

Luckily only Marcus's housekeeper, Ms. Bryant, was home.

After we'd gotten all set up in the upstairs study, she poked her head in. "Are you sure you boys should be on the computer, Marcus? Your mom said you're not supposed to be playing that game of yours."

"We're not playing the game," Marcus said quickly. "We're just... doing a project."

She gave him a really suspicious look. "I better not find out later that you've been up to something..."

"You won't," said Marcus.

She turned and went back down the hall.

"Yeah — we know better than to get caught," whispered Yoshi, as she walked away.

"*Shhh!*" said Marcus, swatting him with a piece of paper.

As soon we heard her footsteps get all the way downstairs, Yoshi and I started taking turns reading lines of code for Marcus to type in.

It was *very* boring. And it made no sense — at least not to Yoshi and me.

And it took *forever*.

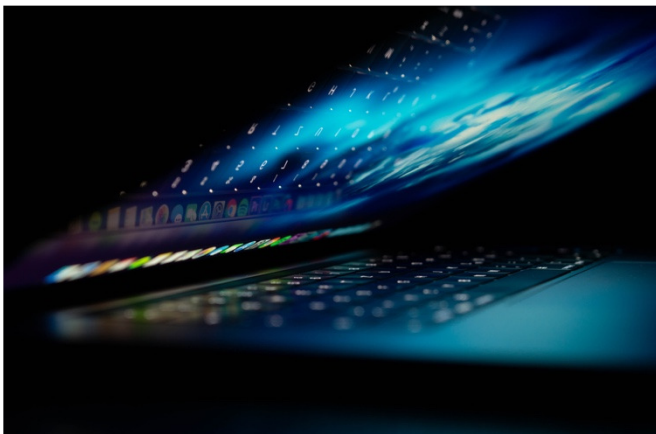


photo by Philipp Katzenberger via Unsplash

Finally, though, we got to the end of the last page.

"Ok," said Yoshi. "This is the last line. It says '@ExMachina.'"

Marcus started to type it in, but Yoshi grabbed his arm.

"Um, I should probably mention that it *also* says in bright red letters that

you type this in ‘at your own risk,’” he added. “And to ‘only do it if you’re prepared for what’s coming.’”

Marcus took his hands off the keyboard. We all looked at each other.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” asked Marcus.

“Maybe it’s just hacker talk?” said Yoshi.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to sound less rattled than I felt. “Maybe they’re just trying to make it sound like their code is so powerful and dangerous.”

“Or just a lame joke, more like,” said Yoshi.

Marcus took a deep breath. “Well, it *would* be lame to have typed in all this stuff for nothing.”

He sat up straighter in his chair. “Ok, here goes...”

We watched closely while he typed in the final bit of code, AND...

...absolutely nothing happened.

“Well, *that* was anticlimactic,” said Yoshi.

“Can you at least get into the game now?” I asked.

Marcus opened the Programs folder and clicked on Venture Quest. A few seconds later, a message flashed up on the screen:

Access Denied

“Aw, *man!*” said Yoshi.

“Seriously??” said Marcus.

“After all *that*??” I said.

There was nothing left for us to do but spend the rest of the afternoon on our actual homework.

Marcus took the sofa in the corner of the study, Yoshi snagged an armchair, and I sat on a cushion and spread out on the floor.

I tried to get through a chapter of our history assignment, but I ended up just reading the same paragraph over and over. After all that buildup about “being prepared” and all that, homework had never felt so boring.

But we’d only been working for about fifteen minutes or so when Yoshi’s voice broke the silence.

“Um, guys...is it my imagination, or is that *purple smoke* coming out of the computer?”

I looked up, assuming he was kidding. But sure enough — there was a stream of purple smoke spewing out from the computer’s hard drive. At first it was just a thin little wisp, but it was quickly getting heavier and heavier.

“*What the—??*” I spluttered.

I jumped up off the floor.

Marcus ran to the computer. When he touched it, his hand jerked back. “*Ow!* It’s burning hot!”

“Unplug it!” suggested Yoshi.

Marcus crawled under the desk and yanked out the cord.

But unplugging it only made the screen start glowing a weird green.

Then suddenly the lights flickered and there was a loud *POP* and a flash.

The lights went out completely.