

The Game to Win

Colors, lights, familiar music- he had done it a million times. Play the game, grab the food, and head home. Richard took the joystick and manipulated his character, “Jumpman” through the newly generated maze. “Labyrinth” was designed by the Developers as a first-person game to test and maintain basic abilities, such as problem solving, memory, and reaction time. Richard had played the lunchgame, as it had come to be colloquially known, every weekday since he was 21. Sure, it was updated occasionally, but the feel of the game had always been the same. The Googlies’ attacks had become predictable, so it was fairly easy to move through the maze without being defeated. Blocking and parrying had become second nature. The end of the maze was in sight. As the Richard inched his character further, expecting the usual “final fright”, he was shocked when nothing happened. You Win! popped up on the screen, and Richard grabbed the can of soup that came out of the machine.

“Play stupid games, win stupid prizes,” was the phrase of the masses, who had become accustomed to nonsense like this. “Still,” Richard muttered to himself, “this is better than the Dark Ages of the 40-hour work week.” Richard’s friend, Mabel, appeared behind him.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Hrrm,” Richard grumbled.

“Hey- did you, um... notice anything different about Labyrinth today?” Mabel asked.

“Yes,” replied Richard “There was no last attack before the finish line.”

“Really? For me, the always turn left trick didn’t work,” Mabel replied, with a confused expression, “How is that even possible?” she added.

Richard pondered for a moment. “Well, I don’t want to worry about this now,” he said. Clearly, this conundrum was a shower thought, not a 1 P.M. problem. “I guess I’ll talk to you later.”

She replied, “Will you be able to chat on Grouper, at let’s say... 2:30?” He nodded.

On Richard’s walk home, he decided to take a detour. He needed to get away from the audibly and visibly noisy city center of Detroit. On his way home, he stopped because a loud smash came from the diner across the road. Police droids dragged out a middle-aged man struggling. “Don’t do this to me! I’ve gone to this diner every Friday afternoon of my entire life! I don’t deserve this!” The people stood and stared. The droids carried on. Their cold, metallic eyes glared unremorsefully, intently. As they flew away with him in their arms. Richard wondered where they went. Folks like that never seemed to come back. Maybe he was resettled. It wasn’t anybody else’s problem, so everybody turned back to what they were doing before.

Dinner also presented a new challenge. The dinner trivia game was significantly more difficult than usual, and Richard only won some fries. As Richard walked home, he could hear the factories whirring. Workers hadn’t worked since the 1970’s, but the auto industry had returned. He could even see new factories being built down the road. Detroit was booming, but he didn’t feel it. In fact, over the next weeks, he noticed his friend, Joseph, looking particularly thin. Richard walked up to him. “Is anything wrong?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Joseph responded.

“Are you sure? You are looking kind of sickly,” he said.

“Well, I broke my glasses, but I can’t win a game to earn points because I can’t see. So, I’m stuck sightless and can’t play games to earn anything else,” Joseph mourned.

“Could I help you?” Richard inquired. “Maybe I could win a game and buy the glasses for you.”

“Not possible. You don’t have a prescription, and the scanner will identify you as someone who doesn’t have it. It’s part of the new update,” the sickly man stated.

“New update?” he said.

“You haven’t heard? In the new update, The Developers improved the learning algorithm, added facial recognition, and basically made life a lot harder. If you’ve noticed the games getting harder, it’s because of this. Thankfully for me, it’s actually gotten a little easier to accommodate my needs. That’s the main reason I’m on the sidewalk and not in a casket.”

Richard had missed a few meals, but he had never thought that there was a serious fundamental change to the entire system on which the Syndicated States of America ran. He had always been healthy, so he had never imagined how difficult certain games were for impaired people. “Is there any way I could guide you through The Labyrinth, or something like that?” Richard asked.

“No. Did you hear what happened at Diner of America with the man who was pulled out of the restaurant?” Joseph asked.

“I was there, actually,” he said.

“That whole situation was caused by the man helping a paralyzed friend of his with The Breakfast Challenge. The machines recognized his fingerprints, and he was caught and arrested. Look, if I need help, I’ll figure something out. If you still have questions about the update, talk to my friend, Amy Fletcher, who works as a regional manager at the Development Department,” Joseph said.

“You know a regional manager? How?” he responded incredulously.

“Opportunism,” Joseph responded, and walked away.

In the following months, the games got harder, the people got thinner, and Richard really began to wonder if Labyrinth was winnable anymore. Talking to his friends on Grouper, he learned that in all of the player versus non-player games, Americans, particularly those from Detroit were suffering. Finally, after missing his third lunch in a row, Richard had enough. He called Joseph to organize a meeting with the regional manager.

This meeting could be a watershed moment. If he was convincing enough, he might help his community by changing the broken and failing system. Using some of his last points, he

bought an old black suit, with a tie that looked like it hadn't been worn since the early 2020's. As he studied himself in the mirror on the day of his meeting, he stopped. "What if I failed?" he muttered. "What could happen? Would the response be worse than no? What if he messed up? Stop. The only option now is to act and to hope that Ms. Fletcher is understanding."

The building of the Department of Development itself was menacing and imposing upon the city. The town hall was practically a puppet to this building. They control the commerce, they control the people. He spoke to nobody on his way to the secretary's desk. The lobby itself was the grandest room Richard had ever been in. Its pure splendor was incomparable to anything he had ever seen. Eventually, the secretary called Richard over. "She's ready to see you," she said. The regional manager's room itself was dim, but very colorful. "Welcome to the court of the queen," a sonorous, powerful feminine voice said. "This is where all the major commercial decisions in Michigan take place."

"Hello Ms.... Fletcher, I've come to talk about the new update," Richard stated timidly. "What about the new update?" she asked. "Having trouble?"

"I'm having some trouble, but I'm more worried about my friends," he said.

"Ah yes, the learning algorithm. I am ashamed to say that it wasn't us who created that. It was the Central Committee. Do you know why we would have created such a thing?" she spoke confidently.

"To make life harder?" questioned Richard.

"Not exactly," Ms. Fletcher said. "The true purpose is to test something different than we ever have before. We used to check the participant's reaction time, to a certain degree their reasoning, and ability to fit in. Now we check something different. Adaptability. We have realized that the true test of a person's value is their willingness and capability to change and evolve to the environment that they are in. That is the test we have put on the

populace. Only the strong will survive and be victorious against the challenges they face. Clearly, this is the ultimate test.”

“Why would you do this?”

“Haven’t you seen it? Since the near complete automation of the workforce in the 2030’s, there was no point to having a large population. There is no need for workers. Why use money when the ultimate source of the value of currency is based on labor, but there is no labor to be done? At this point, the only reason for gamification is to provide some kind of ‘purpose’ in peoples’ lives! So, in order to make humanity reach its true potential, we must rid ourselves of weakness and impurity! Detroit is only the beginning, the test for the learning algorithm. Soon, all the Syndicated States will operate the system that the Department of Development has placed forth, and humanity will become truly great, creating a true Golden Age!”

Richard was utterly shocked. He hadn’t expected such a radical plan in any way and so was not prepared to respond. “But... what about me?” he just barely managed to speak out.

“That depends...” declared she. “Are you strong?”