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2016

Gamer Girls, Gold Farmers, and Activism In Real Life

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This is the author's manuscript: This article was published as **Musgrave, Megan L. "Gamer Girls, Gold Farmers, and Activism In Real Life."** ***Children's Literature in Education*** **47.2 (2016): 161-176**. The final publication is available at Springer via http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10583-015-9265-z.

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Gamer Girls, Gold Farmers, and Activism *In Real Life*

In real life, a cultural crisis that has been brewing for years in the video game industry came to a head in 2014 when a leaderless online community of hardcore gamers organized under the hashtag #Gamergate with a self-stated mission of pushing for journalistic reform and anti-censorship in the gaming industry (Dewey, 2014). Critics from outside the movement have accused it of generating "misogynist terrorism" (McEwan 2014), particularly since individuals affiliated by the media with Gamergate began targeting prominent female game critics and designers with a relentless campaign of threats and harassment largely conducted via social media. At least four of these women were forced to leave their homes in 2014 due to death threats in which their home addresses were published online (McDonald 2014).[1]

In real life, a new and controversial economic sub-sector has emerged due to the popularity and profitability of video games. The industry employs hundreds of thousands of people, of whom an estimated 85% live in China (Heeks 2009, p. 12), to work in "virtual sweatshops" as gold farmers

[1] Cultural critic and creator of the *Feminist Frequency* video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* Anita Sarkeesian has received rape and death threats since 2012 for speaking out about sexual discrimination in video game culture (Collins 2014). In October 2014, Sarkeesian canceled a speaking engagement at Utah State University after an anti-feminist detractor threatened a mass shooting and campus police refused to search attendees for weapons, citing the state's concealed-carry law (Collins 2014, Dewey 2014). Along with Sarkeesian, game designers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, and gaming journalist Leigh Alexander were also forced to leave their homes this year due to threats of death and sexual violence against them and their families (McDonald 2014).

(Dibbell 2003). These low-level employees earn a few dollars a day to acquire in-game currencies, items, and services that are sold for real-world financial gain by their employers (Heeks 2010, p. 7).[2]

In real life, the October 2014 release of Cory Doctorow and Jen Wang's graphic novel *In Real Life* could not have been more timely or more prescient of these two crises affecting the gaming industry. As a self-proclaimed technology activist ("About Cory Doctorow" 2015), Doctorow uses fiction to explore potential uses of technology to promote civic engagement and activism in YA novels including *Little Brother* (2008), *Homeland* (2013), and *For the Win (2010),* which centers around the problem of gold farming, as does *In Real Life*. Wang's illustrations are a suitable complement to Doctorow's activism; she brings to the text the same preoccupation with moral "goodness" in the midst of modern life that characterizes her first graphic novel, *Koko Be Good* (2010). This essay analyzes *In Real Life* as a new example of Doctorow and Wang's intention to raise young people's awareness about gender and economic disparities within the gaming industry.

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[2] Because gold farming is publicly frowned upon in the video game industry and its legality is a hot topic of debate, information on real-life gold farmers is difficult to gather and statistics are uncertain. To date, the most comprehensive academic overviews of the practice have been published by Heeks (2008, 2010) and Nardi and Kow (2010). Heeks estimates that the gold farming industry is worth in excess of $1 billion US and employs an estimated 400,000 people (2008; 2010, 7). Most academic and critical sources cite these numbers as authoritative. Alternatively, Nardi and Kow (2010) express concerns about the dominant archetype of the Chinese gold farmer and "its failure to look beyond a vision of the virtual sweatshop and its Third World paraphernalia." Whether stereotype or reality, Doctorow clearly bases his *In Real Life* character Raymond on this archetype, presumably because it renders the character more sympathetic to the Western readers whom Doctorow is targeting as potential activists.

Broadly, *In Real Life* combats the pervasive cultural anxiety that Jane McGonigal challenges in her book *Reality is Broken* – namely that young people's growing connection to technology, and specifically to gaming, will cause them to spend their lives "wasting time, tuning out, and losing out on real life" (2011, p. 11). Specifically, it provides a realistic, accessible example of digital citizenship for twenty-first century youth.

In *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction*, Victoria Flanagan provides a useful framework for a discussion of digital citizenship in young adult literature, analyzing texts that represent cyberspace as

> an arena in which children can directly partake in the building of virtual communities and the political activism that such communities facilitate. This emergent group of texts draws on the posthuman concept of subjectivity as networked and collective and, in constructing digital citizenship as an intrinsic benefit of internet culture, suggests that virtual reality functions as an empowering and enabling space for children and teenagers. (2014, p. 71)

Flanagan considers examples of these "intrinsic benefits" in science fiction and dystopian texts, including several texts by Doctorow, whose body of work is designed "to open up this egalitarian and community-minded world to young readers" (Flanagan, 2014, p. 77). Like his other fiction, *In Real Life* sets out to "problematize and interrogate" definitions of citizenship that revolve around the idea that a citizen is a member of a political community that depends upon an association with a sovereign nation-state (Flanagan, 2014, p. 91). But *In Real Life* stands apart from Doctorow's other work as both a realistic narrative and a graphic novel, and thus a text that invites the reader to become what Scott McCloud calls "a willing and conscious collaborator" who must work to make sense of both text and illustrations, and of the story that they enact together (1993, p. 65). In this

case, that conscious collaboration on the reader's part involves a desire to make gaming safer for women and more economically egalitarian for all players. Doctorow's aim to engage his collaborative readers in these issues demonstrates Hilary Chute and Marianne DeKoven's claim that graphic narratives "have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking the risk of representation" (2006, p. 772). The "cultures of invisibility" represented in *In Real Life* are several: they include females participating in a gaming culture that was traditionally male-dominated and still responds aggressively to female participants; third-world gold farmers seeking agency in the first-world game economy; and the book itself, a graphic novel in a body of political YA literature that is currently dominated by science fiction and dystopian novels. As a radical work of fiction due to both its form and its activist content, *In Real Life* exemplifies how YA literature can function as what Kimberley Reynolds calls "both a breeding ground and an incubator for innovation" (2007, p. 15). The innovative notions of digital citizenship Doctorow and Wang present in the text call for an end to gender and economic marginalization as facilitated by a gaming industry in which many young adults participate.

Any discussion of digital citizenship first necessitates a clarification of the fraught notion of citizenship as it applies, and does not apply, to young people. Jacqueline Bhabha defines citizenship as a relationship between an individual and a nation-state that "signifies official recognition of a particularly close relationship between person and country, typically characterized as a bundle of reciprocal rights and duties, a set of entitlements owed to the citizen by the country, and of duties owed to the country by its citizens" (2004, p. 93). Alexandra Dobrowolsky and Jane Jenson further complicate the relationship between citizen and country, suggesting that "a citizenship regime encodes within it a paradigmatic representation of identities, of the national as well as the model citizen, the second-class citizen, and the non-citizen" (2004, p. 156). A consideration of the role of

non-citizens “is especially relevant to discussions that revolve around children” (Flanagan, 2014, p. 91); children, after all, do not have full access to the rights of citizenship because their age prevents them from exercising many rights afforded to adult citizens. That said, the evolving digital landscape allows for new consideration of “how the rights and duties associated with being a member of a political community might be challenged, eroded or redefined in worlds altered by technological advancement” (Flanagan, 2014, p. 98). Virtual reality, after all, can offer young people sites “from which to explore and exercise the citizenship rights denied to them in the real world” (Flanagan, 2014, p. 99). In *Future Girl*, Anita Harris argues that such exploration is generating a new discourse of “active citizenship, which focuses on duty, responsibility, and individual effort” (2004, p. 64) rather than “rights, managed forms of participation, and consumption” (2004, p. 63) on the part of young women in particular; the “neo-liberal model of youth citizenship thus merges well with a version of can-do girlhood that emphasizes self-invention, personal responsibility, and individual economic empowerment” (2004, p. 94-95). Notions of citizenship being reconfigured around responsibilities rather than rights, and of young women as a locus for new modes of engaged citizenship, are central to Doctorow’s exploration of what it means to be a global citizen.

Possibilities of digital citizenship for girls in particular are significant because the Gamergate scandal has provided such a clear reminder of the need for activism and equality in digital communities. As if in response to this need, *In Real Life* explicitly addresses the political potential of gaming as a tool for generating equality and awareness regarding gender and economic inequality. First, Doctorow and Wang directly address female gamers and attempt to combat the exploitative gender stereotypes often perpetuated by video games – the kinds of stereotypes that have prompted the criticism that has, in turn, caused vicious backlash against Sarkeesian and other female critics of

and participants in game culture.[3] Second, they address the antiquated assumption that gamers are not active, engaged members of society. Doctorow combats this stereotype by suggesting that gamers can and must use their gaming skills and capacity for community-building to make real-world conditions better for workers at all levels of the gaming industry. Moreover, he does so in collaboration with Wang's dynamic illustrations, a choice that acknowledges the primary role of images in gaming and reflects Doctorow and Wang's intentions to appeal to an intersection of traditional readers, graphic novel readers, and gamers.

Gamer Girls

In Real Life tells the story of Anda, a shy gamer girl whose aversion to her new high school begins to change when a guest speaker introduces her to the world of *Coarsegold*, a fantasy massive multiplayer online game (MMO) in which players organize into clans and wage battles against opposing clans.[4] The novel hinges on tensions between Anda's real life and the life of her online

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[3] In her series of educational videos *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (2012-), Sarkeesian identifies a wide variety of misogynist tropes that recur in video games including the Woman as Background Decoration, the Ms. Male Character, and the pervasive Damsel in Distress. Sub-categories of the Damsel trope include the Disposable Damsel, the Euthanized Damsel, and the Damsel in the Refrigerator; the latter is drawn from Gail Simone's groundbreaking 1999 bibliography of female murder victims in comic books, *Women in Refrigerators* (http://lby3.com/wir/).

[4] *Coarsegold* can be likened to contemporary MMOs such as *World of Warcraft*, *League of Legends*, *Guild Wars*, and *Eve Online*. Superdata Digital Goods Management estimates that as of April 2015, there were 1.2 billion active gamers worldwide ("MMO," 2015); the leading MMO,

warrior avatar, Kalidestroyer. Wang's ink and watercolor illustrations hybridize comic art and watercolor painting to create a look that unifies Anda's real and virtual lives, while also making the separation between them obvious. The color palette of Anda's real-life world is autumnal; this subdued palette reflects Anda's feelings of isolation and dejection as a recently-transplanted student still trying to find her place in a new school. By contrast, the world of *Coarsegold* is illustrated in a spring palette with bright watercolor tones dominated by turquoise with pink and purple punches. The effect is not subtle: Anda and Kali are interconnected, but real life pales in comparison to the vibrant world of *Coarsegold*.

Importantly, *In Real Life* is an adaptation of Doctorow's 2004 short story "Anda's Game,"[5] which he wrote after reading early blog reports about gold farmers (Doctorow, 2007). Though this essay is primarily an analysis of the graphic novel adaptation, my reading of the novel is at times enriched by the more detailed narrative of the short story – an argument, perhaps, for the benefit of pairing traditional fiction with graphic fiction to achieve deeper understanding of both texts' two-pronged argument in this case: that gaming culture should be more inclusive of females, and that all gamers should become more aware of their participation in an exploitative real-world economy.

In the novel, Anda subscribes to *Coarsegold* after a guest speaker visits her computer programming class at school. Introduced in the text without any of the frames that contain the other

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World of Warcraft, has a fluctuating membership of 7-10 million subscribers thus far in 2015 ("U.S. Digital", 2015). MMOs are projected to generate $11 billion globally by the end of 2015, $13 billion by the end of 2017 ("MMO," 2015).

[5] Originally published on Salon.com, "Anda's Game" is now available in print as a part of his short story collection *Overclocked* (Running Press, 2007) and on Doctorow's website (craphound.com), where he includes a new introduction explaining the origins and intentions of the story.

images, with her half-shaven head, "Game Over" t-shirt worn over a gauzy bi-layered skirt, and platform combat boots, Liza McCombs appears impossibly edgy to the slack-jawed, starry-eyed adolescents in the classroom: "Call me Liza the Organiza… In game, they call me the Lizanator, Queen of the Spacelanes, El Presidente of the Clan Farenheit" (Doctorow and Wang, 2014, pp. 7-9).[6] Liza points out to Anda and her classmates that girls in role-playing games rarely design female avatars, in part because they are commonly targeted by in-game predators. As her character in "Anda's Game" explains, if there are female avatars in the game, they are more commonly created by male players: "You could tell, cos they were shaped like a boy's idea of what a girl looked like: hooge buzwabs and long legs all barely contained in tiny, pointless leather bikini-armor" (Doctorow, 2007). By contrast, Liza's avatar wears a heavily-belted costume reminiscent of a Samurai's robes with a deep v-neck that reveals not gravity-defying cleavage but a neck and chest covered in scales. She has the low-set ears and pointed horns of a faun and the blue-white hair of a snow queen. She defies identification with any particular species, and simply appears as a light sword-wielding warrior. In her presentation of both her real-world self and her avatar, Liza resists being constructed as a sexual object and demands equality and safety for women and girls in gaming. In this way, Doctorow uses Liza to promote the same feminist argument to an adolescent readership that media studies scholar Nina Huntemann promotes to an adult academic one:

> In a space where sexism and homophobia is performed and reproduced as if it is part of the digital code, feminist attention to video games and game culture is threatening. Those who wield gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and other forms of social

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[6] As Doctorow has explained while on his book tour and also in his introduction to "Anda's Game," the character of Liza is based on his real-life wife Alice Taylor, a blogger, game developer, prominent figure in the gaming industry and former professional *Quake* player (2007).

> power in order to intimidate, silence, and oppress others will fiercely reject a feminist lens focused on the cultural products that serve as platforms for that oppression. The mere suggestion that these cultural products are not the domain of white, heterosexual men unleashes a vicious torrent of vicious border policing. (2013)

Huntemann helps clarify why a movement like Gamergate grew out of the perception that participants who are not white, heterosexual males represent a threat to the gaming community. Acknowledging the threats posed to females who simply want to play like everyone else, Liza asks how many of the girls in Anda's class are gamers. In this spread, one small, dimly sepia-toned panel depicts three girls raising their hands (Doctorow and Wang, 2014, p. 9). When Liza poses a follow-up question in the next panel, "And how many of you play girls?" the raised hands sink into the girls' laps in the third panel and the text bubble reflects silence: ". . ." (2014, p. 9). The implication of these questions and their accompanying images is that even in a fantasy world that allows them to construct the alter-ego of their wildest dreams, the majority of girls choose not to dream up warrior avatars that are female. Recent documentation of the harassment females experience in online gaming communities explains why. In her widely-publicized blog *Not in the Kitchen Anymore*, gamer Jenny Haniver documents the kinds of harassment she experiences simply because she chooses to play with a female avatar, using her own name. This harassment spans the gamut from nagging flirtation to name-calling and insults to threats of violence. In one instance, Haniver documents the months she spent appealing to Xbox Live Customer Support to suspend the account of a player who threatened to rape her, impregnate her with triplets, and "make [her] have a very late term abortion" (2013, p. 3 of 16). Experiences similar to Haniver's are documented in numerous blogs, in the widespread media coverage of Gamergate, and in documentary films including *GTFO* (2015) and *Gameloading: Rise of the Indies* (2015).

In Real Life was thus published at a pivotal moment, when a surge of media attention to online harassment coincided with a series of studies suggesting that female gamers now equal males in numbers and influence (ESA, 2014, p. 3). Liza's quest to recruit girls, and to empower them to embrace their identities as gamers, responds to James Paul Gee and Elizabeth R. Hayes's assertion that women are "central to where gaming, popular culture, and learning is going in the future" (2010, p. 16). Still, as Liza's own experience shows, "Women's contributions go largely unheralded, since the media pays much more attention to men as gamers than they do to women as gamers" (Gee and Hayes, 2010, p. 38). The lack of recognition of female gamers raises the greater concern, as Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell argue, "that women are still vastly underrepresented in the fields that design digital technology" (2008, p. 5). But research suggests that cultivating gaming skills can develop girls' interest in IT professions; this argument plays out in countless examples of female gamers who have gone on to careers in game design and other roles in the IT industry at large (Brunner 2008, p. 34; Taylor 2008, p. 60).

Liza the Organiza's personal mission, then—and Doctorow's, by proxy—is to change the landscape of gaming as both a pastime and a profession for females. Her effort to recruit girls into *Coarsegold* exemplifies T.L. Taylor's observation that "If we look at the success many women MMO game players have with getting into, and staying in, that culture, it is tied to their being brought in by an off-line social connection and then extending their network once in the game" (2008, pp. 59-60). The mentorship structure Liza offers to new female players reflects one example of the new kinds of "participatory cultures" offered by video games and other forms of digital media. Jenkins defines participatory culture as "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices"

(Jenkins, 2009, p. 3). By offering probationary membership in the Clan Farenheit and mentorship to novice players, Liza demonstrates the ways that a participatory culture can benefit new initiates and more experienced players alike. Jenkins sees potential for new modes of community-building and civic engagement as a result of the kinds of participation that gaming encourages; indeed, he has become an unofficial national spokesperson for these ideas in the face of continuing attacks on the value of gaming (Jenkins, 2006, p. 187). Gee and Hayes build on these ideas in *Women and Gaming*, suggesting that games facilitate a type of participatory culture they call a "passionate affinity group," in which "people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices— defined around their shared passion— and not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class" (2010, p. 107). The feminist sensibility of passionate affinity groups reflects a new emphasis in the study of gaming; historically, the vast majority of scholarship on videogames has focused on male participation and on violent or action-oriented games. Gee's seminal study *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) is a good example of such male-focused research, and Gee himself later published *Women and Gaming* with Hayes to redress that limitation (2010, p. 170).

Increasingly positive scholarly attitudes toward video games sometimes fail to take potential negative outcomes of participatory cultures and passionate affinity groups into consideration, however. Ian Bogost raises an important concern: if scholars like Jenkins, Gee and Hayes argue vehemently against the premise that playing video games explains bad behavior among gamers, conversely, how can we explain their positive impact? Ian Bogost asks, "If we concede that videogames in the abstract have not been shown convincingly to 'turn an otherwise normal person into a killer,' how does such a concession affect claims about the impact of procedural rhetorics on 'positive' real-world action like politics, health, consumption and other topics…?" (2007, p. 283). In

answer to his own question, Bogost considers that "clearly we must admit that videogames facilitate actual persuasion, not just simulated persuasion" (2007, p. 284). "Actual persuasion," Bogost argues, is the result of games that "give consumers and workers a means to critique business, social, and moral principles (2007, p. x) and "move the player from the game into the material world" (2007, p. 47). Indeed, the modes of persuasion employed in online communities are not limited to those that produce responses motivated by social justice concerns. As the Gamergate scandal has proven, the well-documented actual persuasion that occurs across the gaming community has produced real-world threats against women and other minorities who are perceived as a threat to what Adrienne Shaw identifies as the "sexism, racism, homophobia, and other biases of game culture" (2015, p. 2). These biases reflect "the ways in which violence against queers (homo--or bisexual or not), women (cisgendered or queer or not), and people of color (queer or not, cisgendered women or not) exists everywhere, in all media, and in all institutions of power" (2015, p. 2). Thus, Liza's role as recruiter, mentor, and activist transcends beyond the gameworld of *Coarsegold*; her true purpose is to create a safer, more egalitarian participatory community as an act of resistance against oppositional participatory cultures like Gamergate.

Liza's invitation to the girls to join the Clan Farenheit comes with a challenge: if they want to play, they must play as females. The subtext of Liza's challenge is one of shaming; as a talented female gamer, she says, "I couldn't even be proud of who I was" (Doctorow and Wang, 2014, p. 10). Liza's narrative of shame echoes research suggesting that "many female players have learned that it is dangerous to reveal your real-life gender in MMOs because they will be branded as incompetent and constantly propositioned; In other words, they must either accept the male subject position silently, or risk constant discrimination and harassment if they reveal that they are female" (Yee 2008, p. 93). Indeed, when Anda seeks her mother's permission to subscribe to *Coarsegold*, their

conversation centers entirely upon her mother's fears of online predation (Doctorow and Wang, 2014, pp. 11-12). In this way, Liza's narrative is symbolic of the shame inflicted by sexism, but also by racism, homophobia, and discrimination against the sort of introverted, awkward teenager that Anda is when she accepts Liza's invitation to join the Farenheits and persuades her mother to let her subscribe to Coarsegold for $12 per month (2014, p. 11).

The narrative thus empowers an underserved readership to think about how their gaming activities relate to their choices as women, consumers, and citizens. Wang's illustrations are rich and dynamic, dramatizing the differences between Anda's drab real life and her color-saturated adventures as the fiery, redheaded warrior Kalidestroyer in *Coarsegold*. In real life Anda's hair is constantly disheveled and she hides her pear-shaped figure under dowdy, shapeless clothing. By contrast, she designs her avatar Kalidestroyer to be lean and leggy, dressed in a schoolgirl's pinafore with spandex shorts and motorcycle boots, and to boast a fiery red head of hair that swirls about her when she's slaying undead like a militarized adaptation of Ariel's glorious locks in Disney's 1989 *The Little Mermaid*. Importantly, Anda's design of Kali rejects the female video game and comic superhero archetype who is hyperbolically sexualized, whose proportions are impossible and whose every posture alludes to a sexual position. Rather, Kali's big eyes, straight-cut bangs and slightly protruding ears portray her as young but not sexy, rosy-cheeked but tough. In short, she looks like what Anda aspires to look like in real life: not a reflection of a heterosexual male fantasy of femininity, just a leaner, edgier and more colorful version of her own self. Anda confirms this aspiration at the end of the book when she dyes her mousy brown hair fiery red like Anda's – hinting at a gradual change McGonigal would call "leveling up in life." McGonigal argues that gaming activities help people to find a better balance between virtual and real-life adventures, "and help us put our best efforts where we can reap the most satisfying rewards: back in the real world, with the

help of a good game" (2011, p. 167). Anda's slow real-life transformation is largely explained by the successes she enjoys and the positive changes she achieves as Kalidestroyer.

Economics of Gaming

The evolution of Anda's character transcends issues of physical appearance and personal empowerment, however. Just as importantly, it includes a growing awareness of her participation in a culture that enables exploitation of workers in developing nations. As the dual political purposes of the text reflect, Doctorow wants gamers to use their guilds not only to slay the undead and make gaming a safer activity for women, but also to fight for the rights of workers who play for survival in real life, not just for entertainment. In the introduction, he explains that "*In Real Life* connects the dots between the way we shop, the way we organize, and the way we play, and why some people are rich, some are poor, and how they seem to get stuck there" (2014, p. vii-viii). To this end, Anda begins to build wealth in *Coarsegold* due to her fierce skills as a warrior, and quickly learns that the in-game practice of collecting weapons, armor, fighting skills and other forms of wealth is directly tied to a real-world economy in which inexperienced players buy pre-made avatars so that they can buy in to games at high levels. In other words, wealthier players can pay to leap over the early stages of a game (the most exciting stages in many ways) by paying other players to level up their avatars for them or build wealth for them. In real life, all of these in-game commodities are sold in external markets, a practice called real money trading (Heeks, 2009).

Soon, Lucy, a Sergeant in Anda's guild whose avatar sports a blue pixie haircut and a shaggy huntsman's animal fur vest, approaches her about accepting missions in the game that pay real money. After some hesitation, Anda accepts and begins to collect payments to her PayPal account for missions completed in the game on behalf of anonymous employers. Anda is also indignant when

Lucy informs her of the presence of gold farmers in the game who collect gold and create skilled avatars that they sell for cash: "Oh my god! You can buy a level 85 avatar for $100!" (2014, p. 54). Anda's avatar peaks at level four in the novel. Anda and Lucy's innate sense of justice and integrity is disturbed by the real-world economy enabled by the game; they play for the sheer joy of gaming, while others buy into the game because they don't have the patience and skill to build an avatar from the ground up.

The most disturbing scene in the novel occurs when Anda has been assigned to complete a paid mission by Lucy to "clear" a cottage – kill all of the gold farmers inside. Kali violently bursts through the door, only to discover a room packed full of noobs – low-level avatars one-third the size of hers. The noobs all look exactly the same, with large, round eyes, triangle-shaped headgear and asexual, knee-length kimonos. They shrink away from Kali, their large eyes peering out at her from the shadows as Kali looms large over them (2014, pp. 37-38). Kali pauses briefly, then begins cutting the noobs down with her sword, casting a ragged black shadow on the floor of the cottage. She attempts to engage them in conversation – "Are you players or bots?" – but they only respond by running and crouching en masse in the corners (2014, p. 37).[7] Unsure about slaying defenseless noobs, Anda double-checks her orders with Lucy, who encourages her to "Kill 'em all" (2014, p. 38). Kali pauses, wide-eyed, then agrees. Her eyebrows form a determined slash across her forehead and she slaughters all of the noobs, her hair swirling about her while her sword slices through the tiny, defenseless bodies. In Wang's most ironic illustration, Kali stands in a room full of dead noobs with the phrase "Level 4" transcribed over the scene in large, bold letters (2014, p. 39). By slaying

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[7] Bots are not real avatars, but automated "robot" avatars programmed to collect gold in the game; creating bots requires sophisticated coding skills.

the defenseless, she has leveled up in the game. At the end of the scene, each noob has been reduced to a small, tied-up bundle of fabric on the cottage floor; textiles are a basic unit of exchange in the in-game economy. Kali picks one up, her eyes full of sadness as she absorbs its value.

Afterward, real-life Anda celebrates her victory and her newfound financial gains by buying a backpack full of sodas and junk food for her friends in the Sci Fi club at school. When they ask about her newfound wealth, she confesses that she's been doing paid missions in Coarsegold. "So you're, like, a virtual soldier?" a friend asks (2014, p. 45). Anda responds with round, bright eyes and a dreamy smile, "Yeah, exactly" (2014, p. 45); her victorious glow sharply contrasts Kali's dubious and sad expression after the slaughter. Anda shows signs of feeling empowered by her new role in Coarsegold; her postures are becoming more dynamic, her shoulders are rolled back rather than slumped forward, and her facial expressions are animated rather than listless. The ethical impact of her mission to slaughter a house full of defenseless gold farmers has not yet carried over into her real life. In fact, it is only when she is playing Kali that Anda seems to have a conscience about her missions.

When Anda returns to the game, she voice-chats with Lucy while they play and asks about the gold farmers she's been slaying. Sarge shows Kali an in-game advertisement for a website directing players to an out-game economy where they can buy leveled avatars, houses, weapons, and various other forms of in-game wealth with real-world money. Initially, Lucy and Anda are enraged at the unethical nature of these exchanges; Lucy protests, "I'm as good a gamer as any other dude… and I had to do it without cheats. But these crappy players can buy a house on Day 1. It isn't fair" (2014, p. 55). Lucy's response to the situation is to play both sides – kill the gold farmers so they can't amass more wealth to sell off, and make real-world money of her own off the players who

cheat by buying into the game. Lucy and Anda vow to wipe out the gold farmers together, fueled by their sense of injustice (2014, pp. 55-56).

However, as Anda raids houses and slays gold farmers, her interaction with one of the noobs begins to raise concerns about her complicity in the system. He is a 16 year-old boy playing the game in China, so Anda uses a translator program to talk to him via text (Raymond's messages appear in parentheses to indicate the translation). Anda learns that Raymond represents thousands of kids like him who play *Coarsegold* or other games for 12 or more hours per day (2014, p. 80). His health is poor; his employers feed him junk food, he only sleeps 4-5 hours per night, and he has no health care. Most importantly, gold farmers like Raymond don't get paid for their day's work if their avatars get killed by players like Anda. In other words, as Anda realizes she has been fighting paid missions for players looking for shortcuts into the game, she also realizes that these shortcuts cause thousands of real-world gold farmers to lose their pay, even their jobs, and to go hungry because they are pawns for another entity trying to get ahead in the game.

Anda's conversations with Raymond change her perspective on the game and her role within it. Through her experience, Doctorow takes Bogost's position in support of "videogames that make arguments about the way systems work in the material world. These games strive to alter or affect player opinion outside of the game, not merely to cause him to continue playing" (Bogost, 2007, p. 47). Though *Coarsegold* is not designed to be an educational game like the ones Bogost refers to, Anda does research on her own and learns about the inequitable global economy that thrives because of players like her. Finally, Anda cultivates a real-world sense of responsibility for the fellow players she has terrorized in-game. Even more importantly, she takes not only her opinion but her actions outside of the game. After witnessing the successful contract negotiations of her father's worker's union in real life, Anda helps Raymond and his peers learn how to form a union and demand

workers' rights and health benefits because, she declares, "As a Farenheit, it is my duty to protect" (2014, p. 85). Raymond is concerned that he will have trouble organizing his coworkers; "But what if my coworkers aren't interested? We're all young and I'm the only one who's sick" (2014, p. 112). Anda, optimistic and naïve, explains that this is why Raymond is important; "You're a living example of why things need to change" (2014, p. 113). Anda's optimism reflects her upbringing in an American capitalist system in which workers' unions like her father's wield a lot of power, unlike the Chinese communist system that limits the ability of workers like Raymond to organize.

Acting on behalf of the gold farmers also forces Liza and the Clan Farenheit to recognize their "duty to protect" other players from exploitation. As a result of Anda's efforts to help Raymond organize for better working conditions, she gets into an argument with Lucy, who is still adamant that they exploit of both sides of the game economy. In the fight that ensues, Kali kills Sarge. The act of killing a member of her own clan gets her suspended from the game by Liza. She also learns that "The boss caught [Raymond] conspiring to take down the company and fired him immediately" (2014, p. 132). Using a new username and avatar, Anda sneaks back into *Coarsegold* and organizes a group of young, inexperienced Farenheit members and gets them to help her broadcast Raymond's message to all of the gold farmers working for his company. The message is laden with Marxist overtones: "NYCI will say I am responsible for my own troubles, but they are only hurting themselves by not taking care of their people. What if misfortune were to befall us all? If it happened to me, couldn't it happen to any of us? Please join me in my fight" (2014, p. 157). In real life, a room full of gold farmers working at computer monitors get up, rip the mug shot of Raymond off the wall, and walk into their manager's office saying, "We have some demands" (2014, p. 159). In the end, the gold farmers in Raymond's former workplace succeed in their negotiations, and Raymond gets a new job gold farming for another firm.

Anda earns positive recognition from Liza for "standing up for bullied players" in *Coarsegold* (2014, p. 162). She is officially initiated with a new class of warriors into the Clan Farenheit at an in-game ceremony where Liza declares her intentions that the game should serve as a real-world character-building experience: "You will play honorably, you will play fiercely, and above all, you will show others what it takes to be extraordinary. It is not gender, nor age, nor race, but your ability to work hard at what you love. Today, you become leaders" (2014, p. 167). With these lines, Liza perfectly captures Gee and Hayes's egalitarian notion of a passionate affinity group; "These groups build and maintain powerful tools for design, production, and creativity. They offer mentoring and the chance for status in the group and an audience if one has grit," defined as "passion + persistence" (Gee and Hayes 2010, p. 178). Moreover, the Clan Farenheit's mission statement explicitly invokes feminist notions of equality across all demographic categories and encourages a hard work ethic for girls at play in the game. In short, Flanagan argues, Doctorow's "representation of adolescent subjectivity as networked and collective" and his "shaping of agency within cyberspace as collective confirms the potential for virtual reality to facilitate civic engagement" (87). Anda and her peers become more engaged as citizens, and more aware of their agency in a global system, as a result of their game play.[8]

[8] The conclusion of the novel is problematic because it undercuts the feminist message the text has worked to develop. When Raymond returns to *Coarsegold* to find Anda, his newly dashing, Anglicized avatar approaches Anda's, she is literally beneath him: sitting on a bench in a submissive posture with her arms cast down at her sides, shoulders slightly pitched forward and face tilted up to look at him. Raymond half bows, casts his eyes downward toward her, and offers his hand: "Care to dance?" (2014, p. 169). Their conversation underscores the argument that gamers can form substantive relationships, because at its core, the game is about communication, coalition-building,

If Anda's progression from dejected social misfit to "virtual warrior" and labor rights activist seems implausible, consider that as the gaming industry continues to grow, Doctorow is suggesting its massive feminist, activist and philanthropic potential. Doctorow's text comes at a time when the professionalization of gaming is reaching new heights. In fall 2014, Robert Morris University in Illinois became the first university to recruit coaches and cyber athletes for its varsity *League of Legends* team – a multiplayer online arena game for which cyber athletes (also known as "e-sports athletes") can win scholarships of $19,000 per year to play for the university (McGrath, 2014). World video gaming events are being held in former Olympic stadiums; "Professional cyber-athlete" is now a viable job description for a person entering this field (McGrath, 2014). Video game tournaments are now televised on ESPN. Furthermore, the gaming industry has used its powerful coalition-building practices to create innumerable philanthropic and activist organizations including Child's Play, Humble Bundle, PLEX for Good, AbleGamers, and the Electronic Frontier Foundation. In other words, gaming has a growing influence over an audience that is likewise increasing, and is effectively using that influence to inspire civic engagement.

This move from focus on the game to a focus on how the game applies to real-world choices is Doctorow's response to generational concerns that the growing presence of gaming in popular culture is producing a generation of apathetic consumers. In this way, his fiction supports McGonigal's argument that "Gamers make daily use of collective intelligence, and as a result they instinctively understand the value and possibility of big crowd projects. In short, gamers are already

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and creating mutual trust. However, Anda's submissive posturing and the fairy tale iconography of this final scene belie the empowering message of digital citizenship that the text otherwise creates.

our most readily engageable citizens" (2011, p. 233). Not only does Doctorow provide realistic models of engaged young citizens via characters like Anda, and Marcus Yallow of *Little Brother* and *Homeland*, he does so in a way that merits his inclusion on a list of YA writers who Kimberley Reynolds calls "transliterary pioneers," writers who are experimenting with "navigating the shifting boundaries of the book as a narrative art form in a digital age" (2007, p. 179) and who

> do not presuppose that young people have stopped being creative because the Internet, computer games, satellite television, and the whole panoply of electronic gadgetry now available to them occupy their time and attention. Rather, they show the possibility for fusion and invention between old and new forms of expression, and in doing so, they offer much-needed ways forward through narrative for their readers. (2007, p. 87)

Doctorow's radical experimentation with such "fusion and invention" not only presents new modes of expression and narrative within his texts, it also posits the novel as a metatext that functions as a starting point for discussion and radical action. As Doctorow explains in his introduction to *In Real Life*,

> This is the golden age of organizing. If there's one thing the Internet's changed forever, it's the relative difficulty and cost of getting a bunch of people in the same place, working toward the same goal. That's not always good (thugs, bullies, racists, and loonies never had it so good) but it is fundamentally *game-changing*. (2014, p. viii)

Like Bogost, Doctorow acknowledges that interactions with technology have the potential to produce negative outcomes. The Gamergate scandal clearly demonstrates this. But Doctorow's introduction frames *In Real Life* with the idea that participation in online communities has the

potential to do great good as well, and the narrative itself goes on to provide an example of one such positive outcome. By connecting gaming to activism, both in his pointed introduction to *In Real Life* and in the narrative itself, Doctorow is offering a new avenue by which to use young adult literature to inspire civic engagement on the part of young people.

Doctorow's work makes a significant contribution to a recent surge of YA fiction that focuses on gaming as a platform for empowerment and identity-building, including Conor Kostick's *Avatar Chronicles* (2007-2011), Mari Mancusi's *Gamer Girl* (2008), Salman Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) and Steve Brezenoff's *Guy in Real Life* (2014), to name a few. Furthermore, Doctorow's push toward civic engagement suggests new possibilities for a body of YA literature that has always been concerned with citizenship and activism. The real-world connections he promotes through his novels put him in league with John and Hank Green's Project for Awesome, the Harry Potter Alliance, the Odds in Our Favor campaign (inspired by the economic inequity dramatized in the *Hunger Games* trilogy) and other philanthropic organizations that draw participants directly from YA readership. The aim is to show that the imaginary activism depicted in contemporary YA literature not only has the potential to, but is actually *designed* to engage young people as active users, consumers, and shapers of technology. Imaginary activism leads to virtual activism, which is becoming the 21st century's most effective mode of building an engaged citizenship.

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