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**Austin Grossman's**  
**You**

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—Kate Tuttle, *Boston Globe*

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—Stefan Raets, *Tor.com*

“A work of fiction dedicated to the folks who create the worlds millions of people lose themselves in every day.”

—Evan Narcisse, *Kotaku*

“I highly recommend this novel to anyone who is fascinated by the mechanics of storytelling, and the way fantasy shapes our perceptions of reality.”

—Annalee Newitz, *i09.com*

**YOU**

**Also by Austin Grossman**

*Soon I Will Be Invincible*

# YOU

A NOVEL

AUSTIN  
GROSSMAN



MULHOLLAND BOOKS

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

NEW YORK BOSTON LONDON

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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*To everyone making games.*





For they are actions that a man might play,  
But I have that within which passeth show...

— WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
*HAMLET*



## **SWORD IN ONE HAND, BLASTER IN THE OTHER!**

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BLACK ARTS STUDIOS ADVERTISEMENT

*GAMELORDS* MAGAZINE, MAY 1992



**YOU**





PART I

THE ULTIMATE  
GAME







# Chapter One

So what's your ultimate game?"

He made it sound like a completely normal question, and I guess in this context it was. My long afternoon of interviews had come down to these two strangers. A tall guy, twentyish, with an angular face and graying hair pulled back in a ponytail, who enunciated everything very precisely, as if speaking into a touchy voice-recognition program. The other one was slightly over five feet tall, with long, Jesus-like, wavy dark hair and a faded black T-shirt that read CTHULHU FOR PRESIDENT; WHY SETTLE FOR THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS? It was from 1988.

"Right." I swallowed. "So, how exactly do you define that?"

None of the questions was what I expected. Most of them were esoteric thought experiments, "How would you turn *Pride and Prejudice* into a video game?" and "If you added a button to *Pac-Man*, what would you want it to do?" Conundrums like "How come when Mario jumps he can change direction in midair?" And now this one.

"You know, the game you'd make if you could make any game at all," the long-haired designer explained.

"Forget about budget," the short guy added. "You're in charge. Just do anything! Greatest game ever!"

I opened my mouth to answer and then stopped. It was obviously a throwaway question, a way to close out the afternoon on a fun note. And so it was weird that my mind had gone blank when it was the one

question I should have known the answer to, given that I was interviewing for a job as a video game designer.

I'd spent the past few hours in a state of mild culture shock. I'd arrived forty minutes early at the address the office manager gave me over the phone, an anonymous office complex at the far limit of the Red Line, past Harvard and Porter, where Cambridge gave out entirely, lapsed into empty lots and restaurants on the wrong side of Alewife Brook Parkway, and then into wetlands, brackish water, and protected species like sweet flag and pickerelweed.

Beyond the wetlands were the forested hills and the suburbs Arlington and Belmont and Newton where I grew up. Alewife was built to be the point of exchange between Cambridge and the true suburbs. It was also home to the acres of office space demanded by high-tech companies spun off from academic research and funded by the Department of Defense, IT training schools, human resources offices, real estate companies, and tax attorneys. Coming back here felt like I'd made it to the big city and now was on the verge of drifting back out into the nowhere beyond. This was where Black Arts Studios set up shop.

This particular building was apparently designed in the early eighties, while the Department of Defense was still funding blue-sky tech companies. The heavy glass doors led into a three-story lobby and courtyard with a fountain, pastel Mediterranean tiling, and incongruous broad-leafed faux-tropical foliage. It had a humid, greenhouse smell even in the oddly chilly spring of 1997; the frosted skylights let in a perpetually dim half-light. About half the office space looked empty.

Black Arts was on the third floor. There was no sign or number on the door, so I wandered back and forth along the balcony until I saw a piece of paper with BLACK ARTS written in black Magic Marker taped to the inside of a glass window reinforced with chicken wire. There was no doorbell. Through the square of glass I could see an empty reception area, and behind it an open doorway leading to a dimly lit office.

I wasn't exactly comfortable in a job interview, and what made it worse was I already knew these people—pretty well, actually. We'd met when we were in high school together, fourteen years ago. Now I would be asking them for work, in the company they started. Darren and Simon were the cofounders. They'd been friends since as long as anyone could remember. Simon I remembered as small and dark-haired, round-faced, with olive skin that never seemed to see the sunlight. He wore checkered shirts and corduroys and never seemed to quite come into an adult body—at fifteen he could have passed for twelve. He was supposed to be smart but for some reason didn't take any advanced classes. Pathetic, but so dorky as to almost round the corner into menacing. People claimed he built pipe bombs and had hacked a kid's grades on the school computer once. They laughed at him, but not to his face.

Darren was taller and horse-faced and passably athletic. He ran track one year, but when he got to high school he grew his hair out, dropped the athletics and the honors classes, found an old army jacket and wore it all the time.

They were a fixture, short and tall, two different flavors of loser. You'd see them walking home every day, Simon's hands shaping the air. What did they talk about? Comics, movies, inside jokes held over from the fourth grade? Another teen friendship, another tiny mysterious universe.

I met them in an intro to programming class, and six years later they were legends, the two burnout kids who founded a computer game company and got rich. But even the money wasn't as alluring as the idea that they'd made video games their jobs, even before anybody knew that games were going to turn into an industry, an entertainment medium as big as the movies—bigger, if you believed some people. Simon and Darren made money out of—well, being awesome, essentially.

Don and Lisa went with them, too—got rich, stayed, won. Meanwhile,

I went on to an English degree, a year of law school, an internship at a doomed newspaper in Dallas, sublets in Cambridge, Queens, Somerville, San Francisco (a new start!), Austin, Madison, and imminently, nowhere.

Simon never graduated from college. He was killed four years ago, in a ridiculous accident that resulted in security cameras being placed inside all the elevator shafts of all the buildings on that particular campus. He wasn't even a student there.

People were already starting to talk about him as a genius on a par with Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, and about what he might have done if he lived. The software he left behind was still state of the art in some ways, even though he wrote it way back in the eighties, before video games were in 3-D, before CD drives, before photo-real graphics. It was called the WAFFLE engine, a witches' brew of robust world simulation and procedural content generation, the thing that powered Black Arts games first, to critical success, then to profitability, then to becoming a runaway phenomenon. It was still under the hood of every game they made; it had a weird genius *x* factor to it; it had never been surpassed or even duplicated. Before Simon died he was working on a project that he claimed would be the next generation of the technology. He used the word *ultimate* more than once—in fact, right there in the title of his proposal (it was meant to finally get him his BA from MIT; they'd as much as offered it to him, but he never followed through): “The Ultimate Game: A Robust Scheme for Procedurally Generated Narrative.” There had even been a press conference, but no copy of the proposal had ever been found. The idea—the Fermat's last theorem of video game technology—lingered on at Black Arts.

I should say, people have had the impression Simon killed himself, or else died as part of a game. That was the way it was reported in most of the papers. “A ‘Gamer Death’ on Campus,” as if there were such a phrase. More than one dipshit psychology professor said things like,

“It’s not uncommon for these self-identified ‘gamers’ to lose the ability to distinguish between what is a game . . . and what is reality.”

First of all, this is a viewpoint that is frankly idiotic. People who play games don’t get killed or go crazy any more often than anyone else. It’s just that people point it out when they do. Second of all, Simon was a person with a vocation, one of the few people I’ve ever met for whom this was unmistakably the case. He wasn’t out of touch with reality, he was simply opposed to it. Third of all, fuck reality. If Simon didn’t like the world he grew up in, he has my wholehearted support and agreement. I went to his funeral, as did his many friends. They were not any kind of checked-out gamer fringe; it turns out a dude in a kilt who introduces himself as “Griffin” can be honestly, normatively upset that his friend got killed in a ridiculous accident.

When I heard that Simon had died, I tried to find something appropriate to feel. What I did feel wasn’t flattering. We hadn’t been friends since the early 1980s. I was still young enough to feel the death of someone I’d known as a novelty. Like it was one more aspect of Simon’s eccentricity, or his genius. One more place Simon got to before the rest of us. I felt sorry we’d been out of touch, sorry because we’d both vowed to do the impossible, and it was the only vow I’d ever made, and I hadn’t done it, and Simon—well, that was the thing. I was partly there because I wanted to know what exactly happened. How far Simon had gotten.

I let myself in. I smelled fresh paint; I could hear somebody laughing.

“Hello?” I called into the darkness.

A teenager in a black T-shirt looked out. He was built on a fun-house scale—my height but twice my width, a fat kid with the arms and chest of a linebacker. “Oh, hey. Are you Russell?”

“Yes, that’s me,” I answered, relieved.

“I’m Matt. Hang on.” He turned and yelled down the hall. “He’s here!”

He waved me inside, into a room that turned out to be almost half of

the building's third floor. It was a dim cavern, kept in semidarkness by venetian blinds. From what I could see it was mostly open space. Soda cans and industrial-size bags of popcorn had accumulated in the corners, along with a yoga ball, stacks of colorfully illustrated rule books, and what appeared to be a functioning crossbow. It looked like the aftermath of a weekend party held by a band of improbably wealthy ten-year-olds. In fact, there was a man curled up under one desk in a puffy blue sleeping bag. A young woman in a tie-dyed dress and sandals was sitting against one wall, typing on a laptop, ignoring me, her blond hair done in elaborate braids.

While I waited for Matt to come back, I looked at a wall of framed magazine covers and Game of the Year awards. I went over to one of the computers, which showed what I thought at first was an animated movie of a space battle, but when I touched the mouse the camera panned around the scene, and I saw it was a functioning game, a fully realized environment navigable in three dimensions. I hadn't been paying much attention to video games for a few years, not since I'd graduated from college. Did they turn into something totally different when I wasn't looking?

I was born in 1969, which was the perfect age for everything having to do with video gaming. It meant I was eight when the Atari 2600 game console came out; eleven when *Pac-Man* came out; seventeen for *The Legend of Zelda*. Personal computers were introduced just as our brains were entering that first developmental ferment of early cognitive growth, just in time to scar us forever. In 1978, kids were getting called out of class in the middle of the morning. A woman from the principal's office (whose name I never learned) quietly beckoned us out two at a time, alphabetically, and ushered us back in fifteen minutes later. When our turn came, I went with a boy named Shane. I was tingling a little bit just with the specialness of the moment, the interruption of routine. We were led down the hall to sit in one corner of the school secretary's office in front of a boxy appliance that turned out to be a computer. It was new, a Commodore PET computer.

The PET's casing was all one piece, monitor and keyboard and an embedded cassette tape drive forming a blunt, gnomonic pyramid. It was alien, palpably expensive, and blindingly futuristic in a room that smelled of the mimeograph machine used to print handouts in a single color, a pale purple—a machine operated in exactly the same manner as when it was introduced in the 1890s, with a crank.

The lady sat us down and quietly walked away. Shane and I looked at each other. I don't know what he felt, but there was a realization stirring inside me. They didn't know what the machine was. They'd been given it, but they didn't know how to use it. It didn't do much. It didn't understand swear words or regular English. It played a couple of games, *Snake* and *Lunar Lander*. After fifteen minutes she led us back to class and brought out the next two kids, who would also type swear words into it.

But it was probably the most generous and the most humble gesture I received from an adult in the sixteen-year duration of my schooling. The woman was simply leaving us alone with our future, the future she wouldn't be part of. She didn't know how to do it or what it was, but she was trying to give it to us.

As we grew, the medium grew. Arcade games boomed in the late seventies and eighties and gave rise to video-game arcades themselves, built in retrofitted department stores and storefront offices, making money in twenty-five-cent increments, floods of quarters warmed with adolescent body heat. These were the cooler, dumber cousins of the quiet, hardworking PET. Video games had the street swagger and the lowest-common-denominator glitz of pinball machines refracted through the seemingly ineradicable nerdiness of digital high tech.

I was older when I started going to arcades—eleven, maybe. I relaxed in the warm, booming darkness of the arcade, the wall of sound, and the warm air, smelling of sweat and teenage boys and electronics. The darkness was broken only by neon strips, mirrored disco balls, and the lighted change booth. Looking around the arcade was

like seeing thirty Warner Bros. cartoons playing at once, shown ultra-bright and overspeed.

The state of the technology meant characters were drawn on 8-by-12-pixel grids, a strangely potent, primitive scale. Dogs and mailmen and robots became luminous pictoglyphs hovering in the dark. The cursory, dashed-off feel of the stories seemed to have opened a vein of vivid whimsy in the minds of the programmers and engineers of this first wave. The same limitations threw games into weird, nonperspectival spaces. Games like *Berzerk* and *Wizard of Wor* took place in bright Escher space, where overhead and side views combine.

And the dream-logic plots! Worlds where touching anything meant instant death; where mushrooms are friends and turtles are enemies. In each one I felt the presence of a deep logic living just offscreen, each one a bright painting telling a not-quite-explained story: Why am I a plumber fighting an ape for a princess? Why am I, a lone triangle, battling a fleet of squares? Who decided that?

And adults hated to be in there. It gave them headaches and made them look stupid when we all knew how to play and what to do because we were growing up with a technology whose buried rules made sense to us. In the swirling primordial mix of children and teenagers, hormones and technology were combining to form a new cultural idea. Some days I spent up to three hours in the arcade after school, dimly aware that we were the first people, ever, to be doing these things. We were feeling something they never had — a physical link into the world of the fictional — through the skeletal muscles of the arm to the joystick to the tiny person on the screen, a person in an imagined world. It was crude but real. We'd fashioned an outpost in the hostile, inaccessible world of the imagination, like dangling a bathysphere into the crushing dark of the deep ocean, a realm hitherto inaccessible to humankind. This is what games had become. Computers had their origin in military cryptography — in a sense, every computer game represents the commandeering of a military code-breaking apparatus for



purposes of human expression. We'd done that, taken that idea and turned it into a thing its creators never imagined, our own incandescent mythology.

One summer in middle school I finally got an Apple IIe, a beige plastic wedge with computer and keyboard in one piece, along with its own nine-inch monochrome monitor. I discovered the delinquent thrill of using copy programs like Locksmith to duplicate copy-protected games on 5.25-inch floppy disks and the trick of double-siding a disk by clipping a half-moon out of it with a hole puncher.

The idea of simulating an alternate world had taken over thousands of otherwise promising minds. It was the Apollo program for our generation, or maybe the Manhattan Project was a better analogy. Because everyone wanted to do it, and every year it got faster and better. I could feel it, the chance, the generational luck of being born alongside a new artistic form, the way Orson Welles was born at the right time to make *Citizen Kane* and define the greatness of a medium. It was a chance to own the artistic revolution of our time the way Jane Austen owned hers and D. W. Griffith owned his.

When I ran a game, the splash screen would give the name of the hacker who cracked it, names like Mr. Xerox, the Time Lord, Mr. Krac-Man. Who were these people who cracked games? Who made them, for that matter? How on earth did you get that job?

It was time to find out. It was time to say something. I had an audience of four or five people now. People had been shuffling in and out of the conference room all day, to listen or ask a few questions. All men, though, until Lisa, the third founder of Black Arts, came in. She looked as I remembered — pale, with a big forehead that made her look like a cartoon alien. She'd ditched the flowery dresses for a tentlike oversized black T-shirt. I remembered her from high school, from car rides home at two or three in the morning. In winter she drove with the window rolled down and the heat going full blast.

“The Ultimate Game,” I said. “I can do just . . . anything?”

They nodded. I felt ridiculous. Was the Ultimate Game the one in which I ride a hundred-foot-tall pink rhino through the streets, driving my enemies before me? The one where the chess pieces come alive and talk in a strange poetry? Is it just the game where I always win?

“Relax, guy,” the short guy said. “It’s just whatever you’re into. Your game.”

It was hard to say what was so particularly odd about the two of them. Maybe it was that even though everything about them screamed “loser,” they didn’t seem to care. In fact, they carried themselves like kings in T-shirts.

“So . . . okay, okay. You’re playing chess, right, but all the pieces are actual monsters, and when you take one you have to . . . actually fight . . . it?” Why were they looking at me that way?

“You mean like in *Archon*? For the C64?”

“Um. Right.” Lisa scowled even a little more. A bearded guy at the back rolled his eyes, as if in disbelief at what a loser I was; he was wearing a jester’s hat. It had come to this.

I’d wanted to say, but couldn’t, that what I really meant was the way it felt getting out of the car on that chill September morning, first day at Dartmouth, first day when I had a chance to be a new person and get it right this time after the hell of high school. How badly I wanted that moment back. Simon and Darren had chosen to be, well, awesome, and I hadn’t, I’d been a good little soldier and tried to be an adult, and up until today I’d forgotten that woman and the PET computer and what it felt like to be offered the future.

Before I left I had to stop off and see Don, the company’s fourth founder and current CEO. Unlike the other employees, he had an actual office,

a side room with a picture window looking out on the dark expanse of the work area.

“Good to see you again.” He shook my hand firmly, a grown-up hello. “KidBits, right? How’ve you been?”

He was even taller than I remembered. He’d grown a beard, which suited him.

“Good, good. Is Darren around?” I asked.

“Still in Nepal. He’s the same guy he was. So you really want to work here?” he asked. This was the moment I’d rehearsed more than any other, actually done it in the mirror. Eyes averted, I slid into the faux-casual delivery.

“I kind of do, Don. Law’s getting a little boring — I’m on to the next thing, you know?”

“Design? Programming? Assistant producer?”

“Design, I guess. Or producing. I’m not sure. My programming’s as shitty now as it ever was.”

“Did Jared ask you the ultimate game question?”

“Yup. It was a good question.”

“It is, isn’t it? I guess we’ll call you.”

“Thanks, man.” We shook hands again.

On the way out Lisa brushed past me, apparently on her way back from the snack machine. “Nice one,” she said. “Archon.” They didn’t have things like Asperger’s in the eighties; probably they’d have given her something for it.

“Thanks,” I answered. “See you later.”

I wanted to linger and get more of a look at the games, but there was no pretext for it, so I let myself out into the chilly evening. Outside, I kept on thinking about the game, the game this would be if my life were a game. The lamest computer game of all time.

“You are standing in a half-empty parking lot beside an

office building in suburban Massachusetts. The interview is over, and the sun is setting. What do you do next?"

LOOK

"You can see cars turning on their headlights as they crest the hill of Route Two and start the slow plunge toward Cambridge, then stack up through the Alewife traffic circle. It's getting cold. You have nowhere to be."

INVENTORY

"A worn leather wallet.

"Directions to the office, written on the back of a flier for an open-mike poetry reading.

"A navy blazer. You were incredibly overdressed this whole time."

WEST

"You walk along the bike path. You pass behind seafood restaurant. Most of the land around the parking structure was never developed. Lilac, small oaks, and tall grasses grow out of control here. Where exactly do you think you're going?"

WEST

"You can barely hear the highway behind you, and soon it fades out altogether. You can still see the sun through the branches overhead.

"Oddly enough, you find railway tracks crossing the path. Since when was there a railway line here? It hasn't been used in a long time, but you follow it anyway. The walking keeps you warm. Oak seedlings are growing up from in between the ties. In some places you can barely find the rails among the dirt and leaves.

"Sooner or later you'll round a bend and find Mass Ave. and catch a bus back into Cambridge and that will be that. No idea. Why, you think, did you have to play this character anyway?"

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WEST

WEST

WEST

“God, you’d walk forever if you thought it would get you out of here. The tracks take you uphill, and then you see, through a line of trees, a swing set. It’s the back of an elementary school.

“And that’s when the memory hits you, the thing that’s been bugging you the whole time. It’s been years since you thought of it, but it comes back all the way, breathed in like the burnt-carpet smell of the car Darren used to drive you around in.”