



Cheese Toast

Sunday is 'A Story a Week' day (at least here in Japan it is!) and Monday afternoon I'll be headed off to Canada for a very short (week-long) trip to see my family. As part of the preparation for the trip, I've been running down the food in my fridge, trying to use everything up that might otherwise spoil while I'm away. It's pretty empty now, and this morning I finished up the last remnants of a package of cheese ... I had some cheese toast.

As I sat there eating it, I couldn't help but remember a different type of Cheese Toast, and I wonder if my kids will also remember ... will remember the day that their dad got 'into the zone', and became a superstar!

It's 1995, and our family of three, myself and my two daughters, have just welcomed a new addition - a cute little Macintosh computer! This is before we have ever heard of the internet, so our computer is not used for communication, but for such things as word processing, drawing pictures with Kid Pix (a fun little art program), and of course playing some games.

Back in those days, the games available - especially for a relatively simple computer like the one we had - were not so sophisticated, but they were fun nonetheless. Most of our game time was spent with a very challenging puzzle game (ask me about that one later!) but Cheese Toast was different. It was a straight-ahead 'alien shooter' type of game. You floated in your space craft, defending yourself against a never-ending stream of attackers who came onto the screen from all directions to shoot at you.

Your craft was shaped like a little teapot (Bertrand Russell fans take note!), and you could rotate it, scoot this way and that, and of course shoot back at the attackers. As is usual with these games, if you do well at it, you 'clear' each level, moving up to the next stage, where the attackers come at you even more quickly and more numerously.

It was a bit mindless, but did offer good hand-eye coordination practice, and all three of us reached some degree of skill at it. I don't remember now what level we usually reached before 'dying', but once the aliens became just too numerous, it was inevitably 'Game Over'.

One day though, things were different. We were taking turns at it, and as I settled into place and began spinning the teapot and zapping the attackers, I found that it was going very smoothly. The first few levels cleared very easily. The pace then picked up of course, but no problem; I wasn't fazed by the increased pressure, and held my position. The two girls started to cheer me on, "Lookin' good ... go dad, go!"

The aliens kept coming, but I kept them at bay. Another level cleared. Yet another level cleared. It seemed like I just couldn't miss anything - I spun around the screen, picking them off easily, and was soon at a level above what we had ever reached before.

My audience went crazy; "Dad, don't die now! Be careful!!!" They yelled and cheered as I sat there zombie-like, my entire attention focussed on that teapot and the streams of attackers that came in waves from every corner of the stream. Higher and higher I climbed, clearing the screen again and again. The constant shooting sounds from the computer mixed with the screaming from the 'audience' as the excitement built to an incredible level. "Dad! Look out! Behind you!"

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The running total of the score in one corner of the screen grew to an amount far far above what we had ever dreamed was possible for the game, but I still kept going. There was nothing else in my universe but a tiny teapot and the coloured blobs attacking it. Shoot .. hit! Spin! Shoot ... hit!

It had to end eventually of course. These games have no resolution other than the inevitable moment when you are finally overwhelmed by the masses of attackers, and this was my fate too. But I 'went down fighting', with my final score at an absolutely stratospheric level, one which we knew would never be bettered by any of us. Dad was now the undisputed King of Cheese Toast.

You may laugh, but I can tell you that I will never forget that experience. My 'achievement' of course means nothing in the wide realm of human experience, but within the very constrained 'world' that I was operating in for that half-hour or so, I reached a level of accomplishment that I will probably never attain again.

And I know what it feels like, to be ... 'in the zone' ...

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