

Enter the Cube

by Nicholas and Daniel Dobkin

Chapter 1: Playtime, Paytime

“Bam! Bam! Slam! You’re dead, sucker! Now -- for the big one,” said Erin in a deadly whisper.

“I want you to write a realistic essay. It must be at least 3 pages long on our regular lined paper. The topic is what you don’t like in your life.” Mr. Classen finished writing “WHAT I DON’T LIKE” on the blackboard and, putting his chalk back in the chalk tray, turned to face his fifth-grade classroom.

“No, no, for Gannondorf you use a charged-up shot,” whispered Nicholas to Tennyson. He scribbled quickly on the margin of page 210 of **The Story of Independence** and then tore it off, taking part of Article V of the Constitution (“when ratified by the Legislatures of three-fourths of the States...”) with it. The sound drew Mr. Classen’s attention, but fortunately for Nicholas the teacher’s view was blocked by Andrew on one side and Cassandra on the other. Both boys, noting Mr. Classen’s gaze, stared ostentatiously at the board as if absorbing the deeper meaning of dislike. Meanwhile, Nicholas tried to surreptitiously pass the note to Tennyson below the level of their desks, but with the participants being unable to watch the process, the handoff failed and the note fluttered to the floor next to Clara’s desk, just behind Tennyson.

While Mr. Classen turned back to the board to write the due date for the assignment, Clara scooped up the note. After a brief delay to decipher Nicholas’ scrawl, she snorted and said aloud, “That is so stupid! It takes way too long to charge up.”

This was too much for Mr. Classen. “Why Clara, you’ve already written your essay, I see. Let’s read it to the class, shall we?”

Cane, Nicholas, and Brian snickered. Clara was always trying to get them to let her join their video-game discussions and they relished seeing her in trouble.

Clara cleared her throat nervously and read: “You just hold down the B button and when an enemy is in range, release.”

“Really, Clara -- that is much less than 3 pages of lined paper.” The class broke into laughter. “Though, as I see you’ve removed it from your text book, perhaps that’s just as well.”

“I did not!” shouted Clara, while Nicholas quietly shoved his history text to the bottom of the pile, just under **The Excitement of English Grammar**.

“That’s a great idea for the essay,” whispered Alice to Cane. “I always hated that stuff.”

“What’s wrong with Article V?” asked Brian.

The bell rang.

Mr. Classen quickly concluded that this was a battle not worth fighting, and smiled as the kids plunged into their usual end-of-class competition to be the first to snag their own backpack while pushing everyone else's aside, chattering happily all the while. Clara thrust through the pack of kids like a tank, grabbed her backpack, and marched out of the room.

As soon as they got out of the class, Nicholas, Cane, Tennyson, Brian and Erin headed towards the first-grade playground next to the handball walls. This was their habitual meeting place for the inevitable after-class game strategy forum. Nicholas took his usual spot at the end of the curly slide, while Erin hung upside down from the ladder and Cane and Tennyson spun in circles around the fireman's pole. Brian sat under the straight slide reading a Nintendo Power magazine he had snuck into school in his pack.

"I don't know, I never got Mewtwo," said Nicholas. "You need something like a thousand matches! Roy is much easier. You just get Marth and complete adventure mode with him, and then you get Roy."

"I never even got Marth, how do you do that?" asked Tennyson.

"You have to complete classic mode with all the standard characters," replied Nicholas.

"That's too hard," said Tennyson. "I keep getting beat, how am I going to complete classic?"

"You're still working on that stupid old Melee game?" said Cane. "That's so old that I don't even remember how I won everything."

"An education in the classics, that's what kids are missing today!" said Erin.

"Astro Boy, Mighty Mouse, Mister Magoo. The cartoons that built America!"

"Well, you need to know how use your items better!" said Nicholas, ignoring Erin as usual. "Like, you've got a Mister Saturn and you don't do anything with him."

"Was I supposed to?" asked Tennyson.

"Yeah, you throw him at your opponent when they get close and you get a bonus. Geeze, Tennyson, you have to know things like this if you're going to get anywhere."

"Rearn the fine art of self-defense using Mister Saturn prushy doll," added Erin in an awful faux-Japanese accent. "Get comprete course book and video tape, onry twenty-nine ninety-five, operator standing by, call now!"

"Marth is dumb. Why bother with that stupid sword stuff anyway?" interrupted Cane, continuing to circle around the pole. "Just use Starfox, blam! blam! Zap 'em with the ray gun. Me 'n Fox, we win every time."

"I thought you forgot how to play Melee?" asked Tennyson.

"Wasn't Sonic in Melee?" asked Brian, looking up from his magazine.

"That was just a rumor!" said Cane. "He was way too famous to be just another fighting character."

"What about Mario?" said Tennyson. "He's famous, too."

“What about PacMan?” replied Cane. “I can’t believe they took the PacMan game away at Medieval Diner! It always takes forever to get seated and now there’s nothing to do.”

“You mean the one next to Bridegroom Depot?” asked Brian. “They have about two hundred books on the bookshelves in the waiting room. Medieval history, warfare, what people used to eat, religious life--”

“That’s what I said, there’s nothing to do!” interrupted Cane. “I mean, last month, when the game machine was there, I got Inky, Blinky, and Pinky with one quarter!”

“You mean they got you,” said Tennyson. “I was there, remember? You have to turn the ghosts blue first or they eat you.”

“Yeah, eat or be eaten, that’s my motto, what’s the difference as long as it’s food!” By this point he had fallen flat on his face and was still too dizzy to sit up straight.

“Foods that strike back, next on the Famous Zombie Chefs channel,” said Erin.

“Doesn’t Samus have a ray gun, too?” asked Tennyson, as he lost his tenuous balance and fell flat on top of Cane. “Maybe I should try her.”

“Samus? Only a woos would be stupid enough to play Melee with a girl,” said Nicholas.

“What about a girl?” said Brian.

“Yeah, Brian, you’re right, girls are so stupid they would use a girl to battle,” said Cane from beneath Tennyson. “Hey, can you get off me, you’re making me dizzy.”

“I’m not making you dizzy, you’re dizzy already,” said Tennyson.

“Or Clara, she’s even stupider!” said Nicholas.

“I heard that!” came a voice from the other side of the handball wall.

Nicholas and Brian looked at each other. “Oh, no,” said Nicholas.

Clara’s head popped out around the steel support post. “I got Mewtwo and finished classic mode and adventure mode and completed all fifty-one events and unlocked the sound test and got all the trophies and beat All-stars in hard mode all with Samus, and that was in fourth grade! And I could use Samus to beat any one of you.”

“Just like a stupid girl,” said Nicholas. “I could whip you with Marth or Roy or even Jigglypuff! You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Just like a stupid boy,” said Clara, stomping into the sandbox to face Nicholas. “You just never let me come to play ‘cause you’re afraid you’d lose.”

Tennyson had recovered enough to stand up, though he was drifting down a non-existent wind. “Good idea, you can come but only if you’ll stop the playground from spinning.”

“Spin the other way, you dufus,” said Clara, but she took his arm and led him to a seat on the climbing structure. “The playground isn’t spinning, your head is.”

“Fine, and if you lose you buy us all chocolate ice cream!” Nicholas added.

“Could I get vanilla instead?” asked Brian.

“You’re on,” said Clara. Clara reached down to help Tennyson, now apparently recovered, to get his butt out of the hole in the climbing structure, wrapping her arm around his shoulders as she did so. Cane, noting their compromising position, started to

chant “Clara and Tennyson sittin’ in a tree -- k- i- s- !” His recitation was abruptly interrupted as Tennyson decided he was dizzy again and landed on top of Cane’s face.

“Off to the Cube!” sang Erin. “Off to the Cube! Off to the cube, and whip on the girls and get some ice cream!”

Tennyson’s GameCube was almost buried in the clutter of old toys, wooden and plastic blocks, Nintendo 64 game cartridges, pieces of various video game magazines and guides, partially-assembled Lego spaceships, VCR tape cartridges and homeworks marked “INCOMPLETE” in big red letters. Clara insisted on carefully untangling the controller cables from each other (the boys were accustomed to simply pulling harder until they got enough room, the plugs came out, or the television fell over).

“Sorry for the mess,” said Tennyson. “Boys,” Clara muttered under her breath.

Cane turned on the GameCube and grabbed a controller. “Wait a minute,” said Tennyson. “That’s Metroid Prime, we need Melée.”

Cane said “Oh, forget that, let’s just play Metroid, that’s a cool game.”

“I thought you didn’t like games with girls?” said Brian.

“Cane, we were going to show Clara the RIGHT way to play Super Smash Brothers, so that she can buy us ice cream and stop bothering us,” said Nicholas, ignoring another glare from Clara.

“Oh, all right,” said Cane. He popped out the disk and threw it on the floor in the pile of wooden blocks.

“Cane!” said Tennyson. “That’s not where the game disks go.” Tennyson fished out the Metroid disk and carefully placed it on the top of a rather unstable pile of unpackaged disks and empty cases.

“What’s the difference?” said Cane.

“Because that’s the way I keep things organized.”

“Organized?” said Brian.

“Besides it’s MY games and MY GameCube and MY house so shut up.”

Tennyson then proceeded to scatter the pile of disks and cases searching for Super Smash Brothers.

He had reached the bottom of the pile and was gaining energy for a second pass when Brian quietly spoke from the corner, carefully holding a small plastic disk by the edges: “Is this it?”

“Yeah, that’s the one,” said Tennyson, grabbing the disk out of Brian’s hands. Soon the familiar silver-blue Cube logo walked up on the screen.

“Who’s going to play? We’ve got six people and only four controllers,” said Nicholas.

“Three controllers. Remember the one I tried to make into a Cubesicle in the freezer,” said Cane.

“OK, three. That makes it worse. We can’t do two on two, we can only do one on one battles. Who is going to play?”

“Well I’m not buying you any ice cream if I don’t get to play!” said Clara.

“Yeah, Clara has to play,” said Tennyson. “What about Clara against Brian?”

“I’m not sure about that -- why not let her battle Nicholas?” said Brian.

“I want to go first! I’ll crenelate her! I’ll menebrate her! I’ll discombobulate her!” said Erin.

“No, me!” said Cane. “I’ll just beat her!” he said, grabbing the second controller so hard the plug pulled out.

“Give that back!” said Tennyson. They started wrestling for the controller, while Erin egged them on: “Let’s get ready to RUMBLE!”. The two boys started rolling on the floor struggling for the controller. While the other boys gathered around, Clara took hold of the main controller and started selecting her character.

Within a moment Cane and Tennyson had rolled under the bookshelf, upending it and sending a rain of paperbacks and old board books down on top of them. Nicholas and Erin were laughing wildly while the two combatants exchanged accusations, when Brian quietly said from the corner, “Wow. She’s defeated Giant Donkey Kong in seven seconds. She’s good.”

Nicholas said “Oh, that’s nothing, I’ve defeated Giant DK in five seconds!”, and Erin chimed in, “and I defeated him before I started fighting!” Cane said “You did not neither!” and Tennyson pushed Cane even though he wasn’t being insulted -- he was just accustomed to himself being the object of Cane’s detractions. He tried to apologize but Cane grabbed him and pushed him into the magazine pile.

Suddenly an adult - sounding voice from the other room said “You’d better stop messing that room up or you’re going to get it!”

Tennyson said “Sorry, Da --- Dad?” The voice sounded like his father but not exactly. His puzzlement, however, was overshadowed by irritation when he realized that Cane had messed up his game disk pile again. In a moment everyone except Brian and Clara was rolling around on the ground knocking things over. Nicholas pushed Erin, who fell backwards and hit the CD player with his butt. It flipped right up in the air and landed with a loud crash on top of Brian, who screamed “owww!!”

The adult voice sounded again: “Kids. I hate kids.” They all looked over to the doorway expecting to see Tennyson’s dad -- a pudgy balding man with a grey mustache. In the doorway stood a curious very dark man wearing spiked leather boots and dark gloves, a cape bound at the throat with a jeweled clasp, and a red bandanna around his head sporting a big purple star. All the kids were suddenly silent -- even Clara looked up from the game -- but it was too late. The strange man waved his hand and pointed a wand at the kids. The wand glowed bright purple, and then the whole room seemed to turn purple.

“You look gross!” said Cane, referring to Tennyson’s now - purplish complexion.

“Takes one to know one,” said Tennyson, because he couldn’t think of a more clever response, but by this time Cane looked strangely distorted and Tennyson hoped that he wasn’t right because that would mean that Tennyson was blurring around the edges too.

Brian quietly said, “Tennyson, I don’t think that was your dad.” Tennyson looked at his own hands and started to make a sound between a moan and a scream. Then there was a final burst of blinding purple light and the sound of a big explosion.

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