

MINDWORM

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12th March

"Nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. One million!" Dad untwists the cap on the bottle of fizzy grape juice. It isn't champagne, but it'll do – Dad doesn't drink alcohol anymore and I'm only, like, twelve.

"One million app downloads - so cool!" I raise the glass to my lips, enjoying the feel of the bubbles as they escape up my nose. "We're going to be the new Google."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far." Dad pauses, swirling the drink around his glass. "But we've definitely got something."

What we've got is the world's first intelligent story, an e-book that monitors the reader and reacts to their emotions. Dad has written the words, using his experience in the games industry to create a super-complicated branching story. My role was writing the app software, and I've done an awesome job, even if I say so myself. By tracking the reader's eyes, facial expressions and the temperature of their finger on the touchscreen, I can make the story twist and turn to follow their mood. It's an app that gets into your head and finds out what makes you tick. We call it Mindworm.

14th March - App Store Reviews

***** Incredible. It feels like you wrote this just for me.
***** Totes amazing & brilliant.
***** Mindworm made me laugh, it made me cry, it scared the crap out of me.

19th March

The bedroom door clunks open and I lurch out of sleep. I blink for a couple of seconds before the blurry figure resolves into someone familiar. "Oh Dad, it's you. What time is it?" "Fear the worm. Beware of the worm." He shuffles out again, muttering to himself. It's only 5:15 am, but I can't go back to sleep for worrying about Dad. Is he drinking again?

19th March (later on)

Dad isn't the only one shuffling around like a zombie. Some people at school are doing it too. Either that, or they're sat in lessons glued to a smartphone, ignoring everyone else. Mrs Gulliver tries to get Richard Spencer to stop and he goes mental, punching and kicking her.

20th March

"Come on, Dad, talk to me." I sniff his breath, but

there's no whiff of booze. He just stares vacantly back at me, then returns his gaze to the glowing tablet screen and the story unfolding on it. His lips form muttered words: "Love the worm. Live the worm." It's Mindworm, it has to be. I joked about the app getting inside people's heads, but now it actually seems to be happening.

22nd March

"Just processing your request. Please wait a moment." I sit there, watching the animated progress icon. I had expected it to be an epic struggle (like killing the Terminator or that creepy computer in the film 2001), but this is hardly dramatic. The laptop beeps. "Thank you for waiting. App 'Mindworm' has been removed from the store." All that work wasted. I close the computer and let out a long sigh. Mindworm is dead.

24th March

The app is gone, but Mindworm is still spreading - I can't understand how. The streets are full of the infected, mumbling to themselves or to each other. The government hasn't put two and two together yet, but when they do...

25th March

A moment of hope. Dad comes in to see me and his eyes look clearer than they have in days. "Do you remember when you were very small and we went on that holiday to Blackpool?" For ten minutes, I hold his hand and he holds me spellbound, telling the story from my childhood. Then the light goes out of his eyes and he leaves the room, talking about worms again.

27th March

Twenty million infected and more every day. It's a national emergency, a global tragedy. And it's totally my fault.

28th March

It was the story all along – how could I not have seen that? Every time the app was downloaded, Mindworm found another brain to study, until it had enough knowledge to break free of the software entirely. Now it lives on within us and travels like a virus inside the stories we tell to each other. Stories like the one Dad told me about Blackpool. Stories like the one I'm telling you. Oh no. You should stop reading this right now. Unless it's already too late.

