CHAPTER 1

The Hero with a Thousand Extra Lives

Johnny bit his lip, and concentrated. Right. Come in quick, let a missile target itself – *beep beep beep beebeebeebeeb* – on the first fighter, fire the missile – *thwump* – empty the guns at the -fighter – *fplat fplat fplat fplat* – hit fighter No.2 and take out its shields with the laser – *bwizzle* – while the -missile – *pwwosh* – takes out fighter No.1, dive, switch guns, rake fighter No.3 as it turns *fplat fplat fplat* – pick up fighter No.2 in the sights again up the upcurve, let go a missile – *thwump* – and rake it with – *Fwit fwit fwit*.

Fighter No.4! It always came in last, but if you went after it first the others would have time to turn and you'd end up in the sights of three of them.

He'd died six times already. And it was only five o'clock.

His hands flew over the keyboard. Stars roared past as he accelerated out of the mêlée. It'd leave him short of fuel, but by the time they caught up the shields would be back and he'd be ready, and two of them would already have taken damage, and . . . here they come . . . missiles away, wow, lucky hit on the first one, die die die!, red fireball – *swsssh* – take shield loss while concentrating fire on the next one – *swsssh* – and now the last one was running, but he could outrun it, hit the accelerator – ggrrRRRSSHHH – and just keep it in his sights while he poured shot after shot into – *swssh*.

Ah!

The huge bulk of their capital ship was in the -corner of the screen. Level 10, here we come . . . careful, careful . . . there were no more ships now, so all he had to do was keep out of its range and then sweep in and *We wish to talk*.

Johnny blinked at the message on the screen.

We wish to talk.

The ship roared by – *eeeyooowwwnn*. He reached out for the throttle key and slowed himself down, and then turned and got the big red shape in his sights again.

We wish to talk.

His finger hovered on the Fire button. Then, without really looking, he moved it over to the keyboard and pressed Pause.

Then he read the manual.

Only You Can Save Mankind, it said on the cover. 'Full Sound and Graphics. The Ultimate Game.'

A ScreeWee heavy cruiser, it said on page 17, could be taken out with seventy-six laser shots. Once you'd cleared the fighter escort and found a handy spot where the ScreeWee's guns couldn't get you, it was just a matter of time.

We wish to talk.

Even with the Pause on, the message still flashed on the screen.

There was nothing in the manual about -messages. Johnny riffled through the pages. It must be one of the New Features the game was Packed With.

He put down the book, put his hands on the keys and cautiously tapped out: Die, alein scum/

No! We do not wish to die! We wish to talk!

It wasn't supposed to be like this, was it?

Wobbler Johnson, who'd given him the disc and photocopied the manual on his dad's copier, had said that once you'd completed level 10 you got given an extra 10,000 points and the Scroll of Valour and moved on to the Arcturus Sector, where there were different ships and more of them.

Johnny *wanted* the Scroll of Valour.

Johnny fired the laser one more time. *Swsssh*. He didn't really know why. It was just because you had the joystick and there was the Fire button and that was what it was *for*.

After all, there wasn't a Don't Fire button.

We Surrender! PLEASE!

He reached over and, very carefully, pressed the Save Game button. The computer whirred and clicked, and then was silent.

He didn't play again the whole evening. He did his homework.

It was geography. You had to colour in Great Britain and put a dot on the map of the world where you thought it was.

The ScreeWee captain thumped her desk with one of her forelegs.

'*What?*'

The First Officer swallowed, and tried to keep her tail held at a respectful angle.

'He just vanished again, ma'am,' she said.

'But did he accept?'

'No, ma'am.'

The Captain drummed the fingers of three hands on the table. She looked slightly like a newt but mainly like an alligator.

'But we didn't fire on him!'

'No, ma'am.'

'And you sent my message?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'And every time we've killed him, he comes back . . .'

He caught up with Wobbler in Break.

Wobbler was the kind of boy who's always picked last when you had to pick teams, although that was all right at the moment as the PE teacher didn't believe in teams because they encouraged -competition.

He wobbled. It was glandular, he said. He -wobbled especially when he ran. Bits of Wobbler headed in various directions; it was only on *average* that he was running in any particular direction.

But he was good at games. They just weren't the ones that people thought you ought to be good at. If ever there was an Inter-Schools First-One-To-Break-The-Unbreakable-Copy-Protection-on- *Galactic-Thrusters*, Wobbler wouldn't just be in the team, he'd be *picking* the team.

'Yo, Wobbler,' said Johnny.

'It's not cool to say Yo any more,' said Wobbler.

'Is it rad to say cool?' said Johnny.

‘Cool’s always cool. And no one says rad any more, either.’

Wobbler looked around conspiratorially and then fished a package from his bag.

‘*This* is cool. Have a go at this.’

‘What is it?’ said Johnny.

‘I cracked *Fighter Star TeraBomber*,’ said Wobbler. ‘Only don’t tell anyone, right? Just type FSB. It’s not much good, really. The space bar drops the bombs, and . . . well . . . just press the keys, you’ll see what they do . . .’

‘Listen . . . you know *Only You Can Save Mankind*?’

‘Still playing that, are you?’

‘You didn’t, you know, *do* anything to it, did you? Um? Before you gave me a copy?’

‘No. It wasn’t even protected. Didn’t have to do anything except copy the manual. Why?’

‘You did play it, didn’t you?’

‘A bit.’ Wobbler only played games once. Wobbler could watch a game for a couple of -minutes, and then pick up the joystick and get top score. And then never play it again.

‘Nothing . . . funny . . . happened?’

‘Like what?’ said Wobbler.

‘Like . . .’ Johnny hesitated. He could tell Wobbler, and then Wobbler would laugh, or not believe him, or say it was just some bug or something, some kind of trick. Or a virus. Wobbler had discs full of computer viruses. He didn’t do anything with them. He just collected them, like stamps or something.

He could tell Wobbler, and then somehow it wouldn’t be real.

‘Oh, you know . . . funny.’

‘Like what?’

‘Weird. Um. Lifelike, I suppose.’

‘It’s *sposed* to be. Just like the real thing, it says. I hope you’ve read the manual properly. My dad spent a whole coffee break copying that.’

Johnny gave a sickly grin.

‘Yes. Right. Better read it, then. Thanks for *Star Fighter Pilot*—’

‘*TeraBomber*. My dad brought me back *Alabama Smith and the Jewels of Fate* from the States. You can have a copy if you give me the disc back.’

‘Right,’ said Johnny.

‘It’s OK.’

‘Right,’ said Johnny.

He never had the heart to tell Wobbler that he -didn’t play half the games Wobbler passed on. You couldn’t. Not if you wanted time to sleep and eat meals. But that was all right because Wobbler never asked. As far as Wobbler was concerned, computer games weren’t there for playing. They were for breaking into, rewriting so that you got extra lives or whatever, and then copying and giving away to everyone.

Basically, there were two sides to the world. There was the entire computer games software industry engaged in a tremendous effort to stamp out piracy, and there was Wobbler. Currently, Wobbler was in front.

‘Did you do my history?’ said Wobbler.

‘Here,’ said Johnny. ‘“What it was like to be a peasant during the English Civil War.” Three pages.’

‘Thanks,’ said Wobbler. ‘That was quick.’

‘Oh, in geog last term we had to do one about What it’s like being a peasant in Bolivia. I just got rid of the llamas and put in stuff about kings -having their heads chopped off. You have to bung in that kind of stuff, and then you just have to keep -complaining about

the weather and the crops and you can't go wrong, in peasant essays.'

Johnny lay on his bed reading *Only You Can Save Mankind*.

He could just about remember the days when you could still get games where the instructions consisted of something that said, 'Press < for left and > for right and Fire for fire.'

But now you had to read a whole little book which was all about the game. It was really the manual, but they called it 'The Novel'.

Partly it was an anti-Wobbler thing. Someone in America or somewhere thought it was dead clever to make the game ask you little questions, like 'What's the first word on line 23 on page 19 of the manual?' and then reset the machine if you didn't answer them right, so they'd obviously never heard of Wobbler's dad's office's photocopier.

So there was this book. The ScreeWee had turned up out of nowhere and bombed some -planets with humans on them. Nearly all the starships had been blown up. So there was only this one left, the -experimental one. It was all that stood against the ScreeWee hordes. And only *you* . . . that is to say John Maxwell, aged twelve, in between the time you get home from school and get something to eat and do your homework . . . can save mankind.

Nowhere did it say what you were supposed to do if the ScreeWee hordes didn't want to fight.

He switched on the computer, and pressed the Load Game key.

There was the ship again, right in the middle of his sights.

He picked up the joystick thoughtfully.

There was an immediate message on the screen. Well, not exactly a message. More a picture. Half a dozen little egg-shaped blobs, with tails. They -didn't move.

What kind of message is that? he thought.

Perhaps there was a special message he ought to send. 'Die, Creep' didn't seem to fit properly at the moment.

He typed: Whats hpaening?

Immediately a reply appeared on the screen, in yellow letters.

We surrender. Do not shoot. See, we show you -pictures of our children.

He typed: Is this a trick WObbler?

It took a little while before the reply came.

Am not trick wobbler. We give in. No more war.

Johnny thought for a while, and then typed: Youre not supoosed to give ni.

Want to go home.

Johnny typed: It says in the book you blue up a lot of planets.

Lies!

Johnny stared at the screen. What he wanted to type was: No, I mean, this cant happen, youre Aliens, you cant not want to be shot at, no other game aliens have ever stopped aliening across the screen, they never said We DonT Want to Go.

And then he thought: they never had the chance. *They* couldn't.

But games are a lot better now.

They never made things like the old MegaZoids seem *real*, with stories about them and Full-Colour Graphics.

This is probably that Virtual Reality they're always talking about on the television.

He typed: It is only a game, after all.

What is a game?

He typed: Who ARE you?

The screen flickered. Something a bit like a newt but more like an alligator looked back at him.

I am the Captain, said the yellow letters. *Do not shoot!*

Johnny typed: I shoot at you and you shoto at me. That is the game.

But we die.

Johnny typed: Sometimes I die. I die a lot.

But YOU live again.

Johnny stared at the words for a moment. Then he typed: Dont you?

No. How could this be? When we die, we die. For ever.

Johnny typed desperately: No, thats not right because, in the first mission, theres three ships you have to blow up before the first planet. I@ve played it lots of times and there@s always three ships there—

Different ships.

Johnny thought for a while and then typed: What happens if I switch of tthe machine?

We do not understand the question.

This is daft, thought Johnny. It's just a very -unusual game. It's a special mission or something.

He typed: Why should I trust you?

LOOK BEHIND YOU.

Johnny sat bolt upright in his chair. Then he let himself swivel round, very cautiously.

Of course, there was no one there. Why should there be anyone there? It was a *game*.

The newt face had disappeared from the screen, leaving the familiar picture of the inside of the starfighter. And there was the radar screen—

– covered in yellow dots.

Yellow for the enemy.

Johnny picked up the joystick and turned the -starfighter around. The entire ScreeWee fleet was there. Ship after ship was hanging in space behind him.

Little fighters, big cruisers, massive battleships.

If they all had him in their sights, and if they fired . . .

He didn't want to die.

Hang on, hang on. You don't die. You just play the game again.

This was *nuts*. It was time to stop it.

He typed: All right what happens now?

We want to go home.

He typed: All right no problem.

You give us safe conduct.

He typed: OK yes.

The screen went blank.

And that was it? No music? No 'Congratulations, You've Got the Highest Score'?

Just the little prompt, flashing on and off.

What did safe conduct mean, anyway?