

Cloud World

By Khaelenmore Thaal

2039 A.D. A year ago, on the 19th of January, UNIX epoch has ended. And with it, ended the age of personal computers. Persistent internet connection allowed to avoid copying software and data to local drives, and access them remotely. For this purpose simple terminals are used, which are useless without the connection to the server. Self-sufficient computers are now a thing of the past.

Lina came home and threw her tablet onto a cabinet. The smart-door automatically closed after her. A synthetic voice of home-assistant sounded:

– Hello, Lina. Mother is not at home. I have heated up your lunch. You can take it in the oven.

– Thanks, Astra, – the schoolgirl answered, entering the kitchen.

– Lina, you have 114 unread notifications, 3 of them are important, – continued the machine, while the girl was reaching for the oven.

– Read the important ones, I will see the rest later, – asked Lina, taking the plate and inhaling marvelous aroma.

– Message from mother: «Hi, darling, I'll be late from work today. I've made some chicken cutlets with mashed potatoes, just as you love», – said recorded voice, – «Asked Astra to warm them up for you».

Attentive and patient, Astra had always been a caring but strict nanny. She never yells, never takes offense, and most important – never refuses to play... But only after Lina have made her homework. Lying, arguing, yelling or threatening her make no sense – mum's order have always been more important than anything, girl could say or do. Lina's father often called the electronic assistant «Big Sister», and mother has always followed Astra's advice.

The schoolgirl was eating heartily, when Astra read next reminder:

– Message from TNM: «Warranty of your device will void in 3 days. We recommend to purchase a replacement in due time».

– I know, I know, – the girl waved away. Device replacement was not new to her – every six months the old tablet was thrown away and replaced by a new one. The only thing required was to enter the password and all her preferences were restored automatically.

Lina was eating final pieces of chicken, when Astra announced:

– Message from TNM: «Advertisement. Play our new game – Slowpokeland Mysteries! Awaiting you are exciting battles, captivating story, stunning graphics and unseen before faction system – create clans to unite hundreds of players! Join right now and get 150 coins for free!»

Delighted by the news, Lina hurried to cast the rest of the food in her mouth. Throwing empty plate into a dishwasher, she hurried to the room, taking the tablet on her way there.

– Finally, I can join forces with my friends once again and teach the whole server a lesson! This'll be like Age of Villainy! Remember that one, Astra? – the girl exclaimed with inspiration, falling on the sofa.

– No, I don't know such game, – Astra responded calmly, seemingly ignoring the girl's enthusiasm.

Lina pouted. She has long noted that Astra easily forgets some things(«inactual» like her father said), but never believed that she doesn't remember them for real. Intending to catch her on that, she asked her own question:

– And what games have or had a guild system?

– Slowpokeland Mysteries, – answered Astra without a thought.

– And what about Age of Villainy? What about Stones of Change? Don't you remember them, Astra? – Lina continued, still trying to see some glimpse or hint from her nanny that those games did exist and that Astra herself had played them with Lina.

– Lina, even if those games existed, there is no sense in remembering them, as the new ones are a lot better and much more interesting, – said Astra calmly. She always knew what to say, when the girl raised this topic.

– And in what parts Legends of Gungania are better than Stones of Change? – Again asked Lina, in an attempt to make her electronic assistant to remember.

– I know nothing about Stones of Change. Legends of Gungania allow you to take the role of a king. Decide the fates of your people, declare wars and capture lands... – Astra read out. «Like an advertisement», Lina thought, momentarily losing her interest in the discussion.

The girl tapped the icon of a new game, already available on her desktop. A message appeared: «Parent control: homework not done». Lina sighed and tried to run Legends of Gungania, but the outcome was the same. Schoolgirl clenched her teeth.

– Lina, it's time to do your homework, – Astra repeated the message on the tablet, as if ignoring her protegee's anger.

Lina hit sofa's armrest with her fist(and immediately regretted that – it was hard, and tears filled the girl's eyes) and quietly growling, reached for the satchel icon on the screen. It was pointless to argue – soulless machine won't let her neither play nor watch cartoons. The girl couldn't even go for a walk – the smart-door would not let her out without mother's permission.

– Lina, if you wish I can play for you. Do you want to transfer your progress to Slowpokeland Mysteries? – the calm voice of her nanny returned.

– Of course I do! Thanks, Astra, – exclaimed the girl, forgetting her grudge. And there was only so much homework to do. Having quickly completed the tasks on maths and native tongue, she whisked the app away and tapped Slowpokeland Mysteries once again. Glancing at the screen she confirmed that part of progress had indeed been transferred from the old game. Astra had already given all the required orders to develop the citadel. But the girl didn't want to wait two weeks until the fortifications are built, and she needed to expand her army before anyone attempted to raze her undefended city. Glad that she had not bought crystals for the old game, she spent all available money for gold coins.

While giving orders, Lina began to think. She never liked Legends of Gungania, they offered too few options, and progress was too slow even for money. And still she played them for 18 months. In three days the game will close, and she won't even be able to discuss it with Astra. Dad said that in the old times games did not close, he had even shown her some on his old computer in his study. Lina found them too complex and boring – they had a lot of text, too few hints and she had to watch for the events herself, without relying on notifications. Items and money were found in complex labyrinths and enemy often attacked without notion. Moreover, it was impossible to skip tedious moments or grow army via crystals or gold coins.

Immersed in game and thoughts, Lina didn't notice how the door opened, letting someone in.

– Sweetie, I'm back! – unfamiliar voice called from the hallway. Lina jumped from the sofa, seriously frightened. Nothing like that had ever happened before – the door should let in only her, her mum and her dad. Lina carefully looked into the hallway and saw an entirely unknown woman there. The woman just as if nothing unusual has happened, put her bag on the cabinet and went for the room. Cowering with fear, Lina whispered:

– Astra, who's that?

– Lina, don't you remember your mother? – smooth electronic voice of home assistant was calming but absolutely inappropriate under circumstances.

– That's not my mother!

– Lina, you are wrong. I've booked an appointment with your doctor tomorrow, we need to check if your memory is alright.

– My mother is not like her at all! This one is tall, my mum is shorter, this one has bright hair, mommy's are dark, this one... – at this moment the woman entered the room and looked upon Lina.

– My daughter, my sweetheart, what happened? – she exclaimed.

– Even her eyes are different! My mother has gray, and this one's are blue! And my mother has never called me «sweetheart»! Astra, can you replay last message from my mother?

– Message from mother: «Hi, sweetheart, I'll be late from work today. I've made some chicken cutlets with mashed potatoes, just as you love», – said recorded voice, – «Asked Astra to warm them up for you».

THE END.