

GAME BOY

Steve Filmore ate, drank, slept and lived video games. He spent every spare second with his new system, the DRX7. So it came as no surprise when his math test came back with a big red 43 at the top.

The night before, when he was supposed to be studying, Steve decided to try just one game. One game led to another . . . and another . . . and, suddenly, it was time for bed. The evening had disappeared, swallowed up by the electronic monster.

Now what? he wondered, as he crossed the schoolyard. Mr. Harper had kept him in for “a little chat” about his test result, so the playground was nearly empty. Just as well, too. Steve was in no mood to talk to anybody.

He headed out to the lone tree at the edge of the baseball diamond and flopped down against the trunk. Lately, he’d been hiding out there a lot. It was a great place for playing video games. No one bugged him.

Steve reached into his backpack and dug under his math book to find his DRX7. Within minutes, he was lost in the video game’s universe. An entire baseball team could have thundered past and he wouldn’t have noticed.

So when the voice broke his concentration, he nearly jumped out of his skin. He hadn't heard anyone coming.

Steve stared at the boy who was crouched beside him looking intently at the small screen. He was definitely a kid, yet his face had the wizened, wrinkled look of an old man.

"What did you say?" Steve asked, tearing his eyes away from the strange-looking face.

"I said, do you have to jump on all those guys?"

"Oh yeah. You have to. You get more points."

"Is it hard?"

"Uh, not once you get the hang of it. After that, the more you play, the better you get."

"I get it. Like math," the boy said, pointing to the textbook.

Steve stared again. This kid doesn't just look old, he thinks old, too, he thought. He must be the only kid on earth who thinks video games are like math.

"No way," Steve said aloud. "This is nothing like math. This is fun."

"I always thought math was fun."

"You're nuts. It sucks."

As Steve spoke, he shut down the game and opened up *Tetris*.

"What's your name?" he asked as he began to play again.

"Ben."

"Ben who?"

"Ben Farber. What's yours?"

"Stephen Filmore. But call me Steve. Only my mom calls me Stephen."



“I know what you mean. Mine used to call me Benjamin.”

“But she doesn’t anymore? How’d you get her to stop?”

“Um . . . she just stopped, that’s all. You know, you’re really lucky to have a game like this. It looks amazing.”

“It is. I don’t remember seeing you around here before. Are you new?”

“No. I’ve seen you before, though.”

“Oh, but you don’t go to this school, right?”

“No, I don’t go to this school.”

Steve was really concentrating now. The shapes were falling fast and he had to slot them into place quickly. He didn’t hear what Ben said next.

“Sorry. What did you say?”

“I asked if you’d let me have a turn sometime,” Ben said shyly.

Steve glanced at his watch.

“Oops,” he said. “Not today, that’s for sure. I’ve got to get home.” He shut down the game and began to pack up. “Besides, in another week, I probably won’t be playing it myself.”

“What do you mean?” Ben asked.

“Well, Mr. Harper — my math teacher — says he’ll tell my folks if I flunk another test.”

“But what does that have to do with your game?”

“Are you kidding? If my mom and dad find out I’m flunking tests, they’ll take it away. They said they would, and they meant it.”

“Oh.” Ben frowned, then his face brightened. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. Suppose you pass your next test . . .”

“Get serious.”

“Well, just suppose you do. Then you’d have your game for a while longer at least, right?”

“Yeah. Until I flunk the test after that, anyway.”

“But you won’t flunk another test. Not if you practise. Math is just like playing video games, really. Once you get the hang of it, you just have to practise to get better.

I was pretty good at math. What grade are you in?"

"Six."

"That's good. I got past that," Ben said.

I would hope so, Steve thought. He looks old enough to be a professor or something. Just really small for his age.

Ben continued, "When's your next test?"

"Monday."

"Okay. How about this? I help you with your math for the rest of the week. If you do better on the next test, you let me use your game for just one night. What do you think?"

"A whole night?" Steve couldn't imagine lending it out for more than five minutes.

"Well, if you don't do well, you might lose it forever. And I would really love to play some of those games, especially that last one. They weren't around when I . . . I mean, where I lived."

"No way. Where were you? On the moon or something?"

"Something like that. Now, what do you say? Is it a deal?"

Steve hesitated, then shrugged. "Okay. What do we do? You wanna come to my house or do you want me to go to yours?"

"Oh . . ." Ben seemed confused. "How about we meet right here after school every day? Behind this tree? You're the only one who ever comes here, and . . ."

"How do you know that?" Steve interrupted sharply. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all, he thought. I don't even know this kid. And from the sound of it, he's been watching me.

“Oh . . . uh . . . I’ve seen you here a few times, that’s all. I don’t go to school here, but I wish I could.”

“Well, why can’t you?”

Again, Ben seemed confused. Then he went on.

“Well, my mom and dad had to move here. And the school year had already started, so Mom decided to teach me at home.” He paused, as if remembering something, then added, “She used to be a teacher. That’s what I wanted to be, too.”

“Wow, no school! That would be great.”

“It wasn’t . . . isn’t. It’s actually pretty boring.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Steve said. “I never thought about that.”

“So,” Ben said suddenly. “About this math. You’ve got your books with you. Why don’t we start right now?”

“Okay,” Steve said reluctantly. “But this is a waste of time. You’ll see.”

An hour later, he wasn’t so sure. Ben was patient and he had a way of coming up with great examples. Decimals were parts of his allowance and fractions were parts of game scores. Steve was surprised when he checked his watch and saw that it was nearly dinnertime.

“I’ve really got to go,” he said, packing his bag.

“Same time tomorrow, then?” Ben suggested hopefully.

“No problem, it’s your time that we’re wasting,” Steve said as he took off across the yard. At the gate, he turned back and shouted, “Hey, thanks,” but Ben was nowhere in sight.

The next afternoon, Steve had to help set up chairs for a PTA meeting. It was nearly four o’clock when he headed for the old tree, hoping Ben would still be there.

It wasn't until he got right up to the tree and peeked around the trunk that he saw him. Ben was sitting with his hands clasped around his knees, staring at some kids playing Frisbee in the park across the street.

"Hi, Steve," he said without looking up. Then he turned and smiled. "So, our deal is still on?"

"Guess so. But you're the one who's gonna lose out, Ben."

"Let's just see what happens," Ben smiled.

Once more, he helped Steve work through the world of multiplication, division, numerators and denominators.

They met again on Wednesday and Thursday. By Friday, Steve was beginning to think that doing well on a math test just might be more than a dream.

"See," Ben said as they finished up, "it's really not so bad after all, is it?"

Grudgingly, Steve agreed that it wasn't as hard as he'd thought.

"But," Ben warned, "you should try those last questions one more time over the weekend. Don't look at the answers in the back until you're finished. The test is Monday morning, right? When will you get it back?"

"Actually, Mr. Harper said he'd mark mine right away. If I bomb, which I probably will, he said he'll be on the phone to my parents Monday night."

"No way that's gonna happen. You know your stuff now. And I can have your game Monday night?"

"Sure. A deal's a deal. I'll give it to you Monday after school. But just for one night."

"One night," Ben said, beaming. "That's all."

The happy look on Ben's face gave Steve an idea.

"Hey," he said as he packed up his books, "we always have tacos on Friday night. You wanna come to my place for dinner? My folks won't mind. There's always lots, and . . ."

He stopped. Ben's smile had disappeared and, for a moment, it looked like he was about to cry. Then he said lightly, "Nah, but thanks for asking. And don't worry about Monday. You'll ace it, Steve. I know it."

"Sure," Steve said sarcastically. "See ya," he called as he began to jog toward Park Street.

"Goodbye, Steve," Ben said quietly.

"What did you say?" Steve shouted.

"I said good luck," Ben yelled back.

"Thanks," Steve hollered. "I'll need it."

He spent much of the weekend doing homework — not just math, but social studies and English, too. He couldn't believe how much catching up he had to do.

After dinner on Sunday, he went back to his math. When he was unsure about one question — the last and the hardest — he went downstairs to ask for help. His parents were in the living room.

"Hey, could one of you help me with this?" He sat down on the couch and showed them the question.

His dad began to scribble numbers.

"Dad, could you write the percents as fractions of a hundred right at the beginning? That's the way Ben showed me. I can follow it easier."

"Who's Ben?" Mom asked.

"He's just this kid who's been helping me with my math."

“I don’t remember you mentioning a Benjamin before.”

“Ben, Mom, Ben. And I haven’t. He’s just this kid I met after school.”

“Really? What’s his last name? How old is he? And where does he live? Does he go to your school?”

Steve could tell that his mother’s Beware of Strangers warning system had just clicked into action.

“Mom, it’s fine. He’s just a kid, and he’s really smart, too. His name is Farber — Ben Farber. He doesn’t go to my school — and I never asked him how old he was because I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“What do you mean?” Dad asked. He’d stopped writing and was listening carefully now, too.

“Well, he’s a little shorter than me and he acts like a kid, but he looks kind of old. It’s hard to explain.”

“What did you say his name was?” Dad asked, looking alarmed.

“Ben Farber.”

“You shouldn’t joke about Ben,” his mother said, pursing her lips. “Besides, how did you hear about him?”

“Mom, what’s with you? I’m not joking.”

“Okay, then. Did you just make up this story about getting help to impress us? So we won’t take your video games away or something?”

Steve was confused. It looked like he was in trouble — and he had no idea why.

“He could have just lucked into the name,” Dad said to Mom over Steve’s head.

“Yes, but what about what he said about the way he looked?” his mother asked nervously.

“Hey guys, I’m here. Talk to me. What’s this all about? Ben’s just a kid I met, I tell you. And he just looks a lot older than a kid. A few wrinkles like Granddad, that’s all.”

“We’re being ridiculous,” Dad said abruptly. “Let’s get back to this problem.”

“No, wait.” Steve wasn’t willing to let it drop. Something strange was happening. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, really,” Mom said. “It’s just that there was a boy named Benjamin Farber who moved here when we were kids. His family wanted to be closer to the medical centre. Ben needed so much special care by then.”

“By when? What was wrong with him?”

“Well, we never met him. But our parents told us about him.”

“Yes,” Dad continued. “He had a very serious — and very rare — disease, one that makes your body grow old in just a few years.”

“By the time they moved here, Ben was already too weak to go to school. And apparently he really wanted to. He was just a kid. He wanted to do all the things other kids did.”

“He died about six months after they arrived,” Mom added. “It was so sad. His parents moved away soon after the funeral. So you can see why we were so surprised by what you said, can’t you?”

Steve was stunned. This is crazy, he thought.

“Forget it,” Dad said. “It’s just a coincidence, that’s all. Now let’s get back to this problem, shall we?”

Steve sat quietly while Dad finished explaining the math question, but he wasn’t paying much attention. As soon as possible, he escaped to his room.

There has to be an explanation, he thought, as he slipped into bed. There just has to be.

By the time he got to school the next morning, he'd convinced himself that Dad was right — it was all just a coincidence.

Steve was surprised when he was one of the first to finish the math test. He was also surprised to find that he'd at least tried every question. A first. Once the test was over, though, the rest of the day seemed to drag endlessly.

When Mr. Harper finally dismissed the class, he asked Steve to stay behind. Steve's heart was pounding as he waited to hear his fate.

"How did you do it, Steve? Congratulations." Mr. Harper handed him his paper. At the top, with a big happy face beside it, was a large blue 81.

"I think you've finally got the basics, Steve. You keep this up and your mark will be much better on your next report."

Steve thanked Mr. Harper and left in a daze. He wandered slowly out to the schoolyard, where he stood staring at the big tree for a long time. There was no sign of Ben.

His head was spinning. If Ben is *the* Ben, I've just spent four days learning math from a ghost. That isn't possible . . . is it? And if it is, how can a ghost play with a game? And he isn't around, anyway. I'd be stupid to leave my DRX7 here. Somebody'll steal it and I'll never see it again.

He spun around and walked quickly toward the gate. You're not real, Ben. You can't be, he said to himself as he began to jog toward home.

His parents took him out for pizza that night. To celebrate the great math mark, they said. When they got back home, Steve said he was tired and went to his room. He lay on his bed, trying to make sense of what had happened.

No matter how hard he tried, though, the one thing he couldn't forget was the smile on Ben's face when he'd agreed to let him have his DRX7 for a night. And his own words kept coming back to him. A deal's a deal, he'd said.

Steve looked at his watch. It was still only eight-thirty. He got up, grabbed his things and headed downstairs.

"I forgot something in the schoolyard," he shouted as he ran out the door. "I'll be right back."

It was nearly dark when he got to the school. He walked slowly across the empty baseball diamond to the tree. No one was there. It's too late, he thought. Ben got tired of waiting. Maybe he even saw me leave after school.

"Ben, I'm sorry," he whispered.

Then, he saw it — the hole in the trunk where kids sometimes hid secret messages. He reached up and felt inside. It was a small space, but big enough. He looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then he set the unit carefully in the hole.

"Here it is, Ben. Have fun," he whispered and walked away.

When he got home, he crawled into bed and fell asleep wondering if he'd ever see his DRX7 again.

The next morning, Steve got to school early. Again, he looked around to make sure he was alone. Then he reached into the hole.

The console was there, exactly where he'd left it. No one

has touched it, he thought. I was too late, after all. Well, at least I've got it back. Somehow, though, this thought didn't make him happy.

He was surprised to find the power turned on. I must have pushed the On button when I grabbed it, he thought. Then he looked at the screen. Under the Game Over message was an incredibly high score.

Steve hit Start. The familiar *Tetris* tune began and there, on the opening screen, were three high scores. The one he'd already seen was listed first, with two others close behind.

Someone had used the game — someone who was a fast learner and a good teacher, too.

"I hope you had fun, Ben," Steve whispered. "It's easy once you get the hang of it, isn't it?" Just like math, he added silently.

Steve turned off the power. As he walked toward the school, he glanced back at the tree. There was nobody there but, just in case, he waved.