

A smooth hero

Dancing machine.

Julian Tang

“OK class, that’s it for today,” said Mr Phipps, wearily. “Read chapter five for tomorrow. James, can I see you for a minute?”

James looked up in surprise and saw Mr Phipps give him a wink. He liked science best and Mr Phipps knew it. He often stayed behind after class so that Mr Phipps could show him something new. Once everyone had gone, he approached the front desk, expectantly. Mr Phipps reached under his desk, producing a large cardboard box.

“Picked this up at a car-boot sale last weekend,” he said. “From an old man who said he’d never used it. His son’s some sort of inventor and gave it to him years ago. Must’ve had no idea what it could do. I’m still learning about it.”

He lifted out a double-cassette/CD/radio ghetto-blaster, placing it carefully on the desk.

“OK, sooo ...?” James looked at him, questioningly.

“Have a closer look.”

So, he did, and noticed that one side of the double-cassette player was actually a glass window with a funny-looking bulb behind it. The bulb’s glass surface seemed to change colour and pattern as he moved his head around it, like a hologram. A rocker switch on the top panel was labelled ‘Normal’, ‘Reality’ and ‘Reality Plus’.

“Hmm, OK it’s strange, but what does it do?”

“You got a CD?”

James rummaged in his bag and handed him his Michael Jackson *Smooth Criminal* CD.

Just as Mr Phipps inserted it, loud gunshots sounded in the corridor, followed by children’s screams. They looked at each other, wide-eyed.

Mr Phipps went quickly to the door, looked out, then hurried back. “Quick! Under the desk,” he said.

They both crammed under the desk, an old-fashioned wooden thing that looked solid from the front and sides. It was a tight fit, but not a second too soon.

The door slammed open and heavy footsteps entered the room. After a short pause, a man’s rather muffled voice shouted, “Clear here.”

The footsteps receded quickly and the door slammed shut. They emerged cautiously. Mr Phipps grabbed the ghetto-blaster and beckoned for James to follow.

The science lab was on the first floor where there was a balcony overlooking the assembly hall. Hearing faint sounds of sobbing they carefully looked down into the hall below. His classmates and teachers were sitting on the floor, surrounded by at least six gunmen wearing black ski masks.

“We have to call the police!” whispered James urgently.

“You got a phone? Mine’s in the staffroom downstairs,” replied Mr Phipps in frustration. “The classrooms don’t have any phones.”

James was looking curiously at the ghetto-blaster. “Why did you bring that?”

Mr Phipps looked puzzled for a moment then his face lit up. “Ah, forgot about that! Come with me.”

They stole back to the balcony door and pushed it open, quietly. Mr Phipps positioned the ghetto-blaster, facing the glass panel down into the main hall. He opened the back and unexpectedly produced a wireless games controller.

“What’s this for?” asked James in surprise, fingering the controller, very similar to the one from his PlayStation.

“You like those kung-fu combat games?”

James nodded.

“OK, well then, get ready!” He pressed play.

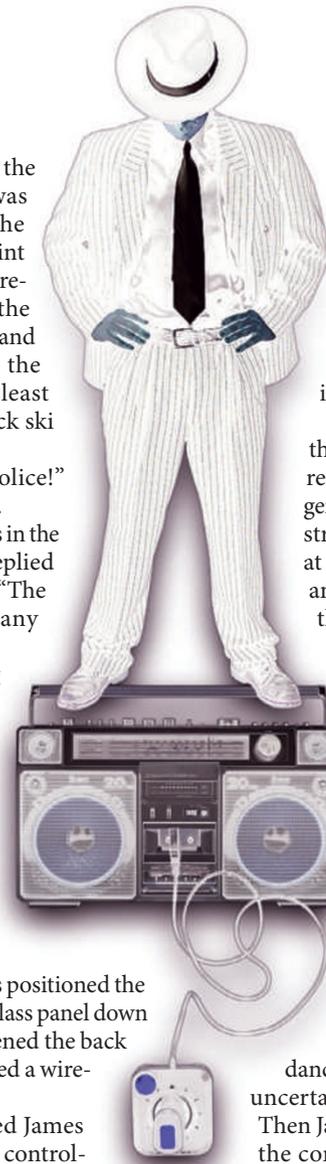
After a few seconds of silence, Michael’s characteristic scream “Oww!” pierced the air of the hall, followed by the metallic beat of *Smooth Criminal*.

Startled, the gunmen looked around, frantically, for the origin of the music. Then after a few moments they started to move towards the stairs to the balcony.

James shook Mr Phipps’s shoulder, desperately pointing at the men.

“Yes, I’ve seen them. Don’t worry,” said Mr Phipps. “Get ready with that controller.” He pushed the rocker switch to ‘Reality’.

Instantly, a dancing holographic image of Michael Jackson dressed in a white suit and hat appeared, suspended just above the heads of the sitting children. He looked



so solid and real! The gunmen fired, reflexively, but their bullets passed ineffectively through the image. Some of the children seemed to forget their fear, just staring in wonder at this dancing image above them.

Mr Phipps then flicked the switch to ‘Reality Plus’. In response, MJ’s image landed gently on the floor and started strutting around, seemingly at random, his gyrating feet and legs passing harmlessly through the children as he moved.

The gunmen fired again at his image, without effect. Then as MJ reached one of the gunmen, he performed his trademark high leg-kick that caught the gunman between his legs. His look of surprise turned to one of agony as he collapsed on the floor, howling.

The MJ image stayed, dancing at that spot, seemingly uncertain as to where to go next. Then James got the idea. He used the controller, moving MJ purposefully around the hall, disarming and disabling each gunman with well-aimed powerful dance moves.

Very soon, all the gunmen were down, either unconscious or writhing in pain. The teachers collected the guns. Luckily, no one had been hit by any stray bullets. Mobile phones were recovered and the police were called.

Mr Phipps clapped and hugged James. “Well done James!”

Leaving the ghetto-blaster where it was for the moment, they went downstairs, agreeing to feign ignorance. When the police arrived, nothing anyone said seemed to make any sense.

James and Mr Phipps nudged each other and just grinned.

Julian Tang is a clinical/academic virologist, who, among other things, enjoys reading science fiction, fantasy and horror. He has many story ideas, but needs time to commit them to paper. He lives and works in Singapore.

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