

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

It's no game.

BY JUDY HELFRICH

Me and Mickey, I swear it wasn't us that hacked history. I mean, we knew we wasn't supposed to play with the original, but we was hepped up on Smartweed and besides, we knew they got a back-up.

Oh. The hacker got to that, too? Bummer.

Right. So we wrestled for who got to play Hitler and I won, 'cause I'd messed with Mickey's history and made his hobby knitting instead of pumping iron.

Yeah, I know you're only allowed to play with dead people's histories, and just the copies, but the hacker made everybody part of the game. So now Mickey's dropping stitches in the pen, and he's got no clue. Mind you, I got this thing for shoes, which gets me beat up in the yard every day and twice on Sundays, so Mickey maybe got a clue after all.

Anyways, I'm playing Hitler and first thing I do is shave my moustache into a heart. I go up to Heinrich Himmler and I'm all, how *you* doin'? He's so surprised his glasses pop off and I'm totally cracking up 'cause this is *real*, man, and that's when the cops got me. Mickey, too.

No, I wasn't gonna kill Hitler. 'Cause everybody kills Hitler, that's why. Hitler's been shot so many times he craps bullets. Yeah, I know he's only been killed in the copies, and this was real history we was messin' with. I told you that already. Is this thing on?

Whaddaya mean you don't think I understand the gravity of the situation. Yeah, yeah, I know playing with the copies is supposed to be exactly the same as playing with the original. But just knowing it ain't real — that gets old after a while, y'know?

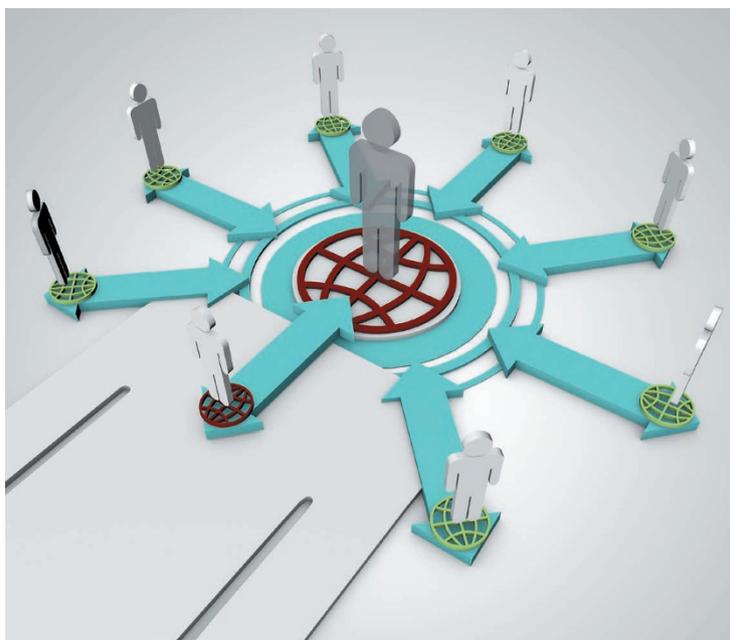
Yeah, well, you can blame us all you want, but you know whose fault it is. The guy who invented the game.

Ow! *Damn!* Why'd you do that for? I think I just swallowed a tooth! Hey, you ain't no

cop. I want a cop in here. I want a lawyer, dammit. Who the hell are you, man?

No way. Seriously?

The guy who invented the game? But you're like Batman — nobody knows who you are. So why you revealing your secret identity to me? Oh, I get it. You wanna punish me yourself. Well the hell with you. You're the one with the security vulnerability. If you didn't want us messin' with history, you shoulda patched it. Scratch that. Maybe you never shoulda made the game. How you like them apples?



And anyways, you can fix history, right? Oh.

Look, I'm real sorry. No, please. You can't erase our history. Our copies, too? Is that even legal? Me and Mickey, it'll be like we never existed, man! Look. I got a kid. You erase me and you erase her. You'd be murdering a child!

I'm beggin' you. Wait. Just wait. I know who the hacker is.

Whaddaya mean you already know? You *played* me? Ain't that, like, against your own rules?

Okay. So, yeah. I'm the hacker. But look — hacking your game — it was just a dare.

What you got there? Hey, where'd you get that picture? Yeah, that's my wife and kid. You got no right messin' with my personal property.

Oh, God. No. NO! Oh, please, no. They had nothin' to do with it! My kid's five, man. Five! She's innocent! *Stop!*

Oh my God. They're gone.

You murdered my wife. My kid. No, it's

worse. You made it so they never even existed. How do you live with yourself, man?

Erase me. *Now.* I don't wanna live like this. I don't care if you got technical difficulties. Erase me!

Whaddaya mean I keep coming back?

Hey! Look at the picture. My wife. My kid. They're back! But you. You're starting to ...

fade. Wicked. It's almost like somebody's erasing *you*.

Hey, lemme ask you a question. Who's interrogating who, here?

Because what have you learned? Nothing. You already knew I was the hacker. But I learned plenty. See, I found discrepancies between my copy of history and yours. Your version is missing people. I've been suspicious of you a long time, but I never knew who you were. Nobody did. But I do now. And I know what you've done. You've been busy, busy, erasing people to protect your game. Making it like they never existed. You are one sick bastard.

It's dangerous, messing with you. So I made a program that auto-restores me. Auto-restores everyone. I've got a

back-up of everybody. Except you. Yeah, I know you think you've got your own, but you don't any more. Trust me. And once you're gone, you're *gone*. You thought you were God, didn't you? It's ironic you'll be the only person who never existed.

It'll be like I'm talking to myself here, *man*.

I'm going to restore history right back to the way it was before the game. I won't remember you. Nobody will. You won't invent the game, and because there won't be a game, I won't remember I was the hacker. Most important? I won't know you erased me. Erased my family. We won't know we're back-ups. Copies. Because even though copies are supposed to be exactly like the original, knowing it? That would get old after a while, y'know? ■

Judy Helfrich exists on the Canadian prairie where long stretches of nothing persist in at least four dimensions. She enjoys writing, painting, and the Oxford comma. More at www.helfrich.ca/writer.

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