The end of our worlds.

Word count: 1,194

‘VIDEO GAME DEVELOPER CONVICTED OF 14 CYBER-CRIME CHARGES FLEES THE COUNTRY.’

Val tossed the newspaper aside, tired of ridiculous headlines. She sipped her coffee at the café two blocks away from her office. “Attempted to steal private data and make a virtual parallel universe- pft. Yeah, right,” She didn’t know the convict, yet felt sympathy for him. Her brother was a gamer, nerd-ing over games all day; well, before he went missing a couple of weeks ago. Sometimes, she would still see him, a tall and skinny frame, honey skin and jet-black hair, just as she could see him across the café. *Wait, what?*

She gasped to herself. Cameron was there, except he looked unusual, almost virtual, with an outlined figure that stood out against everything else in his surroundings. Puzzled, Val began to take a step back, stepping on someone’s foot behind her. “Im so sor-” Val yelped, too startled to speak. Nothing seemed to make sense. The woman behind her had red hair that faded into brown at the ends, a long face, droopy brown eyes and honey skin. The badge on her uniform read ‘Valerie.’

“I have to talk to you,” she claimed in a painfully familiar voice. Val acted on instinct, smacked the clone across her face with her bag and dashed through the door. Her mind was spinning. She jumped up the staircase of her building, fidgeting her bag for her keys. She opened her door with shaking hands and slammed it shut behind her. None of it made any sense. The odd images kept flashing as she tried to comprehend what had just unfolded—*the newspaper.*

*A video game developer, his name redacted for privacy reasons/ attempted to create a game based on reality/ parallel universe/ compromised privacy/ unethical hacking/ spyware/*

“It is your brother,” a voice from behind said. Val jumped. ‎It was Valerie, her virtual avatar. “How’d you get in here?” she asked, trembling.

“I don’t belong in this realm. The physics on here doesn’t apply to me.”

Val was convinced she was having a fever dream.

“So again, how did you get here?”

“Technical glitch and bad timing, I guess. Your brother, he uh-”

“I saw him!”

“No, uh, that’s why I’m here. He is, uhh, trapped in a game?”

“What did you DO to him?” Val screamed, choking back tears.

“Woah hold on- I didn’t do anyth-” “I have a gun!” Val threatened.

“Sweetie, you can’t kill me; I’m not real.”

Val fell on the floor, sobbing. *What is happening to me?*

She felt a hand on her shoulder. “Listen, I can explain everything if you let me. Your brother attempted to make this crazy parallel universe, but it went out of control. He is trapped in the other realm, and some of us are trapped here. Our worlds are colliding, and it’s getting worse by the second. Time is relative. What a day is for us is a second in your world, which I don’t see sustaining for too long. We have to save your brother and pretty much this whole town.”

Something in Val made her move. As weird as it was, it was her only chance to get Cameron back. They headed outside.

“The local arcade has a portal to the virtual universe. There is a procedure to enter. Although I don’t know if I remember all the steps.” She frowned.

“But you might figure it out. I guess your proximity to him-DUCK!” A giant boulder flew past them as the avatar pushed Val away behind the building wall.

Breathless, Val took a peak outside. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Giant boulders flying in the air, and Minotaurs?

“You said it was a parallel universe; this is an apocalypse!” she cried.

“Well, he sampled an existing game that happened to have Minotaurs.”

Val felt all her energy leave her body and evaporate into thin air. The avatar explained the strategy to make it to the arcade without Val being killed by a boulder or a Minotaur. ‘Here, take this.” She handed a copper-plated sword to Val.

They ran across the street. A Minotaur came charging towards them. The avatar carried Val up to its face on her shoulders as Val stabbed his left eye with her sword. Blood spilt all over them. The minotaur shrieked in pain.

They continued running. “I can help you break into a car.” She claimed and headed to the Mustang on the side of the road, magically entering through it and unlocking it from inside, letting Val in.

Val had barely any control as they were speeding on the road with sudden breaks and sharp turns. “WATCH OUT!” A boulder was in full view, heading right at them. Val turned sharply, hitting a tree and breaking the Mustang’s front bonnet open. They yelp in shock as they black out for a second, and then the avatar shrieks in pain. Val turns to see the horror. The passenger door was broken, and she was on the floor, coughing blood. Val crawls out of the car. The sight is horrible.

“Don’t worry about me. I can’t die here. Please go, save your brother.” She manages to spit out a few words. “Go, VAL, GO!” she screams through her bloodied mouth.

Val runs, with guilt and fright burning her insides. The arcade is right in front of her now, empty. She does as instructed by her avatar. Places her hand on the fifth tile. Nothing happens. A sense of betrayal crawls up her spine. Her tears stream down her face and onto the tile. While the entire arcade is dead silent and dark, one game in the back corner lights up. Val runs to the game so fast that she slips several times before getting a good grip on the floor. Painted black with red borders and buttons, the screen lights up. She does exactly as she was told- press X three times and turn the joystick anti-clockwise five times.

WELCOME. The screen displays. ENTER YOUR NAME.

Val chooses the letters, anticipation growing at each letter. C-A-M-P-U. Cameron. And his stupid parallel universe. Is this it? Val waited for the screen to change, to be zooped into the screen and enter another universe. Nothing happens.

ENTER COIN(S)

Val’s face drops and loses all colour. Her mind spirals, with her avatar’s voice playing in her mind. *Although I don’t know If I remember all the steps.*

Unbelievable. There was no way Val had come so far only to lose for so little. She aimlessly moved the joystick and scratched the screen, sobbing. “LET ME IN CAMERON, LET ME SAVE YOU!”

Another loud thud. She flinched and turned. The sky was an indescribable shade of purple, almost too unreal. Minotaurs and destruction. A pink oval in the sky seemed to grow larger at a concerning rate, as though ripping the heavens and the earth apart, screeching, until pink was all she could see. Her life flashed before her eyes. Her back leaned against the game, radiating warmth that felt like her brother’s presence.

“I’m so sorry, Cameron.” She whispered. “If only I had a dirham.” She closed her eyes.