

TOP

SECRET

WELCOME TO RAJ WORLD

Hi. If you're reading this, it means you got out of *Cooper Hawke and the Secret of Phantom Island* without bringing the berry. Thank you for not destroying the world. That was very nice of you.

My name is Raj. I'm 10 years old, but I'm as tall as most 12-year-olds. Some people describe me as "skinny," which is fine, but I wish they would call me "wiry" because that's a skinny person who's strong and flexible, and I am SO strong and flexible.

Let's see, what else about me? Oh, right. I escaped from a video game.

As far as I know, you and I are only people in history to survive that Cooper Hawke game. Cool, huh? Maybe we can form a club. Let me know if you have any ideas for a club name. I'd like to have the word "jar" in the name, if that's OK with you. ("Jar" is my name spelled backward.) What's your name? I used to know a kid named Liam, which is "mail" spelled backward. If your name is Liam too, we could be Mail Jar, which would be pretty awesome. No pressure on the name, though. Just let me know.

Anyway, did you like my notes? I was trying to make them sound like a secret agent wrote them. Nope, just me! I wrote like that so whoever found the notes would take me seriously. Most people don't take me seriously.

What did you think of the game? I wasn't too sure about it until I got to the island. Isn't that island awesome?! It looks like one of those places they use for computer backgrounds. I felt like I was on vacation the whole time I was there. I've never been on a real vacation before, but I can't imagine that any I'll go on will ever top this one. Here's what I did once I got to the island:

Day 1. Got killed by the super-vine 137 times. This was probably the worst day, but still not too bad since I got to jump off a waterfall over and over.

Day 2. Died 48 more times before finally reading that Shandling guy's diary page (I don't like to read). That's when I realized I was supposed to eat the berry to get past the vine. The berry was cool I guess, but it made me feel weird and gross afterward, so I never ate another one.

Day 3. Played hide-and-peek with the underground monster all day. How fun is that?! Nobody gets to play hide-and-peek with a monster. Well, nobody except for Mail Jar.

Day 4. Freaked out when I found the big snake. I love snakes! I've always wanted a snake as a pet, but I never imagined that I'd get to keep one so big! I named him Sherman.

Day 5. Spent the entire day trying to get Sherman to like me, but he kept hypnotizing and eating me. Silly Sherman.

Day 6. Pressed every button and pulled every lever in the temple. That led to a lot more anvils falling on my head than I'd hoped, but also a lot more than spinning cannon rides than I'd imagined, so it all worked out in the end.

Day 7. Beat the game. Sort of. I got to the end of the Declan battle, then stopped when I realized that I wasn't ready to leave. For the first time in my life, I felt safe. I know that's a weird thing to say about an island where everything's trying to kill you, but my life in the real world is not the best. I won't tell you too much about it because I don't want to bum you out, but I would much rather take my chances with monsters and killer bees than go back to how things were before the game. So I let Declan smash me.

When I came back to life, I ran out of the tree, then dragged a bunch of stuff in front of it to seal it. Once I finished, I took a deep breath to fill my lungs with the island air. I spun around with a big, dumb smile on my face, flopped onto the ground, and shouted to no one in particular, "WELCOME TO RAJ WORLD!"

PIRANHA HOME RUN DERBY

I immediately got to work building a giant “Welcome to Raj World” sign with seashells from the beach. Of course, I was the only one in the game who could actually read the sign, but I felt like I needed to do something official to claim the land. After claiming Raj World, I started making it my own. First, I picked out a tree house to live in and raided the temple for a bunch of cool gadgets to make it look like a spaceship (I’ve always wanted to live in a spaceship). Then, I installed a pulley elevator so I could get to my new spaceship home from the ground rather than fighting a hoard of angry apes every time I was ready for bed.

After setting up my new home, I spent a few weeks building booby traps in case Declan ever escaped from his tree prison. I planted patches of those alien mushrooms, rounded up a bunch of spiky bananas, and dug trapdoors to the wolf tunnels. I even found quicksand. Quicksand! Do you know how many booby traps you can make with real quicksand? So many.

Next up: Vacation. Every morning, I would wake up, eat a banana, then go on a new adventure. One day, I perfected an Olympic-worthy diving routine into the volcano. Another day, I built a tiny raft and sailed around the island singing made-up verses of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” until a vine destroyed my boat. A big breakthrough came the day I discovered I could play piranha home run derby by waving a club over the water, waiting for a piranha to jump, then swinging with all my might.

It was paradise. For a while.

The first time I noticed something might be wrong was when I came back from a long day of whacking piranhas to find that my favorite satellite dish was missing from the roof of my spaceship hut. Hmm, maybe the wind blew it off. I replaced the dish, but the new one disappeared too. Other things started going missing from my porch. A fishing pole here, a grenade there. Then, I started hearing noises at night. At first, I thought they were regular jungle noises, but the harder I listened, the more they sounded like the creaking footsteps of someone trying to be quiet.

I probably should have been scared, but I was having too much fun to care. That all changed the day my grenade launcher disappeared. I woke up that morning, excited about a revelation that had come to me in the middle of the night: grenade fishing. I reached for my grenade launcher underneath the bed, only to come up empty. My heart

started racing. Everything else had disappeared from my porch or roof, not inside my house. Had something really broken in? What was I supposed to do?

I decided to attack.

I spent that day building the finest trap ever constructed from bananas and piranhas. When victims would activate the trip wire, they'd get blindsided by a 100-pound bunch of bananas. Before they could collect their bearings, an overhead fish tank would dump piranhas on them. I called it "Attack of the Killer Bananas."

When night fell, I hid in bed to watch the trap. I was on a stakeout! Just like a detective!

I'd never stayed up all night, so you can imagine my excitement. I lasted 10 minutes before falling asleep.

"OOOOF!"

I woke up with a start. That yell hadn't come from my dream. I sprinted outside to see a masked man dressed in all black holding his head and rolling on the ground. He staggered to his feet, only to get knocked back down by the banana wrecking ball. Eventually, the banana bunch slowed enough for the man to grab hold of it and drag himself to his feet. That, of course, activated the piranha dump.

"AHHHHH!"

The man screamed and flailed, desperately trying to shake off a dozen piranhas. He screamed so loud that the world seemed to vibrate. I waited for him to take a breath, then asked my question. "Why do you keep taking my stuff?"

The man kept screaming until he shook the last piranha off his hand. He collected himself, then stood up and delivered a message. "We're watching you."

Although scary, his response didn't really answer my question, so I tried again. "But why are you taking my stuff?"

"We're watching you, and we're coming for y—OW!" A piranha chomped his foot before he could finish his sentence. While the man hopped around in agony, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small box. He fumbled with the box until—*POOF*—he vanished.

TOUGH FACE AND BANANA BRUISE

We're watching you.

Who's "we"? And when had they been watching me? While I ate? While I slept? While I sang "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"? I hoped not. That was not my finest hour. I lay awake feeling creeped out until I realized that was the guy's whole goal. If he was really coming for me, he'd come for *ME*, not my stuff. No, he was trying to scare me. Well, I'd just have to scare him first.

I stayed awake until daybreak (my first ever all-nighter!), then headed to the temple. If I was going to pull this off, I'd need some supplies. Just as I was about to enter the skull door, however, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. I spun around the corner and hid behind the teeth of a big gear.

"Bananas. You're telling me that bananas bit you."

"I don't see why that's so hard to understand."

"Bananas don't have teeth."

"These did!"

Two guys dressed in all black emerged from the temple. They weren't wearing masks, so I could see that one had a banana-shaped bruise across his face, and the other had pencil-thin facial hair like he'd spent way too much time trying to make his face look tough. The second one also had my grenade launcher strapped to his back.

"I'll take him this time," Tough Face said.

"I've been at this for two weeks," Banana Bruise replied. "This kid is tougher than you'd think."

"You're not getting it done because you're fooling around." Tough Face held up a torch. "I don't fool around."

Banana Bruise sighed. "I still don't understand why we need this kid. Why can't we do it ourselves?"

"That's not the way he wants it done."

“He who? Our boss? Are we seriously still not saying the guy’s name?”

“He doesn’t want us to.”

“We don’t even know his name! All he ever gave us was a code name. So you’re telling me, for the rest of my life, I can’t say the word *B*—”

Tough Face cocked the torch over his head to warn Banana Bruise to stop talking. “You don’t know what this guy can do. Don’t mess with him.”

“I just wish he’d take care of this himself,” Banana Bruise grumbled.

“This isn’t a big deal. We scare the kid into finishing the game, and our job is done.”

That caught me by surprise. These guys were going to all this trouble to get me to beat the game. Why? They were walking out of earshot, so I knew I had to act fast if I wanted to find out. I jumped out of hiding, then cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled, “HEY! BAD GUYS!” The two men spun around. “COME GET ME!”

I started running. I didn’t dare turn to make sure they were following, mostly because I was scared of what I’d see. I zigged and zagged until I saw my destination. To the untrained eye, the patch of earth looked like any other on this island, but I knew what it really was—quicksand. By the time I reached the quicksand, I could hear footsteps behind me. The bad guys had almost caught up. Good. I leaped toward a vine and swung over the quicksand. My buddies did not.

SQUISH!

I turned to find both men sinking quickly. I took a second to catch my breath, then held the vine over their heads. “Need help?”

Tough Face tried to look extra tough as he reached for the vine. I pulled it back. “First, tell me why you want me to beat the game.”

The two men looked shocked that I’d heard their conversation. Finally, Banana Bruise said, “There’s a surprise at the end.”

“I don’t like surprises.” (That’s a lie. I love surprises.)

“It’s a good surprise!”

“Look, you’re going to have to beat the game one way or another,” Tough Face said while struggling to pull his arm out of the muck. “It’s the only way out.”

“And what if I don’t?”

“Then we’ll kill you and find someone else who will.”

I squatted down and got real close to Tough Face. That’s not something I’d usually do, but I was feeling bold because the bad guys were up to their necks in quicksand at this point. “Doesn’t look like you can kill me now.”

Tough Face finally worked his arm out of the sand and held up a small box. “We will.” He flipped open the box and pressed a red button.

POOF!

Both men vanished into thin air.

HOME ALONE

My favorite Christmas movie of all time is *Home Alone*. In *Home Alone*, an eight-year-old named Kevin has to outsmart two dumb robbers. The best part of the whole movie comes toward the end when Kevin runs home, shouts, “This is my house! I have to defend it!” then rolls out an elaborate, crayon-drawn battle plan and fills his house with deadly booby traps.

When Tough Face pressed that button, I squealed. I was finally going to star in my own version of *Home Alone*! “This is my island! I have to defend it!” I yelled, then raced back to my hut so I could draw up a battle plan. *Home Alone* has action-movie Christmas music playing during the scene, so I decided to provide my own soundtrack—that “Carol of the Bells” song with electric guitars you always hear around Christmas. “DUN-dundundun, DUN-dundundun!” I sang while I ran.

When I got to my tree house, I turned over a Shandling page and got to work on my battle plan. Five minutes later, I had . . . a really messy paper (I’m bad at drawing). I tried again with another Shandling page, but I drew too big and quickly ran out of room. After accidentally ripping the paper on my third attempt, I realized that there was no reason to draw a battle plan, because there was no one to show it to. I started working on the booby traps.

“DUN-dundundun, DUN-dundundun.”

I quit singing when my voice got hoarse. The trap-setting movie scene is an action-packed two minutes, but it turns out that the real version takes up an entire sweaty day because of all the mess-ups. The only thing I wanted when I finished was a shower, but I knew the bad guys would be back. I completed the last step—hiding a note in the temple for future travelers—then crawled into my hiding spot next to a flytrap plant and pulled out a pair of binoculars. I didn’t have to wait long for some action.

The bad guys arrived after only a few minutes and used the pulley elevator to reach my tree house. They still had the torch. Excellent. They were going to try burning down my house just as I’d hoped. Banana Bruise lit the torch, chucked it through my window, and ran. He was not nearly fast enough.

KABOOM!

The fire was 100 times bigger than the bad guys had planned thanks to the explosive barrels I'd rolled into the house earlier that afternoon. The explosion destroyed both the tree house and the bad guys, sending them to the checkpoint at the beginning of the treetop village level. I cackled while I watched the goons stare down the ape. They kept firing grenades, and the primate kept lobbing them right back. I watched the bad guys explode over and over before finally deciding to move things along. I lowered myself into the flytrap plant, aimed, then tossed a grenade into the goop. It fired me across the treetops.

"DUN-dundundun! DUN-dundundun!" I sang as I flew. When I got close, I curled up and angled my body toward Tough Face. This was the most important part of the whole plan.

POW!

Direct hit! I blasted into Tough Face, who grabbed Banana Bruise to stay upright. That resulted in all three of us tumbling over the bridge. "What's wrong with you?!" Tough Face yelled. I didn't respond because I was too busy digging through his pocket. When I finished, I kicked off his back and deployed the parachute I'd stolen from Declan's crashed plane. "See you soon!" The bad guys disappeared in a poof when they hit the ground.

I pulled out my binoculars as soon as I landed and pointed them at the beach where my pals respawned. They argued with each other for a while before Tough Face pulled the box out of his back pocket. I giggled and pulled out the real box. I'd made the switch during our fall. Tough Face paused and looked at his box funny. "Come on, open it," I whispered. Finally, he opened it.

"BEEEEEEES!" Tough Face and Banana Bruise screamed and ran from the swarm of killer bees buzzing out of the box. I fell to the ground laughing. I'd gotten stung so many times trying to stuff that tiny box full of bees, but it was totally worth it. I watched the circus for a while longer, then jogged to the tree for the grand finale.

YOU FOUND ME

I ran to the top of the tree and hid from the still-furious Declan monster. I could have pressed the button to escape the game at any time, but I had to stick around to see what happens at the end. Tough Face had said they'd find someone else if I didn't do what they wanted, so I needed the final piece of the puzzle if I truly wanted to help.

I made myself comfortable and waited. With no button, the two goons had only one way out of the game—this tree. I'd put a few more booby traps in their way just for fun, but they'd arrive eventually. As time stretched on, I started getting sleepy. What was taking them so long? They couldn't possibly have a second button, could they?

I must have drifted off, because I jumped awake to a scream. "SNAAAAAAAAAKE!" They'd found my last booby trap at the bottom of the tree—Sherman himself. I squeezed tighter into the crevice and waited. Tough Face made it up first.

"I think this is it," he called back to Banana Bruise.

BOOM!

He immediately got pulverized by Declan.

"This is what?" Banana Bruise asked before Declan smooshed him too.

The bad guys respawned and did their best against Declan. It was painful to watch. They were already in rough shape from all the bees, snakes, and piranhas I'd thrown their way, and now they had to face the biggest monster in the game. After 20 deaths, I quietly lit a spiderweb on fire to help. Finally, they finished the battle and beat the game. Banana Bruise tried high-fiving Tough Face but yelped when his hand made contact because it still hurt from all the bee stings.

A voice interrupted the celebration. "You fou-ou-ou-ound me."

The guys spun around when they heard the voice. My eyes got big. A man limped toward them out of the shadows. His face kept rearranging itself until it finally settled on a disturbing mix of the two men—one side had a razor-thin goatee, and the other side had a banana bruise.

“Uh, hi.” Banana Bruise looked at Tough Face for help with this stranger, but Tough Face appeared to be just as stunned as he was. Banana Bruise cleared his throat and continued. “I, uh, I think you’re looking for someone else.”

“Oh no, you’ll do.” The clone smiled. “You’ll do just fine.”

Tough Face tried another explanation. “You’re actually supposed to meet with a kid who’s been in here. Have you seen him? He’s about this tall. Skinny. Puts bees in everything. He’s the one you need to talk to.”

The clone took a moment to consider this information. “I don’t think I will,” he said. Then, he snapped his fingers, and the room exploded into tiny shards and reformed into a cube of mirrors. I started breathing faster. Inside the tree, I’d been able to hide in the shadows, but here in the cube, I was totally exposed. The bad guys had their backs to me, but it was only a matter of time until they turned around. I felt the box in my pocket and scooted to a corner.

The clone made a door appear in front of the men and pulled an edenberry out of his pocket. “I’ve learned there’s more out there,” he said. “I want to introduce the world—the real world—to unlimited power. Go through the door and take this with you.”

Banana Bruise reached for the berry, but Tough Face pushed his hand away. “We’d love to! We really would. Just let us bring you the kid.”

The clone tilted his head, then looked directly at me. His face changed into my face. He pointed at me and spoke the next sentence in my voice. “You mean him?”

THE SCREAM

I waved sheepishly. “Hey, guys.”

At that moment, Tough Face looked like the angriest person I’d ever seen. He marched toward me. “Where’s the button?” he growled.

“I don’t have it.”

Tough Face turned to the clone. “Back pocket,” the clone answered.

I pulled out the button and held it above my head like it was a grenade. “Don’t move!” That stopped everyone. It also gave me some confidence. “This button is your only way out. If I press it, your exit disappears with me.”

Tough Face took another step forward. “We do have a way out. It’s that door. And when we get out, you’d better believe we’re coming for you, Raj.” His face did an evil villain sneer when he said my name. I could just kick myself for advertising my name with that Raj World sign.

“You’ll never find me,” I said both because it seemed like something a hero might say, and because it was probably true. I don’t live in a normal house with parents. I bounce around from place to place, so it’d be pretty hard for someone to find me. Still, “pretty hard” is not the same as “never.”

The bad guys glared at me for a moment before turning to the clone for help. Whatever I was going to do, I knew I had to do it before he spoke. I gulped, then smashed the button on the ground. I stomped on it a few times, then looked up at Tough Face. He didn’t seem upset, just disappointed in me. “What’s the plan, kid?”

I didn’t have one. I only knew that escaping meant someone else would take the berry into the real world, and I couldn’t let that happen. “My plan is to find another way out of here.”

“Bad plan. There is no other way out.”

“Sure, there is. Ask the guy.”

“What’s the other way out?” Banana Bruise asked the clone.

The clone held out the berry. “There’s only one. . . .”

“Not that guy,” I interrupted. “The guy who made the button. The guy with the mystery name. He’s watching, right? That’s why you’re afraid to say his name.”

“I’m not afraid,” Banana Bruise scoffed.

“Then do it!”

Tough Face stepped between us. “That’s not how this works. You take the berry, and this is over.”

I looked at the clone whose face was now a creepy mix of all three people in the room. “Don’t you want to know who’s behind this?”

“I want freedom.”

Tough Face started prying open my hand. “Take the berry,” he said through clenched teeth.

“What aren’t they telling you?!” I yelled to the clone while struggling to keep my hand closed. “Why won’t they take the berry themselves? You know they’ll never let you be free out there!”

The clone took a second to consider this. I didn’t actually know if my argument was true, but the clone’s computer brain determined it to be true enough. He turned to the bad guys. “Talk.”

Tough Face suddenly sounded a lot less tough. “The kid needs to do it, so it doesn’t get traced back! That’s all!”

“Traced back to whom?” the clone asked.

“We don’t know his name.”

The clone huffed, then grew into an edenberry monster, but scarier. Its teeth were big and yellow. Its fur had black streaks. Its head looked lopsided. “TELL ME,” it said in a deep, gurgly voice.

Tough Face had practically curled into a ball by this point. “We—we don’t . . .”

“The Builder!” Banana Bruise blurted. “His name is the Builder. He sends us messages through a website. We don’t know who he is or what he wants, or anything else!”

Click.

The room went dark. Then, the top of the cube opened, letting in enough light for me to see the bad guys' scared faces. Suddenly, Tough Face's head glowed green. "No!" he yelled. "Please, no! Why did you say his name?!"

"I—I thought . . ." Banana Bruise trailed off when he noticed his hand. It was green too. "Ahhhh!" he screamed. He beat the hand against his leg like he was trying to put out a fire, but it just glowed brighter. Then, his thumb transformed into—were those numbers? "AHHHHH!" he screamed louder. More fingers turned into numbers—ones and zeros to be precise—and started streaming up through the hole in the ceiling. Tough Face's nose was doing the same thing.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" the bad guys screamed in unison. When they screamed, the room started vibrating. The vibration got so deep that I could feel it in my chest, then the room burst into tiny shards. The shards hovered in place, quivering like they could explode. The men continued screaming. More and more of their bodies turned into ones and zeros until there was nothing left. When the last zero zipped through the ceiling, the men's clothes fell to the ground, then the shards reassembled themselves back into the cube room.

The clone calmly waited for everything to return to normal, then transformed into a perfect copy of me and held out the berry. "Looks like it's just us."

I stared past the berry at the spot where the final shard had landed. It looked off somehow—like it was a glitch or a crack. Suddenly, I had an idea. I took out a piece of paper and jotted down a quick note.

"What are you doing?" the clone asked.

I ignored him while I finished my note to future travelers. Then, I ran to the glitch spot, touched it, and started screaming as high and loud as the two men had screamed. The room blew apart again. I screamed louder. The clone started shaking uncontrollably. I took a deep breath and screamed the biggest scream I'd ever screamed. I closed my eyes and focused on squeezing out every last bit of air from my lungs.

When I reopened my eyes, the clone was gone. I'd escaped.

NEVER GOING TO GIVE UP

The Builder.

That's all I had. I searched all over the internet, but I couldn't find anything besides Bob the Builder, and I highly doubt Bob has anything to do with this (although I haven't ruled him out).

Something's going on. Something big. Whenever I look up the Builder or Phantom Island or edenberries, my computer screen starts glitching and warping like someone's trying to come through. That's why I always search using computers that don't belong to me. I think you should do the same. Nobody's found me yet—at least I don't think they have. Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night to creaking just like I did on the island, but that might be a dream.

After digging for a few weeks, I have a theory. I don't think the Builder created the edenberry. I think he found out about it somehow and decided to release it into the real world. He then programmed the book so a random kid could do his dirty work without anyone realizing he was involved. Even though we beat him here, I don't think this is over. Now that he knows he can use books to get people into video games, I'm scared about what else he might try. I've thought about asking for help from someone in charge, but that doesn't seem safe right now. I think we should work together to find the Builder ourselves. I'll keep looking. I hope you will too.

To protect you, I've programmed this message to delete itself when you finish reading it. (At least, I think it'll delete itself. It should as long as I set up the deleting thing right. I didn't want to test it because this took a long time to write.) I've also put something in place in case anyone ever tortures you for the password to this website. Sorry, that sounds scary. Um, if anyone ever asks impolitely (or even politely!) for the password, tell them that the secret phrase is "NEVER GOING TO GIVE UP." That'll unlock something that should give you enough time to escape.

OK, I think that's all I've got. It's nice to have a buddy on my side. Hope to meet you some day. Get back to me whenever you can on the club name. Again, no pressure on the Mail Jar thing. It was just an idea.

Sincerely,

Raj

INITIATE SELF-DESTRUCT

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