The Virtual Child, or Six Provocations on Children's Literature and (Pre-) Digital Culture

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What comes to mind when you hear the word "virtual"? Today, we tend to associate it with digital technology: virtual offices, virtual worlds, virtual reality, the newly virtual dimensions of our lives in the wake of COVID-19. The term, however, has a much longer and often controversial history. Rob Shields opens his book, *The Virtual*, with the following illustrative example: in 1556 a Calvinist archbishop named Thomas Cranmer asserted a "doctrine of Virtualism" in regards to the Eucharist—Christ does not have a "Real Presence" in bread and wine, the Calvinists argued, but rather a virtual one (5–6). The Eucharist, in other words, is the blood and flesh of Christ in essence but not actually. This claim proved so contentious that Cranmer was executed for heresy.

Now: what comes to mind when you think about children and the virtual? This combination could recall any number of contemporary debates, some of which might feel as heated as the fight over the Eucharist probably did in the sixteenth century. How much screen time should children be permitted? How and when are children vulnerable in virtual space? What can digital technology teach children, and when does it risk harming them? Are virtual worlds and spaces ruining the minds (and abilities) of future generations? These anxious questions, among many others, seemingly belong to what Samantha A. Smith and Simon A. Cole call "a new breed of techno-scientific moral panics" that concern themselves with the relationship between young people and emergent technologies (208).

Anxieties about children and the virtual might feel unique to the digital age, but as this essay clarifies, a longer, pre-digital history of "the virtual child" demonstrates that the child itself has long *been* "virtual," not merely—and only recently—*confronted by* the perils of virtual space. Such

a history illuminates the peculiarity of our current cultural moment, wherein worries about the digital virtual collide with the child's enduring construction (by adults) as a virtual being that is, simultaneously and paradoxically, both promising and threatening. As I will explain, we need only reexamine the endless attempts to define the child and delineate its characteristics to see the anxious tensions aroused by the child's ostensible virtuality.

Given the etymology of "virtual," I argue that we can characterize children's literature as part of a broader apparatus, one that includes schooling and related sociocultural institutions, that seek influence over the child's virtuality. Children's literature often aims to instill virtue, or moral quality, in the child, while mapping and regulating their *Virtù*, or power, creativity, and possible *lack* of morality. The child's virtuality has been the subject of adult concern for centuries, such that worried attempts to manage the child's virtuality end up *producing* virtual spaces for this management to take place. Frequently, these virtual spaces take shape inside imperialist narratives of colonial exploitation that assign distinctly gendered tasks to its participants, grooming them for heterosexual adulthood. Such narratives survive today, yielding not only apprehensions about and hopes for the virtual child in a digital era, but also new forms of resistance to these enduring conventions.

Instead of a refined and—we could say—fully-grown essay, I offer something "child-like" in the popular sense: six unformed, unfinished, playful provocations, which are occasionally unruly and requiring discipline (perhaps, even, a good spanking). These provocations span genre and form—fairy tales, digital apps, young adult literature, film, and poetry—to consider various iterations of the virtual child over the years, culminating in a brief examination of discourse about young activists; I offer "the activist child" as a noteworthy contemporary version of the virtual child. I begin, however, with a history and etymology of "virtual."

Provocation 1: Historicizing Virtù *and the Virtual*

In *The Virtual*, Shields provides the dictionary definitions and etymology of his key concept: "The virtual: Anything, 'that is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually; admitting of being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned'" (*OED* qtd. in Shields 2). This first definition is the one with which we are most likely familiar, as it persists in contemporary discourse and is most often yoked to notions of the digital—so often, in fact, that the words "virtual" and "digital" often function erroneously as synonyms. This enduring usage has largely replaced a rare and arguably obsolete definition of "virtual": "Virtual: Latin 1. *virtus* 2. *virtuosus*. Possessed of certain physical virtues or capacities; effective in respect of inherent

natural qualities or powers capable of exerting influence by means of such qualities (rare)" (*OED* qtd. in Shields 3). "As an adjective," Shields explains, "a 'virtual person' was what we might today call a morally virtuous or good person: a person whose actual existence reflected or testified to a moral or ethical ideal. Virtue was the power to produce results, to have an effect" (3). The Latin root of "*virtus*" (which itself means "manliness," given the prefix "*vir-*," or "man") provided the Italian Renaissance philosopher and politician Niccolò Machiavelli with material for his theorization of *Virtù*, which he characterizes as the quality required for effective governance.

Machiavelli, however, nudged *Virtù* away from its association with morality, remaining (in)famously ambivalent about how *Virtù* may, in fact, necessitate or even emerge from evil acts. In his account of Machiavelli's philosophy of virtue, Harvey C. Mansfield remarks that translators have been particularly challenged by the Italian word *Virtù*. "Sometimes they simply leave it untranslated," Mansfield notes, but "[m]ore often, skirting the question of evil, they use several words referring to amoral qualities, such as *vigor*, *ingenuity*, or *boldness*, which treat *virtù* technically, as the means to an end" (7). Shields, for example, describes *Virtù* simply as an "open, creative potentiality" (3). Mansfield proposes that we "face . . . squarely" the question of *Virtù*, that is: "Do human necessities require us to compromise with evil?" (8).

The etymology and philosophy of "virtual," then, present a paradox: its usage is associated with ideal moral goodness *and* an ability to exert power or influence that may contain traces of evil. These contradictory significations suggest the historical, social, and cultural construction of children. Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella point us to several pervasive "models of childhood" that may be useful: "the developing child," "the Romantic child," and "the sinful child" (56–57).[1] Recall the first definition of "virtual," which is "something that is so in essence or effect"—this suggests the "developing child," a person who *is* yet *is-not* by virtue of their still-becoming. This also resonates with some contemporary philosophers—Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, for example—who theorize the virtual as bodily or affective "potential." To once again reference the most common definition of "virtual," we call a child a person "so far as the effect or result is concerned." A child, in other words, is also a kind of "potential." A child will one day become a person in the same entitled sense that we, as adults, are people; first they must grow up, and in order to protect and discipline them as they do so, we implement and uphold an array of legal and institutional structures that are attuned to managing their potential—those idiosyncratic virtual qualities we understand the child to possess.

Over the years, the child's virtuality-as-potential has been articulated using metaphors that include seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke's

famous description of the child as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate; "white paper, or Wax," as he writes, "to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases" (265). Jules Gill-Peterson has also scrutinized those metaphors of "plasticity" that underwrite G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* (1904). For Hall, "the natural openness of children's growing bodies and minds *demanded* to be cultivated for the teleological ends of his narrow and racist vision of the human species" (Gill-Peterson 47). The child's malleable virtuality-as-potential persists as both revered endowment and unnerving threat, often in surprisingly Lockean terms. "Becoming a responsible human being is a path filled with potholes and visited constantly by temptations," explains Vigen Guroian in his introduction to *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination*, published in 1998 (3). "Children need guidance and moral road maps," he continues, cautioning us about those "well-meaning educators and parents" who "want to drive the passion for moral clarity out of children rather than use it to the advantage of shaping their character" (3).

The contradictory threads of morality, power, and evil that collide in Machiavellian *Virtù* recall such enduring and equally contradictory categories and qualities of childhood. On the one hand, we often idealize children as embodiments of purity, innocence, and moral goodness—as "virtual" in the now-obsolete sense. Guroian, for example, sees children as "nearer than [his college students] to the wellsprings of human morality" (12), and in the introduction to *The Children's Book of Virtues* (1995), William J. Bennett claims that his collection of stories will transport readers into "a time when there was little doubt that children were essentially moral and spiritual beings" (6). These traits come to us from the Romantics, who were themselves influenced by Locke. The Romantic child, however, often shades into its seeming opposite: the sinful child, a child "easily swayed to do wrong, and susceptible to evil" (Hintz and Tribunella 46). As Hintz and Tribunella explain, eighteenth-century Evangelicals, "influenced" as they were "by both religious doctrines and the increasingly popular views of the Romantics, imagined the child as a composite of the sinful and Romantic child" (47). This epistemology of childhood guided many authors of early children's literature. Take, for example, Sarah Trimmer, author of didactic children's stories, who in 1805 warned parents about the "danger, as well as the impropriety" of fairy tales, given "little children . . . who from the liveliness of their imaginations are apt to convert into realities whatever forcibly strikes their fancy" (Hallett and Karasek 15). In other words, the child might transform the virtual ("that which is so in essence but not actually so") into "reality"; their *Virtù* (power, creativity, and morally questionable impulses) threatens their virtue.

At the heart of so much children's literature, then, lies a desire for both *production of* and *control over* the virtual. It also warrants repeating that

children's literature often attempts, even if it does not succeed, to manage the child's virtuality. Children's literature frequently aims to instill virtue, or moral quality, in the child, while mapping, regulating, and sometimes even paradoxically celebrating their *Virtù*—their power, creativity, and potential lack of morality. What's more: attempts to manage the child's virtuality take place in and through spaces that we can characterize as virtual. It's fitting, that is, that anxieties about the child's virtuality produce such virtual spaces. Virtuality begets virtuality, as we'll see in the following provocation.

Provocation 2: Peter Pan, Neverland, and the Golden Age
of Children's Literature

Time-travel with me to the Golden Age of children's literature, which unfolded between approximately 1860–1930, seven decades that saw the creation of well-known works like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Treasure Island*, and *Peter Pan*, among many others. According to some critics, the Golden Age was the first period where authors "realized for the first time that children were not just undeveloped adults," which "allowed them to understand childhood as a life-stage with positive attributes that should be creatively celebrated, not didactically squelched" (Sorby 97). This view retains primitivist echoes of the Romantic child—a "natural" source of virtue and unfettered creativity. In *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, Marah Gubar complicates such reductive takes on the Golden Age, arguing that the era's cult of childhood was "informed not simply (or even mainly) by primitivism but by a habit of extolling the child's innocent simplicity while simultaneously indulging a profound fascination with youthful sharpness and precocity" (ix). Scholars point out how this dual and often incongruous means of constructing the child was a source of tremendous anxiety for authors of children's fiction. Jacqueline Rose famously argues in *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* that children's literature does not and cannot exist since it has nothing to do with "real" children, and everything to do with adult anxieties about childhood management. "The best book is the book which does the child most good," Rose writes, "that is, the book which secures the reader to its intent and can be absolutely sure of its effects. . . . Children's fiction draws in the child, it secures, places, and frames the child" (2). Rose has been thoroughly critiqued by many scholars, including Gubar, who point out that children engage in material reading practices, with real-world consequences, that defy their figuration by Rose as shadowy, inaccessible vessels for adult desires, anxieties, and fantasies. Regardless, it is compelling that Golden Age texts deploy virtual space as a means of "securing" and "framing" the child—of

containing its *Virtù*, of instilling and preserving virtue—while simultaneously remaining fascinated by, as Gubar argues, its creative potential. J. M. Barrie's novel *Peter and Wendy* (1911), a classic Golden Age tale, illustrates this recurring impulse.

In the context of *Peter*, it is noteworthy that Shields uses a mapping metaphor to describe virtual worlds. He writes:

> Virtual worlds are simulations. Like a map, they usually start out as reproducing actual worlds, real bodies and situations; but, like simulations, they end up taking on a life of their own. . . . As virtual worlds, they become "virtuous," utopian. Virtual worlds become important when they diverge from the actual, or when the actual is ignored in favor of the virtual, at which point they are "more real than real." (4)

This metaphor is illuminating when juxtaposed with a pair of images from the opening movements of *Peter and Wendy*, images that foreground an anxious desire to simultaneously delight in and manage the child's virtuality—to balance *Virtù* with virtue. Here is the first:

> It is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for next morning, repacking into their proper places the many articles that have wandered during the day. . . . It is quite like tidying up drawers. . . . When you wake in the morning, the naughtiness and evil passions with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind, and on the top, beautifully aired, are spread out your prettier thoughts, ready for you to put on. (58)

Here, Barrie's characteristically puckish narrator offers us a playful yet somewhat haunting fantasy of control: the gendered, domestic labor of a mother's housework is extended to the child's cabinet-like mind. Maintaining the child's virtue is, in this case, a straightforward task, "quite like" the folding of laundry. Almost immediately, however, the simplicity of this routine chore is complicated. Recall Shield's map metaphor as Barrie's narrator begins:

> I don't know whether you have ever seen a map of a person's mind. Doctors sometimes draw maps of other parts of you, and your own map can become intensely interesting, but catch them trying to draw a map of a child's mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time. There are zigzag lines on it, just like your temperature on a card, and these are probably roads in the island, for the Neverland is always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there, and coral reefs and rakish-looking craft in the offing, and savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs, and princes with six elder brothers, and a hut fast going to decay, and one very small old lady with a hooked nose. (58–59)

Accruing syntactic momentum, our narrator presses on:

> It would be an easy map if that were all, but there is also first day at school, religion, fathers, the round pond, needle-work, murders, hangings, verbs that

take the dative, chocolate pudding day, getting into braces, say ninety-nine, three-pence for pulling out your tooth yourself, and so on, and either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through, and it is all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still. . . . When you play at [Neverland] by day with the chairs and table-cloth, it is not in the least alarming, but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very nearly real. That is why there are night-lights. (59)

The impulse to "map" a child's mind resembles the desire to arrange it like a set of drawers—both images evince a colonial fantasy of control, an impulse to "secure" the child's mind as something knowable and conquerable. The map sequence, though, offers the child's mind as constantly escaping our grasp; each nonsensical, whimsical image is speedily followed by another in a series of rapid-fire nonsequiturs that constitute unusually long sentences. The child's creativity, here, is something that constantly evades the adult doctor's grasp despite their best efforts. Moreover, in spite of Mrs. Darling's earlier attempts to tuck away any naughty passions, the child's imagination often tunnels into dark places: see how "murders" and "hangings" bury themselves between the relatively innocuous "needle-work" and "verbs that take the dative." The final two sentences of this passage hint at the realization of Sarah Trimmer's fears: in the two minutes before the child sleeps, Neverland "very nearly" "becomes real"—the child risks converting the virtual into reality.

And, as we know, the initially imaginary space of Neverland indeed becomes a reality for the Darling children. This map of the child's mind—this virtual world—takes on a life of its own. The children use Neverland as a site for many types of virtual play: pretend eating, mothering (Wendy Darling to Pan and the Lost Boys), domesticity, and the colonial performance of "Playing Indian" with the island's "Redskins." Such forms of play have been long understood as coming-of-age rituals (see Baxter), and they accumulate additional significance when we consider the British and Anglo-American sociocultural and political landscape at the turn of the twentieth century. As M. Daphne Kutzer points out in *Empire's Children*, "the rise of [British] imperialism is roughly contemporaneous with the golden age of children's literature, and the two grew up together" (10).

Moreover, due to the widespread influence of Freud, Hall, and other theorists of childhood development, the concept of "adolescence" was crystallizing at the turn of the twentieth century. Adolescence grew up with the Golden Age and its imperial energies, taking shape alongside those now firmly entrenched institutions that emerged to manage this nascent age category: compulsory secondary schooling; juvenile courts and detention centers; and the woodcraft movement, which positioned contact with nature, outdoor skill acquisition—and, centrally, the parodic imitation of Indigenous cultures—as a kind of crucial contact with "primitivism" that would yield appropriately

"civilized" adults. The woodcraft movement produced Scout troops and sum-mer camps, and these institutions endure as kinds of virtual spaces—contained simulations of "primitive" living—that young people grow up through and eventually grow out of.[2] Golden Age-era coming-of-age tales by Indigenous authors were also part of these sociocultural trends. See, for example, Santee Dakota physician Charles A. Eastman's 1902 memoir *Indian Boyhood*, writ-ten during westward American colonial expansion and whose circulation, in part, offered space for settler youth to fantasize about "playing Indian": "The Indian boy enjoyed such a life as almost all boys dream of," Eastman writes, "and would choose for themselves if they were permitted to do so" (18).[3]

Returning to *Peter Pan*'s Darling children: after having properly colonized Neverland (by "taming" its Indigenous population, who proclaim Peter to be their "Great White Father" [124]), they off some pirates, rehearse domestic-ity, and return to London ostensibly well-equipped to grow into heterosexual adulthood. Wendy and her daughters occasionally revisit Neverland for spring cleaning; Peter, however, remains behind, fixed as a melancholy symbol of eternal youth. Neverland, therefore, simultaneously secures the child as perpetual "potential" (i.e., will never grow up)—alongside the child's mind as a space of compelling and sometimes threatening whimsy—and maps the ritual play seen as fundamental to growing up. Please keep the Golden Age's colonial impulses—the desire to colonize the child's mind, the desire for the child to learn to colonize—close at hand as we proceed to our remaining provocations.

Provocation 3: Cybernetic Cinderellas

Once upon a time a child left home and embarked on a series of adventures, only to eventually return home and conclude that there's no place like it. Sound familiar? This is, of course, *Peter Pan*'s narrative structure, but we might also be reminded of other Golden Age works (*Alice in Wonderland* and especially *The Wizard of Oz*) that contain home-away-home story patterns. This sequence is fundamental to the *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, which tells the story of a young person's growth into adulthood. Striking is how frequently the "away" portion takes place in virtual space and involves gendered ritual practices—domestic labor or various forms of play, as the case may be. Many classic fairy tales, which enjoyed renewed popularity during the Golden Age, reproduce this pattern. In Aleksandr Afanas'ev's Cinderella variant "Vasilisa the Beautiful," for example, the protagonist must enter a liminal space—the forest on the threshold of her town—and serve as the witch Baba Yaga's housekeeper before she can return home, marry, and ascend the throne. Like Wendy in *Peter Pan*, however, Vasilisa is not "really"

cleaning: she has a magical doll that does it for her. And the housework itself is not "real": Baba Yaga assigns Vasilisa a useless, repetitive task—separating poppy seeds from soil, the fairy tale equivalent of busy work—virtual labor that serves nonetheless to prepare Vasilisa for the gendered labor associated with womanhood. Compare these tasks to the actions performed by Jack, of beanstalk fame, whose adventurous and thieving journey into the clouds requires him to cultivate the plucky, stereotypically masculine *virtus* that allows him and his mother to ultimately transcend their class position.

Remarkably, a popular and award-winning set of iPad fairy tale apps by the London-based children's publishing company Nosy Crow[4] reproduce the imagined social functions of virtual spaces, complete with gendered distribution of labor. These apps gamify domestic tasks like cleaning the Seven Dwarves' house, dressing Cinderella's stepsisters for the Prince's ball, or preparing snacks to bring through the woods to grandmother's house. In her study of multimodality and digital picture books, Naomi Hamer writes: "The picture book apps adapted from published print picture books are often tied to a linear narrative regardless of the interactive features. . . . the Nosy Crow apps move away from the linear and cultural limitations of the classic picture book apps and gesture towards the potential creativity this new hybrid medium offers" (77). Hamer raises questions that can be applied across digital texts for young people, in addition to the Nosy Crow apps. Among these questions: where do apps require the child reader-player to follow a linear narrative, when do they permit play and creativity, and what shape does this play take?

In the Nosy Crow apps with girl protagonists, moments of interactive play are consistently organized around gendered domestic ritual—the sort of task that Wendy performs in Neverland. *Snow White* and *Cinderella* are particularly conspicuous in this regard; their most substantial and involved moments of interactivity involve domestic chores. Snow White begins by having to scrub dirty clothes; later, in a lengthy "play" sequence, she arrives at the Seven Dwarves' house and must sweep, dust cobwebs, wash dishes, hang laundry, light candles and a fire, and even paint the walls (!) (see figure 1).

Cinderella, meanwhile, opens with a task wherein Cinderella must clean the kitchen; players are also asked to dress the stepsisters for the Prince's ball and fetch the various items required by Cinderella's fairy godmother for her magical transformation spell. Nosy Crow's *Jack and the Beanstalk*, one of two apps to feature a human boy protagonist, offers users a different gameplay experience.[5] *Jack* is the least linear app of the initial batch. Players can freely explore the multiple floors of the giant's mansion, and interactive games are structured around puzzle-like activities (sorting library books into their proper sequence, reassembling a broken mirror, searching for a golden egg under various geese). Moreover, this app features multiple endings: the

Hello! Anybody home?

Snow White pushed open the door, and found herself inside a lovely, but very messy, house with no-one at home. She decided to tidy and clean.

Figure 1.

quantity of spoils enjoyed by Jack and his mother depend on which tasks the user successfully completes. The gendered division of play in these apps is striking, despite exceptions like the multiple narrative paths and relatively gutsy protagonist of Nosy Crow's *Little Red Riding Hood*. The nonlinear play, adventure, and engaging puzzle-solving in *Jack* stand in stark contrast to the repetitive, mindless touch-and-drag motions associated with domestic labor in *Snow White* and *Cinderella*.[6]

In the Nosy Crow apps, *Virtù*—space for the child's play, agency, or creativity—remains tethered to Golden Age gendered play, which largely serves conventional adult desires regarding the child's virtue. *Snow White* and *The Three Little Pigs* present one noteworthy complication: these are the lone apps that allows players to occasionally control the villain. In one repeated interactive *Snow White* sequence, players concoct the potion used by the evil queen in her attempts to murder Snow White with a series of poisoned foods. In *Pigs*, the player blows into their device's microphone to send the straw and wooden houses crashing to the ground. In these moments, the apps indulge the sinful child, hinting at the malevolence that lurks under the surface of *Virtù*. Otherwise, however, these apps generally imagine the child player's moral growth and development as mirroring that of the child protagonist:

they structure play around domestic chores (for girls) and the "conquering" of territory through spirited resourcefulness and adventure (for Jack).

These apps offer little space for the kinds of resistant reading or play that Hannah Field and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh have explored in the context of interactive and movable books from the seventeenth century through the Victorian era. Reid-Walsh describes interactive books "as forerunners of today's interactive media," arguing that they "enabled a child's reading and playing activity to become a form of agency." Despite "explicit instructions" for correct use that often accompanied fragile movable books, Field uncovers archival evidence of agential child disobedience—"ripping and tearing, coloring-in, dirt, and reconstruction"—that illustrates a long history of "children's nontextual understandings of their books." When it comes to the Nosy Crow apps, short of physically damaging the iPad, there are few options for rejecting what Field calls a text's "dictates." *Snow White* and *Red Riding Hood*, for example, do contain maps that allow reader-players to navigate the story in a nonlinear fashion, and any given play sequence can be skipped in favor of faster movement through the story. Despite my best efforts at naughtiness, however, I could not burn the dwarves' socks instead of cleaning them, smash their dishes, or flood their home by overfilling the sink. Even attempts to make the house messier by scattering items about fail: when misplaced, every item automatically returns to its original location. If the reader-player wants to proceed through these sequences, the app strictly mandates "correct" forms of play.

If we imagine these apps and iPads as "scriptive things," to use Robin Bernstein's coinage, they invite few opportunities for "original, live" and unpredictable performative "variations" (12). The narrative scripts of the apps are inflexible; again, aside from destroying or damaging it, the iPad itself cannot really be manipulated or reconfigured in ways that resemble children's subversive engagements with moveable and interactive books. Paradoxically, the "new hybrid medium" of the digital fairy tale app, which indeed seems to promise so much "creativity," as Hamer suggests, mostly scripts a well-worn tale. Nosy Crow's digital virtual reiterates the many historical iterations of the pre-digital virtual: it remains a space to be entered during childhood, colonized or domesticated through ritual play, and then abandoned so as to permit growth into a specific form of gendered adulthood.

Provocation 4: Ready, Player One?

Contemporary literature for and about young people set in digital virtual space alternately upholds and disrupts conventional narratives of virtuality and childhood. Ernest Cline's massively popular novel *Ready Player One*,

published in 2011, and its subsequent Spielberg-helmed 2018 blockbuster film adaptation fetishize digital technology and virtual reality while simultaneously safeguarding a moral dichotomy between the virtual and the real. Set in the year 2044, *Ready Player One* is the story of eighteen-year-old Wade Watts, an orphaned video game mastermind who wins a global treasure hunt to become the new proprietor of the OASIS, "a massively multiplayer online game that had gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality most of humanity now used on a daily basis" (Cline 1). The OASIS is so wildly popular, Wade explains, because it is "a magical place where anything was possible"—an escape from the outside world of "chaos, pain and poverty" that has been ravaged by war, capitalist exploitation, and ecological crises (18).

Ready Player One's treasure hunt requires players to master Anorak's Almanac, an obscure set of clues left by OASIS creator and eccentric genius James Halliday. The Almanac details Halliday's personal obsessions, all of which revolve around 1980s popular culture—and a particular canon that uncritically privileges white, heterosexual masculinity in both authorship and content.[7] Noteworthy is how both novel and film so thoroughly celebrate and fetishize the digital virtual and the *Virtù* of (white, male) youth, while simultaneously and ambivalently upholding the anxious, moralizing, centuries-old tradition of maintaining the "virtual" as a space for juvenile play that must be colonized then abandoned. *Ready Player One*, that is, attempts to preserve a false binary between the virtual and the real in the name of moral growth and development. The "real," in Cline's novel and Spielberg's film, is demarcated by a supposed relinquishment of the OASIS's puerile pleasures and an embrace of "adult" heterosexuality. Here is the final passage of the novel, in which Wade and his love interest, Samantha, interact outside the OASIS for the first time:

> My heart felt like it was on fire. I took a moment to work up my courage; then I reached out and took [Samantha's] hand. We sat there awhile, holding hands, reveling in the strange new sensation of actually touching one another. Some time later, she leaned over and kissed me. It felt just like all those songs and poems had promised it would. It felt wonderful. Like being struck by lightning. It occurred to me then that for the first time in as long as I could remember, I had absolutely no desire to log back into the OASIS. (372)

Spielberg's film revises this ending, extending it beyond Wade and Samantha's first IRL encounter, but preserving *Ready Player One*'s contradictory take on the relationship between the virtual and the real. In the film, Wade's final voice-over describes his actions after winning control of the OASIS, which culminate in this:

> The third thing we did wasn't as popular. We closed the OASIS on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I know it sounds like a weird move, but people need to spend

more time in the real world. 'Cause, like Halliday said, reality is the only thing that's real. (2:08:20)

And the film's final shot: Wade and Samantha kiss deeply as they cuddle on a large chair. Player One wins the game, and the prize is "real" heterosexual romance.

    Ready Player One reiterates a key narrative convention: the final return "home" represents a turning away from the virtual, but only when the young protagonist has learned valuable lessons about power, authority, and morality—lessons which, as Roberta Seelinger Trites points out, are central features of the adolescent novel. *Ready Player One* is, moreover, an imperial novel in the tradition of *Peter Pan*. It is through the logic of imperialism—that is, the belief that one epistemology is superior to all others, and a violent deployment of that epistemology in order to amass power and territory—it is through this logic and his devotion to mastering and evangelizing the semiotics of 80s white bro-geeks that Wade is able to obtain power over the OASIS. The corporate "pirates," Wade's competitors in the hunt, are defeated, and Wade wins widespread awe at his perpetuation of Halliday's vision. One Great White Father is handily replaced by another; Wade, Darling-like, is free to leave his Neverland. The film's final, moralizing gesture—Wade's shutting down of the OASIS on Tuesdays and Thursdays in order to elevate "reality" over virtuality—fits with the home-away-home narrative of virtuality seen elsewhere, but in the context of the film is an unusual and even cruel gesture. After all, the outside world remains an apocalyptic dystopia, and the victor who promised to keep the OASIS accessible and free of corporate control has just denied players two days of their life-sustaining escape. Virtuous/virtual Wade emerges, ultimately, as something of a duplicitous tyrant, perhaps a shade more Machiavellian than viewers might initially suspect.

Provocation 5: A Glitch in the Machine

There are, of course, stories that defy this home-away-home pattern, offering more nuance at the intersection of growing up and virtual space. We see glimpses of a different approach to the virtual in Cory Doctorow and Jen Wang's graphic novel *In Real Life* (2014), which offers us a thoughtful and resourceful young woman gamer who, yes, learns a valuable lesson in virtual space, but this lesson is critical of colonial, capitalist exploitation, and the story ends with the protagonist remaining in virtual space instead of abandoning it for "reality." For this provocation, however, I turn to a book of poetry: *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* (2017) by Oji-Cree, Two-Spirit storyteller Joshua Whitehead. *Indigiqueer* flips the home-away-home, coming-of-age narrative on its head, offering us a digital, virtual/viral, genderqueer protago-

nist—Zoa—who births themself to infect, critique, and decolonize numerous literary and popular texts, including Pan.[8] The first few pages of Whitehead's book are a graphic illustration of this coming into-being: flipping page after page, readers witness the exponential growth of a small white circle, placed in stark juxtaposition against a solid black background. This circle gradually expands until we are able to see the coded proclamation in its center, "H3R314M" [Here I Am]: an assertion of presence, a claiming of space (17). I am most interested in Whitehead's poem "Douwanttoknowwhatmak estheredmenred[questionmark]," a defiant rejoinder to the racist song "What Makes the Red Man Red?" from the 1953 Disney adaptation of *Peter Pan*. The poem opens with a series of penetrations, violations of the Indigenous body by colonial intrusions that cause Zoa's "redness," here the color of anger, not racist caricature:

> blood (mihko)
> makes me red
> in the cheeks when you piss me off
> in the scalp for the economic mnemonic warfare you ack[cost] me with
> in the gut for feeding me kfc & deep-fried things
> in the fingers for the daily diabetes pickings
> in the esophagus for the burning from drinking herbal essence
> between the toes for always walking west
> in the vulva for all our babies in cfs
> in the veins: quotidian quantum qualification. (86)

From its insistent repetition of "in," emphasizing the bodily invasions articulated by Zoa, the poem moves to describe extraction: of labor, confessions, and accounts of trauma from Indigenous bodies for the pleasure and profit of settlers, "until theres nothing left / maybe a scar / maybe a virtual participatory ribbon" (87). With direct reference to the virtual function of *Pan*'s "playing Indian," Zoa renders explicit such violent colonial incursions into the Indigenous body. This body is entered, its innards exploited and essence mined, before it is reduced to little beyond those signifiers of value to the colonizer: "i am nothing / anymore / confess / history / shame / story / me / i" (87).

  Throughout, however, Zoa presents readers with a series of images that suggest ongoing resistance to the imperialist and colonial impulses that structure *Peter Pan* and feed the story's racism: an erect phallus, superimposed over the Union Jack, inviting us, perhaps, to fuck the Empire (86); Queen Victoria, illuminated by a faint spotlight such that she appears to wear the pointed hood of a KKK member, her face X'd out by the confederate flag (87); and on the poem's final page, Queen Elizabeth I adorned by a headdress, "playing Indian" above an inverted maple leaf, symbol of Canada (88) (see figure 2).

[period]
there is shame written on my bones –
where my mother etched my name
onto my sternum she wrote
"kisâkihitin"
right beside where a priest wrote
"this is mine"
there is shame here
but there is family too
there is indigeneity
there is truth
& i need these all to survive:
hereIamhereIamhereIamhereIam
in the space between the breast
iam
the beating of my heartdrum
iam:wondrously amused
iam:inthiscell
iam:[injun]
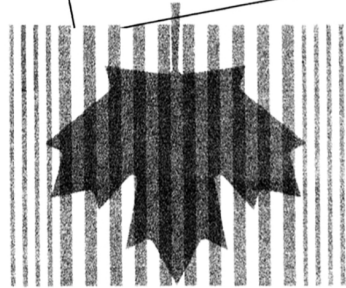iam:[unity]
iam:myshame&thatsokay
iam:wheremisery
becomes:[my]story
iam –
iam
iam

—h/er[e]

Figure 2.

This page also gives us the poem's conclusion: a reclamation of the body and a reinsertion of the self into space, a feverish repetition of "hereIam" and "iam" that culminates in an image of We'Wha, a Two-Spirit Zuni who lived in nineteenth-century New Mexico, an "accomplished artist and crafts[person] as well as an active participant in religious and ceremonial life" who "combined the work and social roles of men and women, an artist and a priest" according to their biographer, Will Roscoe (2). We'wha, playfully and ironically crowned by Zoa themself, gazes directly at the poem's final line, "—h/er[e]," a formulation that confounds and combines gender and space, asserting a smirking We'wha—Indigenous Two-Spirit monarch—as the figure who, in collaboration with Zoa, is responsible for sabotaging the colonial signifiers throughout the poem. Instead of providing a linear coming-of-age story that relies on an entrance into and subsequent exit from virtuality to demarcate growth—like the story told in *Peter Pan*, which exploits Indigenous bodies to advance the Darlings' *Bildungsroman*—Whitehead demonstrates the inextricability of the virtual from the real. Zoa virally self-spawns, invades the colonial real, centers a digital, virtual Indigiqueer/Two-Spirit presence, and stays put, declaring throughout: "H3R314M" (17).

Whitehead's poetry opens the possibility of thinking about the intersections of virtuality and growth beyond the limits of didactic moralizing, beyond the colonial narrative framework I have detailed elsewhere in this essay. Through Zoa's viral and virtual coming-into-being, *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* advocates for the rights of young people—in particular, BIPOC and otherwise marginalized youth—to participate in digital community building, storytelling, and resistance on their own terms. Whitehead's collection of poems also challenges us to imagine models of growth more attuned to the many ways young people navigate space and time. In addition to Indigenous literatures and theory, queer theory has been a site for such imaginings: Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child* (2009), for example, offers "sideways growth" as a way of capturing those nonlinear movements so often demonstrated by children. While Stockton conjures a metaphor for the forms of lateral resistance and delay young people enact when compelled to "grow up" according to a linear narrative, Whitehead dispenses entirely with a lateral/linear schema of growth, replacing it with a picture of "growth" as rhizomatic viral spread. *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*'s virtual protagonist grows into and through colonial texts and signifiers, infecting and dismantling the home-away-home narrative that relies on the imperial conquest of virtual space to signify growth. We continue to require texts and language, like Whitehead's, that imagine alternate relationships to the virtual; texts and language that provide a more expansive view of the child's virtuality.

Provocation Six: The Activist Child

I wonder: what would it mean to return to, and take seriously, the rare/obsolete definition of "virtual" when it comes to how we conceive of young people and their relationship to the digital virtual? That is, what if we think of the virtual child as "effective in respect of inherent natural qualities or powers capable of exerting influence by means of such qualities"? I am not calling for a revival of the Romantic child and its universalization of "natural" childlike qualities, but instead I'm asking: is there something productive in a heightened focus on how young people accrue and deploy "powers" in digital space, in increased attention to how young people are "capable of exerting influence," and where we might trace these influences? Instead of those associations between "child" and "virtual" that I outlined at the beginning of this essay, which tend to suggest that the virtual child requires heavy oversight and management, what if we associated the virtual child with powerful, influential, and unconventional forms of worldmaking? Instead of perceiving the virtual as an emergent threat to the child, what if we more substantially considered how virtual space and the virtual child have had much in common for centuries?

Of course, we already know that young people are building complex selves, communities and relations in and through digital space. In an empirical study of young people and political engagement, Shelley Boulianne and Yannis Theocharis highlight how "young people's lives are being shaped by their intensive use of new digital technologies in ways that, some argue, have no precedent and with dramatic changes in their attitudes and behaviors" (12). Recently, catalyzed in large part by the viral presence of Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, youth have emerged as central figures in the climate movement. As the Student Climate Network writes in an online manifesto: "Previous generations and those in positions of power have failed to protect us, they've failed to ensure we've got a future to look forward to. Not only this, those elected to lead and govern have betrayed countless people across the world already suffering the devastating impacts of climate change." Through a variety of actions, young people are asserting themselves as the inheritors of a planet currently bound for catastrophe. "The government must recognize that us, young people," the manifesto continues, "have the biggest stake in the future."

Digital spaces have been crucial to activist interventions, and the climate movement is no exception. In an article on digital culture and climate change, Maxwell Boykoff writes: "Emergent digital cultures have the power to reconsider collective identities and to recalibrate human-environment interactions to potentially empower grassroots and citizen-centered actions around the world in a changing climate" (23). Boykoff cites the example of "ClimateFortnite,"

a channel on the hugely popular online multiplayer game *Fortnite*, where players can "find climate researchers and others discussing global warming while they play" (22). Refuting claims that the online activities of young people amount to inconsequential "slacktivism," Boulianne and Theocharis' study points to an "abundance of positive correlations between digital media use and engagement in civic and political life" (12). Referencing this study, Boykoff concludes that "venues like ClimateFortnite have emerged with potential to provide space for active digital engagement on climate change and should not be dismissed as mere distraction or escapism" (23). Boykoff's article, published in early 2020, is evidence that much work remains to be done on the virtual "influence" of young activists in digital space.

Interestingly, associations between young people and "virtue" persist in the context of climate activism. In a *Nature* article, Emma Marris cites communication experts who point out that "young climate activists are using their moral authority as children, and their social-media savvy, to surf a rising tide of adult concern." Young people, in other words, are leveraging their figurative, "virtual" (as in moral, virtuous) qualities to influence adult stakeholders. "[R]esearch on the role of youth participants (those aged 16 to 24 years) at UN climate negotiations," Marris continues, "has revealed that adults perceive these activists as having greater moral integrity than others attending the talks" since these youth are unpaid attendees. As my essay has illustrated, the association between young people and morality is longstanding. In the context of climate activism, however, we are seeing something of a new iteration of "virtue," where the "virtue" of young people is attributed to how they are situated outside those capitalist machinations that would sacrifice the environment for profit. "Because young climate protestors don't represent someone else's agenda," Marris explains, "their message is strikingly direct and unvarnished." Marris recalls Thunberg's address to the French National Assembly in Paris: "Maybe you are simply not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children." Part of Thunberg's power, here, is to reconfigure our conceptions of age and maturity: how can "adult" politicians claim to be "mature" when they have no interest in caring for the environment? I wonder: are we witnessing the development of a new model of childhood, "the activist child," an agentic permutation of "the Romantic child" where the child themself weaponizes their perceived moral purity, their most virtual quality?

As Bernstein points out, however, such qualities are typically only extended to white children—we should consider what young activists are celebrated, and who remains ignored or erased. In early 2020, for example, the Associated Press cropped Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate from a photo of five young activists including Thunberg; Nakate was the sole person of color in the

picture. While the AP claims that the edit was made "purely on composition grounds," BIPOC activists quickly pointed out how the climate movement often elides their fundamental contributions and profound influence (Evelyn). Moreover, we might consider disparities in media coverage and celebration of young white activists like Thunberg relative to that which surrounds, for example, Ojibway/Odawa clean water advocate Autumn Peltier; or the six teens who, after connecting on Twitter, organized a Black Lives Matter protest in Nashville that attracted more than 10,000 participants (Elizabeth). There is, perhaps, some evidence that the racialization of virtue is shifting: in *The New York Times*, Margaret Renkl situates the Nashville teens—four fifths of whom are people of color—in a "long tradition of youth activists," claiming that their "power lies in the undeniable moral authority of youth: They did not cause the mess they have inherited, but they are rolling up their sleeves to clean it up." Following Bernstein, however, we should continue to trace how "the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status" endure in their intersection with the activist child (8).

Marris' article concludes by implying that the activist child might be nothing more than "the developing child": "Still to be seen," she writes, "is whether the [climate] movement's participants maintain their enthusiasm as they grow older and leave school. The demands of finding employment and building a stable life in a difficult global economy might leave less time for activism." Is activism, then, merely a virtual space to be abandoned when it comes time for young people to "grow up," a place where they can rehearse political engagement before reaching legal voting age? This would seem to be the wish of many conservative politicians, whose barrage of insults against Thunberg seem symptomatic of deep-seated fears of the child's power and influence (see Marcin, for example). This is profoundly ironic. As Rebekah Sheldon reminds us, "much of the horror of ecological disaster comes from the projected harm to the future. . . . And the future is the provenance of the child" (3). The child is so often called upon to signify futurity, but when young people—especially queer, trans, and BIPOC youth—take tangible steps to fight for the future, they face tremendous backlash. Politicians, that is, constantly position the future-as-child as in need of rescue from a variety of malignant forces.[9] Yet, when *real* children actually perform the material work of fighting for the future, the same (typically conservative) politicians who weaponize the figure of the child are usually among the first to push back, often violently, against young activists. Recall, for example, Donald Trump's admonishing tweets, suggesting that Thunberg "work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!" (Levin, "Trump"). If only we could better secure and manage this child, Trumpian climate deniers seem to say, the land would be

easier to continually exploit; we cannot allow this child's world to become our own; we cannot let their virtual become real. As history has shown, however, the virtual child will persist.

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Notes

[1] In a similar vein, see James R. Kincaid's discussion of Victorian fixations on "the budding body" (104), as well this era's typologies of "the gentle child" (217) and "the naughty child" (246).

[2] See Baxter, Kidd, and Kidd and Mason for more on the early twentieth century emergence of adolescence, as well as histories of woodcraft and summer camp movements.

[3] See Deloria for more on the concept of "playing Indian."

⁴ See https://nosycrow.com/apps/ (last accessed 4 Jan. 2020). As of April 2018, Nosy Crow has discontinued app production, citing poor market trends and a resurgence of print sales (Eyre).

⁵ Nosy Crow released seven fairy tale apps: *The Three Little Pigs, Cinderella, Goldilocks and Little Bear, Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White* (2011–15) and *Hansel and Gretel* (2018). All feature human protagonists except for *Pigs*, which stars two male pigs and one (very conventionally gendered) female pig. Hansel is the other boy protagonist.

⁶ Nosy Crow's newest and final app, *Hansel and Gretel* (released in 2018), seems to defy this trend: when Hansel is imprisoned by the witch, Gretel must solve a variety of puzzles in order to free him ("Hansel and Gretel by Nosy Crow"). Due to licensing issues following the closure of their app department, however, Nosy Crow products are no longer available for purchase and play in certain regions (including Canada); this is the one fairy tale app I could not access.

⁷ Other scholars have astutely assessed *Ready Player One*'s neoliberalism (Stark) and problematic treatment of race and gender (Condis), so I will not rehearse these critiques here.

⁸ It is noteworthy that, when performing his poetry, Whitehead reinforces the digital resonances of his text by reading with a stutter that mimics the intermittent booting of glitchy software. To hear Whitehead read, see "Episode 27."

⁹ See, for example, Bernstein's analysis of a 2009 case that saw a Louisiana justice of the peace refusing to perform an interracial marriage in the name of imaginary, unborn children (1–2). Additionally, recall the vile "Bathroom Bill" debates of 2016 that disguised transphobia as child protection (Levin, "North Carolina").

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