beam, the cake, and the gifts—two grown-ups would strike a deal that’d go on to ruin both of their lives along with the life of young Bentley Carmone.

CHAPTER TWO

SCARY STORY

Bentley's twelfth birthday party was slightly different from his sixth. For one thing, the guest list had been trimmed from sixty kids to four. The celebration had moved from the neon lights and loud music of Polly's Funtime Pizza Palace to the moonlight and crickets of Bentley's back patio. But the biggest difference was that nobody here seemed to be having any fun.

Dakota, a kid who possessed the amazing ability to appear both disgusted and bored every single moment of the day, looked up from his phone long enough to ask, "You almost done?"

"I would be if Zo brought the right cord," Bentley replied as he tried to connect Zo's PlayStation to the outdoor projector with yet another cord.

"You told me to bring the flat one," Zo said. "I brought the flat one."

"The long flat one!" Bentley shouldn't have snapped at Zo, but the party wasn't going well. Dakota and his friend Memphis were both acting like real duds, and the new kid Nolan wasn't exactly bringing anything to the table. That

left Zo—Bentley’s oldest and only real friend—to save the party, so of course he’d brought the wrong cord.

“Can we make a bonfire?” Nolan asked. Nolan was the only one without a phone, and he’d been staring longingly at the empty fire pit for a good twenty minutes.

“My dad usually does it,” Bentley replied as he untangled cords in the dark.

“Can we ask him?”

“He’s not here.”

Undeterred, Nolan started walking toward the forest at the back of Bentley’s yard. “Someone wanna help me grab sticks?” No answer. “Memphis?”

Memphis pointed at his new Jordans. How dare Nolan try ruining his new Jordans?

“There’s wood in the shed,” Bentley said. “I’ll find the lighter when I get my Xbox from the house.”

“Nooooo,” Zo said. “We can get the PlayStation working!”

Bentley motioned to the tangle of cords. “Be my guest.” Then, he marched into the house. What a super fun birthday party. “Mom!” he called. “Where’s the lighter?”

“I thought you guys were playing video games out there,” Bentley’s mom called back from upstairs.

“Now we’re doing a fire,” Bentley responded. “Where’s the lighter?”

“No fires till Dad gets home.”

“Where is he?”

“Working!”

Working? Bentley’s dad hadn’t worked in two years. Bentley went downstairs to grab the Xbox. “Unnnnng,” he groaned when he saw dangling plugs underneath the TV where the Xbox should have been. He walked back to the stairs and cupped his hands around his mouth. “WHERE’S THE XBOX?!” he shouted to his mom.

“Look in Dad’s office!”

Sure enough, Bentley found the Xbox plugged into his dad’s computer monitor. What was going on here? Bentley’s dad had barely programmed anything since being fired from Polly’s.

“Thanks, Mom!” Bentley yelled up the stairs.

“I’m going to bed,” Bentley’s mom replied. “Air mattresses are set up in the basement for the sleepover. Don’t be too loud.”

No need to worry. Bentley wouldn’t be surprised if he came back outside to find everyone already sleeping.

Back outside, Nolan was working hard to drum up interest in his scary story next to the unlit bonfire.

“... And if you walk backward around the statue three times under a full moon, its head will turn.” Nolan waited for a big reaction to this revelation. When he got none, he said, “Guys, I’m dead serious. It’s real.”

“Mm-kay,” Dakota said.

“Ask anyone from my old town. They’ll tell you.”

“Really?” Dakota asked.

“Yes!”

Dakota pulled up Google. “I’ll look it up. What’s the name of the town?”

Nolan deflated. “Come on. You ruin scary stories by looking up the facts.”

“Not the true ones,” Dakota said.

“Fine. Tell me a true one.”

Dakota smirked and sat up. He glanced at Bentley, who was connecting the Xbox to the projector, then nudged Memphis. “You wanna tell him about the video game that kills people?”

CHAPTER THREE

***THE GAME THAT
KILLS PEOPLE***

As soon as Dakota mentioned the video game, Bentley's face started burning red. He tried to look busy.

"Not cool, man," Zo muttered to Dakota.

"What?" Nolan asked. "What's the video game that kills people?"

"Seriously?" Dakota asked. "You don't know about this?"

"How would I know about it?"

"Adamsford, Indiana. Home of Polly's. Home of the video game that kills people. Those are the only two things that anyone knows about this place."

"I just moved here!"

"Don't worry about it," Zo muttered.

"Zo, you know we gotta tell him," Dakota said.

"Bentley's right there," Zo whispered.

Bentley appreciated his buddy sticking up for him, but he'd already heard the story so many times that he was numb to it. And who knows? Maybe it would liven things up. "You can tell him, Dakota."

"See? Thank you." Dakota whacked Memphis on the arm. "Flashlight." Memphis shined his phone's flashlight on Dakota's face at an upward angle to complete the spooky story look.

"This story is about Polly's," Dakota began. "You know Polly's, right?"

"The gas station?" Nolan replied.

"Polly's Funtime Pizza Palace."

"I don't know that one."

"The same guy started both," Dakota explained. "Dale Parker. He opened the original Polly's gas station down on Creighton Road a long time ago. He based the



logo on his daughter, Polly. That gas station got really popular, so he started opening more all the way down the interstate. Anyway, after a few years, the real Polly ended up dying.”

Nolan gasped. “From a video game?!”

“What? No. From, like—I don’t know—she was sick. Anyway, Dale Parker wanted to build something in her honor, so he opened Polly’s Funtime Pizza Palace. It’s kinda like Chuck E. Cheese.”

“Oh. Never heard of it.”

“You’ve never heard of Chuck E. Cheese?!”

“Polly’s Funtime Pizza Palace.”

“Well, they only ever built one. You should check it out. It’s a great place for birthday parties,” Dakota said that last sentence loud enough for Bentley to hear. “Anyway, Polly’s Funtime Pizza Palace used to have this arcade game called *The Legend of Polly*.”



“Is that the video game that kills people?” Nolan asked.

“No!” Dakota replied. “You’ll know when we get to the video game that kills people! In the arcade game, you played as a futuristic version of Polly who blasted aliens. It was pretty normal arcade stuff. The thing that made the game cool was the end. If you managed to win, the game wouldn’t give you tickets or points or whatever. Instead, it’d pour you a real-life Polly Pop.” Dakota paused for effect.

“Am I supposed to know what that is?” Nolan finally asked.

“I want my Polly Pop, pop. Popop-popop,” Dakota sang. When Nolan continued staring blankly, Dakota gave up. “Yes, you should know what a Polly Pop is!



Everyone knows what a Polly Pop is! Haven't you heard the commercial?!"

"Are you gonna tell me or what?" Nolan asked.

"It's a slushie," Memphis jumped in.

"It's better than a slushie!" Dakota shouted. "It's, it's . . . Fine, it's kind of like a slushie. But better. Anyway, the arcade game had a little dispenser, and it'd actually give you a Polly Pop if you beat the game."

"When is this story going to get scary?" Nolan complained.

"Do you know Bionosoft?" Dakota asked.

"The company that got in trouble for putting people into video games?"

"Yeah. A few years ago, Dale Parker had the idea to borrow Bionosoft technology to create a home version of his Polly game."

"OK."

"Like, the whole thing."

"Right."

"Even the end."

Nolan squinted. "Not the end-end, though, right? Like, not the slushie."

“Yes. The end-end. He wanted to push real Polly Pops through the screen into people’s homes.”

“Is that . . .”

“Yeah,” Dakota interrupted. “That’s the video game that kills people.”

It had taken awhile, but the story was finally getting good. Bentley busied himself with the Xbox. He thought he could handle hearing this, but his chest was starting to tighten.

“A secret team started working on the project,” Dakota continued. “A secret team led by . . .” He paused for effect before revealing the twist. “. . . Bentley’s dad!”

Everyone looked at Bentley. Even though Bentley already had the Xbox plugged in, he stayed hunched over the projector so he wouldn’t have to participate in the conversation.

Zo jumped in to clarify things on his friend’s behalf. “His dad worked on the original Polly arcade machine, so Mr. Parker thought he should build the new version.”

Dakota shot a glare at Zo. The last thing he needed was for someone else to take over his story at the best part. “Once they figured out the technology, they set up a big demonstration for Mr. Parker. Do you know what happened at that demonstration?”

Dakota moved Memphis's hand to get the light shining on his face at just the right angle. "Mr. Parker died."

The moment had its intended effect. Nolan's mouth gaped open.

"No one will say what really happened," Dakota whispered. "Some people think the game caused an electricity spike. Others say that the slushie poisoned him. Do you know what I think? I think that something came out of that screen, but it wasn't what anyone expected. It wasn't a slushie. I think . . . an alien killed him."

Bentley had promised himself that he wouldn't get involved, but that last part made him stand up. "Dude, he was eighty-seven years old, OK? He had a heart attack."

"You really believe that?" Dakota asked.

"Yes! It's not some big mystery! They had a doctor do an odyssey or an autopsy or whatever it's called after he died. You can't just make up a reason for someone dying—the doctor has to be the one to say it."

"OK, then why didn't they let anyone see him at the funeral?" Dakota asked. "What were they trying to hide?"

"Nothing! He was old!"

"And if it was just a heart attack, why did they cancel the project? Why did they get rid of the pizza palace arcade game? Why did they fire . . ." Dakota wisely stopped talking

before he could finish the sentence. Bentley stood up and clenched his fists.

“Heyyyyy,” Zo said in an attempt to break the tension. “Looks like the Xbox is working! Let’s get this party started, huh?”

Zo pressed a button on the projector, and an image started slowly appearing on the big screen next to the Carmones’ in-ground swimming pool. “Birthday boy gets first pick, obviously. After that, the winner . . .”

Zo’s voice trailed off when he saw the screen. This didn’t look right. Instead of the normal collection of game tiles, the screen displayed a simple green background along with the words “DEVELOPER MODE.” Zo pressed a button, then immediately dropped the controller.

The most recent game to have been played on the console filled the screen.

P2: POLLY’S REVENGE

“This is it,” Dakota whispered. “This is the game that kills people.”

CHAPTER FOUR

P2: POLLY'S REVENGE

Zo quickly picked up the controller that he'd dropped and fumbled with the buttons. "I'll turn it off."

"Wait." Dakota squinted at Bentley. "You've been playing this game?"

Bentley didn't answer. He'd never seen this game in his life—not even when his dad had been working on it. As far as Bentley knew, it'd been destroyed years ago. Why had his dad been playing it? Had he meant for Bentley to find the game?

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

Everyone turned to Nolan, who was standing and clapping. "Nice job, guys!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zo asked.

"You tell me this big spooky story about a game that kills people—a game where something literally pops out of the screen and gets ya. Then, you start the Xbox and—what do you know—there it is! I just have one question. Which of you was going to dress up and scare me?"

Nobody answered.

“Come on, who’s got the alien costume?”

Even though he’d been the one to tell the story and would therefore have been a key player in this alleged plot, Dakota appeared to believe Nolan. He looked back and forth at Zo and Bentley. “Did you guys set this up?”

“No!”

Memphis, who’d remained silent to this point, shook his head. “Maaaaaan, I don’t like this.”

“Guys, seriously?” Nolan said. “You’re not going to admit it?”

Nobody said a word.

“Fine.” Nolan snatched the controller out of Zo’s hand. “Let’s see what you guys got.”

“No!” Bentley shouted.

Nolan raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong? I thought you said that the game didn’t get him. That it was a heart attack.”

“It was.”

“So why can’t I play it? Unless . . . it really is dangerous. WooOOooOOoo.” Nolan made a little ghost sound.

Bentley backed away. He’d always believed his dad. Now, here was his chance to prove to everyone else that the game was harmless.

Nolan pressed START, which led to a choice of three modes: Story, Multiplayer, and Arcade. The Arcade option sparkled. When Nolan moved down to it, a glowing box promised a free Polly Pop to anyone who could complete the challenge. That's the mode Nolan chose.

The screen turned black. Stars appeared. Memphis whimpered.

Then, yellow text started scrolling in such a blatant *Star Wars* rip-off that Bentley briefly considered the real reason the game got shut down was copyright infringement.

P2 is a substance so powerful that it will soon fuel every civilization in the universe. By the year 2293, Earth will be home to the last remaining P2. Aliens from Planet Pirate, Ninja Nebula, Wizard World, and Gladiator Galaxy have come to steal our P2. Humanity's only hope is a girl. A girl named Polly.

A spaceship then flew through the "O" in "Polly." The camera followed that spaceship down through Earth's atmosphere to an arena where humanity's last stand would take place. Even though the graphics in this game were much better than the dated arcade version, Bentley instantly recognized the layout of the arena. An overhead view showed civilians running around in a panic while Polly stood confidently with her blue laser sword in one hand and blaster mounted to the other. She looked so cool that it was easy to forget she was a gas station mascot.

"If this is like the arcade, the pirates will come first," Bentley said.

The spaceship landed in the top-right corner of the arena and raised a pirate flag. The first enemy off the ship was a spider.

“Space spider” sounds super scary. But because the main purpose of *P2: Polly’s Revenge* was hooking children on sugary slushies, this particular space spider looked more like a cute blob than a planet-eating doom beast. Nolan easily dispatched it with his sword. More spiders flopped out of the ship. Nolan took them out with a sweet spinning move.

After the spiders, a group of blobby pirates globbed out of the ship. Those posed a bit more of a challenge, but Nolan finished them off with his blaster. Each enemy that Nolan defeated raised his P2 meter.

WAVE 2.

“Easy,” Nolan said as he escorted one of the civilians to the evacuation point. But the moment Nolan reached the evacuation point, he got sliced by a space ninja. His P2 meter depleted. Then, he got sliced again and disappeared in a puff of blue smoke. Game over.

“What?!” Nolan squawked.

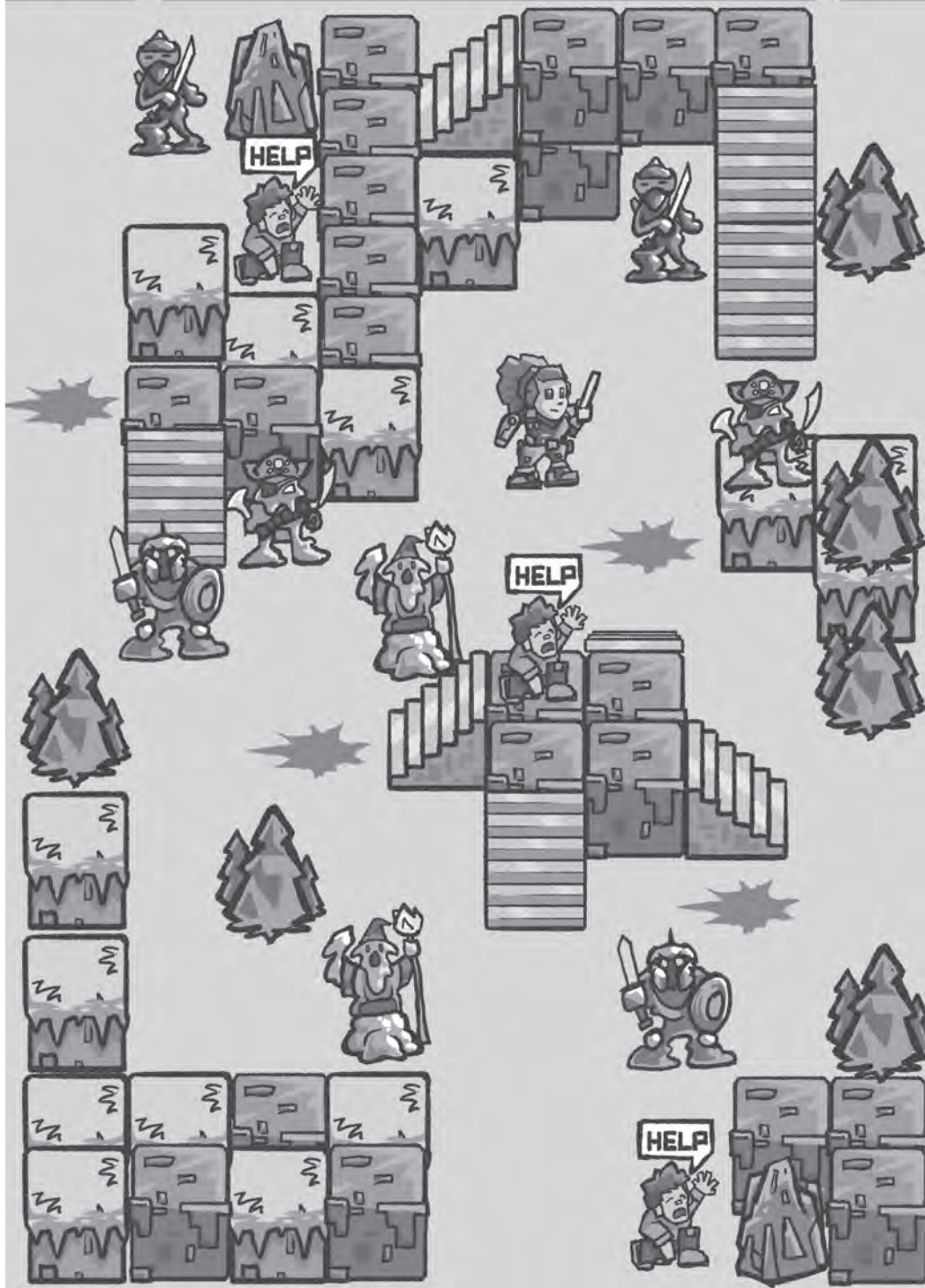
Bentley smiled. This was exactly the same as the arcade. The first wave of enemies was always embarrassingly easy to defeat, probably to keep kids from complaining that they were wasting their quarters. But things always got serious when the ninjas showed up.



x2

SCORE 1460010

P2



Nolan tried a few more times before Zo gathered some courage. “Let me try,” he said.

Zo got slightly farther, which afforded him the privilege of getting squeezed to death by a cute little space snake. Soon, the controller was passed among Dakota, Zo, and Nolan. Even Memphis warmed up to the idea of taking a few turns. Every game started out promising, but the challenge of protecting the civilians from the alien onslaught always proved too great.

“Impossible,” Dakota finally said.

That was the word Bentley had been waiting for. “Mind if I try?” He took the controller and locked in.

One spider blooped out of the spaceship, followed by a second and a third. Bentley stood still while the spiders ganged up on the civilians.

“You gonna do something?” Dakota asked.

Bentley did do something—he grabbed a floating pizza, which increased his P2 meter. While he snacked, the space pirates joined their spider friends in harassing the civilians. One innocent bystander vaporized in a cloud of blue smoke.

“Nice job, dude.” Dakota said sarcastically.

Bentley watched another civilian die, and another and another. A beam of light appeared above the spaceship, and the enemies grew stronger. By now it was an all-out feeding frenzy on the defenseless civilians. The aliens had

forgotten all about Bentley. Finally, when all the aliens had clumped together, Bentley sprang into action with a twirling blade attack.

8X COMBO!

Bentley's P2 meter maxed out, and the glowing beam moved from the spaceship to Polly.

“Whooooaaaaa!” The party went crazy.

Bentley was just warming up. “Watch how it's done, boys.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I WANT MY POLLY POP

“You’re gonna lose,” six-year-old Bentley said.

“Are you telling me how to play my own game?” Mr. Carmone asked with his eyes trained on the screen.

“Humph,” Bentley replied. He continued sipping his Polly Pop while watching his dad play *The Legend of Polly*.

“Combos are king in this game,” Bentley’s dad explained as he flicked the joystick. “Get enough combos, and everything else will be easy. Make sense?”

“Humph.”

“You get combos by gathering all the enemies in one spot. Now, you can try to wrangle them yourself, or you can wait while they attack civilians.”

“Aren’t you supposed to get the people to the subtraction point?” Bentley asked.

“Extraction point,” Mr. Carmone corrected. He waited for the ninjas to surround the civilians before springing into action.

9X COMBO!

“Getting people to the extraction point is nice,” Mr. Carmone said. “But that’s not the best way to win.”

“I wanna help people.”

“You are helping people by beating the aliens! Look. Do you know why this game has an overhead view?”

Bentley shook his head.

“So you can see the whole arena and figure out your next move. It lets you use your brain. When you play with your brain, you understand that nothing is more important than combos.”

“I don’t wanna play with my brain,” Bentley said.

“Well, this is a brain game,” Bentley’s dad said. “Try it. I think you’ll like it.”

• • •

At his twelfth birthday, Bentley powered through the game by playing with his brain. He waited out each attack wave, sacrificing civilians until he could pounce for a massive combo. First, there were the pirates, then the ninjas. Eventually, gladiators and wizards would join the fray too. The beam of light followed the first-place team. Throughout the battle, it’d drift from ship to ship as the groups fought each other, but always returned to Bentley when he’d collect another combo.

After fifteen minutes of furious gameplay, two words appeared on the screen.

FINAL WAVE.

“AHHHHH!” Everyone cheered and crowded around Bentley.

Zo acted like he was Bentley’s trainer in the corner of the boxing ring. “The titans!” Zo said with his hands on Bentley’s shoulders. “You got this!”

Throughout the game, the creatures had progressively grown bigger and scarier. For this final round, one titan emerged from each ship. All four dwarfed Polly.

“You need to kill all of those?!” Nolan asked.

“Not all,” Bentley said. “Just one.”

He focused on the gladiator titan. By this time, Bentley had built up so much P2 that he had a wide variety of attacks at his disposal. First, he unleashed a flurry of swipes and stabs with his laser sword. Then, he used a teleport power-up to zip across the arena and fire a fully powered blast. When the wizard interrupted its battle with the pirate to shoot an energy pulse, Bentley used his reflective shield to redirect the pulse toward the lumbering gladiator.

For several minutes, Bentley chipped away at the gladiator’s P2 bar through a dizzying combination of kicks, punches, slashes, blasts, and bombs. Finally—

KABOOOOOM!

The gladiator disappeared in a flash. Bentley's P2 bar started to sparkle.

"Pop, pop, pop. Popop-popop!"

The famous Polly Pop television jingle blared from the Carmones' outdoor sound system, letting both the party and the entire neighborhood know that Bentley had just earned the best power-up in the game.

"Pop, pop, pop. Popop-popop!"

The screen flashed white.

"I want my Polly Pop, pop. Popop-popop!"

The camera zoomed in from its overhead view to show a supersized Polly Pop in Polly's right hand. She drank it in one gulp, wiped her mouth, then grew to quadruple the size of the alien giants. They tried running to no avail. First, Polly punted the wizard into the sun. Then, she squished the pirate into a basketball, bounced it a few times, then dunked it into oblivion. Finally, the ninja. The poor, poor ninja. Polly picked up the ninja and swung it in circles until it stretched into a long rope. Then, she jumped rope with the ninja, crisscrossing her arms back and forth as she skipped. Finally, she blew him up into a balloon, let him go, and watched him zip off into the night sky.

With the final titan defeated, the screen faded to black, and a message appeared.

CONGRATULATIONS, POLLY! YOU'VE DEFENDED EARTH.

Zo bounced up and down, Dakota yelled “LET’S GOOOOOOOOO!” at the sky like he was the one who’d beat the game, Nolan jumped into the pool with his clothes on, and Memphis filmed the whole thing with his phone.

COLLECT YOUR REWARD?

Bentley was so caught up in the moment, that he hit the “A” button without giving it a second thought.

“No!” Memphis yelled.

Wummmmmmmmm . . .

The ground began rumbling as the outdoor subwoofer kicked in.

LOADING. 9%.

“What did you do?!” Nolan shouted as he scrambled out of the pool.

Wummm, wummm, wummm.

Bentley tried to cancel his last action. He pressed every button on the controller before fumbling it to the ground.

37%.

Wum-wum-wum-wum.

“Turn it off! TURN IT OFF!” Memphis shouted as he ran. He didn’t get very far. Two steps into his run, Memphis tripped over the projector’s cord, tipping it straight up. With the projector beaming its image to the sky instead of

the screen, the party had to rely on sound instead of the progress bar to tell them when certain doom would arrive.

62%.

WUM-WUM-WUM-WUM!

Bentley could feel the sound in his chest now.

79%.

WUMWUMWUMWUM!

Water from the pool splashed onto the patio as the rumbling grew out of control.

94%.

WUMMMMMMMMM—

Suddenly, the sound stopped. Zo held the Xbox power cord over his head like a trophy. “Unplugged it,” he gasped.

The party stood still for a few more seconds while they tried to stop shaking. For a moment, everything remained silent. Then, a voice called out. A girl’s voice.

“They’re coming!”

The group turned as one. Standing at the edge of the forest, illuminated by a blue glow from her laser sword, was Polly herself.

CHAPTER SIX

EXTREME LASER TAG

Bentley's mind scrambled to piece together an explanation for the sight in front of him. This wasn't the same Polly from the video game. Couldn't have been. He'd been watching the Xbox the whole time, and it never sparked or smoked or acted at any point like it was trying to push a whole person into the real world. Also, Polly stood at least one hundred feet away. No way she could have gotten over there so fast.

"Bentleyyyy," Zo whispered.

"We've gotta go now!" Polly demanded. "Right now!"

Suddenly, the pieces clicked into place for Bentley. The video game in his dad's office. His dad mysteriously "working" on his birthday. This was some sort of birthday surprise! At the end of the day, Bentley's dad had been the one to save his party. "She's an actor," Bentley said.

"You've got five seconds," Polly shouted.

"What?!" Zo asked.

"Trust me," Bentley continued. "This is something my dad set up."

"Four," Polly counted. "Three. Two."

Bentley ran toward Polly, adrenaline pumping. Everyone else followed. “My dad always made a big deal about the overhead view in the video game,” Bentley explained while he ran. “He said it let you play with your brain. I never liked that, so I think this is his version of a do-over. I think this is extreme laser tag.”

Polly didn’t acknowledge the boys when they reached her. Instead, she kept her blaster trained on Bentley’s pool.

“So this is laser tag?” Dakota asked as he tried to catch his breath.

No answer.

“That’s a laser gun? Do we get one?”

“If you make it to the extraction point, yes,” Polly replied without averting her gaze.

“Ha!” Dakota laughed in relief. He took a closer look at the blaster and nodded at Bentley. “Legit.”

Nolan was still struggling to understand. “What’s extreme laser tag?”

“She’ll explain it,” Bentley said. “This is gonna be fun.”

Polly turned to the boys with the most serious possible expression on her face. That look was Bentley’s first clue that this might be a little more intense than he’d imagined. “The next few minutes are going to be the most important of your whole life,” Polly said. “Follow me if you don’t want them to be your last.” With that, she sprinted into the woods.

“Can we change first?” Memphis called as he glanced down at his brand-new Jordans. “I don’t wanna crease my J’s!”

Polly slowed down and tapped the temple of her head. A green laser scanned the area. “This way.” She darted left.

“I want one of those!” Dakota said. “When do we get our stuff?”

“Shush!” Polly shushed Dakota in a way that felt a lot more like a real shush than a just-playing-around shush. She scanned again, then switched directions and ran faster. “Keep up,” she hissed.

“Seriously, can we slow down?” Memphis asked as he lagged behind in the dark woods.

“Shush!”

Bentley got an uneasy feeling in his stomach. That unease grew when he heard the pitter-patter of rain hitting leaves. “Did you bring umbrellas?” he asked Polly.

She stopped, looked to the sky, and heaved an exasperated sigh.

“I’m sorry,” Bentley said. “Ponchos are fine too. Obviously, if we knew it was gonna rain, we’d have brought umbrellas from home, but . . .”

“I’m going to tell you one last time,” Polly said. “Stop talking, or I won’t be able to protect you.”

CRASH!



A bolt of lightning lit up the whole forest. Everyone jumped except for Polly.

“We’re calling this off,” Bentley said.

“What exactly are we calling off?” Polly asked. “The end of the world?”

The unease in Bentley’s stomach grew into a full-blown urge to puke.

CRASH!

Another bolt of lightning illuminated Polly's face. Those weren't normal-person eyes. They were crazy eyes.

"Who are you?" Bentley whispered.

"Duuuuuuuude." Memphis started retreating. "We're gonna die, we're gonna die, we're gonna . . ."

ZAP!

Suddenly, Memphis disappeared. He'd been zapped by a blue energy blast fired from the musket of a real-life space pirate.

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