

Doctorow, Cory

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In: Drápela, Martin. *Sbírka textů k předmětu Úvod do syntaxe*. 1. vyd. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2014, pp. 7-20

ISBN 978-80-210-7104-9; ISBN 978-80-210-7107-0 (online : Mobipocket)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/131707>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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TEXTS FOR ANALYSIS

FICTION

For the Win**Part I: The gamers and their games, the workers at their work****#1**

1 In the game, Matthew's characters killed monsters, as they did
every single night. But tonight, as Matthew thoughtfully chopsticked
a dumpling out of the styrofoam clamshell, dipped it in the red hot
sauce and popped it into his mouth, his little squadron did something
5 extraordinary: they began to win.

There were eight monitors on his desk, arranged in two ranks of four,
the top row supported on a shelf he'd bought from an old lady
scrap dealer in front of the Dongmen market. She'd also sold him
the monitors, shaking her head at his idiocy: at a time when everyone
10 wanted giant, 30" screens, why did he want this collection of dinky
little 9" displays?

So they'd all fit on his desk.

Not many people could play eight simultaneous games of Svartalfheim
Warriors. For one thing, Coca Cola (who owned the game), had devoted
15 a lot of programmer time to preventing you from playing more than one
game on a single PC, so you had to somehow get eight PCs onto one
desk, with eight keyboards and eight mice on the desk, too, and room

enough for your dumplings and an ashtray and a stack of Indian comic books and that stupid war-axe that Ping gave him and his notebooks
20 and his sketchbook and his laptop and --

It was a crowded desk.

And it was noisy. He'd set up eight pairs of cheap speakers, each glued to the appropriate monitor, turned down low to the normal hum of Svartalfaheim -- the clash of axes, the roar of ice-giants,
25 the eldritch music of black elves (which sounded a lot like the demo programs on the electric keyboards his mother had spent half her life manufacturing). Now they were all making casino noise, pay off noises, as his raiding party began to clean up. The gold rolled into their accounts. He was playing trolls -- it was trolls
30 versus elves in Svartalfaheim, though there was an expansion module with light elves and some kind of walking tree -- and he'd come through an instanced dungeon that was the underground lair of a minor dark elvish princeling. The lair was only medium hard, with a lot of crappy little monsters early on, then a bunch of dark elf cannon-
35 fodder to be mown down, some traps, and then the level-boss, a wizard who had to be taken out by the spell-casters in Matthew's party while the healers healed them and the tanks killed anything that tried to attack them.

So far, so good. Matthew had run and mapped the dungeon on his second
40 night in-world, a quick reccy that showed that he could expect
to do about 400 gold's worth of business there in about 20 minutes,
which made it a pretty poor way to earn a living. But Matthew kept
very good notes, and among his notes was the fact that the very
last set of guards had dropped some mareridtbane, which was part
45 of the powerful Living Nightmare spell in the new expansion module.
There were players all over Germany, Switzerland and Denmark who were
buying mareridtbane for 800 gold per plant. His initial reccy
had netted him five plants. That brought the total expected take
from the dungeon up to 4,400 gold for 20 minutes, or 13,200 gold per
50 hour -- which, at the day's exchange, was worth about \$30, or 285
Renminbi.

Which was -- he thought for a second -- more than 71 bowls
of dumplings.

Jackpot.

55 His hands flew over the mice, taking direct control over the squad.
He'd work out the optimal path through the dungeon now, then head
out to the Huoda internet cafe and see who he could find to do runs
with him at this. With any luck, they could take -- his eyes rolled
up as he thought again -- a million gold out of the dungeon if
60 they could get the whole cafe working on it. They'd dump the gold

as they went, and by the time Coca Cola's systems administrators figured out anything was wrong, they'd have pulled almost \$3000 out of the game. That was a year's rent, for one night's work. His hands trembled as he flipped open a notebook to a new page and began to take
65 notes with his left hand while his right hand worked the game.

He was just about to close his notebook and head for the cafe -- he needed more dumplings on the way, could he stop for them? Could he afford to? But he needed to eat. And coffee. Lots of coffee -- when the door splintered and smashed against the wall bouncing back
70 before it was kicked open again, admitting the cold fluorescent light from outside into his tiny cave of a room. Three men entered his room and closed the door behind them, restoring the dark. One of them found the lightswitch and clicked it a few times without effect, then cursed in Mandarin and punched Matthew in the ear so hard his head
75 spun around on his neck, contriving to bounce off the desk. The pain was blinding, searing, sudden.

"Light," one of the men commanded, his voice reaching Matthew through the high-pitched whine of his ringing ear. Clumsily, he fumbled for the desk-lamp behind the Indian comics, knocked it over, and then
80 one of the men seized it roughly and turned it on, shining it full on Matthew's face, making him squint his watering eyes.

"You have been warned," the man who'd hit him said. Matthew couldn't see him, but he didn't need to. He knew the voice, the unmistakable Wenjhou accent, almost impossible to understand. "Now, another
85 warning." There was a snick of a telescoping baton being unfurled and Matthew flinched and tried to bring his arms up to shield his head before the weapon swung. But the other two had him by the arms now, and the baton whistled past his ear.

But it didn't smash his cheekbone, nor his collarbone. Rather,
90 it was the screen before him that smashed, sending tiny, sharp fragments of glass out in a cloud that seemed to expand in slow motion, peppering his face and hands. Then another screen went. And another. And another. One by one, the man dispassionately smashed all eight screens, letting out little smoker's grunts
95 as he worked. Then, with a much bigger, guttier grunt, he took hold of one end of the shelf and tipped it on its edge, sending the smashed monitors on it sliding onto the floor, taking the comics, the clamshell, the ashtray, all of it sliding to the narrow bed that was jammed up against the desk, then onto the floor in a crash as
100 loud as a basketball match in a glass factory.

Matthew felt the hands on his shoulders tighten and he was lifted out of his chair and turned to face the man with the accent, the man who had worked as the supervisor in Mr Wing's factory, almost always

silent. But when he spoke, they all jumped in their seat, never sure
105 of whether his barely contained rage would break, whether someone
would be taken off the factory floor and then returned to the dorm
that night, bruised, cut, sometimes crying in the night for parents
left behind back in the provinces.

The man's face was calm now, as though the violence against
110 the machines had scratched the unscratchable itch that made him
clench and unclench his fists at all times. "Matthew, Mr Wing wants
you to know that he thinks of you as a wayward son, and bears
you no ill will. You are always welcome in his home. All you need
to do is ask for his forgiveness, and it will be given." It was
115 the longest speech Matthew had ever heard the man give, and it was
delivered with surprising tenderness, so it was quite a surprise
when the man brought his knee up into Matthew's balls, hard enough
that he saw stars.

The hands released him and he slumped to the floor, a strange sound
120 in his ears that he realized after a moment must have been his voice.
He was barely aware of the men moving around his tiny room as
he gasped like fish, trying to get air into his lungs, air enough
to scream at the incredible, radiant pain in his groin.

But he did hear the horrible electrical noise as they tasered
125 the box that held his computers, eight PCs on eight individual

boards, stuck in a dented sheet-metal case he'd bought from the same old lady. The ozone smell afterwards sent him whirling back to his grandfather's little flat, the smell of the dust crisping on the heating coil that the old man only turned on when he came
130 to visit. He did hear them gather up his notebooks and tread heavily on the PC case, and pull the shattered door shut behind them. The light from the desk lamp painted a crazy oval on the ceiling that he stared at for a long time before he got to his feet, whimpering at the pain in his balls.

135 The night guard was standing at the end of the corridor when he limped out into the night. He was only a boy, even younger than Matthew -- sixteen, in a uniform that was two sizes too big for his skinny chest, a hat that was always slipping down over his eyes, so he had to look up from under the brim like a boy wearing
140 his father's hat.

"You OK?" the boy said. His eyes were wide, his face pale.

Matthew patted himself down, wincing at the pain in his ear, the shooting stabbing feeling in his neck.

"I think so," he said.

145 "You'll have to pay for the door," the guard said.

"Thanks," Matthew said. "Thanks so much."

"It's OK," the boy said. "It's my job."

Matthew clenched and unclenched his fists and headed out
into the Shenzhen night, limping down the stairs and into the neon
150 glow. It was nearly midnight, but Jiabin Road was still throbbing
with music, food and hawkers and touts, old ladies chasing
foreigners down the street, tugging at their sleeves and offering
them "beautiful young girls" in English. He didn't know where he was
going, so he just walked, fast, fast as he could, trying to walk off
155 the pain and the enormity of his loss. The computers in his room
hadn't cost much to build, but he hadn't had much to begin with.
They'd been nearly everything he owned, save for his comics,
a few clothes -- and the war-axe. Oh, the war-axe. That was
an entertaining vision, picking it up and swinging it over his head
160 like a dark elf, the whistle of its blade slicing the air, the meaty
thunk as it hit the men.

He knew it was ridiculous. He hadn't been in a fight since
he was ten years old. He'd been a vegetarian until last year!
He wasn't going to hit anyone with a war axe. It was as useless as
165 his smashed computers.

Gradually, he slowed his pace. He was out of the central area around
the train station now, in the outer ring of the town center, where
it was dark and as quiet as it ever got. He leaned against the steel

shutters over a grocery market and put his hands on his thighs and
170 let his sore head droop.

Matthew's father had been unusual among their friends -- a Cantonese
who succeeded in the new Shenzhen. When Premier Deng changed
the rules so that the Pearl River Delta became the world's factory,
his family's ancestral province had filled overnight with people
175 from the provinces. They'd "jumped into the sea" -- left safe
government factory jobs to seek their fortune here on the south
Chinese coast -- and everything had changed for Matthew's
family. His grandfather, a Christian minister who'd been sent
to a labor camp during the Cultural Revolution -- had never made
180 the adjustment, a problem that struck many of the native Cantonese,
who seemed to stand still as the outsiders raced past them to become
rich and powerful.

But not Matthew's father. The old man had started off as a driver
for a shoe-factory boss -- learning to drive on the job, nearly
185 cracking up the car more than once, though the owner didn't seem
to mind. After all, he'd never ridden in a car before he'd made
it big in Shenzhen. But he got his break one day when the pattern-
maker was too sick to work and all production ceased while the girls
who worked on the line argued about the best way to cut the leather
190 for a new order that had come in.

Matthew's father loved to tell this story. He'd heard the argument go back and forth for a day as the line jerked along slowly, and he'd sat on his chair and thought, and thought, and then he'd stood up and closed his eyes and pictured the calm ocean until the thunder
195 of his heartbeat slowed to a normal beat. Then he'd walked into the owner's office and said, "Boss, I can show you how to cut those hides."

It was no easy task. The hides were all slightly different shapes -- cows weren't identical, after all -- and parts of them were higher
200 grade than others. The shoe itself, an Italian men's loafer, needed six different pieces for each side, and only some of them were visible. The parts that were inside the shoe didn't need to come from the finest leather, but the parts outside did. All this Matthew's father had absorbed while sitting in his chair and listening
205 to the arguments. He'd always loved to draw, always had a good head for space and design.

And before his boss could throw him out of the office, he'd plucked up his courage and seized a pen off the desk and rooted a crumpled cigarette package out of the trash -- expensive foreign cigarettes,
210 affected by all the factory owners as a show of wealth -- torn it open and drawn a neat cowhide, and quickly shown how the shoes

could be fit to the hide with a minimum of wastage, a design that would get ten pairs of shoes per hide.

"Ten?" the boss said.

215 "Ten," Matthew's father said, proudly. He knew that the most that Master Yu, the regular cutter, ever got out of a hide was nine. "Eleven, if you use a big hide, or if you're making small shoes." "You can cut this?"

Now, before that day, Matthew's father had never cut a hide
220 in his life, had no idea how to slice the supple leather that came back from the tanner. But that morning he'd risen two hours early, before anyone else was awake, and he'd taken his leather jacket, a graduation present from his own father that he'd owned and treasured for ten years, and he'd taken the sharpest knife
225 in the kitchen, and he'd sliced the jacket to ribbons, practicing until he could make the knife slice the leather in the same reliable, efficient arcs that his eyes and mind could trace over them.

"I can try," he said, with modesty. He was nervous about his boldness. His boss wasn't a nice man, and he'd fired many
230 employees for insubordination. If he fired Matthew's father, he would be out a job and a jacket. And the rent was due, and the family had no savings.

The boss looked at him, looked at the sketch. "OK, you try."

And that was the day that Matthew's father stopped being Driver Fong
235 and became Master Fong, the junior cutter at the Infinite Quality
Shoe Factory. Less than a year later, he was the head cutter, and
the family thrived.

Matthew had heard this story so many times growing up that he could
recite it word-for-word with his father. It was more than a story:
240 it was the family legend, more important than any of the history he'd
learned in school. As stories went, it was a good one, but Matthew
was determined that his own life would have an even better story
still. Matthew would not be the second Master Fong. He would be Boss
Fong, the first -- a man with his own factory, his own fortune.

245 And like his father, Matthew had a gift.

Like his father, Matthew could look at a certain kind of problem
and see the solution. And the problems Matthew could solve involved
killing monsters and harvesting their gold and prestige items, better
and more efficiently than anyone else he'd ever met or heard of.

250 Matthew was a gold farmer, but not just one of those guys who found
themselves being approached by an Internet cafe owner and offered
seven or eight RMB to keep right on playing, turning over all
the gold they won to the boss, who'd sell it on by some mysterious
process. Matthew was Master Fong, the gold farmer who could run
255 a dungeon once and tell you exactly the right way to run it again

to get the maximum gold in the minimum time. Where a normal farmer might make 50 gold in an hour, Matthew could make 500. And if you watched Matthew play, you could do it too.

Mr Wing had quickly noticed Matthew's talent. Mr Wing didn't like
260 games, didn't care about the legends of Iceland or England or India
or Japan. But Mr Wing understood how to make boys work. He displayed
their day's take on big boards at both ends of his factory, treated
the top performers to lavish meals and baijiu parties in private
rooms at his karaoke club where there were beautiful girls.

265 Matthew remembered these evenings through a bleary haze: a girl
on either side of him on a sofa, pressed against him, their perfume
in his nose, refilling his glass as Mr Wing toasted him for a hero,
extolling his achievements. The girls oohed and aahed and pressed
harder against him. Mr Wing always laughed at him the next day,
270 because he'd pass out before he could go with one of the girls
into an even more private room.

Mr Wing made sure all the other boys knew about this failing, made
sure that they teased "Master Fong" about his inability to hold
his liquor, his shyness around girls. And Matthew saw exactly what
275 Boss Wing was doing: setting Matthew up as a hero, above his friends,
then making sure that his friends knew that he wasn't that much
of a hero, that he could be toppled. And so they all farmed gold

harder, for longer hours, eating dumplings at their computers and shouting at each other over their screens late into the night and
280 the cigarette haze.

The hours had stretched into days, the days had stretched into months, and one day Matthew woke up in the dorm room filled with farts and snores and the smell of 20 young men in a too-small room, and realized that he'd had enough of working for Boss Wing.
285 That was when he decided that he would become his own man. That was when he set out to be Boss Fong.