On Saturday, September 8, 2012, the superheroes began to assemble. They came together in Atlas Park, a zone in the massively multiplayer online game City of Heroes. A few days earlier, a rallying cry had gone out to the message boards, blogs, and Twitter feeds that were dedicated to the City of Heroes community. It called upon all costumed crusaders from all the servers of the City of Heroes system to log in to a single server named “Virtue” and congregate in Atlas Park, the civic center of Paragon City. It was a call to occupy, a call to defend the city from impending doom. The message spread to the farthest reaches of cyberspace, urging players to band together in a display of unity—a last stand against the greatest threat their world had ever known.

Paragon City, the fictive metropolis at the heart of the City of Heroes game, was under attack. Of course, Paragon City was always under attack. This was the point of the game, after all: take on the role of a superpowered do-gooder and protect Paragon City from the forces of evil, including supervillains, criminal organizations, robot uprisings, alien invasions, natural disasters, and any number of other calamities. Another day in Paragon City, another struggle against an eternal barrage of risks.

But this was something new. Paragon City was now facing an existential risk, a threat to its very way of life. Since the game first launched in 2004, Paragon City had survived every onslaught. But now the game’s publisher, the South Korean company NCsoft, had decided to close down the Paragon Studios development team. Based in California, Paragon Studios was a
wholly owned subsidiary of NCsoft, created shortly after NCsoft purchased the rights to *City of Heroes* from Cryptic Studios in 2007. Paragon Studios had been responsible for developing and running the game, as well as the *City of Villains* expansion. Paragon Studios was profitable, according to all reports. And *City of Heroes* itself had well over 125,000 paying subscribers, even in 2011 when it switched to a free-to-play model and allowed anyone to join without a subscription. So it was quite a surprise when the parent company announced at the end of August 2012 that the game servers would be closed on November 30 and that everyone at Paragon Studios would be laid off. “As far as I knew, we were still a studio that wasn’t in dire straits,” said Matt Miller, the senior lead designer for *City of Heroes*. “I’ve seen other studios in dire straits, and I’ve seen our studio, and our studio did not look that way. It came as a shock to everyone.”¹ To the players, NCsoft did not offer much of an explanation for the decision. Lincoln Davies, the director of corporate communications for NCsoft West, said simply, “The continued support of the franchise no longer fits with our long-term goals for the company.”²

Andy Belford, the community manager for *City of Heroes* at Paragon Studios, shared some additional information through the official game website: “In a realignment of company focus and publishing support, NCsoft has made the decision to close Paragon Studios. Effective immediately, all development on *City of Heroes* will cease and we will begin preparations to sunset the world’s first, and best, Super Hero MMORPG before the end of the year.”³ He praised the development team, and he encouraged other game companies to hire the talented developers who were losing their jobs. “Today has been emotionally challenging for us all,” he wrote. He confirmed that the game had been profitable and that it was not for clear financial reasons that NCsoft was closing it down: “This really is a refocusing of direction from NCsoft and unfortunately, Paragon didn’t fit into that vision. Collectively, we [at Paragon] hold no ill will towards NCsoft and thank them for many years of support.”⁴ To the players, he pleaded, “Don’t dwell on the ‘how’ or the ‘why,’ but rather join us in celebrating the legacy of an amazing partnership between the players and the development team.”⁵

The players, however, did not take this announcement with such acquiescence. The fansites were soon blazing with agitated discussions. On the Titan Network, players considered ways to intervene, to change the corporate decision before it was too late. With remarkable speed, they organized an online petition, a letter-writing campaign to NCsoft executives, and a broad media blitz to draw attention to the situation. Around the world, the reportage galvanized support for the employees of Paragon Studios and for
the players of *City of Heroes*, who were about to lose their online home. With each passing hour, more and more *City of Heroes* players came flocking to the message boards to participate in the conversations, developing coordinated responses and possible solutions. These ranged from proposals to find another company who would be willing to purchase the rights to *City of Heroes* to filing lawsuits against NCsoft for breaking an implied obligation to the players, who had invested not only money but also years of their lives in developing their characters and contributing to the communal experience.

The slogans began to appear: “Save Our City of Heroes,” “Save the City,” “Heroes Never Surrender,” and perhaps most powerfully, “We Are Heroes. This Is What We Do” (fig. 5.1). Drawn from a long-running meme in the *City of Heroes* community, echoing the tried-and-true ethos of superheroes from throughout the history of comic books, this last slogan defined the campaign to save the game from foreclosure. On September 2, 2012, at 2:49 in the morning, TonyV posted the following message on the Titan Network forums:

*WE ARE HEROES. THIS IS WHAT WE DO.*

Remember those words.

I know you all are discouraged, I know that you all feel like you’ve been punched in the gut. Some of you reading this probably just found out that you’re out of a job that you loved and are wondering what tomorrow will bring. Everyone is experiencing the prospect of something we are passionate about being relegated forever to only existing as memories. I hear you. I feel you. For a day now, I’ve reminisced and
shed tears, and it hurts like hell. Now it’s time to clench your teeth, roll up your sleeves, and get to work.

We are heroes, damn it, and I don’t just mean the kind that pushes pixels through a virtual landscape oohing and ahhing at flashy colors. Starting right now, we are going to pull together all of our teams and form a league the gaming world will not soon forget. We will beat this trial. We will save the day. By God, they will chant our names. Incarnates? Give me a break. We are Titans, all of us. We’ve shed blood, we’ve cried tears, we’ve never stopped and we’re not about to quit now. We’ve been saving Paragon City for eight and a half years. It’s time to do it one more time.7

The suggestion that heroic action had been naturalized by the game (“This is what we do”) seemed to bear out in the ensuing weeks. The players raised money to provide lunches for all the employees at Paragon Studios, as a show of support. They made posters and videos, riffing on the graphical conventions of comic books as well as the patriotic traditions of superhero imagery (fig. 5.2).8 They launched new websites and kept up a steady torrent of tweets. An online petition started at Change.org soon gathered more than twenty thousand signatures, replete with heartbreaking testimonies of the emotional connections that players had made in this game over the years. Many pleaded with NCsoft to keep the game running, or at least to release the source code so that someone else could maintain it. They approached other media companies, presenting elaborate pitches in hopes of persuading some executive to look into the possibility of acquiring the property. And they talked about a global boycott of NCsoft, as a plan of last resort should their petitions and outreach efforts fail.9

And, yes, they took to the streets—the virtual streets, the streets of Paragon City, where they could continue to play as the heroes they were striving to be in so-called real life. They took the protest to where it mattered most, at least to them: the city where people could fly. Flash mobs sprung up all over Paragon City to protest (fig. 5.3). Meanwhile, the call for a unity rally at Atlas Park drew thousands to the Virtue server (fig. 5.4). As hero after hero began to arrive for the virtual sit-in, what some referred to as “Occupy Paragon City,” the software was forced to produce separate instances of Atlas Park to accommodate the number of active avatars in the same area. Eventually, there were thirty-three instances of Atlas Park running on the Virtue server. In the ensuing weeks, thousands of players kept vigil at Atlas Park, holding flaming torches and maintaining at least one active player in each instance around
Recollecting James Montgomery Flagg’s famous Uncle Sam poster, this flyer features Statesman, the most iconic character in *City of Heroes* lore. Significantly, Statesman had already died in *City of Heroes* earlier in the year. As if insisting on his postmortem endurance, the flyer performs the resilience of the superhero community to keep going, to keep respawning, even on the brink of destruction.
Figure 5.3. Save CoH flashmob. Screenshot by Omali, September 16, 2012.

Figure 5.4. First day of the unity rally. Screenshot by mrKetch, September 8, 2012.
the clock to keep it open. Players who stepped away from their keyboards for too long would be automatically logged out by the system, so coordination among the protestors was necessary to keep each instance alive—no small feat, considering that even when the game was in full swing, rarely would any zone have more than one or two instances at a given moment.

Although many of the Atlas Park instances collapsed during the nearly three months of the vigil, the final one, Atlas Park 33, remained open and occupied for the entire time until the decisive date of November 30, 2012. Atlas Park 33 was made into a symbol of unyielding resistance, standing against NCsoft’s nefarious plot to snuff out the world (fig. 5.5). On other servers, similar instances of the occupied Atlas Park were also spawning furiously. On September 11, 2012, the software developer and *City of Heroes* player Leandro Pardini and his colleagues posted a video they had made about the Atlas Park occupations to YouTube. Altogether, more than 3,700 active player-characters are represented in the video—standing strong, standing together, heroes till the end (fig. 5.6).

Yet ultimately, their archnemesis prevailed. In the late hours of the night between November 30 and December 1, the world of *City of Heroes* winked out of existence.

**Challenge of the Super Friends**

What became clear in all the efforts to resist the game’s closure was that the in-game protests and the out-of-game protests were symbolically aligned. Many players were implicitly playing as their superhero characters, both in the city and out of the city. As one player wrote, “I managed to meet tons of amazing people with their own characters in a massively fleshed-out universe. . . . It was a grievous mistake for NCsoft to simply end this amazing experience. And I do NOT stand at their side. I stand across the battlefield, inspirations filled up, enhancements all green, ready to take on this new Arch-Villain.” Like others, he narrated his response to the situation using vocabulary and concepts drawn from the game itself (“inspirations filled up,” “enhancements all green”). Another player created an image macro (carrying forward the “Condescending Wonka” meme) that aptly captured the collective attitude: “So you made a game where players have spent the past 8 years defending their city? Tell me about what happened when you threatened to destroy their city” (fig. 5.7).

In these performative acts we find traces of what was at stake in the online and offline agitations, mobilizing so many players to collective action. At the
figure 5.5. Atlas Park 33 logo. Created by EspionageDB7, September 2012.

figure 5.6. Leandro Pardini, “Heroes,” YouTube, September 11, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRsj2DtLCQs. This video was made from composite fly-throughs of fifty different instances of Atlas Park across the fifteen different City of Heroes servers.
very least, the closure of *City of Heroes* represented the loss of a beloved form of entertainment and recreation. As one player wrote, “It is the place where your imagination can soar. The place where you and your friends can meet up, smack some bad guys and laugh your asses off!” Such pleasures may be less than profound, but their significance should not be discounted. For they are often the basis of social cohesion as well as technopolitical awareness, in other words, attentiveness to the technical dimensions of social organization and governance. As one player explained, the joyful game design and its integral mechanisms—the elaborate customization options, the cross-server chat windows, the mission architect features, and so forth—highlighted the synergy between robust software tools and robust community bonds: “CoH is the only game that seems to have gotten everything right. . . . They regularly surprise me with their keen insights with regard to the direction they have taken the game. I have been playing and paying since shortly after the game started (8 years now) and this is the one game I keep coming back to. Not only is the game more enjoyable than other MMO’s the community is better, and better tools for the communities to be strong are available.”

Players from all over the world have testified to these qualities. For example: “City of Heroes is more than just a long-running MMO, it’s a community. I have played a lot of MMO’s in my time and this one, by far, has the kindest, most helpful, most mature, most welcoming community of any of them. The vast majority who play this game do more than just play it, they invest their
time in it and they make it a part of their lives. . . . NCsoft sees this as just another game they no longer want to put money into, but to those who have been playing for years, it’s really not a game, it’s an extension of our lives. And the community is more than just a community, it’s family.”

Another player noted that many in-game friendships fostered out-of-game relationships, even leading to marriages and children: “It’s not exaggerating to say that there are lives that would not exist today if not for *City of Heroes*.”

More than one player also claimed that the game was a support mechanism for surviving the trials of mundane reality: “I honestly believe City of Heroes saved my life as it gave me a purpose. . . . I was getting the support I needed to stay alive from a digital community of strangers and a machine.”

Another player simply said, “CoH is a community. People care here.” For these players, the game was all about community, vitality, and life—a form of life sustained by hardware, computational media. In other words, technogenic life. Another player summed it up: “I am a female gamer. We exist and in surprising numbers on City of Heroes. There are women, men, and children on this game all happily sharing the skies of paragon city. . . . Please don’t let this game die . . . please . . . it has a thriving community that wants to live.”

To be sure, the closing of the game represented the loss of an online community of pronounced camaraderie and somewhat exceptional holding power. These aspects were often noted:

Yours truly plays on Infinity [server]. . . . Playing there for a lot of us hasn’t been like being in a game—it’s been like joining a village of fifteen hundred people and living with them for the better part of a decade. We’ve butted heads, forgiven, forgotten, learned to cope or carried grudges like newborn babies for years. We’ve talked smack about and trained each other until every one could laugh when the smack talking resumed. We’ve fallen in love, celebrated weddings, shared recipes, given each other (or gotten) the greatest advice and attended graduations together. We’ve held funerals for our truly fallen heroes. We’ve been there through and after the divorce. We’ve watched each other grow up then begin careers. . . . Our global lists are in many cases perma-full and we wish the max size were larger. We’ve helped each other get out of debt and opened our doors to one another. We’ve come home after crap days and gone to bed smiling because of the people we’re privileged to know here. When natural disasters strike and some of us go missing, we actually make it a point to find each other—up to and including sending real human beings [i.e., Omen] to make sure everything
is alright. City of Heroes isn't really a game. . . . It's a phenomenon, likely impossible to reproduce, which draws people interested in being better people towards other people interested in helping them to do just. And all the while, the teachers learn those same lessons. Knowledge or otherwise; by design or on accident. That is what this game does, and it works.\(^{16}\)

Above all, the failure to save *City of Heroes* represented the loss of an ethos, a set of values and meanings inherited from a long tradition of superhero fictions. It was an ethos cultivated through role-playing, reinforced not only by the game and its rules but also by the community and its standards. Through playing and having a good time, leveling up their characters, completing missions, and developing a storyline, the players were trained to be more super than ever before. As one of them wrote,

Part of it is because the game itself started out actively encouraging people to help others. . . . [*City of Heroes*] had powers that absolutely no benefit to the person that had the power, but had immense benefit to the person's teammates. . . . Sometimes life seems like it's got you down. It doesn't seem like there's a lot of good news out there, but you can log into a game and feel like you are actively helping people. . . . Even though it's a game, it still makes you feel better. I think the hero aspect of that is unique and helped contribute to that sense of, “[This] is something that we do.”\(^{19}\)

Already in the early history of *City of Heroes*, many players came to see the game adventures as rehearsals for real life, presenting a model of upstanding citizenship that could be put into practice elsewhere. They started charity drives for various real-world causes—world hunger, children’s hospitals, supporting the U.S. troops in conflict zones—and they also organized benefit events and sponsored marathons. The community even launched a charitable organization called Real World Hero (fig. 5.8). Its slogan was inspiring: “In our real lives we are not super-powered, but we can still be super-purposed.”\(^{20}\)

Thus the effort to defend Paragon City from its corporate closure was also staged in defense of the superhero as a figure, which includes the idea that one person can make a difference; that diversity and weirdness are wonderful qualities; that courage and friendship can overcome incredible obstacles; that helping others is the most important thing anyone can do; and that heroes—whether they be human or alien, animal or plant, monster
or machine—have an obligation to help make the world a better place, even while recognizing divergent positions about what that would mean and how it should be achieved. This is not to say that the game and its players always lived up to these lofty ideals. After all, the software's character-design options tended to privilege certain styles of bodies over others. Its narrative lore and scripted missions sometimes veered toward xenophobic fantasies of securitization despite the prevailing themes of tolerance and openness. And, yes, occasional eruptions of toxic gamer discourse had shaken the denizens of Paragon City a number of times over the years—though the larger community was usually quick to denounce any derogatory language in the game's public chat channels or social media platforms. For many players, however, the figure of the superhero represented a horizon of possibility, standing not for the condition of the world as it actually is, but for how it might yet be. Their characters were not simply reflections of themselves, but instruments of change, indicating how they might still become otherwise. For these players of City of Heroes, then, the superhero was a form of applied science fiction, a tool for putting fabulation into practice—aspiring to a better future, sometimes failing, sometimes misaligned with present constraints, but always casting ahead for a new line of flight. Up, up, and away!

Figure 5.8. City of Heroes: A Paragon Times billboard publicizes Real World Hero's charity efforts. Featured in the Samuraiko Productions video “Real World Hero—A City of Heroes Charity Event,” YouTube, November 1, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gv-QvhUOOWY.
In this regard, the ideological implications of the confrontation between the players and the company became quite stark. As one player wrote, “This game was the very first superhero MMO, and remains the most complete, detailed, and interesting. Shutting it down is like saying ‘NCsoft doesn’t believe in heroes.’”23 Another put it even more succinctly: “The world needs heroes.”24

**Gathered Together from the Cosmic Reaches of the Universe**

In the days leading up to the shutdown, a number of players prepared for exodus. They worked quickly to archive their characters. Some used software tools to extract data from the game servers (such as the Sentinel+ Extractor character-export tool, rapidly developed by a player called Guy Perfect to help these evacuation efforts). Others posted screenshots and stories to various websites as public memorials—looking ahead to the next respawning.25 While they did not give up hope for a last-minute salvation, they nevertheless saw the writing on the wall. Yet rather than give in to melancholy, they instead chose to script their departures from the city on their own terms. One player, for example, drew on the narrative lore of the game to make sense of the necessity to relocate to another online world:

The way it works in my mind is thus. In Primal Earth, NCsoft is a research lab. They decided that Paragon’s Heroes depended too much on the power given by the Well of the Furies ((i.e. the game wasn’t a mind-numbing grindfest like they seem to want)), so they were experimenting on a connection to the Well that they had in their possession, unknown to the rest of the world. As a result . . . pretty much every parallel universe is about to be destroyed. This company won’t admit there’s a problem, and won’t do anything to fix it, so Portal Corp. has sent Heroes out to newly contacted parallel worlds to find a place to evacuate to. ((This way CoH players can move their Heroes to games that are compatible with them, Champions Online, The Secret World, etc.) My main [character] has been assisting in the efforts to find a suitable home, and will be helping with the evacuation in the final hours of Primal Earth’s existence.26

This imaginative fiction takes the real situation of corporate control of the game-as-product and turns it into mythic discourse, a narration of exile that enables continuity, remembrance, and mourning for what was lost, all at once—even while looking ahead to the future. It recaptures a familiar story of exodus from a doomed world, relocation to an alien culture, and the
community obligations of the savior or hero. It is a narrative template that has been endemic to comic books since Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster established the origin story of Superman in 1938. Indeed, another player of *City of Heroes* wrote of the imaginative work required to relocate his superhero character to a new world, namely, *DC Universe Online*, drawing on a number of comic-book tropes:

I recently did a similar shutdown of my character. He was a Paladin that ultimately gave his life to fight the forces of Greed (it was an actual demon). And yet, he failed, because the powers to be cast him out, and he eventually died as the last man standing. He cost the city too much by killing the demons they wanted, not just the ones that were terrorizing them. “7” years later, he crash lands in Metropolis with a new body for his soul to continue its work. I moved on to *DCUO* [DC Universe Online], and it’s alright. But he will never forget that it was Greed that ultimately won over his home, and took everything he knew, and he will never be “just a good guy” again because of it. He’s considered a vigilante now, the law doesn’t want him and the villains fear him.

Killed during the primal battle against the corporation—NCsoft as the demon Greed—this player’s character carries a memory of diabolical injustice along with him. Even in his new body, he can no longer abide by the rules and regulations of “the powers to be.” He continues to fight against the forces of greed, represented as much in the ruling authorities of the new city of Metropolis (“the law”) as in the villains who prowl its streets.

Regardless of which path they chose after *City of Heroes* closed, many players made efforts to keep elements of the old community alive. Some called out to scattered friends, urging them to reconvene elsewhere: “a bunch of us slipped over to Champion City (Champions Online) and are trying to make a go of it over there. Why not come over and join us. Its no Paragon City, but its a good place none the less, in the need of Awsome heros like you.”

Another said, “I regularly play paper and pencil RPGs, and in my group all but one of us have played CoH. We all agreed to create a CoH-themed RPG to keep flying over Paragon City . . . at least once a month. Farewell, Paragon City.” Others instead kept faith that the city would return: “City of Heroes servers may be shutting down, but It will still live on forever in our hearts and minds, stand proud not in its passing but its existence for being, from the first day to the last it has been a pleasure. . . . And when the sun sets the last day, I will salute its fall for I know City of Heroes will rise again, For We are the City of Heroes, and we shall forever be here.”
The dispersed community has continued to work to make this vision a reality. Through the Titan Network, Twitter, and their Facebook pages, the players stay in contact and endeavor to record the history of *City of Heroes*, remembering the characters and events that made it so special. They have taken steps to rebuild the technical elements of their shared lifeworld, as well, hacking together new launchers and support apps (such as the Titan Icon and Paragon Chat programs developed by the players Codewalker and Leandro) that restore some degree of playability to the defunct game client. At the same time, they have considered schemes to reverse-engineer the multiplayer software on rogue servers, even though it would mean violating the intellectual property rights of NCsoft. For some players, such efforts represent a necessary form of technopolitical disobedience, opposition to a legal regime they see as corrupt and unfair. Eliot Lefebvre, for instance, wrote a short fiction about heroes from Paragon City coming to terms with the need to break rules, to make their own justice—a parable, it seems, of cracked software, illegal servers, and the dark web:

His first instinct was to reach for his costume, but he stopped himself before trying to grab it from its usual hiding place under a throw pillow. Sighing at himself as much as anything, he walked over to the window, unsurprised by the sight of his two partners on the fire escape. They were dressed like normal people, of course, but Seagull and Sipahi were pretty hard to mistake. . . .

Both of the women stared at him for a moment, but it was Sipahi who spoke first, rubbing her arms to get the chill out. “You’re just going to sit there? Getting drunk?”

“Not much else I can do. They’re tracking me and treating us like criminals.” He shrugged. “Any better ideas?”

“Yeah, actually. We break the rules.”

Swift raised an eyebrow. . . . [“]We have to be responsible about this, right?”

“Oh, most certainly. But responsible is . . . a loaded word. The people shutting us down aren’t being very responsible about it, are they?” She reached out and grabbed the remote, shutting off the movie before sitting next to Swift on the couch.

He was going to protest before he saw Seagull reach over to pull the beer out of his hand. “We were talking about it after we had our meeting with the agency. And . . . it’s just not right. They can’t just kick us out when we’re trying to do good.”
“Yeah, they can.”

“All right, whatever; they can, but they shouldn’t.” She rubbed the back of her neck, visibly searching for words. “I’m not about to just roll over and let go because Paragon City isn’t our home any more.”

Swift sighed. “We can’t leave the city. The rules are—”

“Swift, you know I don’t say this sort of thing often, but forget the rules.” Sipahi sprang out of her seat now, gesturing for emphasis as she spoke. “We can leave. Yes, we’ll be fugitives, and they’ll call us criminals, but do you want to stop helping people? Can you honestly tell me that you want to live your life like this?”

“Of course I don’t. But . . . ” He frowned. It seemed as if there should be some way to refute what she was saying, but nothing leapt to mind.

“Come on, big guy. We’ll go out there, we’ll fight crime across the country, we’ll do . . . you know, the whole wandering justice thing. . . . It’ll be an adventure. Even if no one else gets to see it, it’ll be an adventure.”

“We’re supposed to be the people who uphold the rules, though. We’re . . .”

“Heroes.” Sipahi finished the sentence. “We are heroes. And this is what we do.”

Swift looked at her. There was no way he would ever be a hero in Paragon City any longer. But that didn’t mean that he couldn’t still be a hero, that he couldn’t make use of the lessons he’d learned over the years. Even if the city was gone, he didn’t have to stop being himself.

He stood. “You’re right. We’re heroes. No matter when, no matter where . . . no matter what.”

And even if it didn’t make everything all right, even the thought helped.32

This allegorical fanfic subtly tests out the moral arguments for relocating to a rogue server. It represents the dilemma for player-characters who are accustomed to upholding the law but forced into circumstances that have exposed the injustice of the law, and who now feel compelled to join the shadow world of pirates and hackers. In this regard, the City of Heroes community has come face-to-face with a predicament shared by others before them, including Batman, the Punisher, the Hulk, Spawn, Deadpool, and many more. But while some costumed crusaders are notorious vigilantes or antiheroes, to flagrantly disregard rules and regulations does not fit the moral code of the most upstanding citizen-heroes. So at the same time, and
hoping to alleviate the desire to go rogue, grassroots projects have emerged to rebuild a version of Paragon City that will not infringe on the intellectual property rights of NCsoft. Some players banded together to create the development company Missing Worlds Media, starting a “Phoenix Project” called City of Titans that would resurrect some of what had been lost: “There are some legal constraints on what we can build. But our goal is to remain as true to the spirit, the feel, the concepts. . . . Legally, no one can rebuild the exact game. No one except the legal owners of that IP [intellectual property]. What we're doing is providing fans with a new world. A world that is new, yet one you remember.”

Other player-developers started different projects, parallel efforts to create a “spiritual successor” to City of Heroes, including Valiance Online, Heroes and Villains, and Ship of Heroes, with others possibly still to emerge from the far-flung community that once dwelt in Paragon City.

While Paragon City may be gone, a notable commitment to superhero values endures in the diaspora—along with the scripts and narrative conventions of comic books that address the limits of justice in the modern world. Former residents of City of Heroes have endeavored to maintain ties even after they have moved on to other games, other regions of cyberspace. They have done so by rehearsing the cultural mythologies and practices of technogenic life that they shared during those halcyon days of yore, holding them together even though they no longer have a city of heroes to call home.

**Holding Out for a Hero**

The City of Heroes saga illustrates a more general situation, of course. Since 1978, when the first Superman cartridge appeared for the Atari 2600, the video-game industry has produced a steady stream of superhero experiences. Some games, such as Batman: Arkham Asylum and Injustice: Gods among Us, feature familiar characters from comic books and media franchises. Others, such as Freedom Force, The Wonderful 101, and the infamous series, present new spins on old tropes. To varying degrees, all of these games address the power fantasies of digital culture, allowing players to perform extraordinary feats of derring-do by toying around with computational hardware. In this regard, they often reinforce the idea that anyone can become super, given the right technical resources and expertise—and some games explicitly draw connections between high-tech heroics and the virtuosities of gameplay.

For example, in Batman: Arkham Knight, Batman uses a “remote hacking device” throughout the game to break into computer terminals, swipe pass-
words, hijack surveillance drones, and access any number of other technical systems. In the PS4 and Xbox One versions of the game, the player must rotate the analog sticks on the game controller to tune the remote hacking device, feeling the controller’s vibrations. On the screen, Batman does the same thing: the player’s thumbs and Batman’s thumbs are perfectly in sync, mirroring one another as the device penetrates locked computer systems (fig. 5.9). The symmetry highlights the game controller as a kind of hacking device, a tool for accessing the digital world, as well as an interface to Batman’s amazing gadgets and gizmos: a multipurpose utility belt that helps even an average player to become the “world’s greatest detective.”

While such conceits are coded as fiction, escapist fabulation, the discourse of superhero media nevertheless feeds into the lived practices and vocabularies of gamers, hackers, and other technology geeks. As we have seen in the case of City of Heroes, the tropes and plotlines of superhero games become compelling templates for the practice of technogenic life. They afford visions of the body extended through digital media, providing scripts for acting, for living in the network society. For example, “Iron Man mode” is a hardcore style of gameplay that eschews the save function and the respawn function.
of modern video games, challenging players to reach the end of any game with only a single avatar life. It is a self-imposed way of playing with strict limitations, a metagame that embraces the finitude of living beings. The video-game rapper Dan Bull describes Iron Man mode as “digital Darwinism in a saveless world.” In a music video, Bull notes that playing in this manner reinforces a new respect for life itself:

I want an adrenaline overload.
Iron Man mode, Iron Man mode.
Never save gameplay, never reload.
Iron Man mode, Iron Man mode.

You’ll realize real life is irreplaceable.
No three strikes, this isn’t baseball.
Your bones are breakable,
your foes’ll break ‘em all.
They’ll take the opportunity by any means available
to demonstrate that your remains are quite biodegradable.
If you’re incapable to comprehend mortality,
I advocate the remedy of permanent fatality.

But rather than resting content with the lot of common humanity, accepting the frailties of the body and its organic limitations, Iron Man mode instead performs the capacities of technology to exceed the boundaries of normal biology. In his music video, Bull wears an Iron Man mask and quips, “This is Iron Man mode and I am Tony Stark.” By invoking Tony Stark and his Iron Man persona, the Iron Man mode of gameplay both reflects and amplifies the embodied relations between players and their hardware devices (fig. 5.10). For Tony Stark becomes Iron Man not through any unique biological mutation or supernatural power, but through technoscientific ingenuity. Iron Man is a cyborg, his vulnerable human parts protected by a cutting-edge suit of robotic armor. The Iron Man mode of gameplay, as a test of gamer virtuosity and endurance, becomes an affirmation of the prosthetic imagination, the extension of the human in excess of its own organic dimensions. While professing an abhorrence of the respawn function, Iron Man mode nevertheless reproduces the sense in which gaming technologies can transfigure the standard operations of human embodiment, joyously inviting the overflow of technogenic life (“I want an adrenaline overload”). As a metagame of hardcore survival in the field of digital fictions, Iron Man mode expresses a desire to excel, to achieve extraordinary things in a world
undergoing rapid computerization, to fight the forces of ordinariness and complacency, the commodity of the common denominator. As Bull puts it, Iron Man mode is a small gesture of resistance—“computer mutiny through the screens”—a way of pushing back against the status quo and the marketing of passive, anodyne entertainment: “If there is no risk, then there’s no reward. / Slaves to the save, throw your overlords overboard.”

Certainly, Iron Man mode is nothing more than recreation, a digital sport that often foregrounds its own ironies: “It makes the player an absolute bad-ass. People who regularly play games in Iron Man Mode are legally allowed, and actively encouraged, to loudly declare how boss they are whilst at any social occasion (including, but not limited to: weddings, parent/teacher meetings, visits to the zoo and PETA protests).” In other words, playing in Iron Man mode hardly makes anyone a hero, and it may instead inflate a misplaced sense of personal accomplishment. Nevertheless, in its own ironic way, Iron Man mode describes a self-imposed obligation, a duty to perform beyond the call of duty—to play beyond the rules, or rather, to uphold a different set of rules, an ethical framework that supersedes what is merely required by the software or baseline commodity culture. (As Bull sings, “Be brave, and implement a higher plan / of gaming and never saving. The name is Iron Man.”) Indeed, by taking up the tropes of superhero media to critique the authorized pleasures of average media consumers and present an adrenaline-pumping alternative (“a higher plan”), it conjures an imaginary

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**Figure 5.10.** Dan Bull, “Iron Man Mode,” YouTube, August 18, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7fl_7noJd8.
space within the social order yet outside its normal laws and regulations: the extralegal domain of caped crusaders, masked marvels, and outlaw avengers.

To be sure, the actions of some online activists and vigilantes, whether they use elite hacker tools or commonplace search engines, have often similarly elicited the language of superpowers. The Jester—a patriotic, pro-American hacker known for taking down jihadist websites, trolling Anonymous and other hacktivist groups, and attacking Russian government servers in retaliation for Russian meddling in U.S. politics—has sometimes used an altered image of Captain America to represent his Twitter account (fig. 5.11). News reports frequently describe the Jester as the “Batman of the Internet,” alleging that even FBI agents honor him with this title.³⁸

Likewise, a secretive white-hat security researcher who successfully hijacked a portion of the Dridex botnet in early 2016, reconfiguring compromised servers to distribute copies of Avira antivirus software instead of the Dridex banking trojan, has also earned comparisons to Batman: “Somewhere online right now, a digital Batman is protecting your cybersecurity. An unknown security researcher is widely believed to have hacked the hackers, and is now using one of the Internet’s biggest crime machines for good. And now, just like Gotham City supports the Caped Crusader, the Internet security community is rallying behind their own vigilante for justice.”³⁹
These figurations—tropes of applied science fiction—rehearse a comic-book narrative of advanced technologies extending the capacities of mere mortals, rendering hackers and other technical experts posthuman, telepresent, and above the law: cybernetic gods among us. While distinguishing elite hackers from everyday computer users (“a digital Batman is protecting your cybersecurity”), this narrative frame also makes legible the difficulties and challenges faced by those with such extraordinary capabilities, the burdens that only other supers could properly understand. For instance, the security researcher and computer forensics analyst Scot Terban, a.k.a. Dr. Krypt3ia, has written about the endless battle between sysadmins and cybercriminals in precisely these terms, seeing computer security forces as like a beleaguered Batman standing against a “Rogues Gallery” of the Dark Knight’s enemies—an invisible, nearly thankless job suited only for the most stalwart defenders of digital peace and prosperity:

Batman and his “Rogues Gallery” of evil doers. It’s not reality, but, many of us tend to gravitate to the stories and the ethos right? . . . So, you . . . yes you . . . the one in the batcowl. Protecting your domain, your “Gotham” as the network warrior, the lone sentinel holding back the night of the internet. How are you feeling about your job of late? Post APT [Advanced Persistent Threat network attack, often associated with state-sponsored hackers] and Anonymous, how are you feeling about the safety of your city? Do you feel that you have the tools and the know how to protect it? Are you backed up by the right people? Funds? Tools? Do you sleep at night or do you toss and turn. . . . Oh, sorry, during the day, as you work at night . . .

This seems to be a common mentality in many of the network security folks out there, that of the protector, the Batman. . . . Feared by some, loathed by others, and generally looked upon as someone to avoid as the story goes. Sure, you are likely a hero to still others, but, those are not the majority, and it is your thankless job to protect them all. With or without their help. . . . Meanwhile, just like the escalation of the rogues gallery, you too will have to face new threats every day. Jack Napier made Batman by killing Wayne’s parents in front of him. Batman made Joker by battling Napier later on and ultimately driving him insane, thus becoming the main nemesis for Batman. After that others came along, seeing the Batman as their nemesis and upping the ante. Do you see where I am going with this? Look at the INFOSEC world today. APT, ANONYMOUS, HACKERS, CRACKERS, HACTIVISTS, LULZSEC,
LulzSec reborn . . . It’s all about escalation. . . . If you can deal with never-ending war then do gird your loins and wade into battle. If not, if you take stock and the battlefield is not even remotely in your favor nor will it ever be, consider what you are doing. This is a battle you can never win. . . . If you can accept these things, and you feel you can fight on . . . Then let the battle rage. If not, then you might want to consider moving out of Gotham.40

In this world of online heroes and villains, digital mutants and cybernetic warriors, the guidelines for defending “truth, justice, and the American way” are not always clear. Even for an infosec professional such as Dr. Krypt3ia, responsible for protecting innocent citizens from those who would steal their data or disrupt their computer systems, the actions of hackers and high-tech activists sometimes confound easy distinctions. Despite their roguelike appearances, hacktivists might seem to be on the right side of history, from time to time. While the antics of LulzSec and other hacker crews often recall the enigmatic games of the Riddler or the chaotic gags of the Joker, according to Dr. Krypt3ia, the lulz may not always be in strict opposition to civic responsibility. Commenting on some of Anonymous’s coordinated activities, such as their 2011 Operation DarkNet attacks against the online child pornography trade or their support of the Occupy movement, Dr. Krypt3ia concedes that adversity can make strange bedfellows: “Anonymous has become more like The Batman in certain quarters.” After all, desperate times call for desperate measures: “Sometimes when the system cannot function other means need to be taken to effect change.”41

System failures are often the conditions of possibility for enterprising superheroes. In October 2013, for instance, following a report in the Kansas City Star that the teenagers Daisy Coleman and Paige Parkhurst were unable to bring their alleged rapists to trial in Maryville, Missouri, Anonymous responded by launching OpMaryville:

Two young girls have been raped in the town of Maryville, Missouri. Another high school football star, the grandson of a Missouri state official, has walked free. The people of Maryville turned their backs on these victims and one family has been forced to flee the town. Their house was later burned to the ground. . . . If Maryville won’t defend these young girls, if the police are too cowardly or corrupt to do their jobs, if [the] justice system has abandoned them, then we will have to stand for them. . . . Maryville, expect us.

We Are Anonymous.
We Are Legion.
We do not forgive.
We do not forget.
Join us.\textsuperscript{42}

Anonymous organized protests online and on the ground, helping to draw international media attention to the situation. Shortly afterward, the county prosecutor agreed that the case should be reopened. On Reddit, supporters of Anonymous celebrated this turn of events: “I love hearing about Anonymous getting justice for people. It’s like hearing about a real life Batman. Except Batman is a group of nerds, and they don’t beat people up.”\textsuperscript{43} Ultimately, one of the accused rapists pled guilty to misdemeanor child endangerment. Despite the efforts of the special prosecutor appointed to the reopened case, however, no felony sexual assault charges were ever brought to trial.

A sense that justice cannot or will not be sufficiently protected by governments, corporations, or other authorities—a creeping sense that “the system cannot function”—has galvanized various and sundry online activists, from the Jester to the players of \textit{City of Heroes}. It is a sense that the risks and insecurities, the precarities of technogenic life demand active intervention and resistance rather than resignation (“computer mutiny through the screens,” according to the haunting lyrics of Dan Bull). Reiterated by innumerable video games and comic books, it promotes increasingly reflexive, ironic performances. For instance, on December 21, 2016, the hacker group OurMine—known for targeting the social media accounts of celebrities and tech executives, allegedly to expose the security holes in platforms such as Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube—cracked the Twitter accounts of Marvel Studios, taking over all the Marvel superhero promotional feeds (fig. 5.12). Occupying the social media avatars of Captain America, the Avengers, Ant-Man, Doctor Strange, and the Guardians of the Galaxy, OurMine sent out the following message: “Hey, it’s OurMine, Don’t worry we are just testing your security, contact us to help you with your security contactourmineteam@gmail.com.” This takeover of the Marvel Twitter accounts presented a cheeky commentary on mass-marketed heroes while performing OurMine’s own claims to break the law only for the greater good, exploiting security flaws for the sake of a higher security. Marvel’s trademarked heroes could not even protect themselves, seemed to be the message—a promotion for OurMine’s own under-the-table security services. Yet by delivering this message through the Marvel characters, the hack also indicated how these fictive heroes can still serve as models, offering us ways to think about our own precarity in an
online environment dominated by careless companies, rampant cybercrime, and ubiquitous surveillance—an environment where we all may be called upon to rise up, to take sides in the secret wars that rage behind our keyboards.

But even if some online vigilantes may desire the status of heroes, the enterprise is riddled with hazards and pitfalls. Things can go awry, totally fubar. For example, following the Boston Marathon bombings in April 2013, many users of Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms began sifting through surveillance photos released by the FBI,
monitoring police scanners, collating and sharing information, and using a variety of online tools to help identify the perpetrators. As one Reddit user later described it, “The Internet turned on Batman Mode.”44 On Reddit, a theory emerged that a missing Brown University student named Sunil Tripathi may have been one of the bombers. Reddit sleuths compared photos of Tripathi with the surveillance photos and propagated the idea across different media domains. Amid these discussions, a Reddit user called Greg Hughes, listening to a police scanner, tweeted that the Boston Police Department had identified Tripathi as one of the two suspects. Hughes’s claim was false—the Boston police had never even mentioned Tripathi’s name—but the claim, already explored with enthusiasm in various sub-Reddits, began to spread. One Redditor responded cautiously to the question “Is missing student Sunil Tripathi Marathon Bomber #2?” while also stoking the flames:

According to Boston police scanner (via twitter)—the answer may be yes. . . . I would, however, like to caution against people now concluding that we should all be internet detectives / vigilantes, etc. Yes—it seems speculators here got it right this time. There have been plenty of cases in the past (even the recent past) where online communities (reddit included) have gotten it wrong and caused someone innocent a lot of grief. . . . So I hope people aren’t patting themselves on the back too hard over this.45

Yet such cautions were thrown to the wind as numerous reporters, media personalities, and social media users began to repeat the accusation. Tragically, Tripathi had actually committed suicide nearly a month before the bombings, and his body was found floating in a river shortly after the FBI named Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev as the actual bombing suspects. Tripathi had been wrongfully accused by legions of amateur detectives armed with search engines. Afterward, Reddit admins issued a public apology to the Tripathi family, who suffered weeks of harassment due to the false claims. A few reporters also reflected on the faults of the news media in spreading the crowdsourced theory, turning online rumor into authoritative discourse. For example, Jay Caspian Kang suggested that the mechanisms of social media have now made journalism into a kind of video game for professionals and amateurs alike, establishing rules and scoring systems for leveling up, winning accolades, creating instant internet superstars:

It helps to envision modern journalism as a kind of video game. If you’re part of the Internet media, everything you put out into the world
comes with its own scoring system. Tweets are counted by retweets and favorites, stories are scored by page views and Facebook likes. A writer’s reach and influence is visible right there, in the number of his followers and the number of “influencers” who subscribe to his or her feed. If you’re wondering why so many writers and journalists from such divergent backgrounds would feel the need to instantly tweet out unconfirmed information to their followers, all you have to do is think of the modern Internet reporter as some form of super Redditor—to be silent is to lose points. To be retweeted is to gain them.46

In this manner, the ludic systems of the internet facilitate casual fantasies of the “super.” Internet reporters strive to become “some form of super Redditor,” while Redditors themselves jump to play online vigilante at a moment’s notice. Switching into Batman mode—an orientation to high-tech methods of investigation and intervention, a media complex informed by superhero narratives and video games—becomes a commonplace, unrestricted practice. And like Batman’s own methods, it affords both positive and negative outcomes at exactly the same time:

Consider the Boston Bombing and Reddit’s role in the aftermath. The Internet embraces superheroes like Batman: self-appointed justice-seekers at best, raging avengers at worst. After the tragic events at the Boston Marathon, the Internet, largely well-meaning, sprung into action, crowdsourcing hours of security footage, social media feeds, and other data to try to identify the twisted souls behind those events. After accusing several people wrongly, most users backed off the witch hunt. But the Internet also produced a wave of volunteer emergency responders. . . . Thanks to the Internet, that wave rippled around the world as Internet users paid medical bills, sent money and pizzas, created maps to shelter, or offered places to stay to stranded runners. People were as creative in finding ways to help as they are in creating parody videos. That day, we were truly a community.47

A double-edged sword, it seems—two sides of the same coin. This is a key point of Batman: Arkham Knight, as well, reflecting a persistent theme in the post–Frank Miller history of Batman stories. In the game, even as Batman uses his powerful gadgets and crimefighting techniques to restore order to Gotham, he ends up destroying major parts of the city and repeatedly gets his friends kidnapped, tortured, or killed. The neural-ghost of the Joker reminds Batman that his vigilante detective work, driven by an overwrought
sense of moral superiority and an unwavering faith in high-tech solutions, can have disastrous consequences: “After all, you’ve seen what happens when you drag your friends into this crazy little game of ours.”48 As Batman makes a series of difficult decisions that further endanger the city and his allies—tearing through the streets in his tanklike Batmobile, routinely stopping to brutalize every petty thief and tough guy in his way—the “crazy little game” presents important considerations for real-life superheroes.

Significantly, by the end of the main game narrative, Batman has literally become his own worst enemy. Before the Joker died in Batman: Arkham City, he had infected Batman with a virus containing the Joker’s genome. During the course of Batman: Arkham Knight, the Joker’s biochemical signature and psychotic personality gradually take over. At the climax of the game, the final battle happens inside Batman’s own mind: the game discloses a possible future where Batman, possessed by the sadistic drives of the Joker, rampages through Gotham and destroys everything he had once cherished. The player must suddenly take on the role of Joker-as-Batman, killing everyone, burning the city, while Alfred pleads with Batman to stop: “Please listen to me. After all the good you’ve done for the city, think about what you’re doing. Sir, I’m begging you. Master Bruce. Batman! You have to listen. . . . Please, please stop this rampage.” Here the game requires the player to inhabit multiple levels of identification simultaneously, temporarily aligning with the Joker—recognizing that, at this juncture, to keep playing means using Batman’s own expert abilities to wreak havoc—while actively fighting against the remaining traces of Batman-as-hero inside the crumbling ruins of Bruce Wayne’s psyche. Ultimately, the hero version of Batman emerges victorious, subduing the Joker personality by the force of will alone. Nevertheless, the virus remains in his system: the Joker infection could flare up again at any time. It serves as a commentary on the dangers of high-tech vigilantism while affirming the importance of heroic ideals and introspective deliberation. After all, however well intentioned they may be, in rushing to put on the mask of the online superhero—taking up the digital utility belt for some cause, rallying around a hashtag Bat-Signal—aspiring crusaders may misrecognize their own alignments, self-righteously obsessing over their own personal opinions and predilections, all the while overlooking their own latent Joker infections.

In recent years, for instance, online mobs of trolls have often descended on media critics who dare to offer negative reviews of geek movies, comics, or video games. On August 2, 2008, the entrepreneur Alyssa Royse posted a short essay on her blog called “Business Lessons from Batman and The Dark
Knight.” Poking fun at the cinematic bloat of Christopher Nolan’s 2008 film, *The Dark Knight*, Royse’s blog post was about the branding challenges of startup companies, taking the film as “a cautionary parable for the mistakes entrepreneurs make.” According to Royse, “[The Dark Knight] is a study in what happens when a director tries to do more than they can, loses focus, is fake, gets too big a team and misses opportunities. The death knell of both a film and a startup.” She expressed her distaste for the film while reading it as an object lesson: “[The Dark Knight] was an orgiastic cocktail of chaos and delusion steeped in self-indulgent whining. It tried to do too much: psychoanalyze 4 characters, throw in some international intrigue, and oh, oh, oh, can we blow up a lot of stuff, and oh oh oh, how about that cool tech thing and that cool gadget and . . . You can’t do that much in a single film. Just can’t.” Her thoughts about the movie seemed to hit a sensitive nerve in the interwebs. The post was viewed more than ten thousand times. Hundreds of people left vicious threats and sexist jokes in the comments section of the blog, excoriating Royse for her remarks about Batman: “Get a life you two dollar whore blogger, The Dark Knight doesn’t suck, you suck! Don’t ever post another blog or unless you want to get ganged up”; “you are clearly retarded, i hope someone shoots then rapes you”; “if you were my wife i would beat you”; “This is why women are too stupid to think critically and intelligently about film; and business for that matter.” As the trolls swept in to defend Batman, using the simple web tools at their disposal to punish the blogger for a misperceived slight, they proved to be less on the side of justice than the side of terror and mayhem—the dark side of the lulz.

They did not resemble Batman, after all, but rather Batzarro—the twisted Bizarro World clone of Batman, who seems to think he is a hero but is actually the “world’s worst detective,” committing the very crimes he hopes to solve. If only these avid defenders of the Dark Knight had actually paid more attention to the comic books, in this regard! Or even had they played the “Bizarro” expansion pack for the 2014 *LEGO Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* video game, where the delusions of Batzarro and the other Bizarro World characters are rendered awkwardly playable: an ironic tale about the difficulties of saving the world while getting everything completely backassward. At inopportune moments, for example, Batzarro’s high-tech cowl spins around so that he cannot see where he is going—and when he throws his exploding batarangs, they often come right back to smack his own head.

Or consider GamerGate. The trigger for this bleak moment in gaming history happened in August 2014, when Eron Gjoni, an ex-boyfriend of the indie game developer Zoe Quinn, published a bitter screed on the *Penny*
Arcade and Something Awful forums, as well as a WordPress blog called The Zoe Post. Gjoni accused Quinn of infidelity, claiming that she had slept with several men in the games industry as well as a Kotaku reporter during the period of their relationship. On 4chan, some readers saw The Zoe Post as evidence of foul play in the gaming world, alleging that Quinn had exchanged sex for career advancement and favorable media coverage of her 2013 game Depression Quest. These salacious allegations were false, bristling with misogyny, but they propagated among certain online communities, some ostensibly concerned with ethics in games journalism, others more concerned with the growing prominence of women in software development. Discussions raged on 4chan, The Escapist forums, YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit, fomenting a conspiracy theory that feminists and other left-leaning elements were actively trying to destroy gamer culture. The idea was that, evidently, progressive game developers, journalists, and academics were collaborating through backdoor channels to promote “fringe” titles such as Depression Quest while also trying to undermine the legitimacy of mainstream games, critiquing the gender and racial politics of popular franchises, apparently with the goal of changing the entire games industry and spoiling everything. From this perspective, the Quinn situation (the “Quinnspiracy”) started to look like the tip of a vast iceberg. The actor Adam Baldwin, attending to these increasingly unhinged gamer discussions, coined the hashtag #GamerGate.

Now given a name, the sense of a movement, supporters began strategizing to confront the alleged conspiracy, specifically targeting Quinn, the game developer Brianna Wu, the media critic Anita Sarkeesian, the programmer Randi Harper, the journalist Leigh Alexander, and a number of other figures in the software industry, tech media, and academic game studies. The GamerGate attacks included doxing, swatting, hijacking social media accounts, and sending endless threats of rape, murder, and grotesque brutality. Over a period of months, Quinn, Wu, and Sarkeesian each had to flee their homes and cancel public appearances due to the escalation of violent threats. Anyone who publicly critiqued GamerGate or challenged sexism, racism, and homophobia in games risked becoming a new target.

On 4chan, the GamerGate debates became so explosive that Christopher Poole, the founder of the site, decided to ban discussion of these issues in September 2014. Despite 4chan’s reputation as a space for relatively unrestricted speech, GamerGate was tearing the community apart. (For Poole, already fatigued from other recent scandals, it was the last straw: not long after he became a target of GamerGate’s ire, Poole announced that he was selling 4chan and retiring as its administrator.) Undaunted, GamerGate simply
relocated to 8chan and other sites that were more welcoming of its rancor. Nevertheless, it represented a pivotal moment in the history of 4chan, marking an ongoing transition from the more anarchic, collectivist shock discourse that had produced Anonymous toward the identitarian obsessions of the alt-right, which had been hiding in plain sight on 4chan for many years, especially on the /pol/ “Politically Incorrect” board. As one longtime 4chan-ner later observed,

Despite most of the rightist discussion being limited on /pol/, there was a website-wide rightening of 4chan culture. . . . While GamerGate started off as a very diverse, vocal opponent to what they saw was unethical journalism (before it was debunked), many of the anonymous /pol/ rightists would take advantage of its anti-left character by creating sock-puppets [i.e., alternate personas to amplify reactionary positions]. . . . Today it is hard to find a 4chan user that doesn’t have an attachment to far right politics. By being anonymous, rightists took advantage of their lack of identity to spread a hateful world-view.51

The hacktivist vanguard of Anonymous had largely migrated to other online spaces by this time—and, of course, many other Anons had been arrested for their participation in Operation Sony and other protest activities, significantly chilling any lingering social-justice aspirations on 4chan. Yet some Anonymous hackers rallied to strike back against the troll armies of GamerGate, even launching a counteroffensive dubbed Operation Gamer-Gate on October 24, 2014. Commander X, one of the operation’s organizers, noted that both Anonymous and GamerGate had germinated on 4chan, seeing them as twin offspring of the same technogenic forces: “4chan and specifically /b/ is a breeding ground for Internet culture. Probably the most fertile breeding ground. That means it is going to give birth to both the good and evil, the full spectrum of moral memes.”52 It was therefore the duty of Anonymous to fight its 4chan doppelgänger, its Bizarro World duplicate. Planning to identify the IP addresses of those participating in the harassment campaigns and to expose their true names, Anonymous promised to end GamerGate with maximum carnage: “This is going to be a troll genocide, fucking beautiful.”53

But before this operation even got off the ground, a different faction speaking in the name of Anonymous called on Operation GamerGate to stand down: “Many of Anonymous are gamers. We understand that gamers are diverse, and labels such as ‘misogynist’ and ‘terrorist’ make no sense to use for the entire group. The label ‘gamer’ is currently under attack by fringe
feminists and corporate bullies. This is a message to any Anonymous involved in Operation GamerGate. Do not blindly follow others. . . . We condemn Operation GamerGate. . . . We do not endorse any of their actions. . . . WE ARE GAMERS. WE ARE ANONYMOUS. . . . WE ARE LEGION. EXPECT US.” The meaning was clear: if Anonymous tried to destroy GamerGate, it would also be at war with itself—hivemind versus hivemind, gamer versus gamer.

Meanwhile, GamerGate turned its wrath on particular websites that were disparaging of the movement or openly supportive of diversity in gaming culture, especially Gamasutra, Kotaku, Ars Technica, Polygon, and Gawker, even coordinating a massive letter-writing campaign to pressure advertisers to withdraw from these sites. The editor-in-chief of Gawker, Max Read, later reflected on the tenacity of the GamerGaters, their dogged, win-at-all-costs attitude honed by years of playing video games: “As Gawker was imploding in the summer of 2015, a group of teenage-video-game enthusiasts was throwing gasoline on the already-raging fire. These were the Gamergaters. Of all the enemies Gawker had made over the years—in New York media, in Silicon Valley, in Hollywood—none were more effective than the Gamergaters. . . . What I’d missed about Gamergate was that they were gamers—they had spent years developing a tolerance for highly repetitive tasks. Like, say, contacting major advertisers.” Gawker lost advertising revenue during the GamerGate debacle while gamers turned the site’s survival into a playable challenge, a major boss battle. In 2016, Gawker Media—the parent company of Gawker and Kotaku—went bankrupt after losing a sex-tape lawsuit filed by Hulk Hogan. The Gawker website shut down. The GamerGaters rejoiced, claiming Hulk Hogan as one of their own.

Many were keen to emphasize that their experiences as gamers had prepared them for such media skirmishes. As one infamous bit of GamerGate copypasta explained,

They targeted gamers.
Gamers.

We’re a group of people who will sit for hours, days, even weeks on end performing some of the hardest, most mentally demanding tasks. Over, and over, and over all for nothing more than a little digital token saying we did.

We’ll punish our selves doing things others would consider torture, because we think it’s fun.

We’ll spend most if not all of our free time min maxing the stats of a fictional character all to draw out a single extra point of damage per
These people honestly think this is a battle they can win? They take our media? We're already building a new one without them. They take our devs? Gamers aren't shy about throwing their money elsewhere, or even making the games ourselves. They think calling us racist, misogynistic, rape apologists is going to change us? We've been called worse things by prepubescent 10 year olds with a shitty head set. They picked a fight against a group that's already grown desensitized to their strategies and methods. Who enjoy the battle of attrition they've threatened us with. Who take it as a challenge when they tell us we no longer matter. Our obsession with proving we can after being told we can't is so deeply ingrained from years of dealing with big brothers/sisters and friends laughing at how pathetic we used to be that proving you people wrong has become a very real need; a honed reflex.

Gamers are competitive, hard core, by nature. We love a challenge. The worst thing you did in all of this was to challenge us. You're not special, you're not original, you're not the first; this is just another boss fight.56

Rhetorically, the GamerGaters cast themselves as upstart insurgents confronting an entrenched army of “Social Justice Warriors” (or sjws) and “White Knights,” imagining cartoonish, larger-than-life enemies committed to the eradication of fun and masculine privilege. Standing against such intolerable forces of change, GamerGaters fashioned their own side as the domain of true superheroes. On December 6, 2014, Brianna Wu inadvertently accelerated this figuration with a series of tweets comparing Batman's shadow war on crime to her own struggle against the trolls: “I watched Dark Knight again recently, and my God did it feel similar to my own life. . . . You have a city that ignored a problem to the point the criminals took over. Bruce Wayne, because of his painful past, stands up to them. . . . Meanwhile, you have Joker and his gang, who are simply having fun burning the city to the ground. They have no conscience. . . . And even though standing up to them comes at a deep, painful, personal cost to Batman, many people in the city have no gratitude. . . . It's not just me, it's all the women that have been targeted. The whole week has been hell for me, Zoe and Randi. And I'm exhausted.”57

GamerGaters responded with disdain to Wu's tweets and other superhero references made by their victims, insisting that sjws were merely pretending to be heroes, posing in fake costumes, while GamerGaters were the real champions of truth and freedom. One issue of the GamerGate Life webcomic illustrates this common refrain (fig. 5.13). Kukuruyo, a Spanish cartoonist,
created GamerGate Life to bolster the movement: “Gamergate, a movement that started on August 2014 due to some related events in a shot period of time, all related to unethical behavior on games journalism and the invasion of the so called Social justice warriors, people who want to apply censorship and force changes into the industry while not playing games themselves. Those related events made people unite with a single goal, defend gaming and freedom of expresion.” The webcomic series features the cousins Vivian James (a character developed on 4chan to represent GamerGate) and Lillian Woods (a character developed by Nightwulfe1 to represent anti-GamerGate, later adopted by GamerGaters as a caricature of the Social Justice Warrior). In this particular episode, Lillian Woods wears a Batman costume and claims Batman’s identity. However, the two figures behind her shoulders are wearing Harley Quinn and Two-Face costumes, suggesting that the sjw league is secretly aligned with criminals. Superman, bearing a GamerGate flag, swoops down and initiates a Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice faceoff (dir. Zack Snyder, 2016). Superman’s pro-GamerGate intervention here alludes to a comment made on July 31, 2015 by the actor Dean Cain, who played Superman in the 1990s TV show Lois and Clarke. As Kukuruyo

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explains on his website, “Dean expressed his full support to gamers and the Gamergate movement, commenting how he has been a gamer all his life. So, yeah, we have Superman on our side.”\(^{59}\) In this regard, the cartoon allegory implies that Dean Cain playacting as Superman is more authentic than Lillian Woods playacting as Batman. The comic suggests that Superman—the true hero, bulging with muscles, towering above Lillian with clenched fists and a smile—will pound the gang of female SJWs into submission.

It was a prevalent trope, a mode of self-fashioning. One GamerGater wrote, “They’re not Batman. They are the side with the White Knights and the Jokers. We’re the ones who Dark Knight the whole time trying to save our hobby from the corrupt while the general population think we’re criminals. We’re the ones banished to the Darknet but still fight for justice. We are all Batman.”\(^{60}\) Others instead found parallels with the Hulk: “I thought of GamerGate (as a whole) more like The Hulk. When at rest, it’s brilliant and analytical, most often rational and up for debate. When angered it’s a force of nature, unstoppable.”\(^{61}\) Yet others suggested comparisons to Spider-Man, pointing to the idea of an ordinary guy suddenly made extraordinary thanks to high-tech interventions (the radioactive spider and the homemade web-slingers), noting as well the similarly facetious attitude, the fraught relationship with the press (“The media is JJ Jameson and Gamergate is Spiderman”), and the tactical use of information technologies for archiving and distributing evidence. After all, both Spider-Man and GamerGate “work on the web.”\(^{62}\)

As another GamerGater explained,

If anything, I feel that GamerGate is Spiderman. . . .

- Spiderman is a superhero who doesn’t need any money to do good.
- The press slanders him but he continues to do good anyway.
- For some reason, we attract a lot of bad guys but we just want to do good.
- He want proper press about himself.
- He is an ordinary everyday sort of guy that no one sees that he can potentially be someone special.
- He cracks jokes in the middle of a fight the same way we laugh at the foolish efforts of the other side.
- He takes a lot of pictures of himself while fighting crime to send to get positive press about him the same way GamerGate screenshots and archives anything positive GG has done to show that we’re good.\(^{63}\)
Desperately wanting “to show that we’re good,” numerous supporters of GamerGate tried to forge a narrative of the virtuous crusade. Other Gamer-Gaters, however, came to embrace the tropes of villainy, conceding their antagonistic relationship to social values. The media personality Milo Yiannopoulos, for example, opportunistically jumped on the GamerGate bandwagon in September 2014 to promote the racist and misogynistic discourse of the alt-right, celebrating GamerGate as an antifeminist, antiliberal uprising. Although he had formerly dismissed gamers as “pungent beta male bollock scratchers” and social outcasts (“Few things are more embarrassing than grown men getting over-excited about video games”), at the time of GamerGate he made an abrupt about-face, professing a newfound admiration for geek culture. He also began to describe himself as the “most fabulous supervillain on the internet.”

Following suit, some GamerGate factions joined Milo in advertising a supervillain image. For example, a few suggested that Bane—the pharmaceutically enhanced criminal mastermind, one of Batman’s recurring foes who sometimes, perplexingly, endorses ideas of social justice and economic equality through a murderous fundamentalism—could serve as the movement’s moral compass. As one GamerGater tweeted, “Don’t forget the words of Bane, #GamerGate ‘It doesn’t matter who we are. What matters is our plan.'” Others said that Brianna Wu could keep her Batman quip, since GamerGaters were happy enough to cast their lot with the Clown Prince of Crime: “Brianna Wu is Batman and we’re the Joker gang.” Such labile position-switching and adventitious principles characterized GamerGate as a whole, which actually comprised several distinct, even incompatible agendas and perspectives, united only by a shared sense of disenfranchisement, a commitment to a medium allegedly under attack by dominant cultural forces, and an emboldened, militarized rhetoric of geek warfare.

The ambiguities, the incoherencies of GamerGate eventually folded back into video games themselves. For instance, one of the Batcomputer “City Stories” in the Batman: Arkham Knight game—unlocked by solving the Riddler’s challenges—tells about the Riddler’s “CrusaderGate” campaign, an attempt to turn the “internet’s idiotic and easily roused rabble” against the Dark Knight (fig. 5.14). But the campaign failed. The rabble instead turned on the Riddler, harassing him with homophobic slurs:

“Y do u attack B@man? He is b@sed! U r a fa—”

Riddler deleted the email, and all the others like it, as prickly hot anger and shame squirmed through his insides. No point in denying it: #CrusaderGate had been a disastrous social media campaign.
He couldn’t understand it. Seemed the internet’s idiotic and easily roused rabble could froth itself into a full-fat cappuccino of frenzy over “white knights.” But offer it up a Dark one—on a plate!—and you get a soy latte’s worth of indignation at best! Didn’t they understand what Batman had done?

This tiny incident in Batman: Arkham Knight provided an ironic capstone to the GamerGate mess, showcasing the Riddler’s befuddlement at the whole movement. Riddle me this: how could they rile themselves into a frenzy over White Knights and Social Justice Warriors but align themselves with Batman at the same time? “Didn’t they understand what Batman had done?” pondered the Riddler—recalling not only his own humiliation at the hands of the Dark Knight, but also everything in Batman’s career that would suggest an overriding commitment to social ideals of justice. No wonder that the Riddler seems confused here. It remains a puzzle that even the GamerGaters have been hard-pressed to resolve.

As these various examples indicate, the mapping of superhero mythologies onto video games and other computational tools—sometimes sincere, sometimes tongue-in-cheek—affords a potent set of resources for intervention in the networked world, frameworks or scripts for the practice of technogenic...
life. Playing superhero—whether on a gaming console, a search engine, or the interwebs of social media—rehearses a desire for resistance, a struggle against obstinate systems. Even if resistance fails, the superhero framework renders the stakes all the more sublime, narrated in continuity with a multitude of other endeavors, other fights to secure the future or disrupt it entirely.

Yet many different ideological positions and competing forces now situate themselves in relation to the discourse of high-tech superpowers—and they draw promiscuously from the same toolkits, employing all the same tactics and strategies. The distinction between the good guys and the bad guys, the superheroes and the supervillains, tends to get rather blurry. But this situation only further affirms the value of superhero stories for making sense of the transformative energies afoot in the world today, the ways in which games and computational media allow us to reach out from our own bedrooms and immediately intervene in the lives of others far away. As instruments of applied science fiction, superhero stories sometimes reinforce fascistic tendencies, aspirations to defend the status quo with overwhelming might—but they can also help us imagine a better tomorrow and unlock surprising achievements. As fables of high-tech enhancement, parables of the respawn function, they offer critical insights and ethical deliberations for a moment in history when fabulous secret powers can be activated at will, unleashed by the click of a button. Our world needs heroes, certainly—as well as the wisdom to survive our own superhuman condition.

As Spider-Man himself learned long ago, with great power there must also come great responsibility.